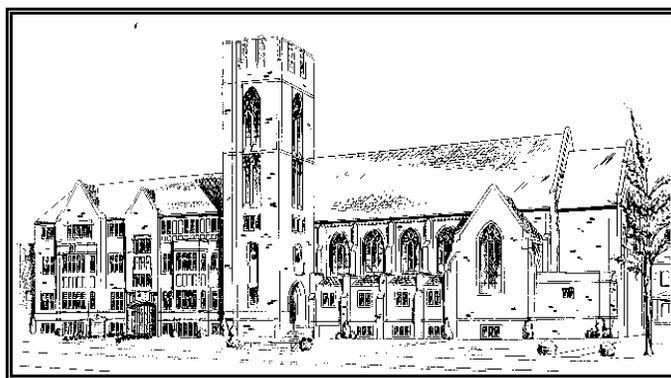


Proposed Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church Final Report

By a resolution dated March 5, 2003, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.



The proposed Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church Historic District consists of a single property located north of Grand River Avenue at 5151 W. Chicago on the city's northwest side. The proposed district is situated in the middle of a residential block of small to medium apartment buildings that surround the Nardin Park/Richard Allen Park.

Boundaries: The boundaries of the proposed historic district, which encompass the real property containing the one contributing resource, are shown in heavy black on the attached map and are as follows:

On the west the centerline of the eastern right-of-way of West Chicago;

On the north, the north line extended east-west of Lot 385 of Nardin Park Subdivision (Liber 26 Page 96);

On the east, the centerline of the north-south alley lying between W. Chicago and Ravenswood Ave.; and

On the south, the south line extended east-west of Lot 390 of the Nardin Park Subdivision.

HISTORY:

The two congregations which have occupied the church complex located on W. Chicago reflect Detroit's diverse history. The original congregation, Nardin Park Methodist Church, and the present congregation, Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church, are representative of that diversity. The beginnings of both congregations are rooted in the ministry of the founder of Methodism, John Wesley. In addition, both congregations have been dedicated to the preservation of the church complex.

The Nardin Park Church was formed from a union of two large Methodist churches in Northwest Detroit; one was the Grand River Avenue Church located on the corner of Grand River and McGraw Avenues and the other was the New Ninde Church located at Grand River and Beverly Court. In the mid-twenties a Methodist survey of this section of the city revealed that these churches served practically the same territory.

Nardin Park Methodist Church was to be the strategic center of the denomination in Northwest Detroit. According to church records, "...this church will complete the link in a chain of carefully situated major churches of which Central Methodist Episcopal Church in the downtown section, St. Mark's in the eastern section, and Metropolitan and the Boulevard Temple in the northern section of the city were to ensure the Methodist Church representation throughout the city.

A building site was secured in 1927 at Nardin Park on West Chicago Boulevard near Grand River Avenue. The Chicago based architectural firm of Edwin F. Jasson and Frank L. Venning, along with Detroit architect Andrew R. Morrison, was commissioned to design the church complex. The first phase of the project was completed and dedicated in December 1928 and included a chapel, an education unit with forty classrooms, gymnasium and social hall. Plans were drawn up for the second phase of the project, the sanctuary, with construction to follow immediately. However, the financial crash of 1929 and the Great Depression made it impossible for the congregation to begin the second phase.

Through a series of liquidations and debt paying campaigns the financial problems were solved and by 1937 the campaign slogan, "We Are Building a Sanctuary," was adopted. In 1940 the Kresge Foundation made a generous gift of \$50,000, one-third of the cost of construction. This inspired the congregation to contribute the remaining two-thirds of the funding. On August 10, 1941, ground was broken for the new sanctuary and on October 19, 1941, the cornerstone was laid. The sanctuary was completed one year later and the congregation held its first Sunday service in that space on January 17, 1943. The new sanctuary had a seating capacity of over six hundred on the nave floor with an additional 135 seats in the balcony.

Reflecting the belief that "Christ is the Light of the World," the church has twenty-nine stained glass windows. Most prominent is the Peace Window, dedicated to the 390 church members who served in the Armed Forces during World War II. The

central figure of the window is Christ as the Prince of Peace, with symbols of the prophecies of peace and fruit of peace at the sides. Located in the lower panels of the window are symbols of the branches

of the armed services. Facing the Peace window is the Wesley window with a life size figure of John Wesley, founder of Methodism, and figures of his brother Charles, famous hymn writer, and their mother Susanna. The sixteen aisle windows depict symbols of the Christian Church.

