

**City of Portage, Michigan  
Historic District Study Committee**

**Historic District Modification**

District #6 Schoolhouse  
8009 Cox's Drive  
Portage, Michigan 49002

**Preliminary Report**

July 14, 2016

**Introduction**

Property addressed as 8009 Cox's Drive and commonly known as the District #6 Schoolhouse is a historic district in the City of Portage. A request from Mr. Michael Kasten, owner of the property under Kasten Investments LLC, to demolish the schoolhouse building on the 5.53-acre property was received by the Historic District Commission on May 23, 2016. The owner's plan to demolish the historic structure would nullify the property's historic designation, removing one of the 40 properties from the City of Portage roster.

On September 25, 2007, the Portage City Council appointed the Historic District Commission as a standing Historic District Study Committee (HDSC). The HDSC is charged with review and recommendation for the requested Historic District Modification at 8009 Cox's Drive (District #6 Schoolhouse).

Alternatively, the owner has offered the building to the city at no cost, with the condition that the building be relocated from the property on Cox's Drive.

**The Charge of the Committee**

The committee is charged with reviewing the request and acting as set out in Public Act 169 of 1970. Specifically, the HDSC must:

1. Conduct a photographic inventory of resources within the existing historic district.
2. Conduct basic research of the historic district and the historic resources located within the district.
3. Determine the total number of historic and non-historic resources within the historic district and the percentage of historic resources of that total. In evaluating the significance of historic resources, the committee shall be guided by the selection criteria for evaluation issued by the United States secretary of the interior for inclusion of resources in the national register of historic places.
4. Prepare a preliminary report that addresses at a minimum all of the following:
  - a. The charge of the committee.
  - b. The composition of the committee membership.
  - c. The historic district studied.
  - d. The boundaries for the historic district in writing and on maps.
  - e. The history of the historic district.

- f. The significance of the district as a whole, as well as a sufficient number of its individual resources to fully represent the variety of resources found within the district, relative to the evaluation criteria.
5. Transmit copies of the preliminary report for review and recommendation to the Portage Planning Commission, to the Michigan historical commission and to the state historic preservation review board.
6. Make copies of the preliminary report available to the public.
7. Hold a public hearing not less than 60 days after the transmittal of the preliminary report.
8. Following the public hearing, prepare and submit a final report with its recommendations and the recommendations, if any, of the Portage Planning Commission to the City Council. If the recommendation is to modify the historic district, the final report must include a draft of a proposed ordinance.

## **The Composition of Committee Membership**

### Voting Members

The HDSC is comprised of members of the Portage Historic District Commission: Suzanne Nemeth, Russell Randall, Katie VanLonkhuyzen, James Ebert, Fred Grunert, Jessie Duniphin, Martha Deming Maytnier, John Lotz and Collin Forrest.

### Non-Voting Participants

City of Portage Staff Liaison: Erica Eklov

## **Historic District Location**

Property Address: 8007 Cox's Drive (mailing address: 8009 Cox's Drive)

Parcel ID# 00024-081-O

## **Written and Visual Boundaries of District**

The description of the current historic district:

SEC 24-3-11 COM AT NW COR SEC 24, TH S 132 FT TO P.O.B., TH CONT S TO NW COR OF S  $\frac{3}{4}$  OF W  $\frac{1}{2}$  OF NW  $\frac{1}{4}$  SEC 24, TH E 420 FT, TH N TO N LI OF SD SEC, TH W 120 FT TH S 137 FT, TH W 199.39 FT, TH N 5 FT, TH W 100.61 FT TO P.O.B., RES COX DR AND CENTRE AVE FOR ROW.

Aerial and parcel maps are attached to this report.

On June 9, 2016, Suzanne Nemeth, Katie VanLonkhuyzen and Martha Maytnier, along with Erica Eklov, visited the property to tour and photograph the historic resource. Photographs were taken of the structure proposed to be removed from the historic district, in context within surrounding buildings, neighboring parcels and the streetscape (see photographic attachments).

The property address for the entire parcel is 8007 Cox's Drive (parent parcel). There are a total of five buildings on the property: the schoolhouse (currently designated office use), two utility sheds, one warehouse and one commercial office building. Only the schoolhouse is significant and historic. (The Schoolhouse has a mailing address of 8009 Cox's Drive, while the second office building is addressed as 8007 Cox's Drive.)

