



## City of Ann Arbor

HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION

Planning & Development Services

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### MEMORANDUM

To: City Planning Commissioners

From: Jill Thacher, City Planner/Historic Preservation Coordinator

Date: April 26, 2022

Re: Robert & Erma Hayden House Preliminary Study Committee Report

On behalf of the Robert & Erma Hayden House Study Committee, please find attached their preliminary study committee report for your review.

On August 2, 2021, the Ann Arbor City Council appointed a three-person study committee to make a report and recommendation on whether to establish a single-resource historic district consisting of the Robert & Erma Hayden House at 1201 Gardner Avenue. Robert Hayden was born in Detroit in 1913, attended Detroit City College and the University of Michigan. After finishing his degree in 1942, Hayden taught at UofM for several years and was the first Black faculty member in Michigan's English department. Hayden taught at Fisk University for over 20 years, but he and his family returned to Ann Arbor, to 1201 Gardner Avenue, in 1969, where he taught at UofM until his death in 1980.

Hayden wrote some of the most powerful Black history poems in the English language. In 1976 Hayden was offered and accepted the position of Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress (later called the Poet Laureate) - the first Black American to hold this position. He accepted and was reappointed in 1978.

If you have any questions or comments to share with the Study Committee on this preliminary report, please share them with me. The Study Committee will hold a public hearing no less than 60 days after this draft has been distributed for comments to the State Historic Preservation Office, Michigan Historical Center, State Historic Preservation Review Board, Ann Arbor Historic District Commission, and Ann Arbor City Planning Commission.

**Preliminary Historic District Study Committee Report**  
**Proposed Robert and Erma Hayden House Historic District**  
**1201 Gardner Ave.**  
**Ann Arbor, Michigan**



**April 26, 2022**

## **Charge of the Robert and Erma Hayden House Historic District Study Committee**

The Robert and Erma Hayden House Historic District Study Committee was established by the Ann Arbor City Council on August 2, 2021, to examine the roughly 0.01 acre parcel containing the Robert and Erma Hayden House (with the final area to be determined by the committee) in accordance with Chapter 3, Section 8:408 of the Ann Arbor Code of Ordinances and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act. On September 20, 2021, the City Council appointed members to the committee, who are to report their findings to the City Council no later than August 2, 2022. A list of members follows.

### **Study Committee Members**

#### **Patrick Patillo**

Mr. Patillo is the owner of the Robert and Erma Hayden House and a member of the Hayden family: he married Maia Hayden in 1988. Like the Haydens, Patillo is also a musician (he plays tenor saxophone), and a writer. He lives in Ann Arbor.

#### **Jennifer Ross**

Ms. Ross is a professional historic preservation planner who lives in Ann Arbor's Lower Burns Park neighborhood and works for the the City of Detroit Planning and Development Department. She has a M.S. degree in architecture from Texas Tech University. Ms. Ross is a member of the Ann Arbor Historic District Commission.

#### **Beverly Willis**

Ms. Willis is an Ann Arbor resident and administrator of the Washtenaw County Historical Society, where she assists with management of the Museum on Main Street. Ms. Willis is also a member of the Ann Arbor Historic District Commission.

#### **Staff Support**

The study committee was assisted in its work by Jill Thacher, AICP, City Planner/Historic Preservation Coordinator with the City of Ann Arbor and Timothy Boscarino, AICP, and Michael F. Webb, PhD, of Twosixfour LLC.

