

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL

Historic Designation Advisory Board

PROPOSED CASS METHODIST HISTORIC DISTRICT

Final Report

The proposed historic district consists of a single property located on the southwest corner of Selden and Cass Avenue. The property contains the Cass Community Methodist Church, formerly known as the Cass Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church, addressed at 3901 Cass Avenue.

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

Beginning at the point of intersection of the centerline of Cass Avenue and Selden Avenue and proceeding northerly along the centerline of Cass Avenue to its intersection with the north boundary (extended westward and eastward) of Lot 2 of the Milo A. Smith Subdivision; thence westward along the said north boundary of Lot 2 as extended to its intersection with the centerline of the alley running north-south between the east boundary of Lot 24 and the west boundary of Lots 1 and 2 of the aforementioned subdivision; thence south along the centerline of said alley to its intersection with the centerline of West Selden Avenue; thence eastward along the centerline of West Selden Avenue to the point of beginning. (Legal description: Lots 1 and 2, Milo A. Smith Subdivision, Cass Farm, Block 94. [Liber 1, Page 177])

HISTORY: In 1880, the Cass Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church was formed to serve the fashionable and rapidly growing residential area 19 blocks north of Jefferson Avenue, beyond the vicinity of the Central and Simpson Methodist Episcopal Churches. The church was "an outgrowth of the effort of the Methodist Church and Sunday School Alliance, whose Missionary Committee, since 1878, has been of the unanimous opinion that a church upon the Cass farm was necessary for their denomination."

On May 8, 1881, David Preston, a prominent local Methodist, bought two lots totalling 107' x 150' at the intersection of Cass and Selden Avenues from Crosier Davidson, grandson of General Lewis Cass, former governor of Michigan.

By May of 1883, the contract was let for the first building on the site. The architectural firm chosen for the project was Mason & Rice, a highly successful partnership which later designed the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island (1887), First Presbyterian Church (1889), Trinity Episcopal Church (1892), and the Scripps Mansion (1891).

The new chapel faced Selden Avenue and was executed in a simple Victorian Tudor style which freely drew on medieval precedent in its use of varied textures, steep roofs, and ornamental chimneys. George D. Mason felt that "brick, terra -cotta, and stone are always preferable to wood for outside use... Wood should be very sparsely used in exterior work." The cut stone foundation, red brick walls, and slate roof clearly reflect this belief in the permanence of masonry materials. The structure utilized a T-shaped plan with meeting rooms in the front and the main sanctuary in the rear wing. The facade was composed of a central projecting pavilion accented with a half-timbered gable. The contractors were Dewey and Abel and the total cost of the building and lot \$20,860. Dedication services were held December 2, 1883, with 99 people in attendance.

Eight years later, the congregation decided to erect a church, this time in the Romanesque style popularized by Henry Hobson Richardson in his design for Trinity Church (1872-77) in Boston. The new Cass Methodist building incorporated the existing structure into the plan. The Detroit Tribune reported, "The old chapel on Selden Street will be allowed to stand, but its front will be removed and rebuilt six feet closer to the lot line and to correspond with the design of the main building." In spite of the Tribune's statement, the facade of the building was not removed; instead, a series of rooms was added in front of it on the first floor level, while the original walls were sheathed in stone at the second floor level and above. Thus, the first floor facade of the chapel building was made to correspond with that of the new church, while the second floor, now set back, was made to match in material.

The firm chosen to design the new building was Malcomson & Higginbotham, an experienced Detroit firm which also designed Central Christian Church (1891) and Central High School, now Wayne State's Old Main (1896). The church's cornerstone was laid by Bishop Newman on September 17, 1891. Henry Chandler & Co. was the contractor for the stone work and Mayhew & Son the contractor for the carpenter work. The cost of the new structure was approximately \$50,000. The church was dedicated free of debt in 1892.

During the decade from 1918 to 1928, when membership shrank from 767 to 275, the once exclusive Methodist church found itself in the center of a district of transients in an area which was rapidly becoming commercial in character. In 1929, a study committee was formed to analyze the situation and make recommendations. The obvious solution was to close the church and dispose of the property. Instead, it was decided to embark on a one-year experiment to convert the church into an evangelistic center.

