City of Detroit CITY COUNCIL

HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD

218 Coleman A. Young Municipal Center, Detroit, Michigan 48226 Phone: (313) 224-3487 Fax: (313) 224-4336 e-mail: historic@detroitmi.gov



New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church in 2012.

Final Report

Proposed New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church/Beth David Synagogue Historic District

2201 Elmhurst Street

By a resolution dated November 7, 2012, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church/Beth David Synagogue Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church/Beth David Synagogue Historic District consists of a single contributing building located at the southwest corner of Fourteenth Street and Elmhurst Avenue, in the city of Detroit, about five miles northwest of downtown. The building is presently owned and occupied by New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church.

BOUNDARIES

The boundaries of the proposed New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church/Beth David Synagogue Historic District, shown in bold lines on the attached map, are as follows:

On the north, the centerline of Elmhurst Avenue;

On the east, the centerline of Fourteenth Street;

On the south, the centerline of the alley running east-west between Elmhurst Avenue and Tuxedo Avenue;

On the west, the western boundary line, as extended north and south, of Lot 67 of Elmhurst Park Subdivision, Liber 28, Page 65, Wayne County Records 8/138.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The west boundary is defined by a parking lot that is not historically associated with New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church/Beth David Synagogue. The north, east, and south boundaries are defined by adjacent public streets and an alley.

HISTORY

The proposed New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church/Beth David Synagogue Historic District consists of a single building located at 2201 Elmhurst Street. Completed in 1928, it was home to Beth David Synagogue (later known as B'Nai David Synagogue) until 1958 and New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church from 1960 to the present day. It is significant as one of Detroit's most outstanding examples of synagogue architecture and as the former home of one of the city's largest Jewish congregations. Furthermore, its transition to New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church exemplifies broader geographic and demographic trends which were occurring in Detroit's African American community in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Beth David Synagogue

An Orthodox congregation, The Beth David Synagogue was founded in 1892 and originally met in a rented facility at the northwest corner of Gratiot Avenue and Hastings Street. It was established by a group of fourteen recent immigrants from Russia. The first permanent home (no longer standing), located at 293 Adelaide Street, between Hastings and Rivard, was dedicated on September 9, 1900, and was constructed at a cost of \$5,000. The congregation was founded by Rabbi Saul Rabinowitz. Early rabbis also included Jacob H. Scheinman and Ezekiel Aishishkin, a Lithuanian immigrant. ¹

Although most Jewish Detroit residents in the 19th century had immigrated from Germany and Russia, in the 1910s and 1920s the Jewish population in the city increased significantly as Jews from New York and other areas of the East Coast were attracted by Detroit's growing automobile industry. While many new synagogues were founded, existing ones were expanded. In 1915, as membership in Beth David grew, the congregation moved to the former Shaarey Zedek location at 545 Winder Street, between Beaubien and Hastings in an area that later became known to the African American community as Paradise Valley. The following year, membership included a total of 178 families. From 1925 to 1928 the congregation met in a location at Owen Street in the city's North End neighborhood.

Like many immigrant communities, Detroit's Jewish population expanded outward from the city center as subsequent generations accumulated wealth and sought new homes in more spacious conditions. Jews, in particular, tended to move north and west. In 1910 the Jewish population was located almost exclusively in an area bounded by Woodward, Gratiot, Russell, and Brady streets; by 1920 the community had expanded as far north as Grand Boulevard. Temple Beth-El, the city's largest, was built on Woodward in this area in 1903 and moved north to Woodward and Gladstone in 1922 to follow this migration.

Within the next decade, much of the city's Jewish population established itself in the vicinity of Twelfth Street (now Rosa Parks Boulevard) north of Grand Boulevard. Beth

¹ Irwin J. Cohen, *Echoes of Detroit's Jewish Communities* (Laingsburg, Michigan: City Vision, 2003), 28, 41-42, 78.

² Allen A. Warsen, "The Survey of the Detroit Jewish Community," *Michigan Jewish History* 19:2 (1979): 8.

³ Jewish Society Book (Detroit: Jewish Society Book, 1916), 16.

⁴ Warsen, "The Survey of the Detroit Jewish Community," 8.; see also "Our History," Congregation Shaarey Zedek, accessed 7 Nov. 2012, http://www.shaareyzedek.org/congregational_family/history.html. ⁵ Cohen, Echoes of Detroit's Jewish Communities, 60.