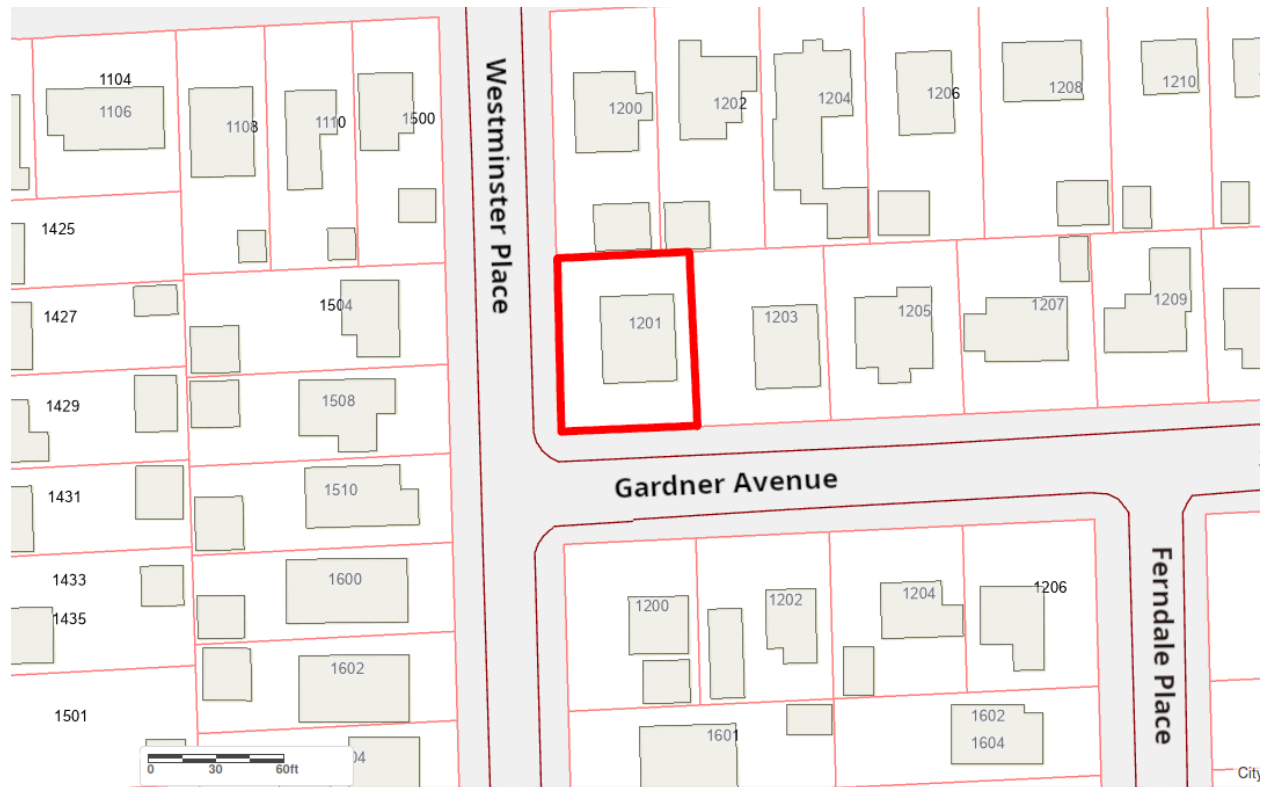
### **Description**

The Robert and Erma Hayden House is a one-and-one-half story, Cape Cod-style house on Gardner Avenue in Ann Arbor's Lower Burns Park neighborhood, built in 1936. It remains largely unaltered since its period of significance of 1969–1980.

#### **Environment and Setting**

The neighborhood surrounding 1201 Gardner Avenue consists of an irregular network of

mostly rectangular blocks, oriented with streets oriented north-south and east-west. It is developed with single-family, one-and-one-half-story houses of similar scale and a variety of architectural styles, built in the 1930s and 1940s. Healthy, mature street trees of a variety of deciduous species are common.



*Proposed historic district boundaries.*

## **Exterior**

The Hayden House sits on an a corner lot, facing south onto Gardner Avenue, with Westminister Place to the west. Its approximately square parcel is 4,782 square feet in area (60.04 feet of frontage on the Gardner Avenue side and 78.65 feet on the Westminister Place side). The house is set about twenty feet back from the public sidewalk on both sides, with a small back yard to the north and a narrow side yard to the east. An off-center, poured concrete walkway leads from the sidewalk to the front porch steps; a concrete driveway on the west side of the building accesses an attached one-car garage and carport. The yard is defined by shrubbery: waist-high yews run along the Gardiner Avenue and Westminister Place sidewalks, with higher yews planted along the foundation of the house. White cedar trees, taller than the house itself, are planted at the southeast and southwest corners. A large black walnut tree is located in the back yard. Two oak trees sit near the curb along Westminister Place. The yews and oaks were planted by Mr. Hayden during the period of significance (a third oak tree along Gardiner Avenue has since been removed).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Patrick Patillo, personal communication, April 26, 2022.

The house sits on a poured concrete foundation with a full basement. The three-bay, side gabled house is symmetrical in plan, with east and west bays containing one opening on each floor on the south (front) facade, rising to terminate in gabled, wall dormers. The building is entered through a projecting, single-story, front-gabled entrance bay. On the east and west faces, the house contains two window openings on each floor as well, with a projecting, shed-roofed bay window serving a dining room on the building's east side. The north (rear) facade also bears two gable-front, wall dormers, but they are not symmetrically placed. Rear window and door openings are irregular in placement and size.

On the south facade, the main entrance to the building is through a steel door; the north (rear) entrance is wood. On the east bay of the south (front) facade, a single multilight glazed wood door provides access to from the dining room to a poured concrete patio with a metal railing. All door openings also have more recent, glazed, aluminum storm doors. Windows are a mix of original six-over-one and eight-over-one sash windows and vinyl replacement windows. Semicircular, fanlight windows on each gable end illuminate the attic.

Rows of large (approximately 16 inches in height) wood shingles clad the building on all sides. A common feature of Cape Cod residential architecture, these appear to be original. The roof is clad in asphalt shingles and is topped with a centered, brick, ridge chimney. The house is painted white. Narrow vergeboards, the garage door, and muntins on the front patio entrance are painted a light blue. The front door is bright red. The paint colors have been changed since the period of significance—a photo provided by Patrick Patillo shows a reddish-brown paint color on the siding and a tan-colored front door. Decorative shutters that once flanked the windows were removed in the 2010s.

An attached garage projects northwards from the rear of the house, its gable roof oriented perpendicular to that of the core building. A single, tilt-up garage door opens facing west onto Westminster Place, and is sheltered by a flat-roofed carport. The carport was added in 1957, according to building permits.



*Undated family photo showing paint color scheme from the period of significance.*



*Mr. Hayden's typewriter in upstairs office.*



## **Interior**

On the interior, the Hayden House opens to a central stairway. To the west (left) is a large living room which also serves as a library and music room, containing Erma Hayden's grand piano. To the east (right) is dining room, which leads to a kitchen. Upstairs are three bedrooms, one of which served as Robert Hayden's study, where he wrote much of his poetry and other works during the years 1969–1980.

