

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL

Historic Designation Advisory Board

PROPOSED ST. JOHN C.M.E. CHURCH HISTORIC DISTRICT

Final Report

The proposed historic district consists of a single property located on the west side of Woodward between Blaine and Gladstone. The property contains the St. John C.M.E. Church complex, which includes the sanctuary and associated structures at 8715 Woodward Avenue, and a terrace of nine row houses at Woodward and Gladstone Avenues.

BOUNDARIES: The boundaries of the proposed district are as shown on the attached map, and are as follows:

On the east, the centerline of Woodward Avenue

On the south, the centerline of Blaine Avenue

On the west, the centerline of the alley west of and parallel to Woodward Avenue between Blaine and Gladstone Avenues.

On the north, the centerline of Gladstone Avenue.

History of the Congregation. During and after World War I, many southern rural Black people emigrated to industrial cities in the north. In Detroit, this migration included a number of members of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, a denomination which had no congregation in the city. For that reason, many such persons joined other denominations upon their arrival.

The Colored Methodist Episcopal Church was established about 1870 as the result of an amicable separation from the Methodist Episcopal church in the south. This denomination is in contrast, therefore, to the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which was established earlier in the north as the result of an acrimonious separation from the Methodists. Today, the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church is known as the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, a sign of changing times, but the denomination has always been commonly known by the initials "C.M.E."

The Rev. O.L. Mitchell, assisted by Mr. W.D. Coar, established a C.M.E. mission in his home at 102 Charlevoix on June 17, 1917. In July, 1917, Rev. R.A. Carter, Bishop of the C.M.E. conference which included the Detroit area and presiding Bishop of the C.M.E. Church, came to Detroit and issued a call for a meeting on July 8, 1917 for the purpose of establishing a C.M.E. church in Detroit. St. John C.M.E. Church was thus established as the

first of its denomination in Detroit, and located in a brick church at the northwest corner of Dubois and Catherine Streets which had been built in 1883 for the First German Evangelical Association Church. The new church was received into the C.M.E. Church Annual Conference, and in the fall of 1917, the Rev. O.L. Mitchell was appointed pastor and Presiding Elder of the Detroit area.

In 1918, Rev. J.M. Rivers was appointed pastor, but fell ill; the Rev. W.M. Crain was transferred to Detroit and took over the duties both at St. John and as Presiding Elder. Rev. Crain had a reputation for his preaching and attracted many new members to the congregation; the church found its building too small after only little more than a year.

On November 18, 1919, St. John C.M.E. Church purchased St. Mark's English Evangelical Lutheran Church at the northwest corner of St. Aubin and Maple; the annual conference as well as other C.M.E. congregations assisted with the purchase price. This building, a classical style wooden structure, had been built under a permit issued on November 3, 1899 to Norval Wardrop, a Detroit architect listed in the 1900 City Directory as working for Gordon W. Lloyd. The building was a one-story classical style structure with a columned portico and a drum and dome centered on the hip roof. St. Mark's held their last service in the structure on October 15, 1919, and moved their services temporarily to the Rialto Theatre; their new brick church, on East Grand Boulevard near Forest, was dedicated in 1923, and still stands. The congregation is now part of Genesis Lutheran Church.

In 1920 Rev. Crain led the St. John C.M.E. congregation in procession the three blocks from their first church to their newly purchased second home. There the congregation remained for over thirty-five years. Their first building became home to another notable Black congregation, St. John Presbyterian Church, and was eventually demolished as part of the Elmwood Park redevelopment.

The young congregation had experienced several short pastorates, but in 1921 the Rev. A.W. Womack became the first long-term pastor, remaining until 1928. The 1920's were a period of growth for the congregation; the depression years that followed were difficult. St. John served as an important resource for its community in those hard times, becoming a distribution center for government surplus food.

