

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL

Historic Designation Advisory Board

PROPOSED ST. CHARLES BORROMEIO R.C. PARISH HISTORIC DISTRICT

Final Report

The proposed St. Charles Borromeo R.C. Parish Historic District consists of three buildings at the north end of the block bounded by Townsend, St. Paul, Baldwin, and Agnes. St. Charles Borromeo Church is at 1515 Baldwin, the rectory is at 1491 Baldwin, and the school is at 1480 Townsend. The proposed district is located within the Island View community just west of West Village.

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

On the north, the centerline of St. Paul Avenue;

On the west, the centerline of Townsend Avenue;

On the south, east along a line 15' north of the south line of Lot 224 of Moses Field's Sub (L8/P37) to its intersection with the alley running north-south between Baldwin and Townsend; thence north along centerline of said north-south alley to its intersection with the south line of Lot 237 of Moses Field's Sub (L8/P37) extended west; thence east along said lot line to its intersection with the centerline of Baldwin Avenue; and

On the east, the centerline of Baldwin Avenue.

HISTORY: St. Charles Borromeo Roman Catholic Parish is historically significant as the focal point of a late-nineteenth century Belgian community in near-east Detroit. Its locational association with the Roman Catholic church began in 1808, when an agreement of sale was reached between Francois Paul Malcher, owner of Private Claim 16, and Louis Beaufait, Joseph St. Pere St. Jean, Benoit Chapoton, and Francis and Charles Rivard, as representatives of the Catholics in the Cote du Nord-Est territory (Northeast coast territory). In consideration of 100 pounds a year for the rest of his life, Malcher, a Catholic watchmaker in poor health, agreed to transfer his 347 acres comprising Private Claim 16 in Hamtramck Township. Thus, the ribbon farm became known as the Church Farm. Father Gabriel Richard, pastor of St. Anne's parish, solicited the donation of Malcher's land for religious purposes, but no new parish was created. "The title of the Church Farm was only temporarily

held by the Trustees to secure themselves against loss but it was planned from the beginning that it should be held by the pastor of St. Anne's, and it was actually held by him for the whole parish, which meant the whole city....." (Copy of Brief sent to Rome in the "Church Farm" Case, Oct. 6, 1920) In 1833 Frederick Rese, as pastor at St. Anne's, was deeded the Church Farm by the Trustees then living. Just a few months later Father Rese was appointed Bishop of Detroit, and never recorded the conveyance of the deed. The College of St. Philip de Neri, where priests prepared for the ministry, was built in the Cote du Nord-Est territory, but no new parish was established.

The deed to Frederick Rese as pastor of St. Anne's was brought to light in 1901 by the historian, Clarence Burton. He found it in ex-governor William Woodbridge's, Rese's attorney's, file. If this deed had been recorded by Rese at the time of the conveyance the turmoil that followed would have been unnecessary.

In 1857, in an out of court settlement, Bishop Lefevre sold half of the Church Farm to land speculators in exchange for clear title to the other, less valuable northern half. Because no deed between the Trustees and Rese could be found, heirs of Trustees made claims that the deed of transfer from Malcher was in fee simple, rather than in trust. The Wayne County Circuit Court effected and ratified the settlement.

The little church and mission of St. Philip de Neri burned and was not rebuilt. The Church Farm was treated as the property of the diocese. Because of the scarcity of priests and irregularity of services at temporary churches in the Cote du Nord-Est, parishioners attended other Catholic churches, usually St. Anne's.

