

City of Detroit

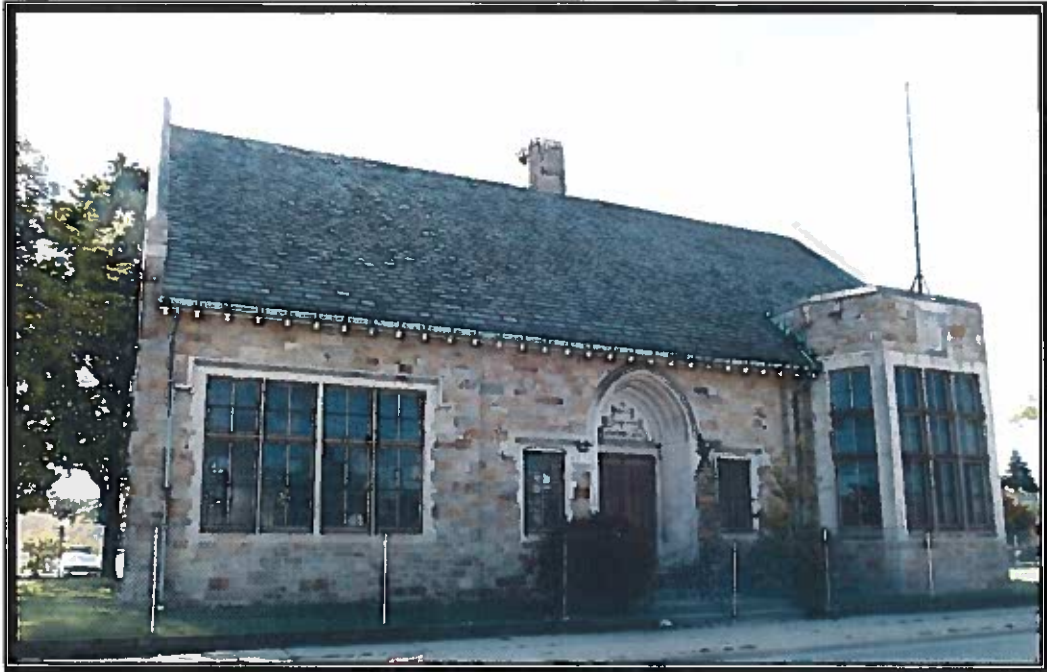
CITY COUNCIL

HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD

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Proposed Redford Branch-Detroit Public Library Historic District Final Report

By resolution dated September 23, 2014, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Redford Branch-Detroit Public Library Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic District Act.

The proposed Redford Branch-Detroit Public Library Historic District consists of a single property at 21511 West McNichols Road. The proposed district is located on the northwest corner of West McNichols Road and Burgess Avenue and is adjacent to the Rosedale Park Historic District. The proposed district is located approximately fifteen miles northwest of downtown Detroit.

BOUNDARIES

The boundaries of the proposed Redford Branch Library Historic District are shown on the attached map and are as follows:

**S—W McNichols 3 Thru 1 EXC McNichols as WD Cherry Subdivision Liber 41
Page 79 Plats, W C R 22/452 133 x 76A
Parcel: 22013325-9**

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The boundaries of the Redford Branch- Detroit Public Library Historic District are defined by the original library lot. The boundary is defined by public streets located on the north; east and west of the Redford Branch-DPL Historic District (West McNichols Road, Chapel Avenue, and Burgess Avenue) and the south vacated alley lot line.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANT

The Redford Library is one of a few remaining buildings associated with the history of 1926 annexation of a large portion of the Village of Redford to the City of Detroit. Originally, intended as a township hall for the village, the building's English Gothic style was designed to fit seamlessly into the residential neighborhood of Old Redford. The Redford Library is the last of the municipal township buildings in the city.

HISTORY

“Redford” is the third name given to the area by the non-indigenous people of the region. Prior to this, the indigenous people referred to the area by two different names: “Minosa-Goink,” ‘the place where game is cleaned’, a Potowatomie name; and “Mishqua-Goink” used by the Ottawas. Early French settlers referred to the area as the shallow crossing in the “Red” river where Shiawassee tribesmen gathered annually to go to Canada to collect their pension for services in the War of 1812. Redford Township was originally known as Bucklin Township named after William Bucklin, the first white settler to live in area and the township's first supervisor. An ardent abolitionist, Bucklin denounced slavery at every turn. In May 1841, Bucklin severed relations with the Methodist Episcopal Church over their stance on slavery and helped organize the Wesleyan Methodist Church with strong anti-slavery activity. In 1829, Bucklin Township became Peking Township named for the city in China. The township name changed one final time in 1833, to Redford.

