



History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

July-August 2019

Upcoming Events

50 Years Since Apollo

Monday, July 8 – 6:00 p.m.

Delta Township District Library, 5130 Davenport Drive

On July 20, 1969, man first set foot on the moon. Learn about the history of the Apollo program, what we have learned from the lunar samples, and about humanity's plans to return to the moon from NASA's Solar System Ambassador Nicolle Zellner. Sponsored by the Delta Township District Library.

Downtown Historic Churches Walking Tour

Saturday, July 27 – 10:00 a.m.

Corner of Capitol and Ottawa at Central United Methodist Church

You asked and we're responding! After many requests, HSGL is refreshing our walking tour of downtown historic churches. The tour will include some of Lansing's oldest congregations and most beautiful historic buildings, including Christ Community Church (formerly First Baptist), Central United Methodist Church, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, St. Mary's Catholic Cathedral, First Presbyterian Church, the former Christian Science Church (at 505 Seymour) and we'll finish at the old St. Paul's German Evangelical Church, located at Walnut and Genesee. We'll be talking about a variety of topics, including architecture, the relationship between churches and the capitol, how churches benefitted from the local auto industry, and the evolution of a German congregation during World War I.

Pave the Way: Intersection of I-496 and Education

Saturday, July 27 – 11:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.

EC3 Educational Child Care Center (former Main Street School), 1715 W. Malcolm X Street

"Intersection of I-496 and Education" will explore the changing dynamics of education in Lansing during the 1960s, including desegregation of schools and busing. Former teachers at Main Street School will participate in a panel discussion, and the Pave the Way Project will collect ephemera, photographs and

video memories, along with hosting a curated bus tour of the I-496 route. Anyone who went to school at the Main, Lincoln, Michigan, Kalamazoo and Sexton schools are invited. Also during the event, the presentation of the Morris-Peckham Award will be made, honoring Adolph Burton and Kenneth Turner for their work preserving local history.

A Pave the Way Tour of Important West Side African American Homes

Thursday, August 22 – 7:00 p.m.

Sexton High School, 102 McPherson

HSGL will be hosting a walking tour on the West Side focusing on African American history as it relates to the Pave the Way project. The tour will include the homes of the Letts family (of Letts Bridal), the McGuire family, doctors, dentists, lawyers, elected officials, and others. The tour will provide insights into a tight knit African American neighborhood created as the result of the I-496 construction. The tour is in cooperation with the West Side Neighborhood Association.

Progress on Pave the Way: The I-496 Project

by Bill Castanier

If you hop on I-496 at Waverly Road, it takes about seven and a half minutes to drive from Lansing's western border to the U.S. 127 interchange, its eastern city limits. The streets fly by so fast you don't notice what's on either side of the expressway, and for sure you give no thought to what was in the expressway's path before it opened in 1970, erasing an entire neighborhood. *Pave the Way: The I-496 Project* is opening people's eyes and ears to the history of that neighborhood.

Pave the Way is a partnership between the Historical Society of Greater Lansing (HSGL), the city of Lansing, and the National Park Service to tell the story of a vibrant African American neighborhood that fell to the wrecking ball. That neighborhood,

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Progress on Pave the Way: The I-496 Project - Cont'd

on the St. Joseph-Main Street corridor, stretched from River Street on the east to Clare Street on the west.

It was a quiet walkable neighborhood with more than 600 homes and dozens of businesses, including clothing stores, groceries, and beauty and barber shops. It was a pleasant, hospitable and welcoming neighborhood. Children walked to schools on Michigan Avenue, Kalamazoo Street and Main Street, while their parents walked across the street to their jobs at Oldsmobile or nearby drop forges. On summer evenings you would find residents tending their backyard gardens and later retiring to front porches to talk well into the night. The sound of



Fig. 1

kids playing stickball and jumping rope echoed up and down St. Joe and Main streets until the street lights came on and they ran home.

By recording oral histories, collecting and exhibiting personal ephemera, preserving family photographs, and recreating the neighborhood on-line, Pave the Way is rebuilding and preserving the history of a vital neighborhood. Or as Adolph Burton, who grew up in two homes along the expressway's path, calls it: "a way of life."

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

P.O. Box 12095 ~ Lansing, MI 48901

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The driving forces behind Pave the Way are the people who lived and grew up in the neighborhood and who are telling their own stories. Adolph Burton, a retiree of the Michigan Department of Transportation, and his high school friend Kenneth Turner, a retiree from Lansing Board of Water and Light, are two neighbors who have been at the forefront of saving those original stories. For more than a year, they have interviewed and shot video of more than 60 neighbors whose way of life was disrupted by the construction of I-496. The interviews will be used to create a documentary to tell the story of the vital neighborhood.

The oral histories include interviews with business owners, teachers, pastors, politicians and workers who lived in the path of I-496 or in adjacent neighborhoods affected by the expressway. These stories have revealed some amazing tales. Overriding themes include incredible stories of a bustling, vital neighborhood with good schools and nearby churches.