Meanwhile, Belgian families began arriving in Cote du Nord-Est. Some Belgians emigrated to the original French settlement long before the Civil War, in the early 1880s, and at first settled in the downtown area. The earliest Belgians in Detroit were Flemish missionaries, who began arriving in the 1830s. Most of the Catholic clergy in and around Detroit were Belgian; there were few Belgians other than men of the cloth in the city prior to 1857. As families came, they settled in the area around Gratiot and Baldwin, Baldwin being the city limits then. Others chose to settle in Centerline or Mt. Clemens. The center of the Belgian colony in Detroit was then the Catholic church located at Dubois and Fort Street. In 1884 a German church was purchased and re-dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows on Catherine Street and Gratiot, and that, with Father Hendrix as pastor, became the religious

center of the growing Belgian community. The Belgian population expanded in the 1880s because of unsettled conditions in Western Europe. The Belgian settlement moved eastward, and St. Charles Borromeo parish was established in 1886 in the heart of the Belgian community. Its first church building was located on Field between Agnes and St. Paul. It was a small frame building measuring 30' X 60' and was built primarily with the talents and materials of its parishioners. Charles Goddeeris, born in West Flanders in 1855, provided carpentry expertise; Charles Rabaut, born in Courtri, Belgium in 1830, a sash and door manufacturer, provided his wares, and the Dieryckx Brothers, contractors, provided their services. The small church was dedicated on February 6, 1887 and Father Hendrix divided his time between Our Lady of Sorrows and its offshoot, St. Charles Borromeo. The parochial school was opened three weeks later in the church, with 57 pupils.

Among members of old Belgian families in Detroit were Peter de Coster, the first Belgian consul; Charles Vande Poele, inventor of an electric light that lit the Detroit Opera House and father of the electric trolley; Charles Rabaut, most zealous leader in the founding of St. Charles parish and grandfather of Congressman Louis Rabaut, and Francis Palms, one of the largest landholders in Michigan. Belgian saloons, of which there were many, became meeting places for Belgians, and several Belgian fraternal organizations, such as the St. Charles Benovolent Society, sprang up to serve needs within the Belgian community.

Father Denissen became pastor of St. Charles in 1889. His church was too small for its membership, so in that year Charles Goddeeris supervised the move and expansion of the building. It was sawed in two, its front was moved 20' forward, and a new 20' section was built between the two ends.

Father Denissen, born in Holland in 1847, dug deeply into the ownership of the Church Farm after innocently researching land transactions of a house he wanted to buy in the Church Farm. It appeared to him that the Church Farm was never intended to be the property of the diocese; it was supposed to be in trust for the parish and its people. Denissen wished to build a new church and school, but lack of funds would not allow it. When Bishop Foley made light of his request for some proceeds from sale of pieces of the Church Farm, Denissen engaged Father Baart, an expert on canon law, from Marshall, Michigan. The case was ultimately appealed to the Pope in Rome. When the decision came in 1897, it was in the parish's favor.

The decision required that approximately \$270,000 in proceeds from previous land sales were to be used for the benefit of the Catholics in the Cote du Nord-Est territory. For the next 20 years, the "Church Farm" questions had not been settled. Bishop Foley insisted that the Cote du Nord-Est territory encompassed much more than St. Charles parish; it extended from downtown Detroit to St. Clair Shores; St. Charles would not be the sole beneficiary. He also stated that the diocese had paid taxes on the property all those years and if it didn't own the land it should be paid back by the parish. It took the newly appointed Bishop Gallagher to diplomatically close the matter shortly after he came to Detroit from Grand Rapids in 1918. He asked Rome to reconsider the case in light of the previously unrecorded deed to Rese and records of St. Anne's Church. He argued that taxes of the former 20 years had eaten away \$100,000 and in the ten years hence all of the money will have gone to taxes. Only four city blocks of the originaly Church Farm still owned by the church were left. On November 26, 1920, the case was decided in Bishop Gallagher's favor, resolving the issue once and for all.

At the time of the 1897 decision from Rome, the parishioners of St. Charles parish, in order of their numbers, represented French, Belgians, Germans, Irish Scotch, and other English-speaking people. The parish continued to expand after the turn of the century, along with the expansion of the city as a whole. When Father Hewlett was appointed to the parish in 1911 it had 800 members. Father Hewlett built the rectory and the parochial school in 1912, and the church in 1918. The school accommodated 700 pupils. Its size was doubled in 1925. By 1920, St. Charles parish had over 3000 members, most American born.

