

Garaged: A City Accommodates the Automobile South Jefferson Avenue - Saginaw, Michigan

Since the founding of the community, Jefferson Avenue has been one of Saginaw's most important and vital streets. Its history is closely related to Saginaw's relationship with the automobile. Business owners who lived and worked on South Jefferson were the first to purchase cars and invest in the fledgling auto industry. Two cars were produced in a plant located on South Jefferson and Atwater. (Portions of the plant still exist. The cars were the Argo Electric, 1910 - 1915 and the Yale-8, 1916 -1918.)

Saginaw's automotive history is normally defined by its role as an automotive production center; however, this tour seeks to help people explore another part of the community's automotive history - how the city was reshaped to accommodate the car. The first car was brought to Saginaw in 1900. The community was a mature, densely constructed city with little room for automobiles on the streets and even less room for parking on tight urban lots. In 1901, a car accident on Jefferson Avenue resulted in the city's first recorded automobile fatality. By 1904 there were over one hundred cars owned by Saginaw citizens, City Council had passed its first traffic ordinance, and the first automobile dealership opened. By 1917, city residents owned over three thousand cars and the automobile had infiltrated every corner of the community.

The buildings of South Jefferson record the pervasiveness of the automobile and the creativity and ingenuity with which the buildings and community were adapted. Sometimes accommodation was simple - demolishing a barn and building a garage. Some changes were more profound - and almost as innovative as the cars they were designed to accommodate.

Many of the buildings on this tour are not restored. However, they uniquely capture a fragile, transitory part of our community's history. As you explore South Jefferson, please remember that unless otherwise noted, buildings are privately owned. Please respect the privacy of the owners and view the buildings from the street. Do not trespass onto private property.

Neighborhood Renewal Services of Saginaw, Inc., The Saginaw News
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1. Castle Museum of Saginaw County History - 500 Federal Avenue

Original use: United States Post Office Building.

When the building was dedicated in 1898, mail was moved by horse drawn wagons and trains. When the building was enlarged in 1938, a large covered loading dock was constructed across the rear of the building to accommodate truck traffic. In 1949, the United States Postal Service started the Highway Post system - mail was sorted on specially fitted trucks while en route. Until it was discontinued in 1970, Saginaw was an important point in this regional system. A curb service mail box was installed on South Jefferson in 1949.

2. Parking Ramp #1 - Federal at Baum

In 1913 the City Market was constructed on this site. As parking demands increased in the business district, the site was used for parking on non-market days. In 1947, the market was relocated and the site was converted into a parking lot. In 1957 the three-story concrete parking ramp was dedicated by the City Council. The newspaper reported that the mayor and council members arrived at the dedication of the modern parking ramp in a horse drawn surrey with fringe on top.

3. AKT Peerless - 214 Janes

Original use: Aubry Dry Cleaners & Dyers and apartments

Constructed c. 1948, this building housed a commercial laundry on the first floor and apartments on the second. The owner of the firm lived in one of the units. The garage located behind the establishment's parking lot was for the use of the apartment residents and company vehicles.

4. Residence -303 S. Jefferson

When the house was constructed c. 1869, the yard surrounding the house extended to Baum Street. A carriage house was located at the rear of the property. In 1909 the house was purchased by Dr. and Mrs. Henry Meyer. The rear part of the property was sold to a developer and an auto showroom was built where the carriage house once stood. Dr. Meyer purchased his first car in 1904 - a Thomas Touring car. The Meyers had a garage excavated under the kitchen wing of the house. Dr. Meyer served as a physician in the Army during World War I. Mrs. Meyer's correspondence to him during this time records the frequent repairs that their automobile required. When she was thinking of selling their car she noted, "And the working class want autos now."

5. Saginaw Choral Society Office - 326 S. Jefferson

Original use: Parsonage for Jefferson Avenue United Methodist Church

When completed in 1940, the newspaper commented on the simplicity and convenience of the parsonage. The conservative colonial revival architecture of the house is echoed in the design for this garage. The simple, concrete block structure is faced with brick. Unlike some of the earlier contemporary designs, this detached garage is set at the rear of the lot some distance from the rear door.

6. Residence - South Jefferson at Hayden

In 1934, the Saginaw firm of Frantz and Spence were engaged to remodel the home on the northwest corner of South Jefferson and Hayden for the residence of Dr. and Mrs. Rockwell Kempton. As part of the project, an office wing was constructed to the north of the home and an attached garage was constructed in the rear of the house. The garage is not visible from Jefferson Avenue and is entered from a driveway located on Baum Street.

