

## MEMORANDUM and ADVISORY REPORT

**To: Madison Planning Board**

**From: Madison Historic Preservation Commission (HPC)**

**Re: HPC Report on 3 Central Avenue and 5 Central Avenue Development Applications**

**Date: Sept. 16, 2022**

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Central Avenue from Main Street north to Elmer Street and Cook Avenue is part of the National Register designated Madison Civic & Commercial Historic District. The Historic Preservation Commission's main purpose is to preserve the character of Madison's historic districts. Preserving character means more than considering the facades of proposed new buildings. The HPC must also consider the scale, massing, and streetscapes (the harmonious relationship between individual buildings along a street front) among other criteria laid out in the Borough's newly adopted Design Guidelines found at: <https://www.rosenet.org/DocumentCenter/View/15306/Borough-of-Madison-Historic-Preservation-Design-Guidelines> and in the Borough's Historic Preservation Ordinance.



Left to right: Madison Diner, 13 Central Ave.; Micone House, 11 Central Ave.; Micone Barber Shop, 9 Central Ave.; 3 Central Ave. Photo August 2022. JWF.

## HPC Report on 3 Central Avenue and 5 Central Avenue Development Applications

The National Register of Historic Places is our nation's inventory of buildings, sites, landscapes, and places that embody aspects of our local, state, and national history. Since the National Register was created in 1966, the concept of historic districts has been used to include *groups* of historic buildings and sites that share a historical record and often, an architectural vocabulary. While individual buildings may appear to be uninteresting, "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" in a historic district, where even the most modest building can be understood as part of a larger story that includes its grander neighbors, and each building enhances the value of the others.

This inclusive thinking is further developed by preservation architect John Hatch. "The district is the resource, not its individual parts. Designated historic districts are significant as a collective whole & must be considered as such and protected in their entirety. This is the primary overarching principle." To that end, Mr. Hatch goes on to say that "demolition of a... contributing structure is... the most drastic & most damaging action that can be contemplated in any historic district."<sup>1</sup>

With the Ordinance, Design Guidelines, and foregoing quotes in mind, it should be clear how difficult it is for any Historic Commission to simply review applications for development based upon the demolition of the historic buildings on site, particularly of "key" contributing structures. This designation is reserved for the highest value buildings in a district as defined by the National Register of Historic Places. Out of the original sixty structures in our Madison Civic & Commercial Historic District comprising the downtown commercial area, nineteen are designated as key contributing structures.<sup>2</sup>

In the National Register nomination 3 Central Avenue is described as a Contributing building in the Historic District, a "vernacular commercial" style structure of 1925. The building at 9 Central Avenue, Alex's Barber Shop; the Micone House at 11 Central Avenue; and the Madison Diner at 13 Central Avenue are all identified as Key contributing elements of the Historic District, notable for their history and survival as once common and now rare architectural types in Madison. Their individual histories will be described later in this document.

Three of the four structures that would have to be demolished in the pending applications for development of 3 Central and 5 Central are Key contributors to the historic district. This represents sixteen percent of the Madison Civic Historic District's total of Key contributing structures enumerated in the district. Losing all these Key contributing structures of high historic value structures in our diverse and attractive commercial historic district is significant.

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<sup>1</sup> John Hatch, of the firm Clarke, Caton, Hintz, writing in "Historic Preservation Assessment of the Lyons Theater, Madison, NJ" prepared for the Borough of Madison, February 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The complete National Register Nomination for the Madison Civic & Commercial Historic District is available for reading on Rosenet at: <https://www.rosenet.org/DocumentCenter/View/1631/Madison-Civic-Commercial-District-PDF>

## HPC Report on 3 Central Avenue and 5 Central Avenue Development Applications

Moreover, Central Avenue has not been well-respected as part of the Madison Civic & Commercial Historic District.<sup>3</sup>

Madison’s historic downtown core was listed as a National Register Historic District in 1990, just two years after Alex Micone died in 1988 at age 101 as the oldest resident of Madison and proprietor of the longest-lived business in town. At the time of his death, his barber shop at 9 Central Avenue was functional, as it had been for decades. (*Eagle*, October 20, 1988). He lived in the house next door, now known as 11 Central Avenue and raised his family there. He inherited the house from his parents, who purchased it about 1910, and Alex, a barber by trade, established his own barber shop in the next-door shop in 1911. (*Eagle*, October 20, 1960, and *Eagle*, September 23, 1976).



