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## Corktown History



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### Ethel Claes and the West Side Industrial Project

*Two important sources deserve special acknowledgement: my neighbor Ann Aldridge, who loaned me her collection newspaper and magazine clippings about Ethel Claes; and the 1962 book Profile of a Metropolis: A Case Book by Robert J. Mowitz and Deil S. Wright, which dedicates a whole chapter to Corktown's urban renewal in the 1950s.*

### "The Queen of Corktown"

On October 9, 1982, a *Detroit Free Press* obituary declared, "The Queen of Corktown is dead." Ethel Claes, a Corktown resident for over fifty years and longtime president of its homeowners' organization, had passed away at the age of sixty-nine. The neighborhood—or at least what was left of it—partly owed its existence to the co-owner of a Corktown book shop run out of a Victorian house on the corner of Leverette and 11th Street.

Miss Claes (pronounced "klahs") was born in Duluth, Minnesota on July 24, 1913. Her father Bernard had immigrated from the Netherlands, and her mother Hilja from Finland. After moving to Detroit around 1916, Bernard Cornelius Claes eventually got a job with the Detroit Book Exchange. Having to sell books from his personal collection during hard financial times led ultimately to the opening of his own business, The B.C. Claes Book Shop, by 1930. After four years at 1665 Leverette Street, the family and their book shop moved across the street to their final location, 1670 Leverette. After Bernard's death in 1946, Hilja and Ethel Claes continued to run the book shop, which became well known among rare book collectors throughout the Midwest.



*Ethel Claes (right) with her mother Hilja.  
(The Detroit News, 22 November 1957)*



*The Claes Book Shop at 1670 Leverette in 1954.  
Note the "BOOK SHOP" sign in the parlor window.*

## Corktown's Decline

Corktown has historically been an enclave of laborers and immigrants, resulting in a high demand for affordable housing. By the early 1900s, most of the dwellings in the neighborhood were either flats and rented houses. Because there were no zoning laws at the time, commercial buildings cropped up within the residential areas of Corktown. As early as 1917, a publication by the [Detroit Police Department](#) described Corktown as consisting primarily of businesses and rental homes:

*...the entire district from Sixth Street to Fourteenth Avenue and from Fort Street to Michigan Avenue [is] now occupied by factories and rooming houses ... it is almost impossible to find a private residence, as almost each one is either a boarding house or lodging house, and the transient population here requires close and constant supervision.*

By 1937, the *Detroit News* stated, "Corktown may have crumbled into its own dust as a neighborhood." In 1940, the Detroit City Plan Commission included the area bound by Trumbull, Bagley, Sixth and Howard Streets in a study on urban blight. According to its 1940 Annual Report, it found "ample justification for (its) designation as blighted." Initially, the Commission considered clearing the area for public housing, but the site of the [Jeffries Projects](#) was chosen instead. However, the city planners did not forget about Corktown. To paraphrase H.G. Wells, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic regarded this neighborhood with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against it.

## The Age of Urban Renewal

With the passage of the [Housing Act of 1949](#), Federal subsidies for slum removal became available to local municipalities. This and similar laws were intended to replace overcrowded, squalid housing with safe and affordable homes, but it carried with it the unintended consequences of the destruction of urban fabric, the clearance of irreplaceable historic structures, and the displacement of poor and minority populations.



*July 15, 1949--Pres. Harry S. Truman signs the Housing Act of 1949 into law.*

Although the law supposedly addressed a housing shortage, new dwellings did not have to replace leveled slums. New construction only had to comply with the city's master plan. Detroit city planners believed that Corktown, one of the city's "oldest and most blighted residential districts ... cannot be transformed into a good residential area because of its proximity to existing large industry, rail lines, transit terminals (and) other traffic generating activities" ([source](#)). Ironically, what is today one of the city's most desirable residential areas was once derided as "**unfit for homes**" by the City Plan Commission.

## A Brave New Neighborhood



*Planners' View of Proposed Corktown Industrial Area (1957).*

*Note Most Holy Trinity Church on the right.*

*Courtesy Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.*

At the beginning of the 1950s, when Cobo Hall was still in its planning stages, the site was occupied by a busy warehouse and light industrial district. City leaders did not want to lose the displaced businesses to the suburbs, but population and industrialization were at their peak in Detroit and there was little vacant land available within the city limits for their relocation. Corktown, with its convenient access to downtown, the Detroit River, rail terminals, and expressways, was seen as the ideal replacement. The neighborhood was to be rezoned, cleared, and renamed the West Side Industrial District.