The World War II years brought economic prosperity; the mortgage on the church buildings was retired in 1944, and improvements were made to the church property. The congregation continued to grow, and in 1945 Rev. Walter H. Amos became pastor and Rev. Emmanuel M. Dozier became Presiding Elder. This leadership team served for a very long term - into the early 1960's - and led the congregation in unprecedented growth and prosperity. Rev. Amos'

pastorate reached its peak in 1955, when he led the congregation to its new home at Woodward and Blaine Avenues. St. John C.M.E. thus become the first Black congregation to be established in the "Piety Hill" section of North Woodward between the New Center and the Boston-Edison-Arden Park neighborhoods. In 1962, the C.M.E. church recognized the outstanding quality of Rev. Amos' leadership, and elected him a Bishop of the C.M.E. Church.

In recent years, the congregation has continued to prosper, investment in their church properties reflecting their pride in the beautiful buildings they occupy. The Rev. Julius C. Clay now serves as the fourteenth pastor of this historic Black congregation, whose commitment to the community continues.

History of the Buildings. The church complex now occupied by St. John C.M.E. Church was originally begun in 1902 for the North Congregational Church, then being formed as a daughter congregation of First Congregational Church, which had purchased the property at Woodward and Blaine in 1902. North Congregational Church is listed at this location in the 1902 Detroit City Directory. On August 16, 1907, the Detroit architects Malcomson & Higginbotham took out a building permit for a brick veneer church structure 42' x 65', to be built at an estimated cost of \$5,000; this was apparently a major addition to the earlier building. The resulting structure contained a "chapel" as well as offices and other facilities, and was built of brown glazed brick in the Arts and Crafts manner of the period.

At Easter, 1908, North Congregational Church merged with the Woodward Avenue Congregational Church to form North Woodward Avenue Congregational Church. Woodward Avenue Congregational Church was also an offshoot of First Congregational Church, having been established in 1866, when it was called Second Congregational Church. Second Congregational built a chapel on Sibley shortly after the congregation was formed, and built a church in 1873 on the adjoining lot on the northwest corner of Woodward and Sibley. During the 1880's, the congregation changed its name to Woodward Avenue Congregational Church.

After the merger of the Woodward Avenue and North Congregational churches, plans to build a sanctuary at the Woodward and Blaine location moved forward; on October 30, 1909 the cornerstone was laid for the new church designed by architect Hugh Barret Clement, a member of the church. Building permit # 2318 had been issued on September 22, 1909 for a two story brick and stone church 83' x 153' x 72' high, with a slate roof. Gearing Brothers Ltd. was the contractor, and the estimated cost was \$78,000. The new church was dedicated on February 5, 1911.

The Woodward Avenue Congregational Church property at Woodward and Sibley was sold in 1909 and the combined congregations used the chapel unit at Woodward and Blaine until the new sanctuary was ready. The old Second Congregational Church was demolished and replaced by the Colonial Theatre.

In 1921, North Woodward Avenue Church bought the terrace of nine row houses located at the southwest corner of Woodward and Gladstone. These had been built under a permit issued October 17, 1904, at an estimated cost of \$20,000, and had two units facing Woodward and seven facing Gladstone. This purchase gave the church ownership of the entire block face of Woodward between Blaine and Gladstone. The terraces were transferred with the church to St. John C.M.E. in 1955 and remain in church ownership today.

During the booming 1920's the neighborhood grew and completed its development, and the recreational and educational facilities of North Woodward Avenue Congregational Church demanded expansion. On March 20, 1929 permit number 56,200 was issued to architect A.R. Morison for the building now seen to the north of the sanctuary. This stands in front of the 1907 chapel by Malcomson & Higginbotham and completely screens it; the only 1907 portion of the complex now visible is the alley side of the chapel building, constructed of common brick.

The Great Depression began the process of neighborhood change in the North Woodward area, and the housing shortages and influx of workers during World War II contributed to it. By the early 1950's, the North Woodward Avenue Congregational Church was serving many who lived at some distance from the church, and a decision was made to relocate. Property was purchased along James Couzens Highway in Southfield, and a new church complex was begun. The last Congregational services were held in the Woodward Avenue church in May, 1955, and the congregation moved to its new home under the name of North Congregational Church.