## **Integrity**

The National Register of Historic Places defines *integrity* as “the ability of a property to convey its significance” through its physical features. It is described in terms of seven aspects: location, setting, materials, design, workmanship, feeling, and association.<sup>2</sup> Other than several replacement windows, a change in paint color, and missing shutters, the Hayden House, along with its site, landscaping, and neighborhood context, appear to be unaltered since its period of significance. Thus, integrity remains largely intact. “When walking by that house as a historic district, one can pause and imagine the poet, Robert Hayden, at work inside.”<sup>3</sup>

## **Resource List and Count of Historic and Non-historic Resources**

The Proposed Robert and Erma Hayden House Historic District comprises one, single, contributing (historic) resource and no noncontributing (non-historic) resources.

### **Boundary Description**

Lot 14 of the Krapf Addition to the City of Ann Arbor.

### **Boundary Justification**

The boundaries comprise the entire parcel presently and historically containing the Robert and Erma Hayden House.

### **History**

The house located at 1201 Gardner Avenue is significant as the home of educators Robert (born August 4, 1913) and Erma (February 15, 1911) Hayden, who first took up residence there in 1969. Ann Arbor residents in the 1940s, they returned to their native Michigan after two decades in Nashville, Tennessee. A key figure in the Black Arts Movement, Robert Hayden served as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (a position now known as Poet Laureate of the United States) from 1976 to 1978, at the peak of a long and influential career as a poet and professor of English literature. He was the first African American writer to hold the Consultant in Poetry position, the highest honor the United States can bestow upon a poet. Erma (Morris) Hayden was an accomplished music teacher and concert pianist. Both individuals

<sup>2</sup> *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation* (Washington: National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, 1995), 44.

<sup>3</sup> Beverly Willis, personal communication, April 18, 2022.

continued to live, practice their crafts, and meet with students and colleagues at the residence until their deaths in 1980 and 1994, respectively.

### **Robert Hayden's Early Life**

Robert Earl Hayden was born August 4, 1913, in Detroit. He was given the name of Robert by his adoptive parents, Sue Ellen Westerfield and William Hayden (his birth name, Asa Bundy Sheffey, had never been legally changed—a detail he would not learn until many years later when applying for a passport to attend an event in Bulgaria in his role with the Library of Congress). The Haydens were next-door neighbors of his birth mother, Ruth Sheffey, who left Detroit for Buffalo, New York, only a few weeks after Robert was born (Robert Hayden would maintain a relationship with Sheffey through correspondence and an occasional visit; this relationship would become closer later in Sheffey's life, with Sheffey known as "Grandma Kitty" to the Hayden's daughter, Maia). They lived on Beacon Street in Paradise Valley, a multiethnic neighborhood that, at the time, was home to a large European immigrant population. By the end of the decade, the neighborhood had become the center of Detroit's growing African American community as World War I brought European immigration to a standstill and the Great Migration brought large numbers of African American migrants from the South to Detroit seeking economic opportunity and a better way of life.<sup>4</sup> This community was centered around St. Antoine Street, a Black-owned business district where Robert would spend much of his free time during his childhood and adolescence.<sup>5</sup>

Robert Hayden was raised in a working-class, Baptist household. He had an ambivalent relationship with his adoptive parents, especially his father, who was supportive of his aspirations—especially his desire to seek a college education and, later, to find employment as a writer—but struggled to understand Robert's devotion to literature, theater, radio programs, and movies, interests which he developed at a young age. He was provided with emotional support in these pursuits, if remotely, through letters from Sheffey. The "emotionally tumultuous" nature of Hayden's childhood was compounded by his nearsightedness and propensity for migraines, which interfered with his ability to enjoy sports and other childhood activities. Hayden nonetheless maintained an active social life throughout his childhood with an ethnically diverse group of Black Bottom friends—a "positive force" during those years.<sup>6</sup> Decades later, Hayden would reflect on these times in much of his work, including his famous poem, "Those Winter Sundays," as well as "The Ballad of Sue Ellen Westerfield." Beginning in childhood and continuing throughout his life he would experience episodes of depression and self-doubt that he would term "dark nights of the soul."<sup>7</sup>

He attended Miller High School, transferring to Northern High School in order to study Spanish. He graduated in 1930 and published his first poem, "Africa," in *Abbot's Monthly* in

4 Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 23–24. This no-longer extant neighborhood would remain the center of Detroit's African American community until it was razed during the 1950s and 1960s urban renewal era for the I-375 expressway, Lafayette Park, and adjacent developments, dispersing the heart of the Black community into other areas of the city. Robert Hayden's childhood home, thus, no longer stands.

5 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness: The Life and Poetry of Robert Hayden* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1984), 7.

6 Ibid.

7 Robert Hayden and Michael Harper, "Robert Hayden and Michael Harper: A Literary Friendship," *Callaloo* 17, no. 4 (1994): 980–1016.

1931. In 1932 Hayden enrolled at Detroit City College (renamed Wayne University while Hayden was a student there, now Wayne State University), with a scholarship. Majoring in Spanish with plans of becoming a teacher, he studied poetry mostly in his free time. Hayden was influenced by the Harlem Renaissance writers who were active during this era.<sup>8</sup>

One credit short of a degree, Hayden left Wayne University in 1936 to begin a job with the Federal Writers Project, an initiative of the federal Works Progress Administration, where he worked until 1938. He was politically active during this time, attending antiwar rallies and organized labor activities, becoming acquainted with radical activists. Hayden developed an interest in African American history during this period, as well as a heightened sense of identification with the struggle of the Black community against discrimination and violence. This was partly a result of meeting so many people from other parts of the United States, and befriending other writers, during his WPA years. Nonetheless, Hayden eschewed labels. According to John Hatcher, a personal friend who would later become Hayden's primary biographer, "his strong religious convictions would not allow him to believe that any purely economic or political cause would be a sufficient force to cure the ills of mankind."<sup>9</sup>

