A TRIBUTE TO HOUSING AND THE DUNBAR CENTER

From the Center to the Tower: Affordable Downtown Housing Reimagined in 2026

The United States first recognized the urgent need for adequate and affordable housing during the Great Depression. Franklin D. Roosevelt explicitly outlined the right to housing in his January 11, 1944, State of the Union address, President Roosevelt declared that housing was not merely a necessity—it was a right. However, in Ann Arbor, this vision began to take shape decades earlier, in February 1923, when Rev. Ralph M. Gilbert of Second Baptist Church established the Dunbar Civic Center, named for the celebrated Black poet and novelist Paul Laurence Dunbar.

A Growing Community and Its Needs

The 1860 census recorded 80 Black residents in Ann Arbor, with another 24 living across the river in Lower Town. By 1870, that number had grown to 230. Black families settled in various pockets of the city, with Kerrytown emerging as one of the largest. During this era, the expansion of roads, railways, and construction projects—particularly on the University of Michigan campus—created a demand for skilled labor. Black men migrating to Michigan for these jobs needed short-term, affordable housing until they could secure permanent homes in these neighborhoods.

Rev. Gilbert's solution, supported by community and civic leaders, was to renovate space in a Black-owned building to provide housing for these workers and help them integrate into the community.

The Dunbar Civic Center: A Hub for Housing and Hope

Built in 1899, the three-story building at 209–211 N. Fourth Avenue served as a hotel through World War I, managed by at least eight Black proprietors. In 1921, the Colored Welfare League purchased the building, transforming it into a vital community hub. The first floor housed Black-owned businesses, the second floor offered offices and meeting rooms for local organizations, and the third floor contained six reasonably priced rooms for rent.

Over time, the building evolved to meet changing needs. The Community Leaning Post later rented those rooms to low-income individuals and others requiring supportive services to avoid homelessness. Community groups and businesses continued to operate there well into the 1990s. When the re-named Dunbar Center acquired 420 N. Fourth Avenue in 1937, its mission expanded to include educational and social programs for the growing community.

Extensive oral histories, photographs, and archives documenting this rich history are available online at https://aadl.org/dunbarcenter.

The Dunbar Tower: A Modern Vision for Affordable Housing

Fast forward to 2026: the Dunbar Tower is under construction at the corner of E. Catherine and Fourth Avenue, and will carry forward the legacy of its predecessor. Like the original Civic Center, the Tower will offer community space on the first level, with residential units above. When it opens, it will provide 63 apartments for low-income residents, individuals exiting homelessness, those needing supportive services, and income-qualified workers in the arts industry.

From six rooms in 1923 to 63 apartments in 2026, the Dunbar Tower represents a century-long commitment to affordable housing and community empowerment in Ann Arbor—a testament to the enduring vision of Rev. Gilbert and the generations who built upon it. We are grateful to our partners the Ann Arbor Housing Commission and Avalon Housing for their commitment to expand supportive, affordable housing, while recognizing the rich cultural history of the Black community in Washtenaw County.

Guest editor Beverly Willis is an Ann Arbor historian and administrator for the Washtenaw County Historical Society at the Museum on Main Street. She has worked with several historical organizations, including the African American Cultural and Historical Museum of Washtenaw County, Ann Arbor Historic District Commission, and the Ann Arbor Historical Foundation.