7. Residence - 411 Hayden

When the house was constructed about 1884, a carriage house was constructed along Baum Street. About 1910 the barn was replaced with a brick garage. Set some distance from the house, its conservative story and a half form echoes the form of earlier carriage houses. However, the building's configuration, an attic too small to store grain and solid masonry walls, all reflect its function as a garage for an automobile. The not-too subtle settling of the building is a reminder that Baum Street was once a Bayou and the buildings constructed in this area were constructed on fill.

8. Franklin Oil Company Filling Station and Office- Baum at Hayden

Designed by the Saginaw architectural firm Frantz and Spence, this service station was constructed in 1927 for the Franklin Oil Company, distributors of Sun Oil. The building was designed to accommodate the functions of an up-to-date full-service gas station. However, for design inspiration, the architects looked to the past.

9. Mary Dow House – 403 S. Jefferson

Designed by Midland architect Alden B. Dow, this home was completed in 1936 for Mary Dow, the architect's aunt. In this design, Dow makes storing the automobile an integral part of the home. Both house and the attached garage are constructed using Dow's patented Unit Block system. Like the house, the same materials and finishes are used on the interior and exterior - it gave the impression that one was driving into the home. The roof of the garage was finished to serve as an open terrace adjoining the master bedroom.

10. Garages on Millard - 503 S. Jefferson

The house was constructed in 1886 at the apex of Saginaw's lumber boom. The garages along Millard Street were constructed in three phases and tell the story of the neighborhood's accommodation of the automobile. Starting at the western end of the block, the five bay wood frame garage was constructed c. 1930 to lease to residents of the Jefferson Apartment building. The middle garage was constructed c. 1936 and served as the warehouse for a wholesale grocery business. The eastern-most garage was constructed in the 1950s and used as a garage for the residence.

11. Residence - 523 S. Jefferson

Constructed in 1886 for Clarence and Susie R. Hill, this massive Queen Ann style home originally was accompanied by a carriage house. In 1910, the family commissioned a Saginaw architect, W.T. Cooper, to design a garage. With walls of locally produced Saginaw paving brick, the garage features a steep slate roof. By 1911, it appears that the family owned both a Pierce Arrow and a locally produced Argo Electric car. With a chauffeur living on the property, the distance between the house and garage would not have posed an inconvenience.

12. Wolverine Baptist Center - 615 S. Jefferson

Original use: Saginaw YWCA

Designed by noted Midland architect Alden B. Dow for the Saginaw YWCA, the building features two main public entrances - a secluded, pedestrian-friendly entrance from S. Jefferson, and an entrance facing a rear parking lot, described in period accounts as the vehicular entrance. On the interior, the parking lot entrance leads directly to the swimming facilities. The Jefferson Avenue entrance is convenient to the meeting rooms. (When the building was remodeled for use by the Wolverine Baptist Center, an additional entrance was added in the center of the South Jefferson Avenue façade.)

13. Residence - 505 Thompson

Making full use of space on this tight urban lot, this house features an attached garage with a rooftop airing porch. It was designed in 1919 for the Julius Liebermann family by Saginaw architect, J. Fred Beckbissinger. Julius Liebermann owned and operated a trunk store and invested and lost money in the Saginaw produced Yale-8 automobile. (The Yale-8 plant was on South Jefferson seven blocks north of his home.) However, Liebermann never drove a car and the garage was not utilized until over a decade after the home's construction.

14. Residence - 515 Thompson

The house was constructed about 1903 for Mr. & Mrs. Frederick Fox. The garage was built about 1915. Although small in size, the garage is designed to complement the house - its massing, roof line and details all relate to those found in the home. According to neighborhood tradition, Mr. and Mrs. Fox would go for a recreational automobile ride every Sunday afternoon with friends.

15. New Amadore - 518 Thompson

When the apartment was completed in 1931, a newspaper article proclaimed "From its imposing stone entrance and its attractive lobby, to its airy rooms, its unexcelled facilities and the commodious garage at the rear, the Amadore is a residence that anyone may well find attractive." The entrance to the fireproof, attached garage is located on Thompson Street.

16. Saint Mary of the Assumption Rectory - 615 Hoyt

In 1950, an addition was added to the rear of the Cathedral's 1870s rectory. Designed by Fred Wigen, Architect, the addition included a three bay garage located under a screened-in porch. Today the rear of the area behind the rectory is open; however, when the addition was constructed, the parish complex included additional buildings that left little room for parking.