Outside of his professional work, Hayden was involved in local theater, directing the Paul Robeson Players in Detroit. A mutual friend introduced him to Langston Hughes, a Harlem Renaissance poet and playwright, during a lunch at the Lucy Thurmon YWCA in Detroit. There Hayden shared his poetry and received pointed criticism. Hayden was profoundly inspired: "My meeting with Hughes is one of my pleasantest recollections, for he was the first recognized poet I'd met, the first to spend time talking to me about my own poems."<sup>10</sup>

Another life-altering relationship Hayden developed during these years was with Louis O. Martin, editor of the *Michigan Chronicle*, an African American weekly newspaper published in Detroit. Martin hired Hayden as a music and theater critic, and later served as a patron of his work, establishing the Falcon Press to publish Hayden's first book of poetry: the 1940 volume *Heart-shape in the Dust*.

Finally, it was also through his theater work that he met Erma Inez Morris, a pianist and composer, and the two bonded over their mutual love of theater and the arts. They were married in 1940.<sup>11</sup>

## University of Michigan

Seeking to further develop his talent, Robert Hayden began taking part-time, summer classes at the University of Michigan in 1938. He and Mrs. Hayden moved to Ann Arbor, living at 326 Beakes Street in the Kerrytown neighborhood. Mr. Hayden enrolled full-time as a graduate student in 1941, having been accepted despite not having completed his bachelor's degree at Wayne University.

His literary style soon shifted remarkably. Prior to *Heart-shape in the Dust* he closely emulated the style of the Harlem Renaissance poets, displaying the influence of not only Langston Hughes but also Claude McKay, Melvin B. Tolson, and Richard Wright, often writing in dialect about topics such as slavery, lynchings, economic inequality, and war. Afterwards, he developed a more uniquely personal voice, influenced by the school of New Criticism. The

<sup>8</sup> Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*



creative shift was significant and purposeful enough to Hayden that he would later discourage anthologists from publishing any of his work from *Heart-shape in the Dust* or earlier.<sup>12</sup>

While at the University of Michigan, Hayden studied with W.H. Auden, a British-American poet who taught there in 1941 and 1942. Inspired by Auden, he began to deviate from the more direct messaging of his earlier works to a more symbolic style that requires a degree of interpretation on the part of the reader.<sup>13</sup>

As a student, Hayden won the Avery Hopwood and Jule Hopwood Major Award for Poetry twice, in 1938 for *Heart-shape in the Dust*, and in 1942 for *The Black Spear, With Additional Poems*.<sup>14</sup> The award was bequeathed by Michigan alumnus Avery Hopwood to support “the new, the unusual, and the radical” among creative writing students.<sup>15</sup> *The Black Spear* was a not-yet-complete (Hayden wanted to include his forthcoming “Middle Passage,” but it was not able to finish it in time) collection of works focusing on themes of African American history. It included such titles as “The Ballad of Nat Turner” and “Frederick Douglass.” These poems would, over the following years, earn him more wide-ranging recognition through broader publication. He published “O Daedalus, Fly Away Home” (from *The Black Spear*) in *Poetry*, one of the leading English-language poetry magazines, and “Frederick Douglass” in *Atlantic Monthly*.<sup>16</sup>

Hayden earned his Master of Arts degree from the University of Michigan in 1944, along with his Bachelor of Arts degree from Wayne University (the institution granted the degree without the missing credit). He worked as a teaching assistant at the University of Michigan for the 1945–1946 academic year. During this time the Haydens lived in a “rustic cabin” in Brooklyn, Michigan, thirty miles southwest of Ann Arbor.<sup>17</sup>

It was at this time that the Haydens joined the Bahá’í Faith community, which would become a powerful influence on the artistic development and careers of both individuals. Erma was introduced to the religion in 1942; Robert joined the following year. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Robert and Erma’s daughter, Maia Beth Hayden, was born October 5, 1942. It was a joyous occasion and also a serious one, as the responsibility of caring for Maia would shape Mr. and Mrs. Hayden’s choices for the next two decades.<sup>18</sup>

## **Bahá’í Faith**

During 1942 (Robert Hayden’s final year as a student at the University of Michigan), Erma Hayden, “the spiritual backbone of the family,”<sup>19</sup> became involved with a small Bahá’í Faith community on the University of Michigan campus. She was immediately moved by the Bahá’í teachings regarding universal brotherhood and the unity of all religions, and by the end of the year, after reading the Bahá’í Writings, had chosen to become a member of the Bahá’í Faith herself. Though she was eager to share her enthusiasm with Mr. Hayden, Robert was, at first, not

12 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 15–17.

13 Ibid.

14 University of Michigan Department of English Language and Literature, “Alumni and Winners,” <https://lsa.umich.edu/hopwood/alumni---winners-.html>

15 Ibid., “About Hopwood,” <https://lsa.umich.edu/hopwood/about-us.html>

16 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 18.

17 Ibid., 24. It is unclear why the Haydens chose this location, an hour-long commute from Ann Arbor. They may have had friends there, or may have preferred the quiet, rural environment. Patrick Patillo, personal interview, March 8, 2022.

18 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 18.

19 Patrick Patillo, personal interview, March 8, 2022.

interested. After some time, Mr. Hayden had acquainted himself with the Bahá'í Writings and developed a relationship with a local Bahá'í teacher. As he later recalled, neither he nor Erma had, at the time, been actively seeking a new faith; however, upon encountering the Bahá'í Teachings, they simply realized that they believed and, thus, felt compelled to follow. Mr. Hayden formally joined the faith in 1943.