Designed by Andrew R. Morrison, the new Sanctuary is a stone Neo-Gothic structure with high vaulted ceilings. A native of Scotland, Morrison received his degree from the Glasgow School of Architecture. In 1909 Morrison moved to Montreal and formed a partnership with William S. Painter. Their work included several additions to the Chateau Frontenac in Quebec. Morrison moved to Detroit in 1916 to work for the architectural firm of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls. In 1923 Andrew R. Morrison established his own firm which specialized in church and institutional work. In addition to his work on Nardin Park Methodist Church, his other commissions included All Saints Roman Catholic Church, Our Lady of Lourdes River Rouge, an addition to North Woodward Avenue Congregational Church, Kroger Baking Company, Schroeder Paint & Glass Company, and New England Pie Company. Morrison also served various professional organizations as president of the Detroit Chapter of the American Institute of Architects; president of the Michigan Society of Architects; president of the Michigan Board for Registration of Architects, Professional Engineers, and Land Surveyors. Andrew R. Morrison died in 1951.

By the early 1960s, the majority of the members of the Nardin Park congregation had moved to the surrounding suburbs. With the majority of the church's membership living some distance away, a decision was made to move. In 1963, the Nardin Park Church congregation voted five to one to sell their building to Ebenezer African Methodist Church for \$600,000.

History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church

The history of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in many ways is synonymous with America's enslaved citizens in their struggle from slavery to freedom. Founded in 1787 by Richard Allen, a former enslaved person who worked and purchased his freedom at a young age. The African Methodist Episcopal Church reflected Richard Allen's desire to share his belief in the connection between freedom and spirituality with other former enslaved persons. An ordained pastor in the Methodist faith, Allen began preaching the gospel on the streets of Philadelphia. It was not long before Allen was asked by an elder at St. George Methodist Church to preach to the church's black members. Richard Allen's first protest movement took place in Philadelphia in 1787, when he and fifteen like-minded individuals walked out of St. George Methodist Episcopal Church in defiance of a demand that they retire from the communion table to make room for the church's white parishioners. Dissatisfied with the segregated worship arrangements at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church, Richard Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church

The history of Detroit's Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church is a continuation of the pioneer spirit of the denomination's founding father, Richard Allen. On November 2, 1871 under the leadership of Rev. G. C. Booth, thirteen members of Detroit's Colored Society organized the new church, Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church, to serve as a refuge for Detroit's newly freed persons. The society held its first meetings at Cook's Hall located on the corner of Prospects and Watson Streets. In August of 1872, the church moved to a building on Calhoun Street between Beaubien and St Antoine Streets. Two years later, in 1874, the old Second Congregational Chapel was purchased and moved beside the meetinghouse of the society. The Rev. C. H. Ward was pastor of Ebenezer in 1874 when the chapel was purchased as Ebenezer's new home. The new church was dedicated on September 5, 1874, with a sermon by Bishop W. A. Wayman. The old building was transformed into a parsonage. Providing for the future, the new church had a seating capacity of five hundred, even though Ebenezer's average Sunday attendance in 1880 was 125.

Ebenezer AME prospered on Erskine Street for the next twenty-five years. In 1933, the Reverend George W. Baber was called to the pastorate of Ebenezer AME. His acceptance as pastor of Ebenezer came during the Depression. Known as "The Builder," Rev. Baber helped to guide the church through its next period of growth and expansion. Rev. Baber would soon leave a lasting imprint on the city. During his first year, Rev. Baber found himself pastor of a church with many of its members unemployed as a result of an unstable economy. He rose to the challenge when the church established an employment bureau and relief agency for families in distress.

In 1935, Ebenezer AME was faced with yet another challenge when the Federal Government began clearing the area surrounding the church. The Erskine church building was purchased for \$20,000 by the United States Government to make way for the slum clearance project initiated through the Federal Housing Authority during the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Seventeen thousand dollars was immediately applied as a down payment on the purchase of Ebenezer's third building, located at Willis and Brush. The former home of the Jewish congregation Shaarey Zedek, the building cost \$40,000. According to an article in the *Encyclopedia of African Methodism*, it was believed that by moving into these new quarters African Methodism came into possession of one of the finest, most conspicuously located and most modernly arranged church buildings to be found in the country. ■It is extremely difficult for a layman to describe the architectural beauty, the physical structure and the artistic arrangement of this building. Suffice to say that when one enters its holy confines, one is aware of the fact that here, at last, is a building that does justice to the name, and mission which it serves, to wit: the House of the Lord. • On December 22, 1935, Rev. Baber led the congregation of three thousand into the magnificent temple on Willis. Rev. Baber continued to serve

as pastor of Ebenezer until 1944 when he was elected Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and moved to Philadelphia.

On August 6, 1960 a fire completely destroyed the main edifice of the church, leaving the congregation without a place to worship. Church services were temporarily held at City Temple Seventh Day Adventist Church from September 4, 1960 to April 9, 1961. Finally, on July 12, 1964, Rev. Hubert N. Robinson led the Ebenezer congregation in its fourth move to the present location at 5151 W. Chicago Boulevard.