*A sketch of the gleaming light industrial district adorns the back and front covers of a 1958 pamphlet promoting the project. (Source.)*

The city wanted to obtain the land in the most efficient way possible--through wholesale condemnation. The area would be cleared and lots would be combined and sold in parcels suitable for commercial use. Utilities would be upgraded and off-street parking requirements would be imposed. All alleys and several streets would be closed. Labrosse and Abbott Streets would be widened to 44 feet in order to serve as trucking thoroughfares, by which the

businesses' loading docks would be accessed, while Bagley and Porter Streets would remain 30 feet wide and accommodate regular automobile traffic.



Detroit -- West Side Industrial  
Typical Conditions -- Before



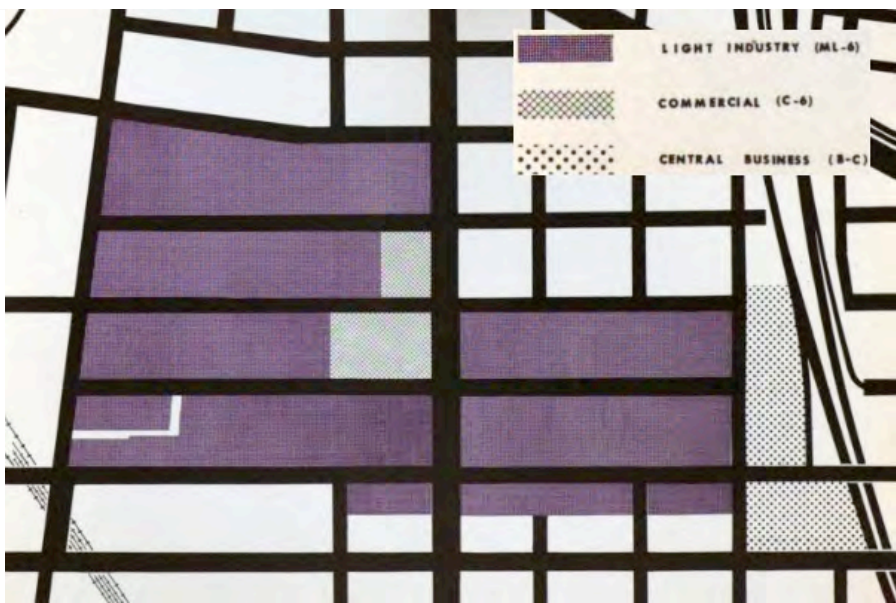
Detroit Trade Center

*Illustrations from Urban Renewal Notes, March-April 1966. (Source.)*

The plan called for multistory office buildings to be constructed along the Lodge Expressway; warehouses and wholesalers to be established between Sixth Street and Trumbull; light industry and trucking terminals between Trumbull and Twelfth Street; and in the middle of it all, "a commercial center to include a hotel for out of town buyers and truck drivers, a cafeteria, small shops and employee meeting rooms" (*The Municipal Employee*, April 1961). A two-acre site was reserved next to the "commercial center" for a public park to include "landscaped recreation areas with shuffleboard courts, horseshoe pits and benches"--evidently the preferred recreational accommodations of truckers and wholesale buyers.

## Quantifying "Blight"

In order to qualify for slum clearance subsidies, Detroit had to prove that Corktown was in fact blighted. City planners chose a 75-acre site which they believed would most likely be approved--between Porter and Lafayette east of Trumbull, and between Bagley and Lafayette west of Trumbull.



*Proposed re-zoning for the 75-acre site within Corktown from 1958. (Source.)*

How does one define "blight"? Common sense factors such as housing defects and crime rate were considered, but the urban planners of the 1950s used more creativity in interpreting the word. They also included indications such as:

- The age of buildings
- The occupants' income
- "Overcrowding" of buildings
- Lack of yard space
- Intrusion of non-residential uses
- Narrow streets
- High traffic volume
- Lack of off-street parking
- "Mixed character" of buildings



**PATTERN DEFICIENCY**

*Actual photo from a 1962 urban renewal report by the Detroit City Planning Commission. The differences in housing styles is supposed to be an example of "blight". (Source.)*

## **The Neighborhood Fights Back**

The city's plan to destroy a large swath of Corktown was obviously controversial among its residents. Although not all homes would be demolished, those left would lose much of their value when suddenly adjacent to an industrial area. Long-time homeowners--especially the elderly whose homes were paid off--were unlikely to find similar housing for the cost of the condemnation awards that they could expect. Many residents resented the city's view of the area as "blighted". They acknowledged that their homes were old in need of repair, but they maintained that upgrades and renovations were superior alternatives to annihilating entire blocks of houses. It was also discovered that some of the littered and overgrown vacant lots were in fact city-owned.