Alex’s Barber shop, 9 Central Avenue.  
Photo April 2022. MEL



ALEX MICONE, Madison’s long-time friend and businessman, greeting customer in front of his barbershop built in 1911. He arrived in Madison as a youngster of 10, worked long hours as a water-boy on construction jobs until his first job in a barbershop at age 13—50¢ a week.

Photo Courtesy Madison Historical Society  
*The Madison Heritage Trail*, p. 141.

Alex Micone operated his barber shop at this location until his retirement in 1986, after 75 years in business. In 1987, his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday was celebrated by the Borough during Bottle Hill Day. Then Mayor Elizabeth Baumgartner proclaimed “Alex Micone Day” in honor of the town’s oldest resident at that time, and a fixture of Madison’s downtown businesses (*Eagle*, October 1, 1987).<sup>4</sup> A bronze plaque was awarded to him, commemorating his life and his business. There is

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<sup>3</sup> Another Key structure, the 1912 Savoy Theater on the northeast corner of Central and Elmer Streets was brutally altered and partially demolished in 2007 for parking access to a new apartment building at 23 Central Avenue. The preservation of the façade alone without restoration of the façade detailing has meant the loss of all traces of this early “nickelodeon theater”. The three-story commercial building at 14 Central Avenue is also a Key building in the district for its association with the Valgenti family, leaders of the local Italian American immigrant community at the turn of the 20th century. This building, too, has been subject to alterations that disguise its historic qualities.

<sup>4</sup> The Borough Clerk’s files include minutes of the Borough Council Meeting of September 14, 1987, which contains the proclamation of Alex Micone Day to be celebrated on Bottle Hill Day, September 24, 1987.

## HPC Report on 3 Central Avenue and 5 Central Avenue Development Applications

a photo in the May 12, 1988 edition of *The Madison Eagle* showing Borough employees laying the plaque in the sidewalk.



PERMANENT COMMEMORATION — Alex Micone, Madison's oldest resident who was honored by the borough on his 100th birthday watches as Borough employee Gus Price places brass plaque in the ground in front of Micone's Central Ave. barbershop. Micone, who ran a business there for 75 years, was suitably honored for his business longevity. (Photo by Joe De Biase)

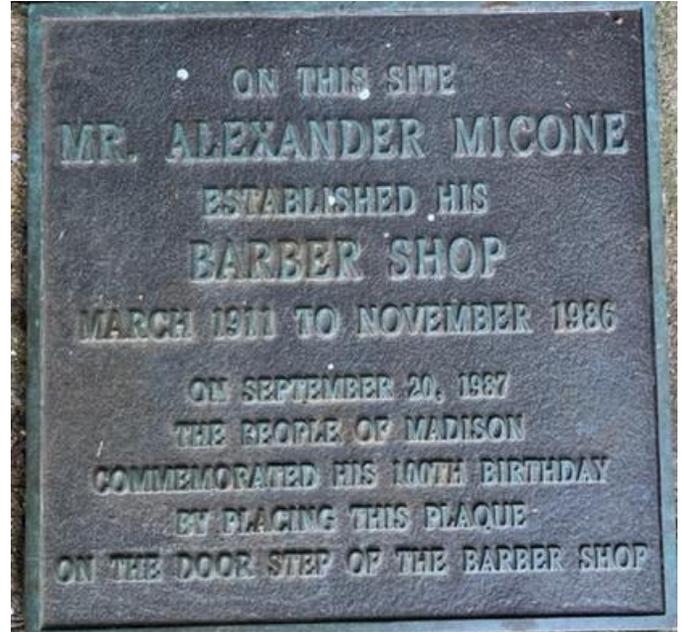


Photo of plaque taken April 2022. MEL

Mr. Micone's obituary, as reported in *The Eagle*, stated:

His building has become a landmark and two years after his retirement it remains intact with the vintage chair, equipment and pictures of Madison adorning the wall. Its place in history is marked by a plaque in the ground, presented by the Borough at his community-wide 100<sup>th</sup> birthday last Bottle Hill Day..." (*Eagle*, October 20, 1988).