Anticipating the move, the church sold its Woodward Avenue property under a land contract dated June 5, 1953, to St. John C.M.E. Church. This land contract was closed out by the issuance of a Warranty Deed on May 1, 1964. Not only did this sale anticipate the actual move of the Congregational church by about two years, but it also likely reflected planning by St. John C.M.E. to replace their St. Aubin property, located within the Elmwood Park redevelopment area. After St. John moved to Woodward Avenue, the St. Aubin property was used by Coggins Memorial C.M.E. Church, but urban renewal demolished the old church not long after.

On June 5, 1955, Rev. Amos led his congregation in procession from St. Aubin and Maple to Woodward and Blaine, and St. John celebrated the occasion of their first services in their new location. Since that time, St. John's C.M.E. Church has maintained the buildings carefully and with pride.

Description of the Buildings. As noted, the St. John C.M.E. Church complex consists of three connected structures; the "chapel" built in 1902 and 1907, the sanctuary built in 1911, and the church house addition erected in 1929.

From either direction of approach on Woodward, the sanctuary is the dominant element. Occupying as it does the corner location at Blaine, its bulk and height demand attention. The subsidiary wing to the north is placed toward the rear of the lot, and thus is a secondary element for the viewer. The complex is built of red "impervious" brick characteristic of the early twentieth century, with limestone trim and a grey slate roof. The design is typical of the Neo-Gothic of the period, derived loosely from English precedents and with influence from the Prairie and Arts and Crafts styles. The building is quite simple, and apparently that was the architect's intent, keeping in mind the puritan background of the Congregational Church.

The sanctuary is cruciform, with the liturgical west end facing east; the only major element of the Woodward facade is the west window; it contains no entrances, although this is the liturgical west. As a result the west end of the building tends to look like a chancel, with its large centered window and no doors. Doors do exist facing north and south terminating the flanking low aisles on either side of the nave, and these doors give access through vestibules to the area under the west gallery. The omission of west doors not only contributes to the simplicity of the Woodward facade, but was intended to have a practical purpose as well, by reducing the street noise entering the church.

The architect likewise sought the simplicity of the meeting house by omitting any tower, depending on the height of the nave to impress; the roofline is reportedly about 72' tall, and the interior of the nave 50'.

The church stands on a foundation of red brick capped by a limestone water table. The liturgical west and the transept facades are all centered with a large pointed window with limestone surrounds and hoodmoulds; each of these facades is divided by a limestone string course at the level of the springing of the Gothic arch of the window, and each has corner buttresses with limestone courses capping each stage. These three facades rise above the roof into parapets capped with limestone which have a short horizontal return at each corner flanking the angle of the gable; the Woodward facade is surmounted by a cross. All these three facades have two limestone string courses above and below a narrow attic window within the gable. With the contrasting bands of stone and the very smooth and regular "impervious" brick, the design suggests some Victorian practices, although it is in no sense Victorian itself.

The Blaine Avenue side of the church has a low aisle with triple rectangular windows in limestone surrounds with a blind Gothic arcade element in limestone above, each bay being divided by limestone features suggestive of flying buttresses without the flying element. Above and behind is the lofty clerestory with large windows with limestone surrounds and hoodmoulds. At the

Woodward end of the aisle is one of the entrances, facing Blaine, the Gothic Arch of the door surrounded by heavy limestone arch and buttresses.

The liturgical south side of the nave is similar, but the aisle is interrupted after one bay by a similarly designed one story link connecting the sanctuary to the church house. A chapel lies behind that facade, which has bays like the aisle design, but with shallow Tudor arched triple windows and brick buttresses.

