



## **Statement of Significance**

### **Description of Historic District (What)**

The historic district of Portage, Michigan is defined by the original township boundaries, now the City of Portage located in the county of Kalamazoo in the State of Michigan. Township and range 3S - 11W; Coordinates: 42°12'35"N 85°35'19"W. Portage was incorporated as a township on April 2, 1838, and as the City of Portage on December 31, 1963. The Portage Historic District includes sites dated between 1840 and 1931.

### **Heritage Value (Why)**

Portage Historic District's significance is reflected in its historical importance as a "cross roads" both geographically and culturally. Geographically, Portage has historically been "the place where the trails crossed" and is today, located at the intersection of highways I-94 and US-131. Culturally, Portage brought together Native American, English and Dutch settlers whose impact is seen in the places they have lived and in the buildings. Portage City Centre as the nucleus of the community, is also a "cross roads" in the heart of the community.

The value of Portage Historic District is in the scattered buildings that historically reflect its early settlement, development of a township that was dependent upon farming (i.e. agricultural period). The Portage Historic District is composed of homes and barns/outbuildings, places of education, commerce and burial grounds all stemming for Portage's initial development. Many of the buildings have been modified for new purposes as is common in the history of the growth of a township, as well as transition to a city.

The heritage of Portage Historic District is reflected in the examples of shifting architectural styles within the district. These structures document the aspiration and achievement of those instrumental in the development of Portage. It is also remembered in the names of streets named for early pioneers such as Schuring, Bacon, Matteson, Osterhout and Kilgore and in Austin Lake named for another early pioneer.

In the Portage Historic District, there is a predominance of Greek Revival architecture. Greek Revival was a craze that swept the country from 1861 to 1880 after the Revolutionary War. Americans believed they were carrying on the legacy of classic Greek democracy. Many of the remaining structures are commonly called Midwestern

Farmhouses, an adaptation of Greek Revival that is found throughout Midwestern townships.

The heritage value of Portage Historic District is seen in its remaining one room schoolhouses, an important characteristic of a Midwestern township.

The 1835 constitution of Michigan established a separate department of education run by a superintendent, a concept that introduced uniform schooling in Michigan, and influenced educational policy throughout the United States. To sustain a statewide school system, revenue from the sale of Section 16 in each township was placed in a perpetual fund.

The heritage value of Portage Historic District is most importantly reflected in evidence of agriculture as the main economic activity before 1860. Celery Flats/Portage Creek Bicentennial Park was developed as a living exhibit on the history of the celery industry in Portage. Several important historic buildings were restored and relocated to the park; an 1846 Greek Revival Home, a barn from 1902, a grain elevator and mill from 1913, and a schoolhouse from 1856. In addition, the number of remaining farmstead outbuildings and barns, as well as the sprawling nature of designated sites among the municipal boundaries further illustrates agrarian rural basis of Portage.

### **Character Defining Elements (How)**

The Portage Historic District structures followed national trends in building style; structures run the gamut of historical stages. Structures that have survived the vicissitudes of time document the aspirations and achievements of those who made Portage history. Some have been meticulously restored, but more often many are in need of repair and refurbishing as Portage has become less focused on farming and more on industry and commerce.

Most of the buildings in the Historic District retain much of their original character which allows observers to determine the approximate age of the buildings. Settings for these homes reflect the era of agronomy, with barns and outbuildings scattered on select properties.

Builders often sourced materials from the land on which these structures were built. The materials and the handmade, detailed nature of these structures reflect the era of their construction. It is difficult to duplicate unique details using materials and methods available today.

From 1838 until roughly around 1861, the craze for anything to do with democracy influenced architecture. Greek Revival architecture, more modestly portrayed in the Midwest – including homes sometimes called Midwest Farmhouses – dot the landscape. Seventeen of the buildings in the Portage Historic District retain elements from this time period such as temple pitched roofs, wide entablatures, cornices and pilasters.

The years following the Civil War were an era of great prosperity. From 1860 to about 1880, the Italianate Style, a more ornate style of architecture that embodied the growth

of prosperity, was in vogue. Buildings built largely out of brick with hipped roofs, cupolas, long narrow windows and doors, decorative window moldings and eave brackets were popular. Seven of the historic properties of Portage retain these elements.

From 1890 to 1900, an even more ornate style, the Queen Anne, was dominant. These homes satisfied a craving for individual monuments to self-made entrepreneurs. Queen Anne buildings “resemble ancestral seats that have been modified again and again over the ages.” The Portage Historic District has four properties that reflect the steep roofs, turrets, towers ornate decoration and most of all the nooks of Queen Anne architecture.

The American Foursquare was popular from the 1890’s to the late 1930’s. Easy to build, Foursquares consist of a cube shape with a pyramidal roof and large porches. A center dormer, if not more on each side, were also common. Two American Foursquares remain in the Portage Historic District.

Beginning in 1905 and continuing through the 1920’s, a trend reflecting “back to nature” was the vogue. Modest homes with quaint decorative embellishments, such as low pitched roofs, dormer windows, and spacious front porches are often called Bungalows. Two of the Portage Historic District homes are bungalows.

Dated: September 13, 2017

Approved by the Portage Historic District Commission

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