⁶ National Register of Historic Places, Tushiyah United Hebrew School/Scott Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church, Detroit, Wayne County, Michigan, National Register #11000616.

⁷ Cohen, Echoes of Detroit's Jewish Communities, 50, 68.

⁸ National Register of Historic Places, Temple Beth-El, Detroit, Wayne County, Michigan, National Register #82002912.

David, with the construction of a new building at 2201 Elmhurst Avene, became the first major synagogue to represent this new population center.

The congregation was granted a building permit #29982 on May 28, 1927, and broke ground on the structure that year. Its estimated cost was \$111,700. Beth David Synagogue moved into its new home on August 26, 1928 during the High Holy Days. The move was commemorated by walking the congregation's Torah from the prior location to the new one, in a ceremony in which approximately 1,000 worshippers participated. The magnificent, 1,600-seat structure is illustrative of the size and prosperity of the community in the 1920s.

A second large synagogue, Shaarey Zedek, also moved to this area, locating on West Chicago Boulevard in 1932. Shaarey Zedek was a Conservative institution, while Beth David was Orthodox, and the two served different populations.

In 1933 Aishishkin retired and Rabbi Joshua Sperka began to serve the Beth David congregation. ¹⁰ Around this time, Beth David reorganized itself as it faced financial challenges, creating a new entity with the name of B'Nai David. ¹¹ Beginning in 1934, B'Nai David distinguished itself from many other Orthodox congregations by instituting mixed seating for men and women, a break from Orthodox tradition. ¹²

In the late 1940s and early 1950s many of the area's Jewish residents began to move to northwest Detroit or to suburbs in Oakland County. Departing Jewish residents were typically replaced with African American residents and, for a variety of reasons, this transition occurred with remarkable swiftness. Thomas J. Sugrue, in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* argues that Jews in Detroit, on the whole, were not as likely as other white groups to enforce segregation based on race. Jewish religious leaders and organizations such as the Jewish Community Council of Detroit advocated a position of tolerance, arguing that "prejudice exercised against any one group is harmful to entire groups and to the entire community." Jews were also less committed to particular neighborhoods due to a low rate of homeownership (only 11 percent in the neighborhood surrounding B'Nai David) and because synagogue membership did not adhere to geographical boundaries. Therefore, Sugrue argues, Jews were both more likely to relocate when a favorable opportunity presented itself elsewhere, and less likely to oppose an influx of African American residents. Herefore, and less likely to oppose an influx of African American residents.

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⁹ Gerald Cook, personal interview.

¹⁰ Cohen, Echoes of Detroit's Jewish Communities, 127, 137.

¹¹ "Beth David Synagogue/New Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church," Ren Farley, accessed 7 Nov. 2012, http://detroit1701.org/BethDavid.htm.

¹² Gerald Cook, personal interview.

¹³ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 244.

¹⁴ Ibid., 242-243.

On the other hand, some writers, such as the authors of the 2001 *Detroit News* series "Broken Detroit," emphasize the "blockbusting" strategies employed by real estate agents. Seeking to profit from commissions, the financing of home sales, and even by speculating on properties themselves, realtors and bankers employed a variety of strategies to fuel racial fears and encourage the rapid sale of houses.¹⁵

Whatever the reason, residential turnover in the area served by B'Nai David was rapid – as observed by the *Detroit News*, 149 out of 159 residents left an adjacent block of Elmhurst between 1953 and 1958. ¹⁶ B'Nai David purchased a site on Southfield Road in Southfield Township in 1954 and broke ground on a new building the following year. The congregation moved out of the city in 1958, seeking a buyer for its now-vacant building. B'Nai David moved from its Southfield site in 1994 and is presently located at a facility in West Bloomfield near Maple and Orchard Lake roads. ¹⁷

New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church

New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church was founded on December 31, 1919, with the Rev. Major Baldwin as its first pastor. The African American congregation met originally in a storefront at Leland and Orleans streets, and soon moved to a location at Leland and Riopelle. The Rev. F. H. Howard reorganized the church in 1923 and began a campaign to raise funds and expand the building. The work was completed in 1925.