The wing adjoining the south transept is made up of both the 1907 and 1929 elements of the complex, but, as noted, the 1907 brown brick is screened by the later addition in red brick and limestone matching the sanctuary. The Church House proper has a two story facade expressed in three bays, the southern containing the large limestone-framed entrance with a window above; the center bay containing similar triple windows one above the other; and the northern bay consisting of a two story bay window with parapet. The gabled roof of this building has parapets capped with stone.

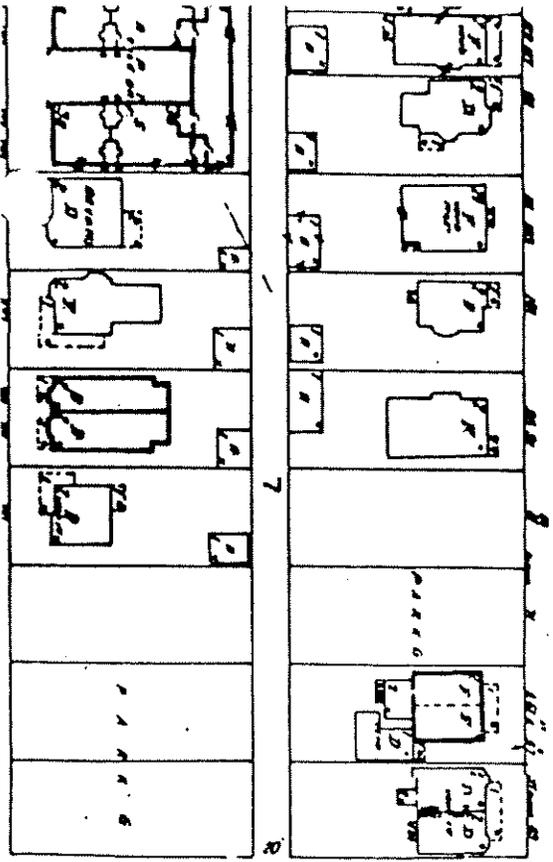
The interior of the sanctuary is cruciform, as noted; the bays of the nave are divided by pilasters which continue upward through the tall clerestory and arch over to form the support for a panelled ceiling having the shape of a Tudor arch in section. Between the pilasters the nave wall is pierced by Tudor arches which open into the aisles; there is no "nave arcade" as such. A large gallery is over the narthex at the liturgical west, and the chancel contains the usual furnishings in Gothic style woodwork. Facing the congregation is a large pierced wooden screen surrounded by painted decoration and surmounted by a circular window; the organ is behind the pierced screen. Newspaper accounts of the time commented particularly on the relative simplicity of the interior, but noted that the interior was quite elaborate for Congregational purposes, as it includes a communion table and the extensive use of stained glass with figural scenes from the Bible. The glass is, in fact, one of the major features of the building, as it was conceived and mostly installed when the building was new, and therefore represents a planned iconography, rather than the catch-as-catch-can character of windows installed over time. The interior also contains considerable painted decoration, and two exceptional installations of Pewabic tile. The baptistery, a recess in the transept wall to the right of the chancel is lined in mosaic tiles by Pewabic and surmounted by a Pewabic tympanum; the entrance door which matches on the left has a matching Pewabic tympanum.

Other interior spaces include the "chapel" in the 1902-07 building, a nearly square two-story space with platform at the north end surrounded by classrooms on both levels separated from the central space by sliding wall units. Below that space is the dining room and kitchens; beneath the chancel end of the sanctuary is a gymnasium complex which includes basketball court,