There were several "human interest" articles about Alex Micone in *The Madison Eagle* over the years. He was noted for his 50<sup>th</sup> year in business in 1960, and his 75<sup>th</sup> year in business in 1986. In the winter of 1981, his antique barber pole was vandalized, and the Madison Rotary paid to replace it.

The simple shed-roofed, single-story wooden commercial building with decorative cornice and large plate glass windows was a common type in small towns across America in the period 1880-1910. The fragility of the materials and the small size made it increasingly rare over time, and it stands today as a telling artifact of an intimacy of scale and social interaction in commercial life that is now gone. The fact that the barber shop stood next to the family's residence is very much a carry-over from earlier norms of property use. When Madison adopted zoning in 1922, the residence became non-conforming in the newly defined commercial area. It survived because

## HPC Report on 3 Central Avenue and 5 Central Avenue Development Applications

Alex Micone survived and continued to use both the residence and the shop in their traditional, historic ways.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century during the “Period of Significance” for the historic district (1873-1930), this stretch of Central Avenue contained a mixture of residences and businesses, which shifted over time from mostly residential to mostly commercial



Left: Micone House, 11 Central Avenue; Right: Similar style and age house at 35 Ridgedale in the Bottle Hill Historic District, restored. Photos August 2022. JWF.

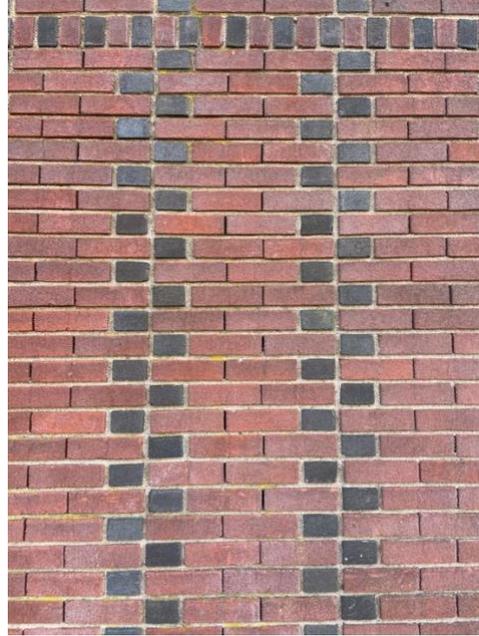
The 1910 US Census records the Micones living on Central Avenue. The Barbato family with 7 children, (like the Micones, a family headed by Italian immigrants), were neighbors down the street. But most of their immediate neighbors were Black, born in the South, and now living and working in Madison. According to the Census, these families included William Lasker, a carpenter, and his wife and son; Dennis Balte, a hostler (livery stable worker who handled the horses) and his wife and daughter; William James, a laborer, his wife and her son, and the Burroughs family, a long-established Black family in Madison.

In the 1920s, the business district definitively moved around the corner from Main Street and headed down Central Avenue with the construction of the brick-front building at 3 Central. Its “tapestry” brick façade the very height of fashion for commercial buildings of the 1920s. The Ratti building at 48-52 Main Street is another example, although it uses a lighter color brick than the dark red and black of 3 Central.

## HPC Report on 3 Central Avenue and 5 Central Avenue Development Applications



3 Central Avenue Commercial Building  
Photo August 2022. JWF



Detail of tapestry brick at 3 Central  
Photo February 2022. JWF

The space served a variety of commercial uses over time. It was used in the early 1930s as a tailor and dry-cleaning business, Dixon & Hedges, but it closed by 1935. In the 1940s through the 1980s, the building was occupied by Speedway Duplicating which offered “excellent mimeograph services” in their earliest advertisements. Since the 1990s, various restaurants have been in the building.