The Cass Avenue M.E. Church has always been vitally concerned with community problems. In 1894, Alice Bowen, founder of the Visiting Nurses Society in Detroit, was given support for this effort from the Cass Avenue Church Relief Committee. In the 1930's, the church provided food and clothing for many families of the neighborhood who were unable to qualify for aid from the Welfare Department. During the peak of this work in 1933, 1,400 families received help during just one month.

In 1941, the building was declared unsafe by the city and closed. Activities were transferred to Jefferson School. Once again the church was in a crisis situation and once again the Methodist churches of the city felt that it was important to retain the church. Five thousand dollars was raised for repairs to the roof, plaster, and wiring. The repairs were made and the building re-opened in 1942. The church has continued its active social service program.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: The present Cass Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church is composed of three sections: the original chapel of 1883, the present church of 1891, and a small, one-story addition on the north elevation of 1968.

The mass of the original chapel is readily apparent on the western end of the Selden Avenue elevation. The chapel, constructed in 1883, faced Selden Avenue and was set back from the street. The structure utilized a T-shape plan with a two and one-half story center block and a one and one-half story rear wing. Corbelled chimneys were located on the end walls. The hipped roof was originally sheathed with imbricated slate and was capped by cresting punctuated with knob finials. The symmetrical facade of the center gable was accented with bargeboards, modillions, and half-timbering. Entrance was gained through a small, ornate wooden side porch located on the east elevation. The fenestration was regular and was composed of rectangular sash windows ornamented with trefoil tracery and stained glass.

The new church building of 1891 is a strong, forceful Romanesque composition. Cross gables form a Greek cross which is dominated by a square corner tower. Because of its corner location, the building has two major elevations. The church measures 72 feet on Cass Avenue by 146 feet on Selden Avenue, including the chapel. The height of the tower is 76 feet and the gable 51 feet. The structure was constructed of uniform rock faced Grafton stone in a coursed ashlar finish and trimmed with variegated Ionia sandstone. The roof was originally sheathed in green slate. This has been replaced with dark grey asphalt shingles with the exception of the roof of the tower, which still has original green sheet metal in imitation of ceramic tile, and one small conical roof still covered in slate. The main entrances

are located on the south and east sides of the tower, and at the north end of the Cass Avenue elevation. The doorways are composed of round relieving arches with carved tympanums and large oak double doors.

