

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD

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Detroit, Michigan 48226

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PROPOSED B'NAI MOSHE - ST. PAUL A.M.E. ZION HISTORIC DISTRICT

Final Report

The proposed B'Nai Moshe - St. Paul A.M.E. Zion Historic District is located at 11359-11411 Dexter on the northwest corner of Dexter and Lawrence. It is approximately five miles northwest of downtown Detroit. The proposed district is comprised of the religious structure proper and attached addition to its north.

BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION: The boundaries of the proposed district are as shown on the attached map and are as follows:

On the north, the south lot line, extended north and south, of Lot 575 of Lewis & Crofoot's Sub No. 3, L. 25, P. 57 Plats, W.C.R.

On the east, the center line of Dexter;

On the south, the center line of Lawrence; and

On the west, the center line of the east-west alley between Dexter and Holmur.

HISTORY:

The subject building was originally built to serve Congregation B'Nai Moshe but has spent the greater part of its existence as St. Paul A.M.E. Zion Church.

St. Paul A.M.E. Zion Church

The history of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States is a rich one. It began with Richard Allen, a freed slave, in 1794 when he organized Bethel Church in Philadelphia. Having attended a predominately white Methodist Episcopal church, Allen and others left because of discrimination suffered by blacks. In 1796, thirty African Americans under the leadership of James Varick similarly withdrew from John Street Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City and formed the second "colored" church in New York, from which St. Paul A.M.E. Zion stems.

In September of 1879, Bishop Thomas H. Lomax organized the Canada and Michigan conference of A.M.E. Zion churches in Detroit. Work suffered after Lomax was removed until

the arrival of Bishop George Lincoln Blackwell in 1908. Blackwell was the first university graduate to become bishop in the A.M.E. Zion church. He organized Blackwell Temple in Detroit and, a few years later, St. Paul on Catherine Street.

St. Paul A.M.E. Zion Church began in the home of Mr. C.B. Cox in 1911. The congregation owned a building at 333 Catherine that was destroyed by fire in 1918. Rev. James Terry became the spiritual leader in 1918, and held services in the Vaudette Theater on Gratiot. In 1921, under the leadership of Rev. L.Q. Conquest, the church met at 312 Catherine in the former Holland Reformed Church building. In 1922, Rev. P.R. Flack moved his congregation to 521 Palmer Street into a former synagogue, where the church remained for many years. Rev. L. Powell served as pastor during the Depression.

Bishop William A. Hilliard succeeded Rev. Powell as minister of St. Paul from 1947 to 1960, when he was elevated to be the 67th Bishop of the A.M.E. Zion Church. He oversaw the move to the present building, which the congregation purchased from Congregation B'Nai Moshe in September 1959. In what was described as "...one of the most tremendous divisions in our connectional history," part of the congregation remained on Palmer and formed Metropolitan A.M.E. Zion Church (*75th Anniversary ...*, 1986).

Since then, St. Paul has flourished at its church on Dexter Boulevard; it has a membership of approximately 2,000 today. The school addition is now home to a Head Start Program and several other community outreach endeavors, as well as religious programs.

Congregation B'Nai Moshe

In the summer of 1911, a handful of recent Jewish arrivals from Hungary met in a restaurant on Hastings Street, then the hub of Jewish life in Detroit. They agreed to organize a congregation that enabled them to worship in accord with the traditional character and customs they brought from Hungary, a land where Jews had enjoyed the freedom to exercise their religious beliefs without limitation for over a half century before. The Hungarian Jewish settlement in Detroit at that time consisted of only 25-30 families. On September 2, 1911 the founders of the new Orthodox congregation signed its articles of incorporation, and Aaron Holland was elected its first president. In that first year, the new congregation worshiped in a hall at Hastings and Winder, and in the second year, in the Hanna Schloss Building on High Street west of Hastings. In its third year, the congregation rented quarters in a hall on Hastings near Brewster, and in 1915 it purchased a home on Eliot near Hastings.

By 1917, the congregation's membership had increased to seventy families. The congregation erected a new synagogue with a seating capacity of 600 on the corner of Garfield and Beaubien streets, and the name, B'Nai Moshe., meaning "Sons of Moses," was adopted at that time. In addition to the space for worship, the structure also included a social hall and Sunday school rooms; B'Nai Moshe Religious School had about 250 students by 1928.

Since 1910, Hastings Street was Detroit Jews' "port of entry." However, after World War I, coinciding with the growth in the Jewish population and better transportation options, Jews began moving away from the center of the city to other neighborhoods. For the Hungarian Jews, it was Delray. Another attractive location was around Oakman Boulevard, in the area of industrial development that created new housing and business opportunities. Other factors in addition to increased opportunities for prosperity influenced migration patterns, as stated in a historical overview of the congregation written in 1944, "Meanwhile, the influx of colored people into the eastern part of the city became so pronounced that, like other congregations of Orthodox character, B'Nai Moshe sensed the necessity of following the trend of migration of its constituents to the northwestern section... (*Congregation B'Nai Moshe, Detroit*, p. 30) . The corner site at Dexter and Lawrence was selected for a new building; meanwhile the congregation rented quarters at Linwood and Clairmont. In the spring of 1927, the mortgage for the new building was signed. B'Nai Moshe was, at that time, home to more than 200 Hungarian Jewish families and hundreds of other orthodox Jews.