The Rev. James S. Williams, Sr., was called to serve as pastor in 1926. Williams came from Omaha, Nebraska, and is remembered as being an outspoken minister, a "firebrand" who "didn't mince words" and helped the church to attract new members. ¹⁸ Soon, a larger building was necessary. Williams recommended the purchase of a church building, the former Salem Evangelical Lutheran Church at Mack Avenue and Chene Avenue. It cost \$68,000 and the congregation, with approximately 2,000 members, moved in on May 13, 1928. At that time the area was home to a large number of Italian immigrants in addition to its growing African American population. ¹⁹

A few weeks later, on May 29, the church was severely damaged by a bomb that had been planted inside the building. Fortunately no one was injured, as the explosion occurred around 3:00 a.m., when the church was empty. Williams, his wife Sarah, and his children²⁰ Thelma and James were asleep in the adjoining parsonage at the time. The blast completely destroyed the church's organ, pews, windows, and entrance vestibule, and damaged the walls and roof. It was powerful enough to break windows on nearby

¹⁵ "Life of One Street Mirrors City's Fall" *Detroit News*, 17 June 2001, A1+.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Gerald Cook, personal interview.

¹⁸ Kenneth Davis, personal interview.

¹⁹ Mary Thomas, personal interview. Thomas was born in 1923 and resided near Mack and St. Aubin streets at the time

²⁰ An older daughter, Emma Poole, was not present during the event. Mary Thomas, personal interview.

buildings, cause severe damage to nearby businesses, and minor damage to over fifty houses in the adjoining neighborhood.

Although the perpetrator was not identified and his or her motivations are unclear, the Detroit News suggests that the act may have been an act of racially-motivated violence by white residents who were attempting to drive the African American institution from the community. According to the *Detroit News*, less than a month after the sale of the building to New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church

[Joseph M.] Vigliotti [the realtor who had sold the building to the congregation] headed a committee of four Italians which called on the elders of the church and offered to buy it back for \$75,000 ... The church officials said they asked the banker why the offer was made and he replied, they said, "that there might be trouble." ... The matter was referred by the elders to the congregation, which voted against the resale of the property ... Vigliotti, when questioned this morning ... said he [had] told the church elders there were "a lot of hot-heads in the neighborhood and that he could not tell what might happen.²¹

Indeed, the *Detroit News* observes, this incident was only one of many that had plagued Detroit's African American community in recent years.²²

The congregation, however, remained at its Chene Avenue location. "We have no intention of moving," the Rev. Williams told the *Pittsburgh Courier* the following week, "and if the cowards who bombed the church think they frightened us, sadly they are in error."23 Mayor John C. Lodge also encouraged the congregation to remain in place, declaring, "it would be a disgrace to Detroit if you move," and placed the building under 24-hour police protection. ²⁵ An estimated \$25,000 in damages drew donations from area business owners, ²⁶ and soon the building was repaired. A subsequent bomb threat occurred when the church hosted the Michigan District Association convention the following year.²⁷

Although many members had been driven away by the events, the congregation persevered. For over a year, worship continued in the church's education building while the main sanctuary was rebuilt. Repairs were completed in August 1929, and church membership rebounded.²⁸ The church continued to prosper at its Chene Avenue location

²¹ "Church Ripped By Dynamite," *Detroit News*, 29 May 1928, A1+.

²³ "Detroit Church Bombed," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 9 Jun 1928, 1:4.

²⁵ Mary Thomas, personal interview.

²⁶ "Detroit Church Bombed," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 9 Jun 1928, 1:4.

²⁷ Mary Thomas, personal interview.

²⁸ "New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church," The Black Churches Network, accessed 5 Nov. 2012, http://theblackchurches.org/churches/mi/detroit/new-mount-zion-missionary-baptist-church/.

for the next few decades. A 1954 church bulletin describes a slight debt, but is optimistic about a future expansion program.²⁹

The church was forced to move in 1960 when the Detroit Board of Education acquired the site for the construction of a new building, William E. Knudsen Junior High School. New Mt. Zion purchased the building vacated by the B'Nai David Synagogue for \$140,000, and moved into the new facility on November 13 of that year.