## **The History of the Historic District**

“Known as Pershing School, this was District #6 Schoolhouse built in 1927 by the Portage Schools. The brick building sit on the site of the earlier wooden schoolhouse, and is now used as a business office.” (Taken from Where the Trails Crossed page 48.)

“The District #6 school is unique as it is a true reflection of the growth of education in Portage and represents an important transition in our community's educational history, a transition that saw Portage move from the one room school system to the consolidated public school system that we still utilize today.

Prior to 1927 this sight was occupied by the District #6 one-room school. A classic wooden framed structure, the school featured the a-typical bell tower to call students to class, boy's and girl's outdoor privy's and a small shed to house a horse used by the teacher. During the patriotic fervor of WWI, the 1918 class voted to name the school Pershing after the great World War I United States General John J. Pershing.

By 1925 exciting things were occurring within the Township. There was a steady growth of families moving into the community and an effort was underway to consolidate Portage Schools. Just three years earlier in 1922 Portage entered into a partnership with Western State's Teachers College - today's W.M.U., in which Portage would provide proper school buildings and equipment and Western would provide teachers. That same year a brand-new two story consolidated school opened in the center of the township. The old District #6 was pushing almost seventy years of age at this time and it was decided by the School Board that a new two room school should be built to continue with consolidation efforts and to better serve the growing student body. Always a frugal board, the one-room school was picked up and moved a bit to the east to accommodate the new two room building. In fact, the one-room would continue to be used for quite a few years as a school meeting hall until it was again picked up and moved, this time across Centre Avenue and converted into a private home.

The new #6 was an impressive, state of the art structure towering over the prairie of southeast Portage Township. Made of brick, it was much better insulated and therefore stayed warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer. It featured a heating and electrical plant, modern classrooms, indoor bathrooms and the like all of which were designed to help raise the bar of education being received by Portage students. It also gave potential "investors" in the Township of Portage clear evidence that the Township was moving out of the past and into the future. The #6 two-room proudly served the students of Portage through the latter half of the "Roaring Twenties," was a beacon to students during the "Great Depression of the 1930's," did its patriotic duty during World War II and continued on into the economic boom of the 1950's. As the student population exploded (due to the Baby Boom after World War II) it was decided that a new, larger and more modern school was necessary. Once again the school board, being frugal, spared the old two-room by constructing the new elementary school further to the south along Cox's Drive. In fact, the old two-room continued to serve as classrooms until being permanently retired sometime in the early 1960's. The building was repurposed and used as a clothing redistribution center through the 1970's before sadly falling into a state of disrepair.

This should have been the inglorious end of the District #6 two-room however it was acquired and converted into a business in the 1980's preserving it for future generations. It should be noted that despite the conversion of the interior, the exterior lines remain identical to what the structure looked like when constructed for the students of Portage almost ninety years ago.” (Taken from June 10, 2016 history researched and written by Portage District Library Local History Librarian Steve Rossio.)

### **The Significance of the District**

Of the eight one-room schools that were constructed in Portage, five no longer exist; one has been moved and restored (#8 – Prairie Edge School now on display at Celery Flats Historical Area park); one has been moved and heavily altered with none of the original façade present (#2 school – 6235 Oakland Drive); one remains on the original site and has been converted into a private home (#7 school – 506 Bacon Avenue). Of the three "two room" school buildings (#5, #6 and #7) only Cox's Drive school remains, the others (#5 and #7) have been demolished. Of the "public" buildings of Portage, buildings that show the transition from original farming community to the educational and economic core that Portage is today, only the Cox's Drive structure remains.

### **Additional Information**

On May 18, 2016 the City of Portage Building Inspector and Fire Marshal performed a walk through inspection of the building at 8009 Cox's Drive (parent parcel 8007 Cox's Drive). The purpose of the inspection was at the request of a potential tenant for a proposed change of occupancy (use) from a business to an assembly (church). The potential tenant and property owner were also in attendance during the inspection.