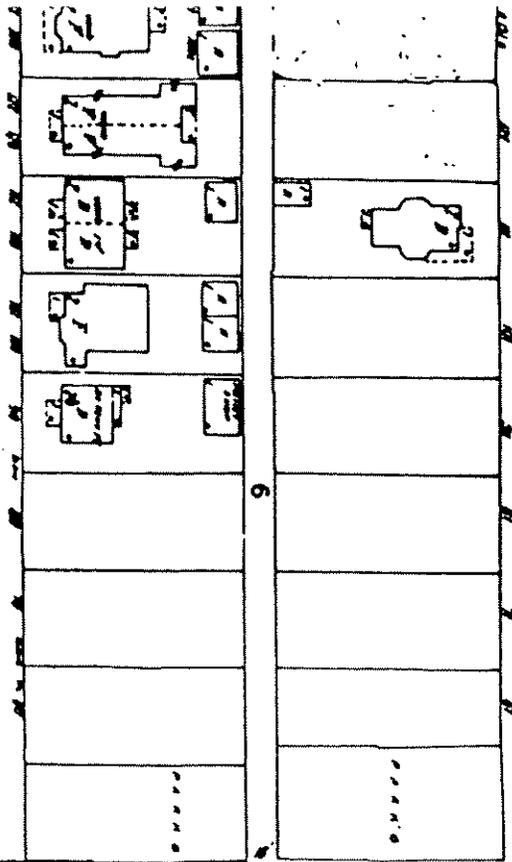
bowling alleys, and locker rooms. In addition to lounges and office, the 1929 building includes, as noted, a fine chapel with Pewabic floor, beamed ceiling, and rough plaster finish typical of the late 1920's. Much of the circulation space of the 1929 building is floored in Pewabic as well.

The final building on the property is the terrace structure on the corner of Woodward and Gladstone. This is a very fine and typical example of the Arts and Crafts design practices of the time. Two units face Woodward, and these have facades almost entirely of brick, with a wooden two-story bay window and typical semicircular hoods over the entrance doors. Facing Gladstone, the facades are less formal, five of the seven units in this range having first floor bays surmounted by shingled overhangs topped by gables with bargeboards. Several of the semicircular door hoods occur here, and the other entrances are covered with flat bracketed roofs.

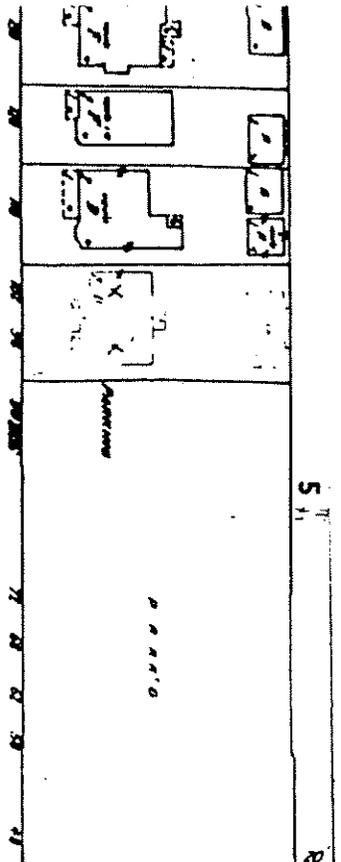
RECOMMENDATION: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that the City Council establish the St. John C.M.E. Church Historic District, with the design treatment level of rehabilitation for the church building and for the terrace of nine row houses also included in the proposed district. The Advisory Board also recommends designation of certain interior spaces in the church building with the design treatment level of rehabilitation. A draft ordinance for the establishment of the district is attached for consideration by City Council.