The Rev. Kenneth Davis, now associate pastor of the church and a member since 1961, does not recall why the congregation chose to move where it did, but is certain that no other site was ever considered. Mary Thomas, a member of the congregation since 1934, remembers the new location as an "up and coming" area where several church members had already resided (Thomas herself lived on Mendota Street at the time). The move certainly provided New Mt. Zion with an opportunity to serve an African American community that, in that section of the city, was growing rapidly. 32

In response to the church's relocation, some members also moved to be near to the new location, while others continued to reside near the old location. The congregation purchased a surplus Department of Street Railways bus from the city and used it to bring members from the old neighborhood to the new location, while other members drove their own cars. Many members did not move, according to Davis, but the church offset the difference by recruiting new members from the surrounding community.³³

At the time, the church had approximately 1,700 members, placing it among the larger African American congregations in the city. It had become one of Detroit's "premier churches" as, due to its seating capacity, it was able to host services for a large congregation as well as community events. A 1964 bulletin indicates a church office (no longer standing) located next door at 2220 Tuxedo Avenue, while the pastor resided in a private home about a mile to the west, on Leslie Street in the city's Russell Woods neighborhood. Street in the city's Russell Woods neighborhood.

The Rev. James L. Newby, III was chosen as pastor in 1968, following the November 17, 1967 death of Williams (a nearby church, Williams Memorial Baptist Church on 2565 Elmhurst, was named in honor of the late pastor).

²⁹ "New Mt Zion Missionary Baptist Church [Bulletin]," 15 Nov. 1964.

³⁰ Kenneth Davis, personal interview.

³¹ Mary Thomas, personal interview.

³² Restrictive covenants, redlining, and other forms of housing discrimination, although weakened by the 1948 Supreme Court ruling in *Shelley v. Kraeme*r, persisted until the passage of Michigan's Fair Housing Act in 1968. Thus, housing options were limited even as Detroit's African American population increased significantly due to the Second Great Migration from the southern United States and other factors.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ "Programme," New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church, 1954.

Under Newby, the church continued to prosper and expand its facilities. An addition to the building, now named the James L. Newby, III Educational Wing, broke ground in 1992 and was completed in April of 1996. According to Davis, "many black churches were moving at the time, but we chose to remain here and expand ... we were the most reliable institution in the neighborhood."³⁶ Throughout the 1990s and into the present century, the church continued to host a wide range of community events, serving a population much broader than the church membership. Newby, a Detroit Police Department chaplain, often used the space to hold funerals and other events for Detroit police officers.

Newby passed away in 2002. The Rev. Jimmie T. Wafer was called to lead the church in 2003 and continues to serve to the present day.

ARCHITECTURE

The proposed New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church/Beth David Synagogue Historic District consists of a single building located on the south side of Elmhurst Avenue. It is situated in a neighborhood of single-family homes, duplexes, and small apartment buildings, about five miles northwest of downtown Detroit. Nearby landmarks include Central High School (now Central Collegiate Academy) and Edgar O. Durfee Intermediate School, one block to the southwest, and the John C. Lodge Expressway, three blocks to the east. The building faces north onto Elmhurst Avenue and occupies almost its entire parcel, with only a shallow lawn in front of the building's front elevation.

Begun in 1921 and completed in 1922, Beth David Synagogue was the first, and among the most significant, major edifices constructed by Detroit's Jewish population in an area that by the 1920s had become the center of that community. As observed by sociologist Reynolds Farley, the building "reflects the faith of the first- and second-generation eastern European immigrants; their desire for an architecturally significant and uplifting synagogue, as well as their economic security."³⁷

Beth David was designed by the firm of P. R. Rossello; 38 likely by architect John L. Popkin. ³⁹ Rossello's firm may have been best known for the now-demolished St. Cyril and Methodius church located at St. Cyril Street (originally Centerline Street) and Marcus Street in Detroit. The firm is also responsible for a Dominican convent, school, and rectory on Van Dyke Avenue near Thirteen Mile Road in Warren, St. Sophia Greek

³⁶ Kenneth Davis, personal interview.

³⁷ "Beth David Synagogue/New Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church," Ren Farley, accessed 7 Nov. 2012, http://detroit1701.org/BethDavid.htm.

³⁸ "See Mr. P. R. Rossello for Better Building and Less Money," undated promotional brochure located at the Detroit Public Library's Burton Historical Collection.

³⁹ "Beth David Synagogue/New Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church," Ren Farley, accessed 7 Nov. 2012, http://detroit1701.org/BethDavid.htm; see also comments of Arnie Collins, past president of the Jewish Historical Society of Michigan, at "B'Nai David – 2201 Elmhurst at 14th – Lost Synagogues of Detroit," accessed 3 March 2013, http://www.shtetlhood.com/Beth_David.htm#.

Orthodox Church on Macomb Street near St. Antoine Street, a Romanian Society hall at Farnsworth and Russell Streets, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church at Frederick and St. Antoine Streets, and a Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church at Fourteenth and Buena Vista streets. Of these, only the latter is still standing, leaving Beth David as perhaps the most significant remaining example of Rossello's work.