The results of the city building inspection indicated that the following items were found to be in need of correction/modification (the list is not inclusive of other electrical, plumbing or mechanical items that may also be in need of repair):

1. The ceiling for the building was sagging in several areas and showed signs of water damage;
2. The foundation walls for the building showed signs of water leakage. In addition, a small room in the basement was once used as a cistern and now appears to have storm water from the adjacent parking lot entering through the exterior basement wall.
3. Mold was found in several areas of the building;
4. Accessibility for the building (handicap ramp) needs to be provided. In addition, barrier free rest rooms and fixtures need to be provided;
5. Proper handrails need to be installed on the stairways for the interior entryway and the basement;
6. Emergency lighting and exit signage needs to be installed throughout the building;
7. The cooking stove/oven (circa 1990) located in the basement needs to be removed or a proper ventilation hood needs to be installed.

In addition, the proposed use (church) wished to remove several of the interior walls to reconfigure the building layout. In doing so, signed and sealed plans from a State of Michigan registered architect or engineer would be required.

### **Recommendation**

Following the study of the Historic District at 8009 Cox's Drive, it is recommended that the request from property owner Mr. Michael Kasten (Kasten Investments, LLC) to modify the Historic District via demolition be denied. Of the 40 sites in the Portage Historic District, only four are schools; part of the original Portage Public Schools' framework. Cox's Drive is one of only three ever constructed 2-room schoolhouses in Portage and the only surviving one. By state law, the HDSC can only remove a property from the historic register if it has met one of three criteria:

- (1) The historic district has lost those physical characteristics that enabled establishment of the district. – Cox's school remains unaltered on the exterior.
- (2) The historic district was not significant in the way previously defined. – Its significance remains one of the originals schools as mentioned above.
- (3) The historic district was established pursuant to defective procedures. – This is not the case for any City of Portage site.

The Cox's Drive School serves as the only original school constructed of brick and is notable for its unique architectural style. Portage Public School District demolished the 1922 Central Administration/Agricultural School building in 2014. The next oldest remaining "modern" school is dated 1949.

### **Next Steps**

While relocation of a resource from its original location is not ideal, if relocation is a viable option, the HDSC will support such an action. The Portage City Administration has initiated evaluation for the potential of acquiring the resource; however, there is no evident need for the building currently. The HDSC is currently researching alternative options for preservation of the resource, including but not limited to: finding an outside interested third party willing to assist in relocation and assumption of the resource, the city assuming the resource and relocating the building to a city-owned property.