Miss Ethel Claes prepared a petition in protest of the urban renewal project. It was signed by 1,200 Corktowners and delivered to Detroit City Council on January 15, 1951. The City Plan Commission disingenuously replied that the Federal funds that they had received up until that point were not for condemnation, but merely to study "which section should be so redeveloped". City Plan Director George Emery assured Miss Claes that the section where her bookstore was located was "unlikely to be included in the early stages of any redevelopment," and that her property would not be in danger "for some time to come". Miss Claes somehow did not find these words to be very comforting.

When Miss Claes attempted to petition the Federal agency that would ultimately fund the demolition (the Housing and Home Finance Agency, a precursor to the Department of Housing and Urban Development), the petition was returned and she was told that her concerns were a local matter. The Detroit City Council was the only publicly accountable entity that she could appeal to.

In 1951, the Corktown Homeowners' Organization was founded to encourage renovations and neighborhood cleanups so that the neighborhood could not be considered a slum. When the group contacted various public agencies (Board of Health, police, etc.) to inquire about the data that indicated blight (crime, child delinquency, etc.), they could not find any such specific information about the actual project area. By 1953, Miss Claes was president of the Corktown Homeowners' Organization and leading its 1,000 members in the fight for their survival. At first the plan was opposed by various ethnic clubs and other neighborhood groups, but they ultimately united under Miss Claes' leadership.

### **"The wrath of God will fall on our city."**

Also involved in the controversy were the heads of Corktown's two largest religious organizations--Father Clement Kern of Most Holy Trinity Catholic Church, and Reverend John F. Mangrum of St. Peter's Episcopal Church.

Rev. Mangrum, originally from Grand Rapids, received his Masters of Divinity in 1949 and served as rector of a church in Albion before coming to Corktown in 1951. He was outraged by the project's displacement of families and called the plan "un-American". In a letter to the editor of the *Detroit Free Press*, published February 11, 1954, he wrote, "Destroy families, tear up homes and supplant them with questionable business development and the wrath of God will fall on our city."

Rev. Mangrum was equally blunt in communicating with city officials directly. When he was invited to meet with the Plan Commission about the project, he replied:

*It is very good of you to invite me to attend the meeting of the Plan Commission relative to the disposal of the people in Corktown--or should I say the buildings? The city government seems so much more interested in buildings than people!*

*There are a few reservations that I would like to make. First, that attendance*

*at your little tête-à-tête will in no wise constitute endorsement of your shop-worn city plan to me. I intend to fight it every inch of the way....*

*Just know that I am certain the plan for Corktown is evil and bad, and must be beaten completely. The proposed "redevelopment" is not progress, is not just, and is at base a cruel, cruel proposal. I am certain of that.*



*Reverend John F. Mangrum circa 1964.*

*Courtesy Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.*

When Rev. Mangrum met with members of the Plan Commission on May 10, 1954, head city planner Francis P. Bennett claimed he was ultimately concerned with the welfare of the citizens of Corktown who live in slum conditions. Rev. Mangrum replied, "You come out here the day they tear down the people's houses and watch their faces and tell me that.... You don't have to live with them. You don't have to go down there. You don't have to watch, to talk, to explain. Statistics to you--that's all."

Rev. Mangrum joined forces with Miss Claes, but Father Kern was *not* convinced that the project was a bad idea. Having been pastor of Most Holy Trinity since 1943, his parish was the largest in Corktown, consisting primarily Catholic Maltese and Mexican families. Father Kern worked closely with the poor and believed that the project would benefit them, as the government pledged to relocate the 140 displaced families to safe and adequate housing.



