

ANN ARBOR HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION

Staff Report

ADDRESS: 515 S First Street, Application Number HDC23-0030

DISTRICT: Old West Side Historic District

REPORT DATE: September 14, 2023

REPORT PREPARED BY: Jill Thacher, Historic Preservation Coordinator

REVIEW COMMITTEE DATE: September 11, 2023

OWNER

Name: John Rokita
Address: 515 S First St
 Ann Arbor, MI
Phone:

APPLICANT

Robert Fowler
 5550 Fox Run
 Saline, MI 48176
 (734) 476-4851

BACKGROUND: This tall and narrow two-story gable-fronter first appears in Polk City Directories in 1894. Staff has been told anecdotally that the building began its life much earlier, as a grain barn that was the first structure on the block and later converted into a residence. According to a July 12, 1987, Ann Arbor News story, this house was joined to the one next to it with a tunnel that was discovered in 1930 when the neighboring house started to sink. The article speculates that this could have been a hiding place that was part of the Underground Railroad.

The house features a full-width front porch with turned posts and spindle work, wide board trim, and one-over-one windows. The L-shaped footprint and one-story rear addition are from the period of significance. Only a small rear side porch has been altered somewhat from what's shown on the 1931 Sanborn map.

LOCATION: The site is located on the east side of South First Street, south of West Jefferson and north of West Madison.

APPLICATION: The applicant seeks HDC approval to construct a small addition on top of the rear one-story wing and add an egress window and well on the rear elevation of the two-story portion of the house. In addition, a roof structure on the south side elevation that was installed without permits would be removed.

APPLICABLE REGULATIONS:

From the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation:

- (1) A property will be used as it was historically or be given a new use that requires minimal change to its distinctive materials, features, spaces, and spatial relationships.

- (9) New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.
- (10) New additions and adjacent or related new construction shall be undertaken in such a manner that if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

From the Secretary of the Interior's Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings (other SOI Guidelines may also apply):

Additions

Recommended: Constructing a new addition so that there is the least possible loss of historic materials and so that character-defining features are not obscured, damaged, or destroyed.

Considering the attached exterior addition both in terms of the new use and the appearance of other buildings in the historic district or neighborhood. Design for the new work may be contemporary or may reference design motifs from the historic building.

Locating the attached exterior addition at the rear or on an inconspicuous side of a historic building; and limiting its size and scale in relationship to the historic building.

Designing new additions in a manner that makes clear what is historic and what is new.

Not Recommended: Attaching a new addition so that the character-defining features of the historic building are obscured, damaged, or destroyed.

Designing a new addition so that its size and scale in relation to the historic building are out of proportion, thus diminishing the historic character.

Building Site

Recommended: Identifying, retaining, and preserving buildings and their features as well as features of the site that are important in defining its overall historic character.

Not Recommended: Removing or radically changing buildings and their features or site features which are important in defining the overall historic character of the property so that, as a result, the character is diminished.

From the Ann Arbor Historic District Design Guidelines (other guidelines may apply):

Guidelines for All Additions

Appropriate: Placing a new addition on a non-character-defining or inconspicuous elevation and limiting the size and scale in relationship to the historic property.

Placing new walls in a different plane from the historic structure in a subordinate position to the historic fabric.

Designing a new addition in a manner that makes clear what is historic and what is new.

Limiting the size and scale of the addition in relationship to the historic building so that it does not diminish or visually overpower the building or the district. The addition's footprint should exceed neither half of the original building's footprint nor half of the original building's total floor area.

Not Appropriate: Designing an addition that overpowers or dramatically alters the original building through size or height.

Safety Codes

Appropriate: Complying with barrier free and safety codes in a manner that ensures the preservation of character-defining features.

STAFF FINDINGS:

1. *Addition.* The single-story rear wing is approximately 10' wide and 6' deep and contains stairs to the basement and a back door. The addition is offset and cantilevered 18" to the north in order to preserve the rear corner of the building and part of the wing's roof structure. Three small awning windows are proposed on the rear and north side. Windows are Jeld-Wen wood windows. Cladding is wood to match the house. Staff believes this isn't an issue since the offset design of the addition is very distinguishable from the original structure.

An existing window on the single-story wing has been omitted from the drawings. That window is expected to be retained. This is included in the motion.

2. *Chimney.* The red brick chimney is proposed to be removed on the interior but is not proposed to be removed on the exterior and appears on all drawings. Retaining the chimney is included as a condition of approval in the motion.
3. *Egress Window.* An egress window is indicated on the floorplan drawing, but not the elevation. Photographs provided do not show whether there is currently a basement window in this location (trash containers are in the way) but the location is appropriate. The foundation wall is fairly tall so there is plenty of room for an egress window, and it would be entirely out of sight from the public right of way. The well is constructed of pressure treated 4x4s with an interior ladder. The interior of the well is slightly larger than the required 36"x36" clear area. The window is not dimensioned but is a wood Jeld-Wen double-hung one-over-one. The depth of the well is not indicated.

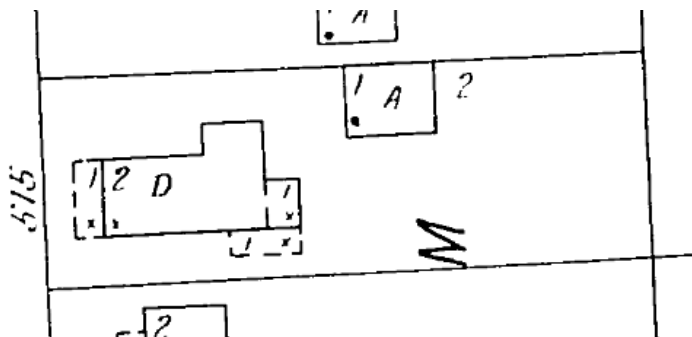
4. Staff recommends approval of the addition and egress window and believes the work meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards, Secretary of the Interior's Guidelines for Rehabilitation, and the Ann Arbor Historic District Design Guidelines.

POSSIBLE MOTIONS: (Note that the motion is only a suggestion. The Review Committee, consisting of staff and at least two Commissioners, will meet with the applicant on site and then make a recommendation at the meeting.)

I move that the Commission issue a certificate of appropriateness for the application at 515 S First Street, a contributing property in the Old West Side Historic District, to construct a second-story addition on top of the single-story rear wing, on the following conditions: that no existing windows or exterior doors are removed or replaced and that the exterior portion of the chimney is not removed. The work as conditioned is compatible in exterior design, arrangement, texture, material and relationship to the rest of the building and the surrounding area and meets *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings*, in particular standards 1, 9 and 10 and the guidelines for additions and building site; and the *Ann Arbor Historic District Design Guidelines* for additions and safety codes.

ATTACHMENTS: drawings, photos

515 S First Street, 1931 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map



515 S First Street (courtesy Google Street View, 2019)