# Aerial Map

8007/8009 Cox's Drive



# 8009 Cox's Drive Photos Study Committee Report





**Front façade – looking east**



**Southwest corner – looking northeast**



**Southwest corner – looking northeast**



**South elevation – looking north**



**Rear (east) elevation – looking west**



**Northeast corner – looking southwest**



**North elevation – looking south**



**Northwest corner – looking southeast**



**Front (west elevation) entry overhang**



**Façade sign**



**Façade – from Cox's Drive**



**Façade – from Cox's Drive**



**South elevation – side & rear parking  
(from southwest lot corner)**



**South & rear elevation – side & rear parking  
(from southeast parking corner)**



**South & rear elevation – side & rear parking  
(from southeast lot corner)**



**Rear elevation – from northeast lot  
corner**



**Corner of Cox's Drive and East Centre Avenue (schoolhouse indicated)**



**View of rear elevation and lot from East Centre Avenue (looking west)**



## South view Cox's Drive

*(courtesy Google street view)*



## North view Cox's Drive (schoolhouse indicated)

*(courtesy Google street view)*



**Interior of front entry**



**Front entry interior & basement access**



**Front entry – upper level (north)**



**Front entry – upper level (south)**



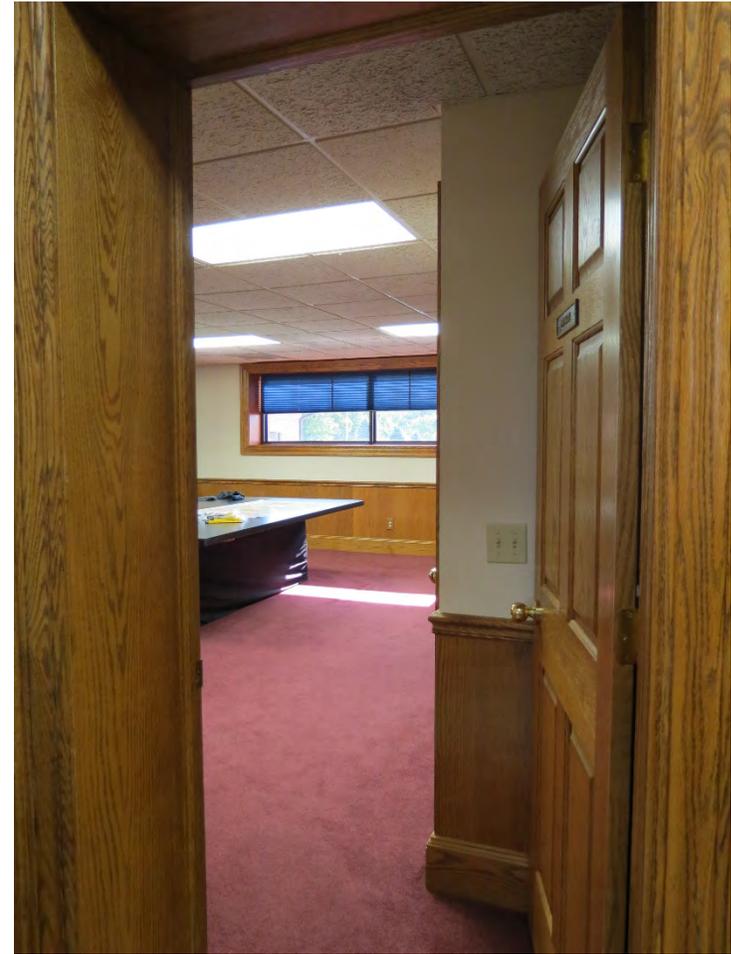
**Middle entrance off upper level entry**



**North doors off upper level entry  
(bathroom on left, office on right)**



**Upper level bathroom  
(northwest corner)**



**Office #1 (northeast corner)**



**Office #1 (looking west)**



**Office #1 bathroom (northwest inset corner)**



**Office #1 closet/side room (looking west)**



**Entry to Conference Room (looking south)**



**Conference Room (door to back mud room/entry – looking southeast)**



**Southeast corner mud room**



**View to Office #2 and front entryway  
(looking west)**



**Office #2 and closet (looking  
southwest)**



**Office #2 (looking southeast)**



**Office #2 Closet (original moldings)**



**Front upper level entry (looking west)**



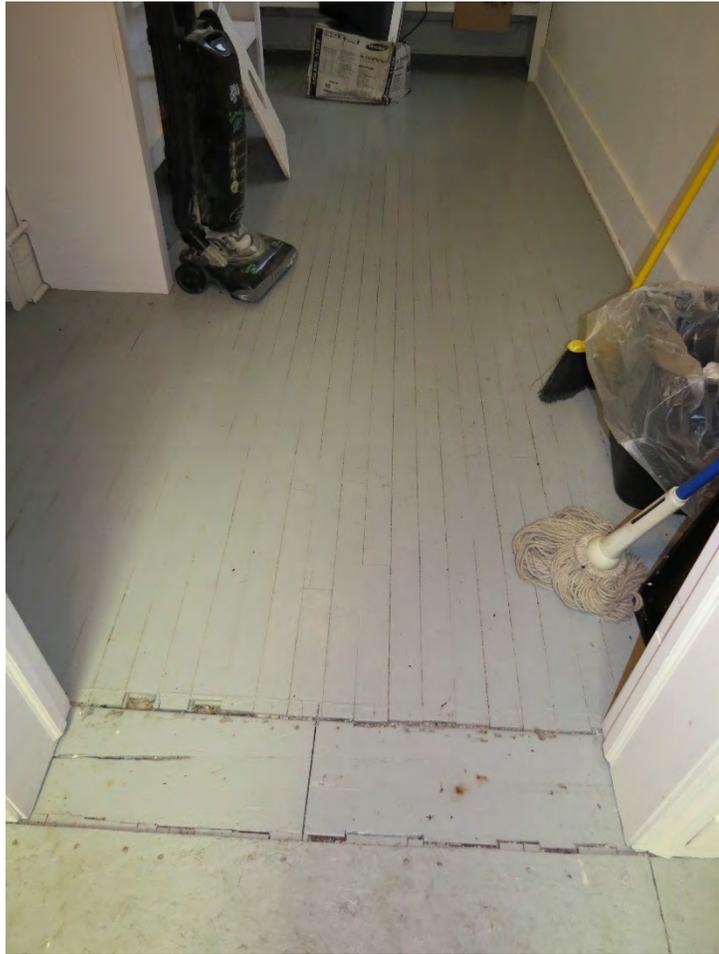
**Southwest corner room (looking south)**