The new church was to be built on land sold years before and reacquired by Bishop Foley for St. Charles parish. After a competition for the contract, the preparation of plans and specs and site supervision was awarded to Peter Dederichs. On February 25, 1918, Peter Dederichs was issued a permit for the construction of an "ediface of Romanesque style for religious use" (Detroit Free Press, 1/13/18), on Baldwin and St. Paul. Its estimated value was \$160,000, and it was to be completed on May 1, 1919.

Dederichs made a specialty of church architecture during his career, and built many churches throughout the U.S. and Canada. It is fitting that he began his career at age 17 with the design of Sacred Heart Church at Rivard and Eliot Streets and ended it in 1918 with the design of St. Charles Borromeo. He is also the

architect of St. Mary's on Monroe and St. Antoine. Dederichs, a lifelong resident of Detroit, was buried from St. Charles Church and buried at Mt. Elliott Cemetery in 1924. The new St. Charles Borromeo Church was dedicated on June 13, 1920, by Right-Reverend Michael J. Gallagher, Bishop of Detroit. It was then one of the largest Catholic edifices in the diocese and the largest on the east side.

In 1929 Rev. Hewlett requested \$20,000 from Bishop Gallagher to spend on decorating the inside of the church.

Today, the church serves a changing congregation of about 250 members. Its school is leased to the Church of the Messiah, the convent has been demolished, and the rectory still serves its original function.

A garage of no significance is located at the rear of Lot 238, just outside of the proposed district.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION: St. Charles Borromeo R.C. Church was designed in 1918 by Peter Dederichs in an Early Renaissance-Romanesque style. Its exterior is of red-brown tapestry brick with trimmings and foundations of smooth white Bedford stone. Green tile fills the spandrels and pediments of the front facade and transept arms. The church measures 92' across the front and 180' in length.

The stone church portico is recessed within a two-story arch and is composed of three arched openings containing double doors and a large rose window above. The large arch is supported by a column set upon a plinth on each side. Classical elements include stylized acanthus leaves in the keystones, egg and dart and bead and reel moldings around arches and capitals, the balustrade beneath the rose window, and the rosettes in the spandrels between each entrance arch. Flanking the stone entrance section are modern motifs in raised brick with stone panels bearing intertwined motifs. The front facade is surmounted by a tower 69' high on the south corner and a taller tower 104' high on its north corner. The roofs of the towers and the church proper are surfaced in red tile.

Most of the windows in the church have round arches; however, circular windows appear within the rose window, the top of the south tower below the final stage of the bell tower, and in the pediments. Flat topped openings appear on the second stage of the north bell tower and in the foundations. Towers and pediments are topped with brass crosses.

In plan, St. Charles is a Latin Cross. Inside, the main auditorium is 72' wide; the transepts are 92' wide and contain two altars each. The three altars in the main sanctuary are 44' wide with a depth of 40' and height of 56'. Side aisles are 30' high, while the nave is 56' high. The ceiling over the nave is barrel vaulted, and access to side aisles and altars is through arches. The main altar is Baroque in character, with a painting of angels flanking a cross beaming rays of light. The reredos contains a broken pediment and volutes near its top, and features niches with shell-arches flanked by corinthian columns containing statuary.

The clerestory rests on ten pillars, and the interior is heavily ornamented with arches and embellishments of plaster. Over the main entrance and transept arms is a stained glass rose window; side aisles are adorned with elongated round-arched stained glass windows, produced by Daprato Studios of Chicago and New York. The organ was constructed in two sections so it would not obscure the view of the rose window.

The interior of St. Charles Borromeo Church is well integrated in its use of painting, stenciling, stained glass, decorative plaster, and statuary.