The interior of Beth David Synagogue in the 1930s. Photo: Wayne State University Virtual Motor City, used with permission.

The massive, cubelike structure is built of steel and concrete and clad in buff-colored, common-bond brick. A projecting entrance bay is composed of large stone blocks, extending upward to pierce the roofline, and topped by the words "BETH DAVID" in relief, flanking a stone medallion depicting the Tablets of the Law. Two winged lions, carved in stone, flank the entrance and sit on a string course that sits a tall story above ground. A shallow-pitched side-gable roof hides behind a parapet wall when viewed from the ground.



The interior of New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church in 2012.

The building is Romanesque in style with a Neo-Byzantine influence. Its façade is dominated by a slightly-projecting central bay with a massive, recessed archway. The first floor features an arcaded, triple entrance with engaged, Ionic columns; above the entrance is a grouping of four windows, similarly arcaded, and separated by slender, Solomonic columns. Heavy, oak doors are located above grade and accessed by a broad, stone stairway. Above the doors are semicircular, stone panels with intricate reliefs depicting menorahs, the Star of David, and other symbols. Wrapping around the top of the building are an arcaded frieze and denticulated cornice in brick. Windows are tall and narrow, separated by floor with stone spandrels, and flanked with thin Solomonic columns.

The building interior features a large nave with an open floor plan, accessed by passing through a relatively shallow entrance vestibule. 1,600 theater-style seats, are arranged in gently-curving rows beneath a vast, vaulted ceiling. A U-shaped, cantilevered balcony curves around the second story on three sides. A sanctuary area with wood paneling is recessed between massive, wooden, engaged columns.

The building's seating has been altered since its original construction. The theater-style seats on the main floor are mid-twentieth century replacement for the original wooden pews. Folding chairs in the balcony, however, may be original to the building.⁴⁰

The original configuration of Beth David placed the bimah and reader's table at the front of the worship space, rather than at the center of the seating area as in some synagogues. ⁴¹ Today, an altar is located where the bimah once stood.

The interior is lit by tall, polychromatic leaded-glass windows, along with hanging, metal light fixtures. Suspended above the center of the space is a massive metal and glass chandelier, with backlit panels, memorializing the names of parents, spouses, and other family members of the building's founders, painted in an ornate script.



New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church entrance vestibule in 2012.

When New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church occupied the structure in 1960, the new congregation chose to preserve the original synagogue architecture, making changes only when necessary to accommodate Christian services. ⁴² A choir stand and baptismal pool were added, and a plaster medallion, above what is now the altar, depicting the Tablets of the Law was modified to include a cross. All other architectural details, including the

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⁴⁰ Mike Kasky, personal interview.

⁴¹ Lee Shai Weissbach, *Detroit Synagogues and the Patterns of Jewish Life* (The Cohn-Haddow Center for Judaic Studies at Wayne State University, 1998), 6.

⁴² Kenneth Davis, personal interview.

seating, leaded-glass windows, decorative plaster and lighting fixtures remain unchanged. Even the white, light blue, and gold color scheme remains as it was when the building was occupied by Beth David Synagogue.

A single-story, flat-roofed addition to the building was completed in 1996. Unornamented, its common-bond brickwork matches the original section in color. A cornerstone reads "New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church."

CRITERIA

The proposed historic district appears to meet the first and third criteria contained in Section 25-2-2: (1) Sites, buildings, structures, or archaeological sites where cultural, social, spiritual, economic, political or architectural history of the community, city, state or nation is particularly reflected or exemplified; (3) 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 the Detroit City Council adopt an ordinance of designation for the proposed New Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church/Beth David Synagogue Historic District. A draft ordinance is attached for City Council's consideration.

COMPOSITION OF THE HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD

The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine appointed members and three *exofficio* members, all residents of Detroit. The appointed members are: Kwaku Atara, Melanie A. Bazil, Robert Cosgrove, Keith A. Dye, Zene' Frances Fogel-Gibson, Edward Francis, Calvin Jackson, Harriet Johnson and Doris Rhea. The *ex-officio* members, who may be represented by members of their staff, are: the Director of the Historical Department (currently vacant), the Director of the City Planning Commission, and the Director of the Planning and Development Department. *Ad hoc* board members for this study are the Rev. Kenneth Davis and Donna Cunningham.

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