**Southwest storage room off upper level entryway**



**Interior of storage room (built-in wall cubby in upper right of photo)**



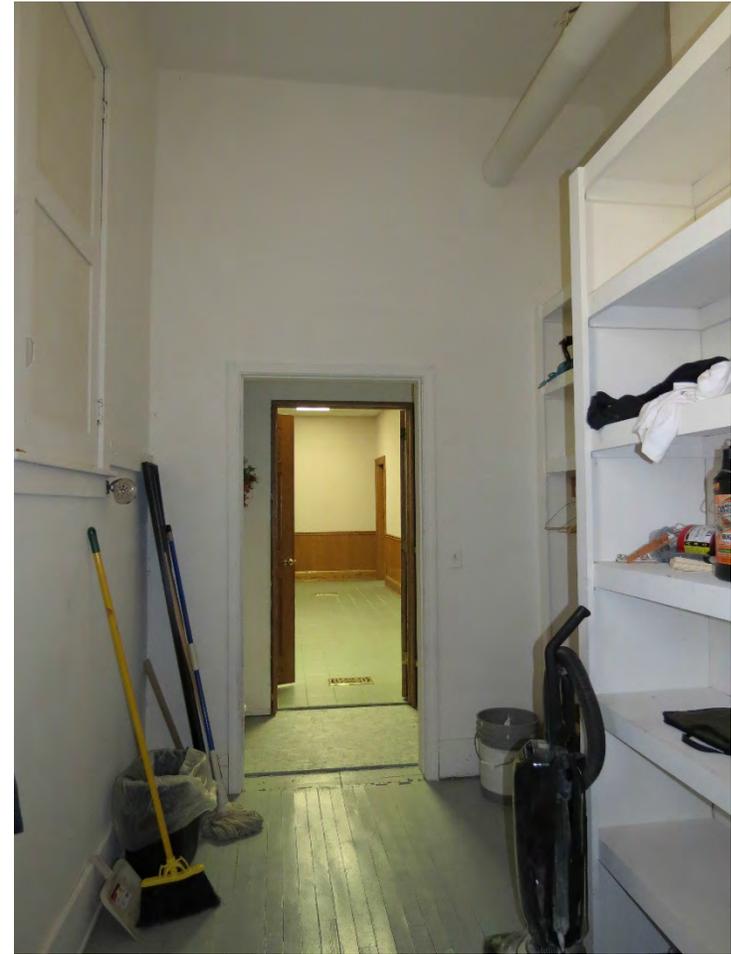
**Original flooring in storage room**



**Interior of built-in cubby storage**



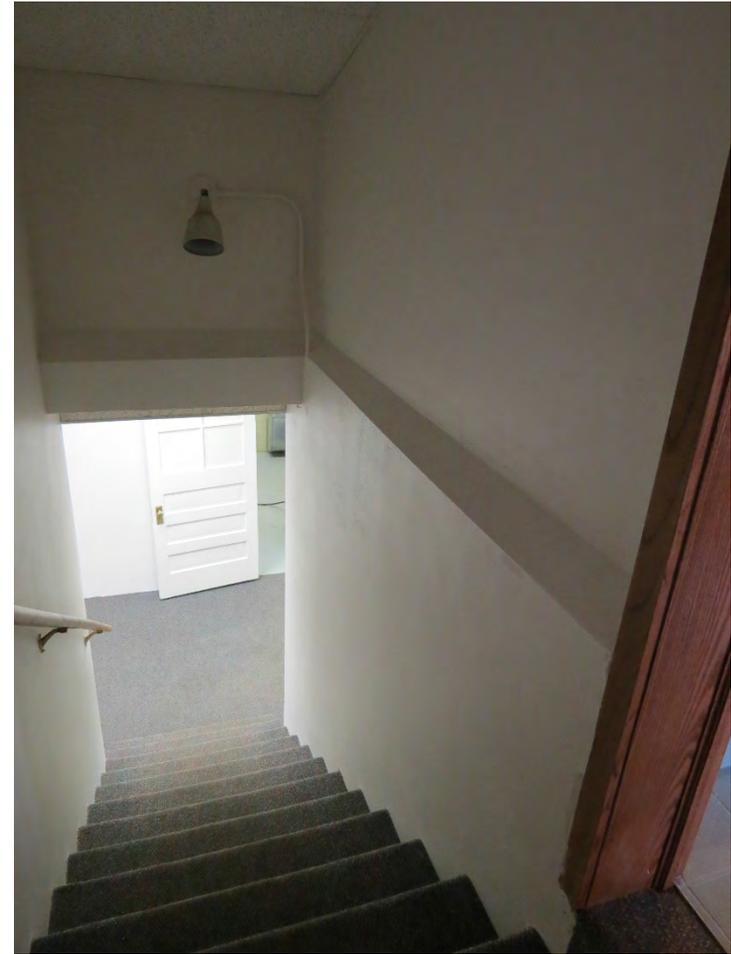
**Storage room interior – original door  
(looking east)**