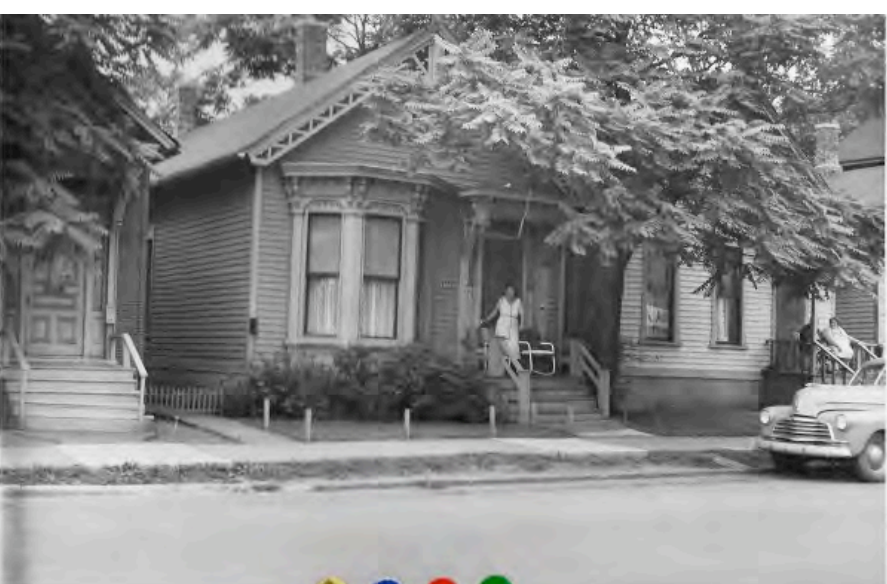
*Father Clement H. Kern, circa 1950s.*

*Courtesy Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University.*

In Father Kern's mind, urban renewal was delivering the city's poor to better homes. He cooperated with the government on the West Side Industrial project, even serving on the Plan Commission's Relocation Advisory Committee.



### **Meetings, Petitions, and a Clean-Up Campaign**

The fight for Corktown dragged on for years. Neighbors signed petitions testifying that the crime rate was lower than stated by city council. Several doctors signed affidavits affirming that tuberculosis and other diseases indicative of blight were not present in Corktown. The Corktown Homeowners' Organization coordinated the community's preservation and encouraged property rehabilitation. In order to highlight recent home improvements, posters were made with photographs of houses in the area. Some of these posters have survived, and the images have been [scanned and uploaded to Flickr](#).



1601 Porter.

Stickers that indicate specific upgrades are affixed to some photos.

IMPROVEMENTS SINCE 1950:	
 HOUSE PAINTED.	 INTERIOR MISCELLANEOUS
 APPLIED SIDING.	a). Decorating.
 EXTERIOR MISCELLANEOUS.	b). Wiring, etc.
a). Gutters.	 ROOFING.
b). Fencing.	 PLUMBING.
c). Perches.	
d). Storm Doors. Windows.	



1419-1425 Abbott.



*An updated, modern kitchen at 1377 Abbott.*



*The garden behind 1730 Labrosse.*

Father Clement Kern of Most Holy Trinity advised the Plan Commission that they would have to convince Miss Claes of the necessity of urban renewal in order for the plan to progress without trouble. The Commission met with Miss Claes on May 3, 1954, but it did not go as they had hoped. She criticized them for not holding public hearings regarding their selection of the project site, and drilled them on their justifications for declaring Corktown a slum. They replied that their studies indicated that the area is blighted, but when Miss Claes demanded to know what statistics led them to that conclusion, *they replied that the data wasn't available because the studies had not been completed.* When she asked why they did not instead help rehabilitate the area if blight was really the problem, planner George Villican replied, "It's not our problem. We merely study problems."

On July 22, 1954, between 400-500 Corktowners packed a public hearing about the project before City Council. Members of the City Plan Commission started the meeting with a presentation of statistics indicating Corktown's blighted condition. They were followed by a

dozen Corktowners defending their neighborhood. Miss Claes was the final speaker, and came prepared with statistics countering what had been presented earlier. She pointed out that the information used by the Plan Commission was based on geographic boundaries (e.g., census tracts) that did not coincide with the proposed project area, and that many homes in the area were currently being improved. The Council decided to allow the Plan Commission to issue a detailed report on blight in the neighborhood and to hold an additional hearing in the future.

Nonetheless, Council was satisfied enough with the data that they authorized the renewal plan to be sent to the Housing and Home Finance Agency (HHFA) in March 1955. The following month Miss Claes and Congressman [Charles C. Diggs](#) met with the Plan Commission to again refute the allegation that Corktown was a slum. Congressman Diggs was convinced enough to contact the HHFA and relay Miss Claes' concerns. The HHFA in turn contacted the City of Detroit to request better data on the neighborhood's condition, and a parcel-by-parcel survey of the properties in the project area was initiated.