Over time, the Bahá'í Teachings would come to influence Mr. Hayden's literary work. As he later recalled:

I saw very little influence on my work for the first several years. . . . But now it has given me a base, a focus. . . . I have learned from it that the work of the artist, the scientist, the philosopher, all sincere effort in any discipline has spiritual value and is both a form of service and a form of worship. This thought sustains me when the dark times come.<sup>20</sup>

The Bahá'í Faith had its genesis in 1844, when a merchant known as the Báb began to preach in Persia (present-day Iran) that a new prophet would come. Later, a follower, Bahá'u'lláh, claimed to be that prophet and spread the faith's teachings.<sup>21</sup> One of the tenets of the faith is the “oneness” of humanity: racial distinctions are meaningless. This was a consistent theme behind Robert Hayden and his work, and his refusal (described below), to see himself as a “Black poet.”<sup>22</sup> On his faith, Hayden noted: “I'm not a joiner. . . . The Bahá'í Faith is about the only organized body I can stand. I cherish my individuality and I don't want to be a conformist except (paradoxically) on my own terms.”<sup>23</sup> Biographer Derik Smith identifies Mr. Hayden's conversion to the faith as emblematic of an ongoing desire to set himself apart from both Western traditionalism and modern secularism.<sup>24</sup>

## **Fisk University**

Robert Hayden received a job offer from Fisk University in 1946, teaching freshman English, American literature, and creative writing. Fisk, a historically Black university, is located in Nashville, Tennessee. For the sake of Mr. Hayden's career, the Haydens could not pass the opportunity up—it was a major improvement over his teaching assistantship at Michigan. However, the Haydens never wished to live in the South, and Mr. Hayden accepted the position only reluctantly.

For the Haydens, who loved theater, music, and movies, the thought of living under Jim Crow segregation was unbearable. Going into a venue as a Black family meant entering through an alley and sitting in a balcony. “I never went to the movies in Nashville,” Mr. Hayden later lamented. Further, coming from urban Detroit and educated Ann Arbor, Nashville would have seemed a small, provincial town, with far fewer cultural opportunities than they were accustomed to enjoying.<sup>25</sup>

The demands of Mr. Hayden's teaching job were also stifling. His department at Fisk had

<sup>20</sup> Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> For an overview of the religion, see Robert H. Stockman, ed., *The World of the Bahá'í Faith* (London: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Patrick Patillo, personal interview, March 8, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*.

<sup>24</sup> Derik Smith, *Robert Hayden in Verse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 10.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 19–20.

little interest in his talent and continued development as a writer, only wanting him to teach. He was given a heavy load of courses. Still, he cared for his students and devoted himself wholeheartedly to their success, even at the expense of his own career and his work as a poet. Midnight to 3 a.m. were the hours he set aside for his own writing. Julius Lester, a student of Hayden's who later became an accomplished novelist and writer of children's books, reflected "no one at Fisk had the vaguest notion of what a poet's function was. . . . Yet somehow, Hayden continued to believe, though no one except his wife and a few students and friends in New York ever cared."<sup>26</sup>

In 1948, when Maia was six years old, the Haydens made a difficult choice—Erma and Maia would move to New York so that Maia could attend an integrated public school system. Robert would visit them when his schedule allowed. Mr. Hayden had almost quit his job the year before over a pay cut, but several supportive colleagues and students managed to convince his department to restore his former salary.

Despite these challenges, Mr. Hayden continued to develop his poetic voice during these years. With several other poets he published *The Lion and the Archer*, a compilation containing several of Hayden's works including his "Ballad of Remembrance," which would become one of his most important works. Significantly, the volume included, as a preface, a manifesto:

"As writers who belong to a so-called minority, we are violently opposed to having our work viewed, as the custom is, entirely in the light of sociology and politics. . . . We believe in the oneness of mankind and the importance of the arts in the struggle for peace and unity."<sup>27</sup>

Hayden—in keeping with his long-held beliefs about avoiding labels and his and Erma's Bahá'í views on the unity of humankind—joined his co-contributors in refusing to be categorized as "Negro poets." This volume also marked the peak of Hayden's use of symbolism, with an imagery and vocabulary that rendered the works less accessible to the typical reader. Hayden would later term this his "Baroque period."<sup>28</sup>

In 1950 the Hayden family received some good news: Robert was granted a leave of absence from Fisk University and was able to join Erma and Maia in Brooklyn. He cared for Maia while Mrs. Hayden held a challenging job, with a lengthy commute, teaching music and dance in Manhattan. Ultimately, however, the long hours for Mrs. Hayden combined with the loss of Mr. Hayden's income proved to be too much, and the family returned to Nashville. Maia's transition was eased by a caring teacher in the Nashville school system, and Mr. Hayden again devoted himself to his students. Mr. Hayden's hard work paid off in 1954 when he received a Ford Foundation grant to travel and write in Mexico. Having majored in Spanish at Wayne University, he was delighted to have an opportunity to live in a Spanish-speaking country; his Bahá'í connections enabled him to easily make friends and find traveling companions while he was abroad. He loved Mexico while also feeling like an outsider: "No place is home for me; therefore, every place is home," he wrote.<sup>29</sup> Returning to Nashville after his time in Mexico, Mr. Hayden was rewarded with a promotion to Associate Professor.