**Storage room interior view to upper  
level entryway (looking north)**



**Basement stairwell off main entry  
(looking north)**



**Basement stairwell**



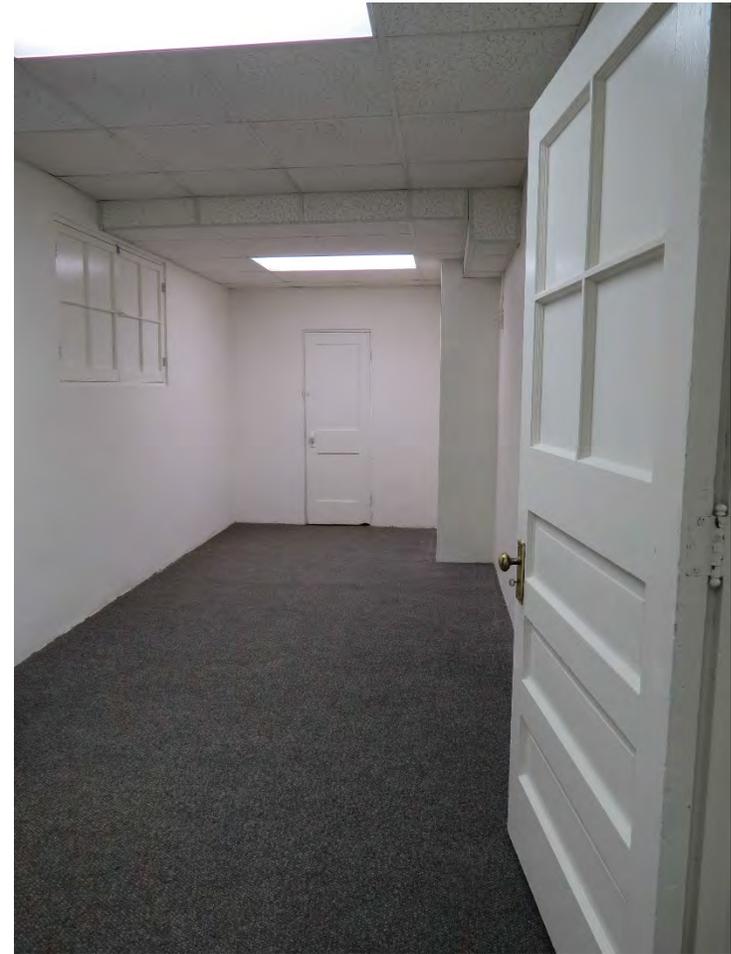
**Basement hall (looking south)**



**Basement hall (looking north)**



**Basement exit to exterior in southeast corner (looking northwest)**



**Original basement doors and windows**



**Basement storage room #1 - south end**



**Original basement window – southeast corner**



**Basement storage room #2 – north end**



**Central Basement storage & utility room(s)**



**View of Upper level floor supports**



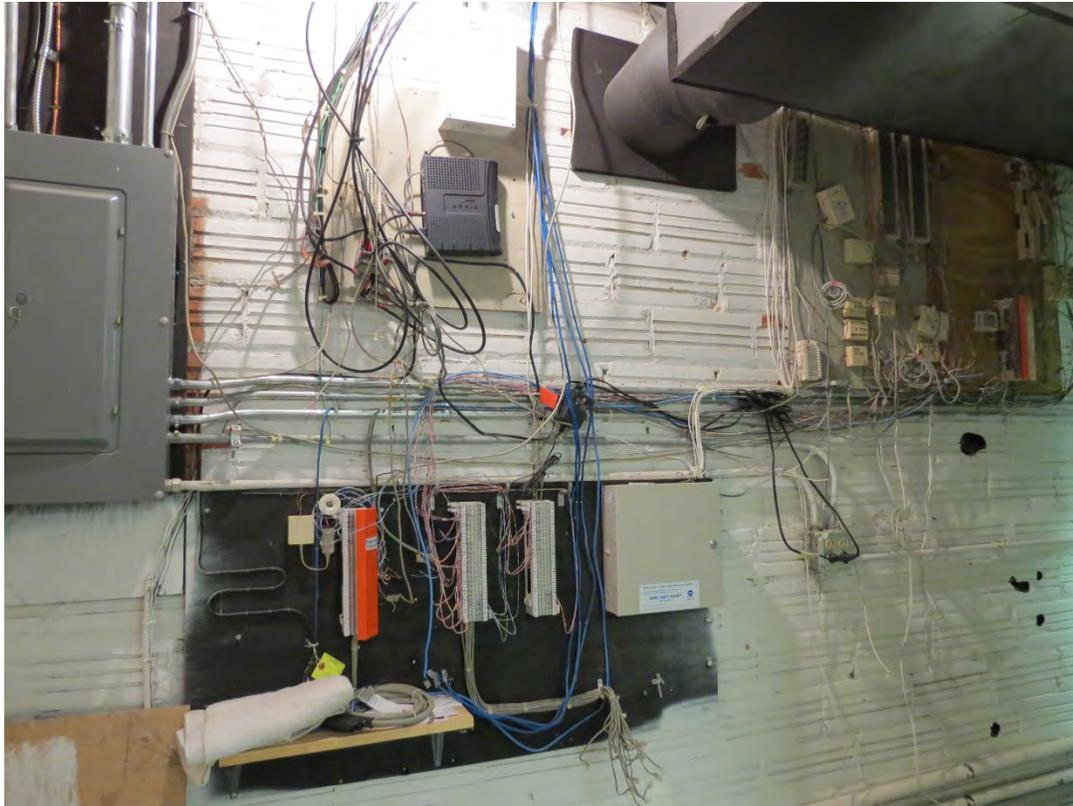
**Central Basement Storage Room – access to electrical panel (looking south)**