Redford Township borders the northwest section of Detroit and had been a trading center for the township since its early days. By the early 1900s the township of Redford consisted of 36-square miles and included a small portion of Southfield Township. The most populous area of the township was the area along Grand River Avenue; the main route from Detroit to Lansing. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, Detroit was the fastest growing urban area in the country. Local real estate developers took advantage of Detroit's population growth. Between the 1910s and 1920s Detroit real

estate developers drove the process of the city expansion and annexation. Burt Eddy Taylor of B. E. Taylor Real Estate purchased 86 farms and subdivided them into lots and sold some, built on others until the entire farming area of Redford Township had become an urban development. Taylor along with other developers employed a new development model-building outside the city boundaries, beyond the reach of urban services such as city water and streetcars and promoting annexation. Taylor capitalized on the idea that living in the outskirts of Detroit was a desirable place to live. He graded roads, pour concrete sidewalks, and provided water to the subdivision. With these services, Taylor marketed the development to Detroit's burgeoning population with the promise of the comfort of suburban living and investment security ("Building a New Town", 1923).

By the mid-1920s, Redford's tax-base was insufficient to keep pace with its rapidly growing population. Redford citizens soon became dissatisfied with the "slowness of building good roads and proper size sewers for sanitation." Taking advantage of Redford Township's mounting debt and local official's inability to raise taxes to address shortfall; Taylor took on the role of community building and argued for the annexation of Redford Township.

The decade from 1915 and 1926 was the most active period of annexation in the city of Detroit. By the end of 1926 a total of eighteen townships had been annexed to Detroit. This series of expansions of the city limit turned Detroit from a city of approximately 40 square miles in 1915 into a sprawling city of 138 square miles by 1926. This ten year period of annexation ended with Redford Township.

Detroit Public Library Branches

The first Detroit Public Library was formally opened to the public on the first floor of the Old Capitol building in 1865, after years of discussion among city officials. A new building was constructed to house the library in Centre Park (present site of the Skillman Branch) in 1875, and received two additions before the turn of the century. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it became apparent that the old library building would soon become insufficient to meet the growing demands of a booming city. The Detroit Public Library Commission was incorporated in 1901, giving the library commissioners the right to accept gifts for the institution and the City the right to issue bonds to raise money. Between the years of 1880 and 1900, Detroit experienced rapid growth, tripling its population and doubling its area. Magnus Butzel, president of the Commission, studied Chicago's system of branch libraries while there for a conference in 1893. Chicago's system was in actuality a pickup and drop-off delivery system. Although Butzel was impressed, Hazen Pingree, Detroit's mayor, advocated a branch for each side of the town.

The first branch of the library system was opened in a building in Waterworks Park, bequeathed by Chauncey Hurlbut and operated by the Water Department. The Commission's early branches were generally located in the City's high schools; branches were opened in Central High School, Eastern High School, and Western High School in 1900. Between 1903 and 1910 the Commission opened five branches in rented stores.

The first specially built and wholly owned branch officially opened at the southwest corner of Field and Agnes (285 Field is the old address) in 1906, and George Booth donated his manor house on Trumbull and Grand River to the library to be used as a branch in 1907.

At the same time, Andrew Carnegie, the multimillionaire steel industrialist from Pittsburgh, was offering liberal cash gifts for the erection of library buildings in cities that would provide the site and raise annually a sum equal to one-tenth of his gift for library maintenance. In 1901, Carnegie offered to give Detroit \$750,000. One-half was to go toward building the new main library and the remainder toward the construction of branch buildings. Because the City of Detroit had never raised such a large amount of money before and Carnegie's oppressive labor policies at Homestead Steel Mills had resulted in massive work force troubles, Carnegie's offer was not accepted by the City Council until 1909.