26 Ibid., 21.

27 Robert Hayden and Myron O'Higgins, eds., *The Lion and the Archer* (Nashville: Counterpoise, 1948).

28 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 22.

29 Ibid., 22–23.

## Robert Hayden and the Black Arts Movement

In the wake of over two decades of hard work for both Mr. and Mrs. Hayden with minimal recognition, the 1960s, and the years 1966 through 1969 in particular, were marked by a series of back-to-back accomplishments for Mr. Hayden that remarkably increased his stature as a major American poet. But these years were not without their challenges as well—one of them, in particular, would serve as a illustrative (if not defining) moment of Hayden's literary career.

As he continued his literary work at Fisk University, Hayden would develop a complicated and nuanced relationship with the Black Arts Movement (BAM), an African American literary, theater, and fine arts movement that emerged in the mid-1960s. BAM developed as the integrationist strategies of the Civil Rights Movement began to stall and Black Nationalism increased in prominence as an alternative. The aim of BAM was to create art connected to the needs and hopes of African Americans; it was an aesthetic correlation to the Black Power ideology.<sup>30</sup> The writer Amiri Baraka, then known as LeRoi Jones, has been called the movement's father, and his founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theater School in Harlem served as an example for other cultural organizations across the United States.<sup>31</sup> Poets associated with BAM tended to advocate the usage of a vernacular that reflected the experiences of Black Americans.<sup>32</sup> It was a nationalistic movement, however, and went beyond artistic style and structure by insisting on a direct relationship between poetry and politics.<sup>33</sup> Poetry served a revolutionary purpose, one that created a Black identity opposed to a euro-centric worldview, and therefore could not be valued on its aesthetic qualities alone.

A host of influential BAM figures arrived at Fisk University in April of 1966 for the annual Black Writers' Conference. At the event, organized by John O. Killens, a writer in residence at the school, to address the role of contemporary Black writers, BAM's ideals were at the forefront of discussion.<sup>34</sup> Biographers including Hatcher and Derik Smith, while each providing varied interpretations, emphasize Hayden's experience at the conference as a critical point in his development as an artist.

BAM's strong connection between poetry and political aims was one that Hayden disagreed with, and he faced criticism by BAM adherents.<sup>35</sup> Both members of the audience and other session panelists critiqued Hayden's defense of an apolitical poetry that could be defined, in his words, as "the beauty of perception given form . . . the art of saying the impossible."<sup>36</sup> His identification primarily as a poet in a general sense—not specifically a "Negro poet," was also attacked. Some of the disagreement was certainly amicable: Arna Bontemps, a writer and librarian at Fisk, critiqued Hayden's position but clearly understood it and respected him.<sup>37</sup>

30 Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review* 12, no. 4 (1968): 28.

31 Komozi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), ix and 63–68.

32 Robert Chrisman, "Robert Hayden: Modernism and the Afro-American Epic Mission" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1999), 15.

33 *Ibid.*, 30; and Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," 28–29.

34 Killens noted: "Our literature should have social relevance to the world struggle, and especially to the struggle of black Americans." David Llorens, "Writers Converge at Fisk University," *Negro Digest* 15, no. 8 (1966): 57.

35 Chrisman, "Robert Hayden," 31–32.

36 *Ibid.*, 62.

37 "One gets the idea Hayden doesn't want to be labeled a Negro poet, doesn't exactly like that Negro thing," added Bontemps, but in his comment there was a touch of compassion, and a world of understanding. Obviously he was speaking of a man he respected." *Ibid.*, 61.

Although from the same generation as Hayden, the poet Melvin B. Tolson was even more adamant about the problematic nature of Hayden's position.<sup>38</sup> A third panelist, Chicago Black Renaissance poet Margaret Walker, also criticized Hayden's views, and students and other attendees joined in as well.

In Hatcher's view, Hayden was "severely attacked" to the point of "humiliation," but stood his ground in a manner that "required infinitely more courage . . . than compliance would have." Hatcher cites the June 1966 issue of *Negro Digest*, which quotes Hayden's words at the conference. "I have said this until I almost think I'll choke and fall over backwards," Hayden stated as he insisted on his identification as "a poet who happens to be a Negro." He read a work from William Butler Yates, stating, "I didn't have to be Irish to love those lines. . . . Let's quit saying we're Black writers writing to Black folks. It has been given importance it should not have." Hayden later responded with frustration that he was tired of the attacks he faced here and "at every writers conference."<sup>39</sup>

Smith, however, provides a counterpoint to the above, which he sees as an oversimplified, "folkloric" narrative. Referring to the relationship as "symbiotic, rather than antagonistic," Smith deems Hayden to be "a dissenting *participant* in the Black Arts Movement" rather than being in opposition to it. Smith begins with the anecdote that in meeting Haki Madhubuti, one of Hayden's critics from the 1960s, he was surprised when Madhubuti confided, "Hayden is one of my heroes."<sup>40</sup> Danner, another critic from the conference, maintained a personal friendship with Hayden as well as Detroit poet Dudley Randall over the years that followed.<sup>41</sup>

Bontemps also remained close friends with the Haydens, in addition to their relationship as professional colleagues.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Hayden continued to debate and gave moving readings of his work on the final day of the conference.<sup>43</sup> Smith argues that histories and anthologies of BAM are remiss if they fail to include Hayden as one of its leading voices. Smith points out that, rather than ostracizing Hayden from BAM, the Black Writers' Conference actually resulted in Hayden's inclusion in *For Malcolm* (1969), a central BAM anthology.<sup>44</sup>



Melvin B. Tolson, Jacob Redick, Owen Dodson, Robert Hayden, Sterling Brown, Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, and Langston Hughes at Jackson State College in 1952. Photo: New York Public Library Digital Collections.