The construction of a “diner” at 13 Central was the first to be approved by the Borough, in 1926. It was called at the time a lunch wagon, and an article heralding its arrival in town was titled “Lunch Wagon Fare May Be Again Offered to Local Epicureans.” (*Eagle*, August 13, 1926). Apparently in years past there had been literal lunch wagons, like today’s food trucks, traveling to working men at their work sites and offering cheap, good food. The lot on Central Avenue was to have a stationary lunch wagon, “akin to the lumbering old wagons which used to perambulate the streets” but this one, to be erected by John Gwiltinan, would cost \$3000 and needed a building permit to assure fire safety.

## HPC Report on 3 Central Avenue and 5 Central Avenue Development Applications



Madison Diner, 13 Central Avenue. Photo August 2022. JWF

The anonymous *Madison Eagle* writer, apparently a fan of lunch wagons and their food, describes well the purpose and form of a lunch wagon which was the ancestor of the American diner.

“The lunch wagon occupies a unique place in American life, particularly in small towns. It is neither restaurant, sandwich shop nor eating house. [It provides] good, plain victuals for hard-working men....The “lunch wagon” ... has its regular clientele....Inside, the patrons must be allowed to sit on stools before the counters and there must be a large battery of shining urns. Counter men take the place of...waiters...Your food is always slid down to you quickly and without ceremony.” (*Eagle*, August 13, 1927)

The structure and the business were purchased in 1928 by Carmine DeBiase. An Italian immigrant, Mr. DeBiase worked in local greenhouses as a young man, but then opened the diner, as he said in a *Madison Eagle* article, “without knowing how to cook.” (*Eagle*, November 2, 1980). His son Joe took over the business and learned to cook well enough to draw a crowd for full dinners as well as cups of coffee and conversation. The building, though worn from decades of use, retains the form and interior layout of this original lunch wagon described in 1927.

All these buildings on Central Avenue contribute richly to the story of the development of Madison and its history. They are small, on small lots, but they are not useless, blighted, or fodder for a landfill. They could be restored or rehabilitated and provide space for small shops or offices which would not require variances for parking, or lot coverage as the proposed buildings do.

In addition to the Design Guidelines and Ordinance referenced in the beginning of this Memorandum and Advisory Report, the Commission examines the actual buildings in our

## HPC Report on 3 Central Avenue and 5 Central Avenue Development Applications

historic districts as reference points for new Applications for Development. The design strengths of these existing historic buildings should be the starting point for the design of any new construction.

The proposed construction on Central Avenue provides an opportunity to step up to the high standard that led to National Register listing a generation ago. It is an opportunity for a creative design that integrates successfully into the Madison Civic & Commercial Historic District. Overall, the Commission felt that the standard for our Historic District was not met when judging the proposed buildings at 3 and 5 Central Avenue. The reasons are discussed and set forth in detail in the accompanying Resolution.

The HPC review of the proposed new buildings at 3-5 Central Avenue may be summarized in short form as follows:

- The facades are too “flat” with little three-dimensional distinction between wall surface, windows, storefronts, and cornices. The street façade reads like a stage set rather than substantial buildings.
- The division of the façade of the buildings (real or perceived) into base, middle, and top (cornice or set-back roofline) is generally not well articulated.
- There are materials used that are not in keeping with the character of a commercial downtown, especially the unpainted wood-look porcelain tiles.
- There is not a clear rendering of how the buildings turn the corner – in other words, what do sides and rear look like, as they will be at least partially visible from other places within the historic district.
- Although the two actual proposed buildings are divided to appear to be 5 separate “buildings,” the long façade retains a bland uniformity of appearance because of the repetition of window design across the elevation.
- The uniform height of much of the combined block is expressly discouraged in our Design Guidelines. More variation, whether the final design creates the appearance of two buildings or multiples, is more consistent with our downtown’s architectural character.

More detail is found in the Resolution’s “Findings of Fact,” to which the HPC refers the Planning Board, for specific points of comparison between the governing Design Guidelines and the proposed buildings. For ease of reference, the relevant pages of the Design Guidelines are appended to this report.

The HPC thanks the Planning Board for its referral of the applications for 3 Central and 5 Central to the HPC, and the opportunity for comment and advice to the Planning Board on the applications. We hope that the Planning Board will take our aesthetic advice, based as it is on the Design Guidelines, seriously and literally, and require incorporation of said advice into revised designs for the proposed buildings, as conditions, should they be approved.