

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL

Historic Designation Advisory Board

Final Report

PROPOSED FIRST UNITARIAN-UNIVERSALIST CHURCH HISTORIC DISTRICT

The proposed historic district under study by the Historic Designation Advisory Board consists of a single property on the west side of Cass Avenue, and extending from Prentis to Forest. The property contains the Perry McAdow House, now the parish house of the First Unitarian-Universalist Church, the church itself, and McColleston Hall, containing educational and assembly spaces. The address of the church complex is 4605 Cass Avenue.

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

1. *The centerline of Cass Avenue.*
2. *The centerline of Forest Avenue.*
3. *The centerline of Prentis.*
4. *The centerline of the north-south alley running from Prentis to Forest west of Cass Avenue.*

HISTORY: The Church of Our Father of the First Universalist Society was established in February, 1879. This Society's first meetings were held at the residence of S. J. Murphy and its first service was held in Whitney's Opera House. Reverend E. L. Rexford became the first regular pastor of the Universalist Church in 1880; and in that same year the First Universalist Society of Detroit was incorporated. The architect Charles B. March was engaged to build a church for the congregation at the corner of Grand Circus Park and Bagley; and on September 18, 1881 the first service was held in the new stone Romanesque Church. More than half the total cost of the land and the edifice was donated by Simon J. Murphy.

In October, 1888 the Reverend Lee S. McColleston of Claremont, New Hampshire succeeded Rexford as pastor of the Church of Our Father. McColleston remained in that position for 24 years and left to become dean of Crane Theological School at Tufts College in Boston. Reverend Willis A. Moore succeeded McColleston and was present to oversee the construction of the new Universalist Church near the site of the McAdow House at the corner of Cass and Prentis in 1915.

The McAdow House was built in 1892-93 for Mr. and Mrs. Perry W. McAdow on then fashionable Cass Avenue. The architect remains unknown although it is almost a certainty that a professional was employed to design the house. The contractor, Martin Scholls & Son, received permit #502 on April 1, 1891 to construct the house at a cost of \$30,000. The McAdows were a colorful pair. Not unlike other nouveaux riches of the period, the McAdows built this house in Detroit as an entre into Detroit society. The origins of the McAdow House bring to mind echoes of the Wild West and the unsinkable Molly Brown. Perry W. McAdow had made a fortune gold-mining in Montana. By all accounts a shrewd

*John C
architect

and ambitious woman, Mrs. McAdow managed the couple's business interests from their modest beginnings in the 1860's and was instrumental in accumulating their great wealth. Late in life, Mrs. McAdow evidently aspired to a greater social sphere than was available to her in Billings, Montana. In 1892 she came to Detroit and acquired the half block between Prentis and Forest and Cass Avenues and began the construction of her new home. Her husband remained temporarily in Montana. The new house was sited at the Prentis Avenue end of the 800 foot lot and elaborate gardens were laid out extending north to Forest Avenue. The house and carriage house reportedly cost \$65,000 to build and were extensively described in a feature article written in 1894 and published in the Detroit Sunday News Tribune shortly after the mansion opened. The detailed description of the interior makes it clear that a decorator was employed to finish the interior, although Mrs. McAdow is credited with the decorating in the newspaper article.

Little is known about the McAdows' social career in Detroit, but in 1897 the house was sold to Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Stoepel who, in turn, sold it to Mr. and Mrs. Horatio Hovey in 1904. The Hovey's occupied the property until 1913 when they sold it to the Universalist congregation who acquired it with the intention of using the house as a temporary church while a new edifice was erected in the garden to the north. The church sold their downtown property to Lew Tuller for \$210,000 for an addition to the Tuller Hotel. The congregation met in the McAdow house until a new church was completed in 1916. Since then, the house has been well cared for as the parish house.