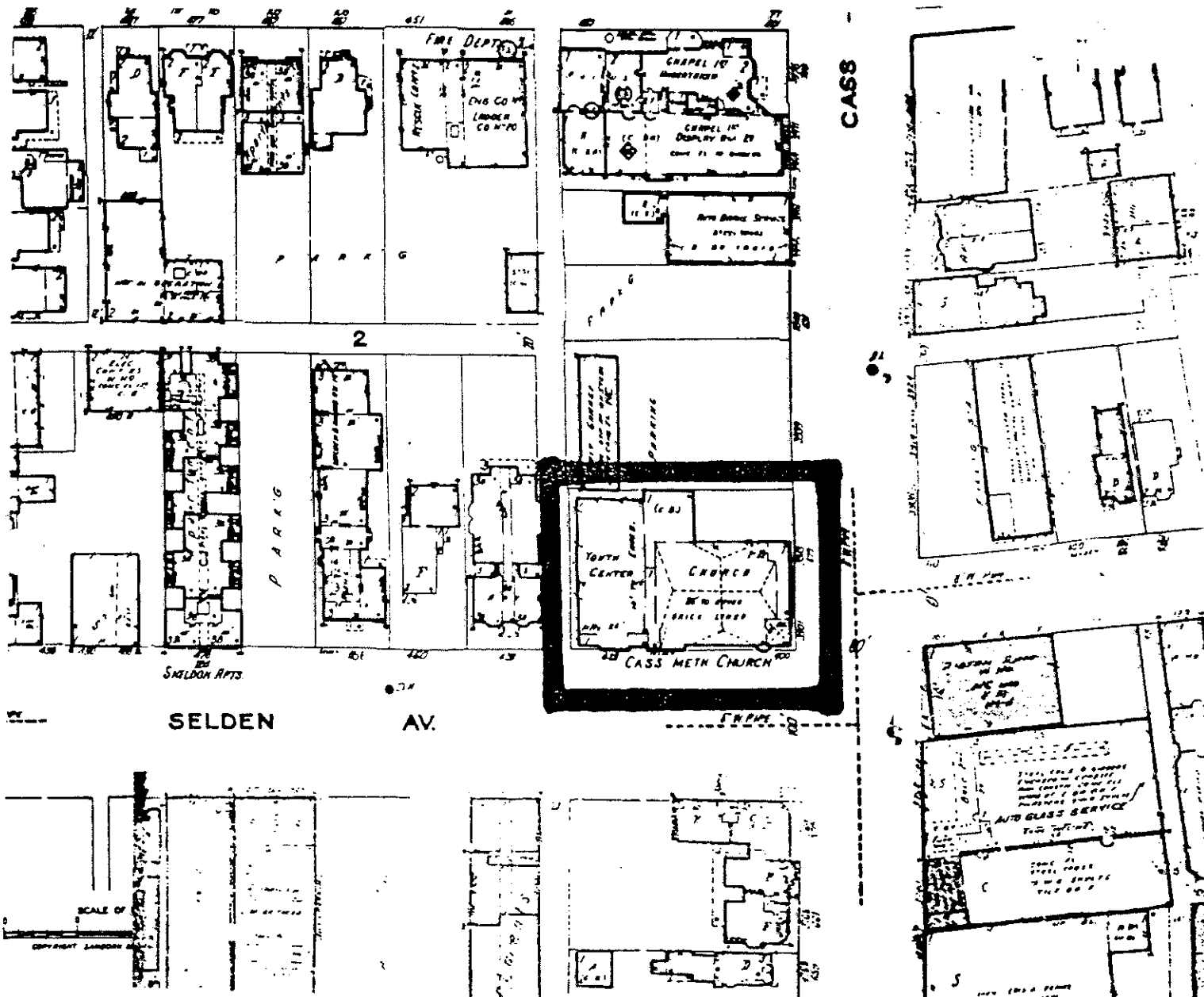
The interior has remained remarkably intact. It retains its original woodwork, windows, ecclesiastical furniture, and pipe organ. The focus of the interior is the pulpit located behind the communion rail at the front of the room. Semi-circular seating is organized around a wide central aisle. The Detroit Tribune described the interior in 1891:

"In the interior striking and unique effects will be produced by the arched trusses supporting the roof. They will be parallel, spanning the entire church from front to rear. The trusses will be invisible being concealed by the wide sweeping arches. At intervals on the arches will be clusters of electric lights. Between the arches the ceiling will be divided by wooden elevations into large panels, which will be decorated by fresco work. The interior of the auditorium will be finished in red oak and fresco work. Another unique feature will be the auditorium floor, which will curve from all sides toward the pulpit on the west end of the church, like half of a bowl. The church will seat 600 people. There will be no gallery."

The extraordinary stained glass windows of the sanctuary were said to have been designed by the architects and were commissioned from the most famous artisan of the time, Tiffany Studios. They are essentially Queen Anne in style with hints of the biomorphism found in the Art Nouveau movement. Abstract and floral patterns are used -- some with obvious symbolic value such as the Easter lily. The colors are very pastel -- pale blues, pinks, apricots, and yellows. Faceted jewels further enliven the surface.

Cass Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church houses the largest nineteenth century organ in Michigan, a three-manual instrument of 34 ranks of pipes built in 1892 by Johnson and Son of Westfield, Massachusetts. The builders were one of the three or four most important firms in the field in the second half of the nineteenth century, and this instrument typifies their later work. Completely unaltered save for the installation of an electric blower, the organ is large enough to represent the tonal ideals of the Johnsons in the early nineties in a complete form. No other Johnson organ in Michigan approaches this instrument in size or in lack of alteration.

RECOMMENDATION: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that the City Council establish the Cass Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church Historic District with the design treatment level of rehabilitation. A draft ordinance for the establishment of the district is attached for the consideration of City Council.



Proposed Cass Methodist Episcopal Church Historic District
 (Proposed district outlined in black)