Rabbi Moses Fisher came to lead the congregation from the largest Hungarian Hebrew congregation of Chicago in 1923, and stayed for twenty years. It was under the leadership of Rabbi Fisher and president Robert Rosenberg that the new synagogue on Dexter was planned; ground was broken on Oct. 21, 1928 and the cornerstone was laid on Nov. 25th. The new building, dedicated on May 26, 1929, was built to serve the spiritual, cultural, and social requirements of the steadily growing congregation. An article in the *Detroit News* described the capacity of the auditorium as seating 1,000 persons. The membership expanded with the merger of the Detroit Hungarian Jewish Congregation under the presidency of John Adler a few years later. Around 1935, the institutional part of building was redecorated; acoustical tile was installed in the social hall, a public address system was installed in the synagogue, and new furnishings were added. A number of memorials for windows were received and both old and new building committee tablets were installed in the main lobby. The congregation had 485 members at that time.

B'Nai Moshe was located in the area of highest Jewish density in Detroit by 1940 (Bolkosky, 1991), that area being in the Dexter - Twelfth - Davison - Clairmont vicinity. Other Jewish institutions, among them a branch of United Hebrew Schools at Tuxedo and Holmur and the Jewish Children's Home on Petoskey and Burlingame, also were located in the area. Adding to this concentration was the new religious school of B'Nai Moshe, attached to the north of the main building in 1951.

Replacing Rabbi Moshe Fisher in 1948, Rabbi Moses Lehrman led the exodus of the Hungarian Shul to Oak Park in 1958. Under Rabbi Lehrman, the congregation became Conservative. The ark bearing scrolls and topped with a rendering of the Ten Commandments moved with the congregation from the synagogue on Dexter Boulevard to 14390 W. Ten Mile Road.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The architect of B’Nai Moshe was the firm of Payne and Kohner, a partnership that designed many theaters in and around Detroit, including the Ramona Theater in 1926, Irving Theater (1927), the Uptown (1926), and the University Theater in 1935. In prior years, Henry Kohner teamed with another partner, Alfred J. Seeler, to design many churches in the Detroit area, including St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1920, St. Thomas Lutheran Church in 1921, and St. Johns Greek Catholic Church in 1922. Hector A. Payne, practicing on his own after 1935, was responsible for the Norwest and the Varsity Theaters, both constructed in 1936. A graduate of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, his obituary identified him as a partner in the group of architects that prepared drawings for the Chandler Park housing project, much of the work having been done by him.

The building today known as St. Paul A.M.E. Zion Church faces eastward on what was historically a busy street corner of a neighborhood commercial district. The building is an imposing Neoclassical structure of stone with an attached school addition that compliments its proportions and style. The main Dexter Boulevard facade is symmetrically arranged with seven bays divided by ten fluted pilasters and five doors. The school addition to the north is a two story structure also featuring seven bays and ten pilasters, its central entrance flanked by two large openings on either side, maintaining the rhythm of the main structure.

The footprint of the church building measures 91' 5" by 120' 5". It is two full stories tall on a full basement; the main structure is approached by two very broad sets of five stone steps separated by a landing. The facades of the main structure and addition are stone featuring carved ornamentation, such as the decorative cornice with dentils and a carving of the Ten Commandment tablets at the attic level. The frieze originally displayed the name, "CONGREGATION B'NAI MOSHE," centered between four carved paterae, and now bears the name, "ST. PAUL A.M.E. ZION CHURCH." The ten fluted pilasters feature a stylized acanthus leaf motif. The stone facing wraps the corner of the building and changes to face-brick along the visible Lawrence Avenue elevation. The rear elevation of the main structure is common brick while concrete block was used for the rear elevation and north side of the school addition. Original exterior lighting fixtures are intact. The hipped roof is not visible from the street but is covered in composite materials.

The main structure features five pairs of wooden doors which each contain three circular raised panels. The addition's front door is also paired and has six circular glass windows. Other doors on various other elevations are of the modern metal and glass variety. Both the Dexter and Lawrence Street elevations have stained glass windows and transoms; the north elevation of the main structure, although no longer visible from the outside due to the position of the addition, also features stained glass windows now seen in a small courtyard between the two buildings which allows light into both the worship hall and addition. These rectangular windows generally feature the original glass with Jewish symbols (Star of Davids) around the outer periphery and newer Christian symbols in the centers, with the original opalescent glass panels in between. The remaining windows not in the sanctuary are in metal frames with clear glass.

The sanctuary is the major public space on the interior of the main structure. It features a cantilevered wooden balcony and a vaulted, elliptical, concave plaster ceiling with gold rope molding encompassing a light blue painted sky with decorative gold medallion vents. Original chandeliers are present in the main worship area and the entrance lobby.

The sanctuary occupies most of the main core block with three smaller rooms at the rear of the two floor levels. The front vestibule has painted decorative and religious motifs on its vaulted ceiling and stained glass with the Star of David motif in transoms over the window and door openings. The basement is comprised of one large meeting hall with a kitchen, storage and boiler room to the rear.

CONTRIBUTING STRUCTURES: Both the original sanctuary and the school addition would be contributing structures in the proposed historic district; there are no non-contributing structures.

CRITERIA: The Historic Designation Advisory Board has concluded that the proposed historic district meets two of the criteria of Section 25-2-2 namely:

Criteria 1, which reads: "Sites, buildings, structures or archeological sites where cultural, social spiritual, economic, political or architectural history of the community, city, state or nation is particularly reflected or exemplified;" and

Criteria 3, which reads: "Buildings or structures which embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural specimen, inherently valuable as a representation of a period, style or method of construction".

RECOMMENDATION: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that City Council adopt an ordinance of designation for the proposed historic district, with the design treatment level of "rehabilitation". A draft ordinance is attached for City Council's consideration.

Bibliography

Architectural drawings, housed in the church office of the St. Paul's A.M.E. Zion Church, Kohner & Payne, Job 2802

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