On January 18, 1915, permit #5734 was issued to the architects Donaldson & Meier for the construction of a church, gymnasium, and hall to cost \$109,000. The local firm of Donaldson & Meier had designed other churches in Detroit, such as the Romanesque Style First Unitarian Church (1890) on Woodward at Edmund. They did not limit themselves to the medieval styles--the Himelhoch Building (1901) of Beaux Arts design and the David Stott Tower (1929) of early Modern design attest to that fact. However, Donaldson & Meier built the Universalist Church in the Neo-Gothic style popularized during the first half of the twentieth century. The Neo-Gothic style is usually characterized by the work of Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson, a firm established in 1890 that quickly established a reputation for the finest designs in the Gothic tradition. Their inspiration came from the craftsmanship and structural integrity of English Gothic and their aim was to create a thoroughly twentieth century style derived from tradition. Donaldson & Meier attained these Neo-Gothic characteristics in the floor surfacing, wall surfacing, and exposed timber trusses and beams of the Universalist Church.

Russel Wheel and Foundry Company was awarded the contract to provide structural steel for the church and McCollester Hall. Indiana Bedford limestone faced the brick walls.

When the new church was dedicated in 1916, Lee S. McCollester, president of the Universalist general conference, returned to Detroit to deliver the dedicatory sermon.

The Newcomb Memorial Window, in the front gable of the church, was dedicated on April 16, 1916. William Willet and Annie Lee Willet, of the nationally known Willet Studio, the artists of this representation of the painting "The Sower," were known for the Sanctuary Window of West Point Military Chapel and the western window of the dining hall at the post-graduate college of Princeton University.

The Murphy Memorial Organ at the Universalist Church of Our Father was built by Ernest M. Skinner. The inscription upon the memorial tablet reads:

"This organ is dedicated to the memory of Simon Jones Murphy and Ann Dorr Murphy, charter members of the Church. Given by their daughter, Annie Dorr Murphy"

The organ was valued at \$25,000 when it was dedicated in 1916.

McCollester Hall, named in honor of Rev. Lee S. McCollester, was also designed by Donaldson & Meier and completed in 1917. It occupied the site of the former carriage house. Connected to both the church and the parish house (McAdow House), it was originally built as a gymnasium and hall for church functions. It was remodelled several years ago to provide more modern classrooms and function rooms.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: The McAdow House is located on the northwest corner of Cass and Prentis Avenues in Detroit about one-and-three-fourths miles from the central business district. It is set back from the corner about thirty feet behind a landscaped lawn. The neighborhood was previously an upper class residential area of large Victorian single-family houses built in the 1880's and 1890's. Most of these have been replaced with light industrial buildings, old tenements and educational facilities. A block north of the house is the campus of Wayne State University.

The McAdow House is a two-and-one-half story, hip-roofed, red-brick-and-brownstone, rectangular building of Renaissance Revival design. The essentially boxy shape is articulated on the exterior with bay windows, corinthian-columned porches and loggias, stone belt courses, parapet balustrades and a modillion cornice. The fenestration consists of large round head single sash plate glass windows with transoms on the first floor, similar square head windows on the second floor, both with contrasting brick quoin surrounds, and large brick dormers in the steep slate roof topped with elaborately carved classically ornamented shell-topped pediments.

The entrance facade facing Cass Avenue is composed of a large canted bay window surmounted by an open brownstone loggia corbelled over the first story. Above the modillion eaves cornice is an open latticework parapet railing fronting a narrow shell topped dormer. Balancing the bay window is the recessed entrance porch sheltered by a pilaster-flanked arched opening and surmounted by an Ionic ordered loggia. Between the entrance and the bay window is one bay of simple sash fenestration. The original front doors have been replaced.

The south elevation has a similar composition to the entrance front. A two-level bay window at one end is balanced by a side entrance surmounted by a loggia-in-artis motif near the other end. Between these two features is a shallow curved bay window surmounted by two bays of simple plate glass sash windows with transoms.