Eight Carnegie-built branch libraries were constructed, four of which were on the Grand Boulevard. A \$40,000 limit was placed on each branch and local architects were to be selected from a pool of Detroit's finest. However, Carnegie's personal secretary, James Bertram, was not impressed with Detroit architects, feeling that they lacked experience with the specialty of library design. Examples from other cities were provided, and the Detroit architects produced acceptable and even distinguished designs. All of the branches were designed from a standpoint latest in library design. They represented Detroit's participation in a significant phase in the expansion of public library systems in urban America.

The last of the Carnegie branch fund was used in the 1916-17 fiscal year. While the Carnegie Gift gave a shot in the arm to Detroit's branch system, it was only the beginning of branch building. With the expansion of the City due to the burgeoning automobile industry, library branch building continued. In addition to the branch libraries, there were more than one hundred library stations located at manufacturing plants, fire stations, school buildings, hospitals and other accessible places.

Redford Branch

The Redford Branch Public Library is a quaint English Gothic structure located at West McNichols Road and Grand River Avenue. It is among the few remaining buildings associated with Redford Township's early history. In 1924, Redford Township officials put forth a bond measure for the purchase of a site and the construction of a building to be used for township purposes. A year later, the bond was approved by the citizens of Redford Township and construction began soon after. According to the original building plans the town hall would contain offices for the various township divisions, a small library that would be under the jurisdiction of the Wayne County Library Service, and a health clinic. Included in the plans were two small rooms in the basement for jail cells. Although designed as a township hall for the community of Redford, it never functioned in that capacity. Construction on the town hall began in 1925. The building was not quite

completed when Detroit annexed the central portion of Redford Township. At the request of the people of the Village of Redford the Detroit Library Commission took over the uncompleted structure to be finished as a branch library. At the May 5, 1925, Commission meeting, the Commission decided to name the branch library Redford, for the area it served. By the time that the walls were up and the roof completed, Redford Township was annexed to the city of Detroit. At the request of the people of the Village of Redford, the Detroit Library Commission took over the uncompleted structure to be finished as a branch library. Construction was then delayed until new plans could be drawn up for the interior and the entire building could be adapted for library use. A reception was held on November 11, 1927, and the library opened its doors for registration two weeks later on November 23, 1927. The new Redford Library was built at a cost of \$135,000.

The building was designed by the firm of Verner, Wilhelm and Molby. William F. Verner resided in Ann Arbor, and partnered with Eugene B. Wilhelm in 1920. Frank Molby, formerly with Albert Kahn, Inc., later joined the firm. Molby began the practice of architecture in Washington, D.C. in 1892 where, for sixteen years, he was in the office of the supervising architect of the Treasury before arriving in Detroit. The firm's commissions included the Foch and Washington Schools (1924), Coolidge School (1925), McKerrow School (1927) and St. Matthias Episcopal Church. They are best known as the architects for the Historic Redford Theatre located at 17354 Lasher Avenue (NR/1985).

Having eventually outgrown the building, the Redford Library closed its doors in 1971, having served the community for over forty years. The Library Commission sold the building to the Detroit Board of Education and in 1972 the building became a museum and cultural center with an emphasis on African American history and culture. The building remained in use until late-1990s when the building closed. The building was sold one final time in 2010, when the building was included in a land sale that included the Redford High School complex. The building is currently vacant.

On November 3, 1978, the Detroit Library Commission held a ground breaking ceremony for the new Redford Branch building. The new library, located at 21200 Grand River Avenue, was designed by the architectural firm of Sims-Varner. The new 20,000 square feet the new building is one of the largest of Detroit's branch libraries. The branch celebrated its opening February 16-21, 1981.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The Redford Branch library, designed in the English Gothic style, occupies a rectangular parcel of land and faces north onto McNichols Road between Burgess and Chapel streets in the area of Detroit known as Old Redford. The site has a very slight slope above the surrounding grade, with eight-inch wooden retaining walls on its north and south sides. Mature maple, oak, and basswood trees stand on the south side of the site, behind the library building. A freestanding, internally-illuminating sign, dating from the late 20th century, stands at the east end of the site facing McNichols Road.