38 "A man has his biology, his sociology, and his psychology—and then he becomes a poet. . . . I'm a black poet, an African-American poet, a Negro poet. I'm no accident." *Ibid.*, 62–63.

39 *Ibid.*, 64.

40 Smith, *Robert Hayden in Verse*, 4–5.

41 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 38–39.

42 Patrick Patillo, personal communication, April 26, 2022.

43 *Ibid.*, 65.

44 Smith, *Robert Hayden in Verse*, 6–9.

## The 1960s: Continued Success

A number of positive developments in the 1960s cemented Robert Hayden's status as an influential American poet. Around 1960, Hayden was contacted by Rosey Pool, a Dutch scholar of African American poetry who had developed an interest in African American spirituals during her internment in a concentration camp: she wished to publish a volume of Hayden's work. He prepared a collection of his favorites from works he had already written, which Pool arranged to have published in London in 1962 as *A Ballad of Remembrance*. He later rearranged the collection for publication in the United States in September of 1966 as *Selected Poems*, his first commercial success and an accomplishment that Hayden considered to be a turning point in his career.



Undated photo of Robert Hayden. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

Hayden's greatest honor thus far came on April 7, 1966, when he won the Prize for Anglophone Poetry at the first World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. Pool, invited to serve on a selection committee, had nominated *Ballad of Remembrance*; Langston Hughes served as chairman of the jury. Hayden was not involved with the event and may not have been aware that his work has been entered for consideration; he received news of the award by telegram a few days later. He was overjoyed; the award was a vindication of his years of struggle to continue his creative pursuit despite the challenges of his teaching position at Fisk.<sup>45</sup>

Robert Hayden was greatly successful in the final years of the 1960s. In 1967 alone he was promoted to full professor at Fisk University, served as poet-in-residence at Indiana State University, recorded his work for the Library of Congress, was reviewed in *Poetry*, and published *Kaleidoscope*, an anthology of African American poetry. The following year he returned to Ann Arbor as a visiting professor of English. In 1969 he was Bingham Professor at the University of Louisville, and then visiting poet at the University of Washington in Seattle. Finally, and also in 1969, he was offered a position as a professor at the University of Michigan—a position he gladly accepted. In the words of Hatcher: “he entered his fifth decade in 1963 thinking himself a failure. . . . Seven years later he had achieved almost every goal he had set for himself.”<sup>46</sup>

## Career in Ann Arbor

When Robert Hayden took the position at the University of Michigan—offered despite his lack of a PhD and relatively short list of scholarly publications—it was a critical accomplishment and a significant transition for both he and Erma Hayden. According to Hatcher, “he had returned, after twenty-three years of seeming exile, to his beloved Ann Arbor.” He was the first African American faculty member in the English department.<sup>47</sup> In the words of Hatcher:

<sup>45</sup> Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 31–36.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>47</sup> Patrick Patillo, personal communication, March 8, 2022.



If anything, he took the position at Michigan and the growing recognition as confirmation of his greatest hopes for his work, and as a confirmation that he should proceed with even greater intensity. At last he was being taken seriously as a professional poet, not simply by a handful of followers or by the esoteric community of fellow poets, but by a prominent university which had hired him in recognition of his talent.<sup>48</sup>

The Haydens' return to Michigan, and Mr. Hayden's continued career at the University of Michigan, was not without challenge, especially at first. When searching for a house in Ann Arbor, the Haydens found limited options. Housing discrimination against African Americans was widespread; another faculty member helped Erma and Robert find the Gardner Street house in Lower Burns Park,<sup>49</sup> which they purchased in 1969.

They were largely welcomed into the neighborhood; however, they faced one instance of racial intimidation: Klu Klux Klan members scattered racist pamphlets on the lawn and in the bushes of the Hayden home, before being driven away by the Hayden family's Jewish neighbors.<sup>50</sup>

Mr. Hayden was also disappointed to have to turn down the highest honor that the United States can bestow upon a poet, one he had hoped for: Consultant in Poetry to Library of Congress, a position now known as Poet Laureate of the United States. Receiving the invitation in 1969, shortly after beginning his position at the university, the problem was one of timing—the chair of the English department discouraged him from accepting, as it would have required an immediate leave of absence from his duties as a professor.

Nonetheless, Hayden continued to work. He published *Words in the Mourning Time* in 1970, a collection of works focusing on the Long Hot Summer of 1967, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Robert Kennedy, and the Vietnam War. The collection contrasted these sorrowful events with a hopeful vision of transcendence for the future of humankind that he derived from his Bahá'í principles. *The Night-Blooming Cereus* (1973) also expounded on these themes. At the time, he referred to the latter collection as “my favorite book up to now.” During this time he also authored several textbook chapters focusing on modern American poetry. In 1975 he published *Angle of Ascent*, a selection of poems from throughout his career, with W.W. Norton. Contracting with this large publisher allowed him a form of popular success he had not previously known, as his work would now be available in major commercial bookstores.<sup>51</sup>

A few months later, Hayden was once again offered the Library of Congress position. This time, he accepted. He served from 1976 to 1977 and was reappointed for another year, into 1978. This position kept him to a busy schedule with interviews, correspondence, speaking engagements, curating the library's poetry collections, and other responsibilities of the position.