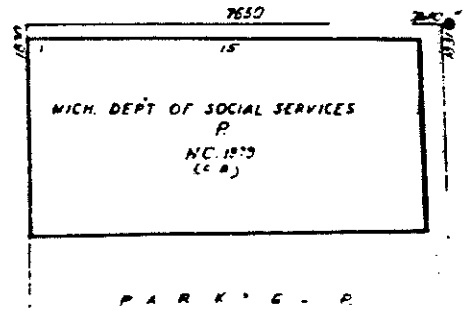
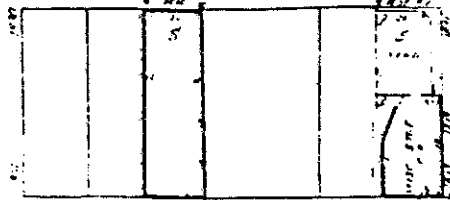
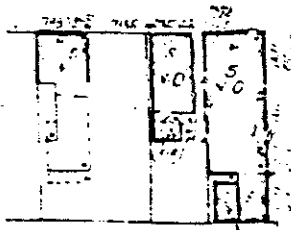
In the basement, there was a chapel for 800 worshippers and rooms for parish meetings. The heat for the church is provided through a tunnel connecting the boiler room of the school building.

Schilling, the architect of the school and rectory, added three new classrooms to the basement of the church in 1946, and in 1952 the interior was rewired and redecorated under the pastorate of Ernest De Puydt.

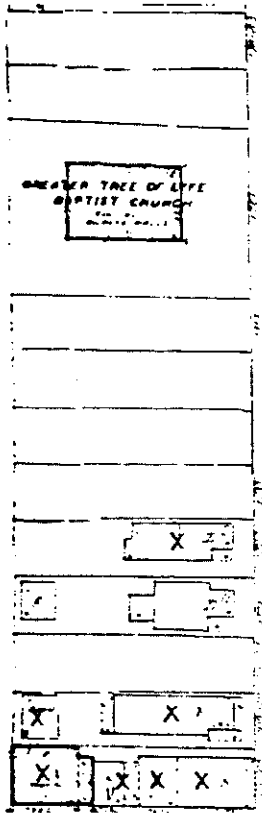
The two-story rectory, at 1491 Baldwin, and the school, at 1480 Townsend, were designed in 1912 by the architectural firm of Van Leyen & Schilling. That firm, with offices in the Union Trust Building in Detroit, also designed Holy Family R.C. Church, now located at 655 Chrysler Service Drive, in 1909. The rectory at St. Charles, like the church, has a red tile roof and is pressed brick with white trim. It is basically a four-square building with a low slung hip roof. At the center of the second story is a projecting section that rises above the roof, forming a round headed dormer. This projecting section, the brick pylons at the ends of the first story porch, and the column capitals of the porch bear a modern, geometric ornamentation. The school building is also geometric in its stone ornamentation. Along its attic or parapet wall along the front of the building is a row of arcading. The school is two stories tall on a very high basement serving as an additional floor. The size of the school was doubled in 1925 but its design was duplicated with exactitude.

RECOMMENDATION: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that the City Council establish the St. Charles Borromeo R.C. Parish Historic District, with the design treatment level of rehabilitation for the church building and conservation for the rectory and school buildings. A draft ordinance for the establishment of the district is attached for consideration by City Council.

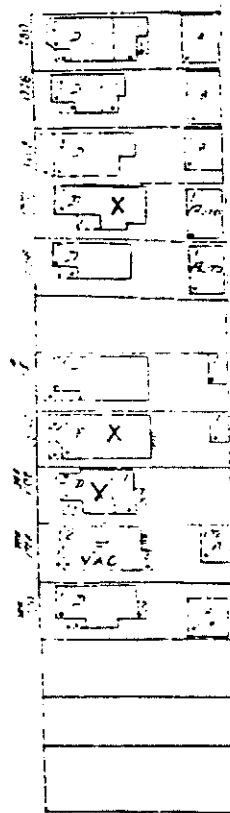
KERCHEVAL AV.