The history of Ebenezer AME Church is entrenched in the traditions of social and political issues that have not only faced Detroit's black community but the nation. From its members' roles as Champions of Freedom to Champions of Civil Rights, Ebenezer AME Church, from its inception down to the present time, has always been identified with the dynamic forces at work in building this great industrial center. In 1901 a young Henry Ford approached the leadership of Ebenezer Church to request a contribution. Rev. Allen gave the young Ford financial assistance in his endeavor to develop his automobile company. Many years later Henry Ford remembered his early benefactors in personal letters and by financial contributions to the church.

Ebenezer accepted and made known her responsibility to the community many years ago and engaged in cooperative effort to help make Detroit a better place. Some of the country's leading orators, educators and statesmen have appeared on the rostrum of Ebenezer AME Church, such as Mary McLeod Bethune; Walter White; Ralph Bunche; A. Clayton Powell; Eleanor Roosevelt; Frank Murphy; Daisy Bates; Rosa Gragg; and former governors Kim Sigler and G. Mennen Williams.

DESCRIPTION:

Ebenezer AME Church is composed of two sections: the educational unit and chapel built in 1927 and the church proper to its west, built in 1941-42. Although they were erected fifteen years apart, the two sections are so harmoniously joined both externally and internally because they were designed at the same time by one architect, Andrew R. Morrison. Both buildings are stone faced with slate roofs and copper flashing, and feature Neo-Gothic architectural styling.

The educational unit is four-stories tall. The arrangement of the front facade is symmetrical in its massing and detailing. Its recessed, compound arched entrance contains a pair of rectangular wooden double doors in a slightly projecting gabled bay, the gable extending up beyond the eaves. Above the entrance is a profusion of blind stone tracery. The doors feature sets of three elongated rectangular leaded windows per door. Above, a segmentally arched transom subdivided into five vertical sections per half by wooden mullions is further subdivided with panes of leaded glass.

Flanking the centralized entrance bay is a flush wall section punctured by a grouping of similar windows per floor; interrupting that flat surface is a three-story, five-sided bay containing similar bands of windows per floor. The half-timbering of the fourth floor adds to the less formal appearance at the top of the educational unit.

One enters through the main doors of the educational unit into a hallway with a slightly vaulted ceiling. The main office is to the left and the wood paneled parlor is to the right. A fireplace and decorative cornice further embellish the parlor. A charming, small chapel with beamed ceiling and raised altar or stage is also off the hallway. Additionally, this unit has forty class rooms and a full gymnasium on its upper floors.

Smoothly making the transition between the educational unit and the sanctuary is a five-stage tower. Its upper stage carries a pair of louvered windows per side; its northeast corner features an octagonal projection bearing a copper roof and cross extending towards the sky.

The main entrance to the sanctuary is through the west portal of the tower, leading directly into the narthex. Doors lead into the Sanctuary from the narthex; the side aisles run parallel to West Chicago, or east-west. On the exterior, a sloped copper roof shelters the visible northern side aisle, and two small rectangular windows per bay punctuate the wall surfaces between buttresses, above which a tracery window lights the sanctuary. Beneath the eaves, between the buttresses, is a row of crenelation details. The delicately carved, ogee arched, recessed entrance has a rectangular wooden double door, above which is a tympanum with two figures in relief flanking a metal relief. Naturalistic carvings are set in impost blocks.

At ground level of the Sanctuary, lighting the large hall and kitchen area in the basement, are groupings of triple windows. Above, the north transept wall projects outward towards the street. It is pierced by a large tracery pointed-arched, stained glass transept window, the Peace Window. Looking down the central aisle of the church from the central doorway of the narthex is the alter and carved wooden paneled reredos. Beyond this, at the west wall of the church, is the Chancel Window, composed of three elongated stained glass windows featuring Christ in the center. The east transept window, similar to the west transept window, is referred to at the Wesley Window.

The interior of the Sanctuary is almost monumental in appearance. A high wood-beamed ceiling is borne by the interior walls of colored concrete block dressed to resemble stone. Together with the light of the stained glass, stone columns, carved elements, and furnishings and lighting fixtures, the Sanctuary, as well as the rest of the complex, is in remarkably original condition.

In keeping with the organic nature of the Gothic style, an exterior place sign crafted to look like natural rock is situated on the front lawn of the Ebenezer AME Church

complex.

Criteria: The proposed historic district meets the first, second and third 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) Sites, buildings, structures, or archeological sites which are identified with historic personages or with important events in community, city, state or national history; (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 City Council designate the **Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church** as an historic district; a draft ordinance of designation is attached.