In the meantime, the City Council formally declared the project area to be blighted on June 16, 1955, without a public hearing and while Miss Claes was away from the city. Father Kern and Reverend Mangrum met with Mayor Albert Cobo several days later to plead that the cleared area at least be replaced with new housing instead of industry, in order to preserve the community. The city had always insisted that it was clearing the site to get rid of a slum, not for economic reasons. Mayor Cobo, however, now argued to Rev. Mangrum and Father Kern that the development *must* be industrial *specifically for economic reasons*.

Later that year, Rev. Mangrum was reassigned to a church in Palm Beach, Florida, and Miss Claes lost an important ally.

## The Final Years

The HHFA approved the city's Corktown renewal plan on January 10, 1956, but Miss Claes and her neighbors fought on. Corktown continued to improve under the guidance of the Corktown Homeowners' Organization, even participating in a neighborhood conservation program organized by the very Plan Commission that wanted to see the neighborhood leveled.

Another public hearing--only the second in three years--was held before City Council on June 28, 1957. Miss Claes spoke, again asserting that Corktown was not a slum by any meaningful criteria. Homes were being fixed up and modernized. Vacant lots were being cleaned up. Properties that remained in bad condition, she pointed out, tended to be owned by slumlords who resided outside of the neighborhood. In her speech, Miss Claes stated:

*The public must be disabused that Corktown and skid row are one. In Corktown everybody works hard; there is no panhandling, and no street loafers, and there is no drink problem.... Corktown and the project area is NO SLUM....*

*It is well known that in the last three years a great improvement has been made in the condition of houses in Corktown. We have held competitions for the best improvements, and a great amount of work has been done on the properties....*

*[Bringing] property up to code within a stipulated period ... can save the area, can save the city a lot of money, and its inhabitants a lot of grief....*

Despite the citizens' efforts, the Detroit City Council voted **unanimously** in favor of the project site's condemnation on July 10, 1957. In an editorial printed the following day, the

*Detroit Free Press* defended the decision with words that sound ironic today: "...it is of paramount importance that Detroit, its vacant land gone, fully utilize existing space to strengthen its industrial structure."

The formal agreement between the HHFA and City of Detroit was signed in November of 1957. By October 1958, a condemnation jury awarded \$1,859,284 to the owners of the 13 commercial properties, 19 multi-housing units, 60 single- and double-family homes, and 18 vacant lots seized by the city. Relocation began immediately and took about a year. By the time the land was cleared, work had already begun on Cobo Hall and the displaced businesses had already relocated elsewhere. Still, the city hoped to attract industry to the area.

### "Progress"



**Above:** Corktown in 1956. **Below:** The same area in 1961. Images courtesy DTE.



*Aerial view of the West Side Industrial District, circa 1966.  
Courtesy Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.*



**FLORIST TELEGRAPH DELIVERY BUILDING IN "OLD CORK-TOWN"**

*The **FTD** headquarters at 900 W. Lafayette was one of the first new buildings to occupy the urban renewal area. (Note Most Holy Trinity Church in the background.) This building has since been replaced by a Greyhound bus station. (Photo source.)*



*The hotel and park at the center of the West Side Industrial District circa 1966. Courtesy Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.*

The city-planned district called for a hotel to serve truckers and out-of-state wholesale buyers. Across the street was a park named Dean Savage Memorial Park in honor of Dean James Savage (1846-1927), who served all but ten years of his priesthood at Most Holy Trinity. The park was equipped with shuffleboard courts. The hotel, located at 1331 Trumbull, originally operated as the Holiday Inn Downtown.



Holiday Inn<sup>®</sup>  
DETROIT-DOWNTOWN



For a memorable dining experience, visit The Steak Room.

*This mid-1960s postcard from the Holiday Inn Downtown invites us to dine at The Steak Room, decorated with artificial wood paneling and blood-red leather-upholstered furniture, "for a memorable dining experience." And why not unwind after dinner with a relaxing game of shuffleboard? (Image source.)*



*Today the hotel is operated as [The Corktown Inn](#). No trucks were spotted in the parking lot when I visited the premises, and I declined to inquire of the gentlemen staying there what wholesale commodities they were purchasing.*



*For the convenience of The Corktown Inn's guests, a vending machine dispenses toiletries, prophylactics, ladies' undergarments, and--in the spirit of Corktown--Irish Spring® soap. Image courtesy [MurderMotels.com](http://MurderMotels.com).*

## **Architectural Casualties**

The buildings previously occupying the project site were photographed before their untimely demise, both by the residents who fought to protect them and by the Plan Commission who declared them to be blighted. The images below credited to the Burton Historical Collection were originally from the Plan Commission's files.