It was “a burdensome honor, but an honor which he, in his customary fashion, handled with a serious regard for quality.” During this time he also took on the role of poet-in-residence at Howard University, where he mentored student poets.

Almost as significantly, Hayden was elected a Fellow of the Academy of American Poets

48 Ibid.

49 Patrick Patillo, personal interview, March 8, 2022.

50 Ibid.

51 Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, 43–45.

in 1977.<sup>52</sup> In recognition of his accomplishments he began to receive a list of honorary doctorates: from Grand Valley State College (1975), Brown University (1976), Benedict College (1977), Wayne State University (1977), and Fisk University (1978). He met president Jimmy Carter and first lady Amy Carter around the time of the president's inauguration in 1977.

### **Life and Career of Erma Hayden**

Born in Philadelphia in 1911, Erma Morris was the daughter of a Jamaican mother and a father from Grenada and Honduras. They met at Howard University's medical school. Morris was raised in an Episcopalian household in Detroit by her aunt and uncle after the death of her parents. Morris was a concert pianist from a family where everybody played the piano.

It was a love of theater, poetry, and music that connected Morris with Robert Hayden when they met in Detroit in the 1930s. After the Haydens married and were living in Nashville, Mrs. Hayden was supervisor of music for the Nashville public school system, the first African American to hold that position. Playing in genres ranging from classical to blues, Hayden taught music in Nashville, New York, Ann Arbor, and around the world. "She not only made a living, she was great at it," her son-in-law Patrick Patillo remembers.

Erma was closely involved with the Bahá'í Faith leadership, and devoted herself wholeheartedly to its work. This was especially true later in her career while Robert was occupied with his duties as Consultant in Poetry. Mrs. Hayden served on the organization's National Teaching Committee for many years.<sup>53</sup>

### **Legacy**

Not feeling well, suspecting cancer due to a family history, Mr. Hayden avoided a doctor visit until February of 1979. He was diagnosed with cancer. Hayden died a year later on February 25, 1980, the day after a tribute event that he was not feeling well enough to attend. Instead, some of the attendees had visited Robert, Erma, and Maia at the house. Erma Hayden also died in the home on December 22, 1994. The Haydens' daughter, Maia Patillo, also resided in the home later in life. It is currently owned by Maia's husband, Patrick Patillo.

Although Mr. Hayden certainly earned a wealth of accolades during his career—numerous publications, literary awards, and honorary degrees—his unassuming, humble manner and lifestyle, along with a penchant for avoiding the confines of groups and labels, likely cost him a certain amount of praise and acclaim during his lifetime. Instead, through his devotion to his work, he earned what his biographer John Hatcher termed the "belated recognition" of a "greater readership from the vertical audience" of those who would discover and appreciate his work in the years after his passing.<sup>54</sup>

### **Significance of the District**

The Michigan Local Historic Districts Act requires local municipalities to evaluate proposed historic districts according to the same criteria used by the National Register of

<sup>52</sup> Tad Richards, *Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Literature* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2005), s.v. "Robert Hayden."

<sup>53</sup> John Hatcher, "Amazing Nashville Bahá'í Community in the 1960s," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, (2019).

<sup>54</sup> Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness*, xi.

Historic Places.<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, the Robert and Erma Hayden House Historic District Study Committee finds that the proposed historic district Robert and Erma Hayden House Historic District is significant under National Register of Historic Places *Criterion B* as it illustrates “the lives of persons significant in our past . . . within a local, state, or national historic context.”<sup>56</sup>

### **National Register of Historic Places Criterion B**

According to the National Park Service (the entity that manages the National Register of Historic Places program), properties are eligible under Criterion B if they are “associated with a person’s productive life, reflecting the time period when he or she achieved significance.” The National Park Service suggests that a comparative analysis is warranted: “ascertain the length and nature of his/her association with the property under study and identify the other properties associated with the individual.” Other properties associated with the productive life of the Haydens would be their 1946–1969 residence in Nashville, as well as Haven Hall at the University of Michigan, where Mr. Hayden had his seventh-floor office during his time as a professor. However, the Nashville residence no longer stands, and Haven Hall does not represent a location where Mr. Hayden produced his literary works (and it has no direct connection with Mrs. Hayden).<sup>57</sup> Other residences of the Haydens, such as the Beakes Street house in Ann Arbor, predate their “productive life.” Thus, the 1201 Gardner Avenue residence bears the strongest association with the “significant persons” of Robert and Erma Hayden.

### **Period of Significance**

The period of significance is 1969 through 1980, reflecting the time period when both Mr. and Mrs. Hayden resided at the property.

### **Criteria Consideration G**

According to *Consideration G*, a property with significance from fewer than 50 years ago must be shown to be of “exceptional importance.” The National Park Service suggests, as examples, homes of individuals nationally recognized in arts and literature as eligible under Consideration G.<sup>58</sup> The study committee has determined the Hayden House to be of exceptional importance in the context of modern American poetry due to its association with Robert Hayden.

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<sup>55</sup> Public Act 169 of 1970, § 399.203(c).

<sup>56</sup> *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, 14.

<sup>57</sup> Maia Patillo, as an adult, returned to Nashville and visited the location to find that the house had been demolished. Mr. Hayden produced the large share of his work in the second floor office of his home, not in his departmental office or elsewhere. Patrick Patillo, personal communication, March 8, 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Residences of playwright Eugene O’Neill, author Rachel Carson, and musician Charlie “Bird” Parker are given as specific examples. See *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*, 14, and *Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties that Have Achieved Significance Within the Past Fifty Years*, 13.

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## **Photographs**