This stands in direct contrast to an important piece of ephemera that was discovered in a scrapbook compiled by Richard Letts who headed the city of Lansing's relocation program. In 1966 several dozen well-meaning white residents, including prominent civil rights activists from the nearby communities of East Lansing, Okemos, Meridian Township, and Haslett signed an open letter "To The Residents of Greater Lansing." In it they said that "the construction of Highway I-496 offers all of us a rare opportunity to break up a pattern of segregation...." Further they wrote: "Such a chance to break up "ghetto" living and eradicate sub-standard housing in a major metropolitan area may not come again for many years."



Fig. 2

To be fair, this group bought into what some historians and writers called the "highwaymen" juggernaut of public policy and public relations that can be traced to the "Good Roads" movement of the late 1800s and the rise of the automobile in the early 20th century. One strategy used by both New York mega-road builder Robert Moses and President Eisenhower had been to characterize the proposed route that expressways would take

through metropolitan areas as “ghetto,” which made the decision to erase entire neighborhoods more palatable.

Their plea, however, flies in the face of reality on two fronts. First, everyone who lived in that neighborhood will tell you without exception that it was not a ghetto. Second, at the time (1966), African Americans and other minorities were prohibited from living in many communities due to restrictive deeds and pernicious real estate practices that steered minorities to certain neighborhoods within the city of Lansing.

Pave the Way has brought to light the blatant “steering” of minorities into certain areas of the city. The dramatic photographs of segregated water fountains in the South are often used to visually tell the story of racism. Cities like Lansing may not have had segregated drinking fountains, but every Sunday realtors would run classified ads in the newspaper under the heading “Colored.” Newspaper ads were a different vehicle for racism, but they had the same impact as signs hanging above drinking fountains.

Telling the story of the neighborhood against this backdrop is important, but it is not the major focus of the Pave the Way Project, which is to bring life to the neighborhood and those who lived there.

Take for example the Abram family whose two daughters became trail blazers in equality. Annette Abrams in 1966 became Michigan’s first African American contestant in the Miss Michigan competition and went on to an important position in state government. Her sister Rosalyn became one of the first African American women to rise to prominence as a TV news anchor.

Adolph’s brother, Michael Burton, became one of the most recognized automotive designers in the United States, and his career can be traced directly to his childhood days on St. Joseph Street where he drew futuristic automotive designs, one of which looks remarkably like a modern SUV.

For their amazing dedication to preserving local Lansing history, Adolph Burton and Kenneth Turner on July 27 will be presented with the Historical Society of Greater Lansing’s annual Morris-Peckham Award for preserving local history. The award is named for Linda Peckham and her late husband Robert Morris, who were pioneers in preservation and local history. The event will be held at the former Main Street School, as part of the Pave the Way program “Intersection of I-496 and Education.” (See Upcoming Events for details.)

By the time of the 50th anniversary of the opening of I-496 in 2020, Pave the Way will have helped preserve the memory of a lost neighborhood. There will be exhibits, a publication, a research portal, and an interactive online research tool to identify

the homes and homeowners who were in the way of I-496.

Nearly 1000 individuals have already attended Pave the Way events. The following items illustrate what has already been accomplished:

- In partnership with the Library of Michigan, created a public research portal where all materials pertaining to the project will be archived.
- In partnership with the Michigan Department of Transportation and the Capital Area District Library, have undertaken scanning of 900 files relating to the homes and businesses that were destroyed for the I-496 construction.
- In partnership with the Michigan Department of Civil Rights, held a program on redlining.
- Completed the design for the exhibit, which will be on display in the Library of Michigan in 2020.
- Designed a template for the I-496 Project Scrapbook.
- Designed the website for the virtual tour.
- Hosted six advisory committee meetings for planning purposes.
- Conducted six sessions at area churches and community centers where photos and documents were scanned and oral histories conducted.
- Recorded more than 60 video oral histories.
- Completed one bus tour of the I-496 footprint.
- Created community-wide support for the Pave the Way Project.

Pave the Way is an on-going project and still looking for important ephemera and artifacts, including handwritten letters and recipes, photographs, employment identification, or any material relating to the construction of the expressway that can be scanned and placed in an online research portal. To share ephemera or offer assistance, please contact: pavetheway2020gmt@gmail.com

Illustrations:

Fig. 1: Visitors to the Juneteenth Celebration viewing a 1949 aerial view of the I-496 corridor and pinpointing their homes that were torn down.

Fig. 2: Pave the Way float in the Juneteenth parade. Ted O’Dell driving a 1923 Model T with Olivia Letts in the front seat, and Adolph Burton and Mary Jane McGuire in the back seat.



Historical Society of Greater Lansing
P.O. Box 12095
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ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

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Historical Society of Greater Lansing, P.O. Box 12095 Lansing MI 48901

Please accept my application for:

- New Membership
- Renewal Membership
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in the Historical Society of Greater Lansing

I have enclosed:

- \$25 Individual Membership
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Historical Society of Greater Lansing

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