10-3-56



*1211 Trumbull.*

*1950s image courtesy Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.*



*1205 Trumbull.*

*1950s image courtesy Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.*



*Convent of the Immaculate Heart, 1051 Porter.  
1950s image courtesy Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.*



*1216 Howard.*



1600 Howard.

1950s image courtesy Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.



*1556 Howard.*



1639 Abbott.



1551 Abbott.



1743 Labrosse.

The older building was [Carhartt's](#) headquarters for three years during the Great Depression after its Michigan Ave. factory closed. 1950s image courtesy Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.



*1525-1531 Bagley.*

The building in the modern image above is part of the Clement Kern Gardens subsidized housing project. Despite being cleared for "urgently needed" industrial space, this entire block sat vacant for twenty-five years. This development, designed by Detroit architect [Roger Margerum](#), was constructed in 1985.

Clement Kern Gardens is adorned with a statue of its namesake, Father Clement H. Kern of Most Holy Trinity Church, who died in 1983. The statue was installed by sculptor [Edward Chesney](#) in 1986, and it is completely enclosed by a locked, eight-foot-high, wrought iron fence to protect it from the community Father Kern once served.



## The Legacy of Ethel Claes



*Miss Ethel Claes in 1975.*

In the end, Miss Claes failed to stop the bulldozers. Seventy-five acres of the neighborhood were cleared, disbursing hundreds of residents. Property values fell and the blight that everyone had been battling only increased. This had in fact been the planners' intention all along. In *Profile of a Metropolis*, Mowitz and Wright wrote:

*Members of the Plan Commission staff and the Housing Commission staff admitted privately that some of the blocks near the project site were in good condition. A Housing Commission staff member said that he expected the*

surrounding area to deteriorate once the redevelopment project was completed, and then all of Corktown could be condemned and put to industrial use.

The history of Corktown in the twentieth century is a history of its destruction. Homes and businesses were cleared to construct Michigan Central Station and Roosevelt Park, to widen Michigan Avenue, to build the Lodge and Fisher Freeways, to create the West Side Industrial District, and even for the unforgivably frivolous use of parking the cars of Tiger Stadium patrons. What we call Corktown today is just a small remnant of what there once was. But these few surviving blocks might have withered and died if not for Miss Claes' charismatic leadership, her book shop as a rallying point for the neighborhood, and the Corktown Homeowners' Organization's emphasis on home maintenance.



*Hilja and Ethel Claes in 1974.*

For the rest of their lives, Ethel Claes and her mother tended their book shop and remained active in neighborhood conservation. As consuming as these tasks were, Miss Claes did find the time for marriage, however briefly. On July 23, 1964, she married Roy Etherton, a Russian-born man 23 years her senior. He passed away just over a year later, on November 16, 1965, at the age of 73. Despite legally becoming Mrs. Etherton, everyone still knew her as "Miss Claes".

\* \* \* \* \*

By the 1970s, American society began to realize that we no longer created beautiful buildings, and that people needed tangible connections to their cultural past. As a result, the need for historic preservation became evident and Corktown received well-deserved recognition for its collection of 18th century working-class homes. An article on the neighborhood from *The Detroit News* of January 14, 1979 gushed, "Architecturally, Corktown is a gold mine, a giant toy store for preservationists."

Miss Claes lived to see her neighborhood added to the National Register of Historic Places on July 31, 1978. After her death, the City of Detroit granted Corktown historic protection on December 24, 1984, and added a western annex that included Wabash and Vermont Streets on September 25, 1998.

When Miss Claes passed away in October of 1982, the *Detroit Free Press*' Louis Cook wrote, "Of all the classic writers of letters to the editor the Free Press has experienced, Miss Claes

was one of the most vinegary and brilliant." She was, he added, "imperious, poetic and a lot of fun to be around if your hide was thick enough."

In accordance with Miss Claes' wishes, there was no funeral service. She was survived by her mother, who passed away just five months later. Both were laid to rest in Fernwood Cemetery in Gladstone, a town in Michigan's upper peninsula where Bernard C. Claes was interred in 1946.



*The headstone of Ethel Claes Etherton.  
Photo courtesy Elaine Ackerman. (Source.)*



*Miss Claes' former home and book shop at 1670 Leverette.  
Photo by Joseph C. Krause.*