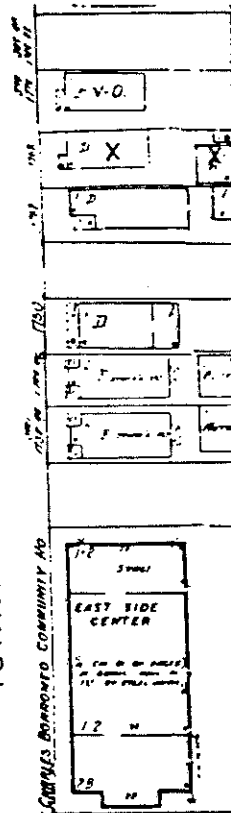
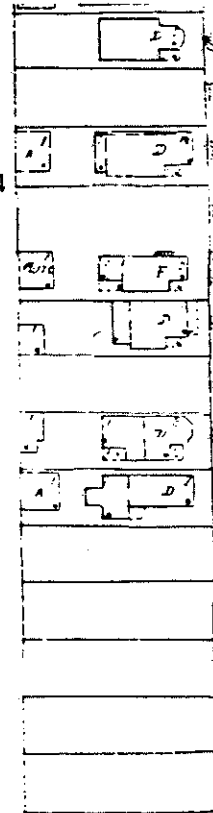
St. Charles Borromeo R.C. Parish Historic District
(Proposed district outlined in heavy black)



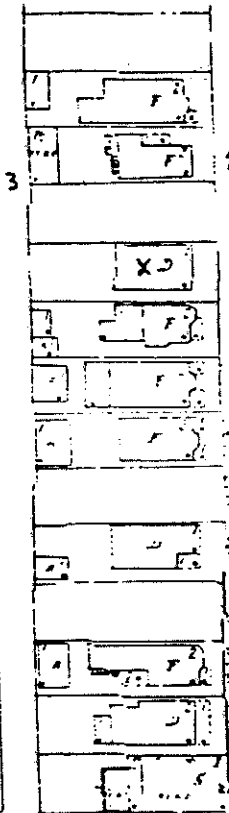
SHERIDAN AV.



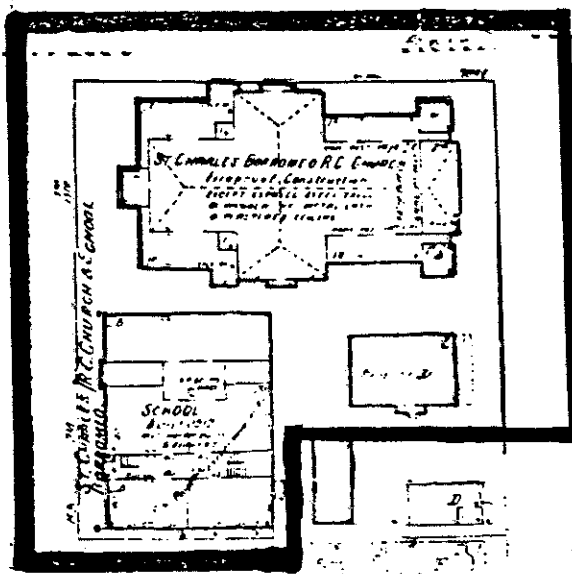
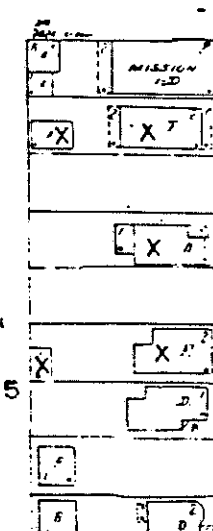
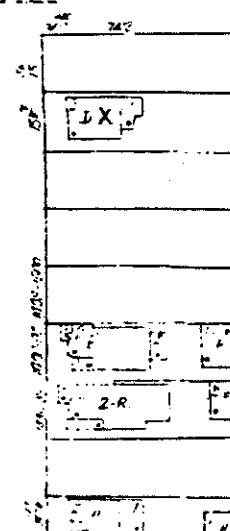
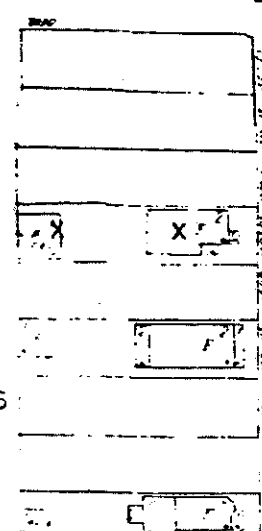
TOWNSEND AV.



BALDWIN AV.



ST. PAUL AV.



BALDWIN AV.