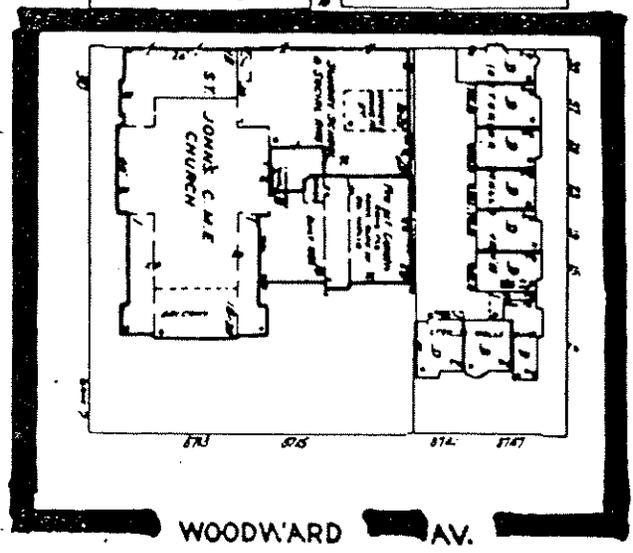
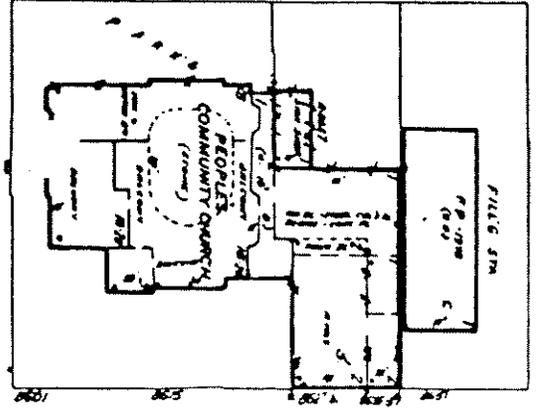
BLAINE AV.



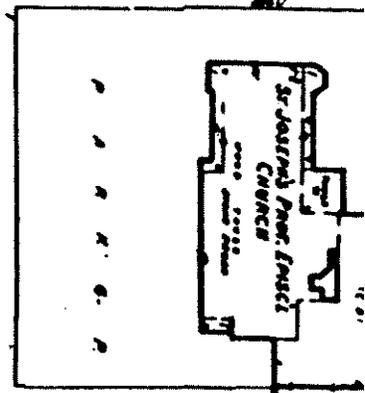
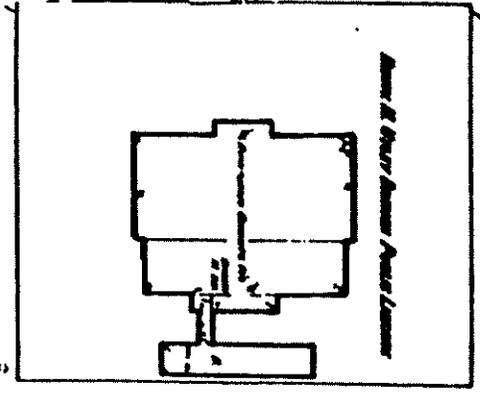
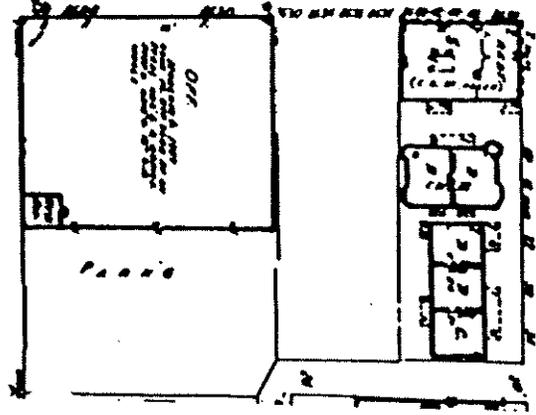
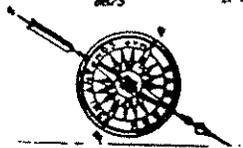
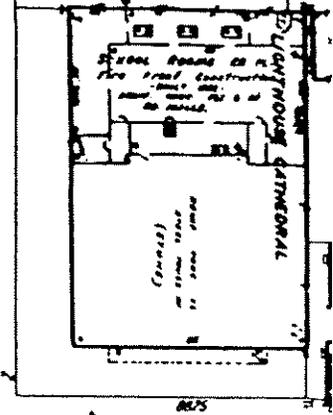
GLADSTONE AV.



S



WOODWARD AV.



Proposed St. John C.M.E. Church Historic District
(Boundaries outlined in heavy black lines)