**Central Basement Storage Room –  
utility area and cistern access doorway**



**Central Basement Storage/Utility  
(shower stall)**



**Electrical and Wiring panel**



**Central Basement Storage Room –  
bathroom (looking north)**



**Central Basement storage room –  
water damage**



**Central Basement storage room –  
bathroom (looking north)**



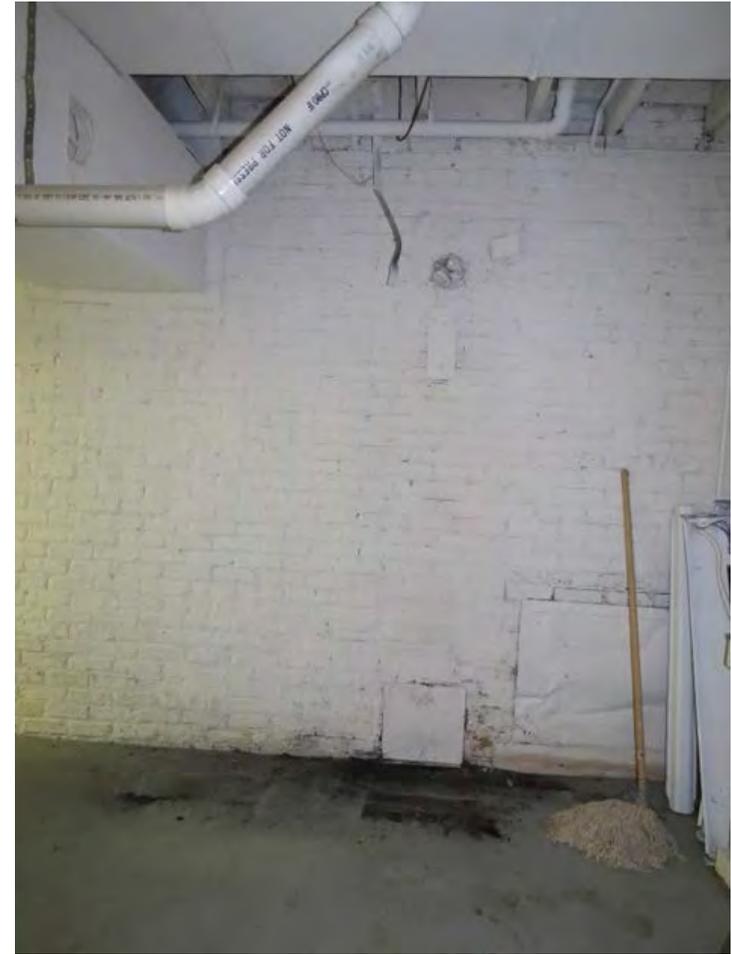
**Central Basement storage room –  
bathroom (sump pump in closet)**



**Central Basement storage room – view  
to basement hall (looking west)**



**Central Basement storage room and utility area**



**Central Basement storage room and utility area**



**Basement kitchen – looking east**



**Basement kitchen – looking south**



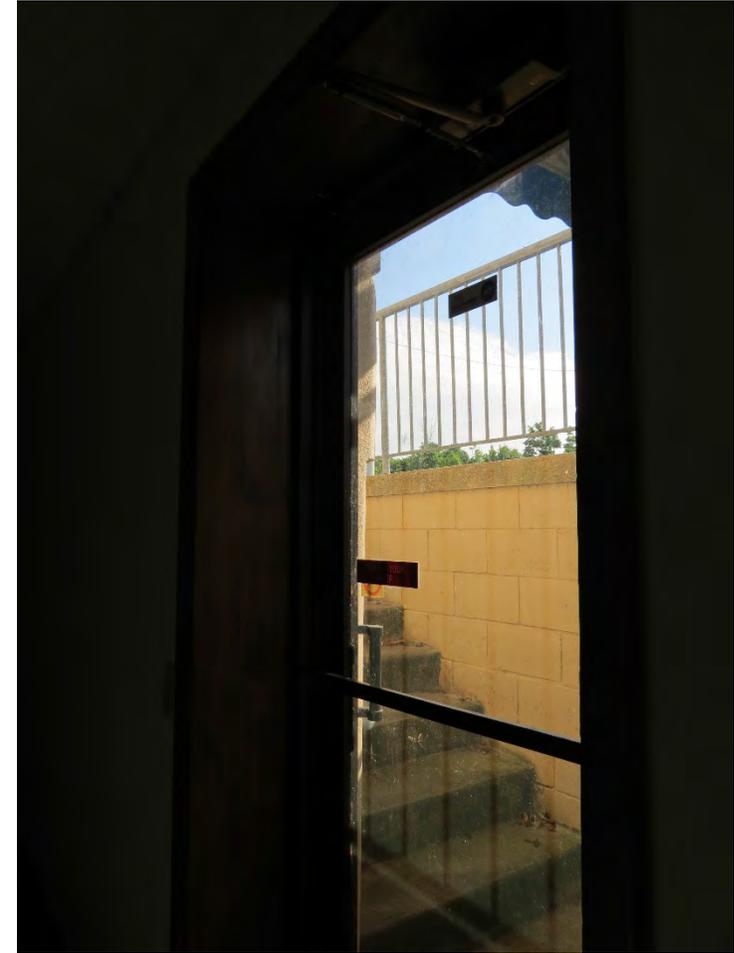
**Rear basement room off kitchen –  
looking south**



**Rear basement room off kitchen –  
looking west**



**Rear basement room off kitchen & rear lower level entry – looking west**



**Lower level entry**