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Restoration of historic Freer House garden at Wayne State begins

Project will include new driveway, flowers and plants, and railing around Ferry Street property

By [Kirk Pinho](#)



Photo by Thomas Holleman A rendering of the restored Freer House garden.

Charles Lang Freer loved Asian and American art so much that he had his 1892 shingle-style Detroit home expanded three times in 1906, 1910 and 1913 to accommodate his collection.

Freer House location

Those Eastern and Western influences also were seen in his garden, installed when the house was built, redesigned in 1906, and now target of a more than \$250,000 restoration campaign.

The project, which is expected to take two years to complete, begins with the removal of slate outside the home at 71 E. Ferry St. so an aggregate-material driveway mimicking the wealthy railroad freight car manufacturing magnate's original can be installed.

Existing plants are also being removed and repurposed around the campus of **Wayne State University**, which owns and manages the home's property between Woodward Avenue and John R Street in Midtown, said Meghan Urisko, research assistant at the Freer House.

The driveway is expected to be complete by November.

The garden's new flowers will range from cherry blossoms to roses of Sharon to anemones in a nod to the tastes of Freer, who died in 1919, Urisko said.

The plants were chosen by David Michener, associate curator in the **University of Michigan's** Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum in Ann Arbor. The varieties were all chosen because they were either the kinds originally in the garden, or are derivatives of them, Urisko said.

In addition, a railing replicating one originally on the property will be built by James Viste, an adjunct faculty member for the **College for Creative Studies** and manager of **Edgewise Forge LLC**, a blacksmithing shop.

The railing will also incorporate a sensing mechanism that will help with security at the property, which is now home to the **Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child & Family Development**.

There are 17 WSU faculty members there who also work as members of the MPSI – originally the **Merrill Palmer School**, which became owner of the property in 1920.

The school had turned Freer's courtyard garden into a children's play area, placing plants and shrubs with swing sets and sandboxes. But decades later in 1965, it was converted back into a minimalist garden that eventually began to deteriorate.

The house is only open to the public a handful of times each year.

But the garden will be open to visitors, and Urisko said plans call for the eventual creation of a visitors' center.

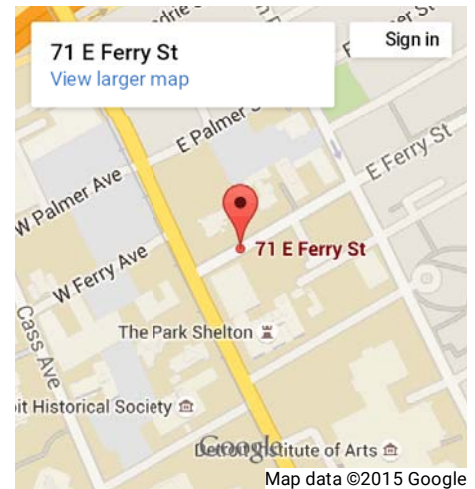
The garden project has about \$60,000 of the \$250,000-plus needed so far, with about \$10,000 raised through donations and another \$50,000 coming from the institute.

"We are in the beginning stages of fundraising," Urisko said.

In addition to Michener and Viste, others working on the project are **Brencl Contractors Inc.** and **K.C. Runciman Landscapes**.

The project is part of Wayne State's \$750 million Pivotal Moments campaign, launched last year and expected to be complete in 2018 to coincide with the school's 150th anniversary.

The campaign is an effort to lift the school into the top ranks of public urban research universities in the U.S.



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