The library building is a three-bay, side-gabled structure, built of seam-face Plymouth granite, its square blocks of varying sizes ranging in color from a reddish to yellowish cast. The building is a single, tall story in height, a steep roofline also accommodating a generous attic half-story. Its slate roof features a stone coping with prominent copper flashing; copper gutters also accent the roofline, held by prominent, curved wooden brackets. A central, slope chimney, also made of granite, rises just behind the ridge of the roof.

The front, McNichols façade bears a prominent, projecting bay at its west end, with a flat roof behind a stone parapet and tall, stone-mullioned, leaded-glass, steel windows on three faces. Centered above the windows is a stone medallion depicting a blank shield and, rising above, a centered flagpole. The eastern bay is simpler in arrangement, with four, mullioned windows and a subtle forward projection.

The central bay is defined by a recessed, compound Gothic-arched doorway, raised six steps above grade. Above paired, paneled wood doors is a scroll-shaped decoration in stone with the words carved in relief, "AD 1925/REDFORD BRANCH/DETROIT PUBLIC LIBRARY." Flanking the doorway are two carved, stone lanterns, beyond which are a pair of leaded-glass windows.

A secondary entrance exists on the south (rear) facade of the building, sheltered beneath a projecting shed roof supported by large, wood brackets. A tall, arched window, set within a compound Gothic arch, illuminates the east end of the building, the lower portion of the window opening enclosed with stone. Smaller windows illuminate both ground-level and attic stories on each end of the building, and windows on the rear façade are asymmetrically-arranged, with larger windows on the ends flanking smaller windows and the off-center doorway in the center. Above the rear doorway, a section of wall rises to meet a projecting cross-gable. To its west, a shed-roof dormer, clad in slate, also lights the attic story.

The building has a full basement, main floor, small mezzanine floor and attic. The building is 80'x 6" long and 45' feet deep in its main outlines. Above, the floors are of reinforced concrete construction covered with 12 inch cork tile squares laid in medium to random shades of brown. Huge leaded glass windows on all sides direct lighting throughout the building. When the library opened, it initially housed a collection of thirty-five hundred volumes with the capacity to house twelve thousand.

The basement contains a small lecture room, a club room, a work room, a room for staff which included a kitchenette and rest room, a vault, a janitor room and a boiler room. Subtle window wells, hidden from exterior view, provide each basement room with a window to allow for the maximum use of direct sunlight.

Originally, the main floor was divided into three sections. At the west end, running from front to back along the full depth of the building was the adult reading room, and mirrored on the east end of the building was the children's section of the library. In the

center section, in the rear, was an enclosed staircase leading from the basement all the way to the attic. At the front of the central section is a vestibule where the circulation desk was placed. The adult reading room and the children reading room were divided from the central section by two sections of low shelving running back at right angles to the front wall. The shelving ran back at the passageways from the vestibule and would bring anyone going in or out right by one side of the circulation desk. The general arrangement was such that a person at the circulation desk could see almost every corner of the room.

The small mezzanine floor in the rear over the librarian's office could be reached by a balcony opening off from the stairway. The mezzanine floor was used for additional stacks and storage. The attic floor occupied the entire length and width of the building and was used for storage.

Criteria

The proposed historic district appears to meet the first and second criteria contained in Section 25-2-2: (1) 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; (2) Site, buildings, structures or archeological site which are identified with historic personages or with important events in community, city, state or national history; (4) Notable work(s) of a master designer or architect whose individual genius influenced his or her age.

Composition of the Historic Designation Advisory Board

The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine members, residents of Detroit, and three ex-officio members. The appointed members are Kwaku Atara, Melanie A. Bazil, Keith A. Dye, Zené Frances Fogel-Gibson, Edward Francis, Calvin Jackson, Harriet Johnson, Victoria Byrd-Olivier, and Kari Smith. The ex-officio members, who may be represented by members of their staff, are the Director of the Historical Department, the Director of the City Planning Commission, and the Director of the Planning and Development Department. Ad hoc members for this study are Conja Wright and John Tiley.

Recommendation: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that the City Council adopt an ordinance of designation for the proposed historic district. A draft ordinance is attached for City Council's consideration.

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REDFORD BRANCH
DETROIT PUBLIC LIBRARY
21511 West McNichols Road
Detroit, Wayne County, MI

W. MC'NICHOLES RD.