The major feature of the north elevation is the brick-and-red-sandstone porte-cochere. Adjacent to this is the wide, two-story, leaded-glass stair bay window.

The interior is elaborately decorated in the English Renaissance style with massive carved wooden fireplace breasts, an open Elizabethan-inspired staircase with beaded openwork railing, and beamed ceilings. The floor plan is Queen Anne inspired with large formal rooms opening from a spacious living hall.

On the first floor, the mosaic tile floored vestibule from the recessed entrance porch opens into the living hall. The elaborately decorated space is divided into two areas by means of a paneled wooden archade. The broad Elizabethan style staircase rises in a short flight to a spacious landing, lit by a two-story leaded-glass window, and then reverses on itself ascending in a long flight to the second floor. The principal decorative features of the entrance hall are the fine stained glass lunette window of a young woman's face by Taylor Studios of New York entitled "Unshed Tears;" the oak mantel piece with mirrored overmantel; the lunette panels over each door painted with scenes appropriate to the function of the room: cupids over the entrance, books and scrolls over the library door, classical vases and flowers over the drawing room door, fruits over the dining room door, a hunting scene over the door to the service wing, and a palette and brushes over the door to the former elevator. The wall ceiling is divided by molded wooden beams into rectangular panels in the Elizabethan manner with a lozenge-shaped center panel containing a scrolled chandelier medallion.

The library to the left of the entrance in the front of the house contains a large carved wooden mantel of Federal design faced with an African marble surround. The fireplace is fitted with an iron firebox of Elizabethan design and has a tri-partited mirrored overmantel ornamented with Adamesque festoons. All of the cherry woodwork has been painted white.

The large drawing room in the front of the house has an elaborate wooden mantel with a multi-shelved overmantel and a Mexican onyx surround. The windows are surmounted by cherry wood frieze boards ornamented with Adamesque festoons.

The focus of the dining room is the oak mantel with an overmantel of five shell-topped niches. There is also a wide, shallow, bowed, bay window, panelled wainscoting and a beamed ceiling. The floors of both the dining room and drawing room have oak and mahogany inlaid borders.

The balance of the first floor is devoted to a kitchen, pantries, a service hall and a secondary staircase.

The second floor contains three large bedrooms, all with period mantels, and two sitting rooms. The bath is still wainscoted in its original gray marble inset with a large bevelled mirror. There is an old ceramic tile floor and early 1900s plumbing features.

The third floor is divided into small bedrooms with polished floors and simple mantels with tiled surrounds. The billiard room and an adjoining room were sometimes used as a ballroom by opening the wide connecting doors to make them one large chamber. In all, the house contains twenty-two rooms and twenty-three closets.

The McAdow House is architecturally significant for its well preserved interiors and its handsome Renaissance Revival designs. The house is a fine example of the solid, conservative dwellings popular with Detroit's upper class at the turn of the century.

The interiors reflect the rich but somber decor popular at that period. The fine stained-glass window in the hall and the painted lunettes over the hall doors are representative of the artistic movement of the late nineteenth century and added aesthetic interest to the rather dark interiors of stained

wood and deep-toned wall treatments of antiqued paint in pale green shading to rose and yellow at the ceiling, simulated leather wall covering and burlap tinted in metallic paint trimmed in bronze rope used with ceilings colored in metallic shades grading from copper to silver. Although the original wall treatments have disappeared, the woodwork, mantels, plasterwork, parquet floors and other decorative features have been meticulously maintained.

The First Unitarian-Universalist Church is oriented northwest-southwest with the southeast end of the church facing the parish house (McAdow House). Its exterior walls are faced with pecked and smooth Bedford limestone. On the northeast corner of the lot is a three-story crenellated tower with a recessed arched entrance, crowned with a finial, facing Cass Avenue. Spur buttresses divide each side of the tower into two bays, each floor containing one narrow pointed arch window per bay. Original copper downspouts are still present.

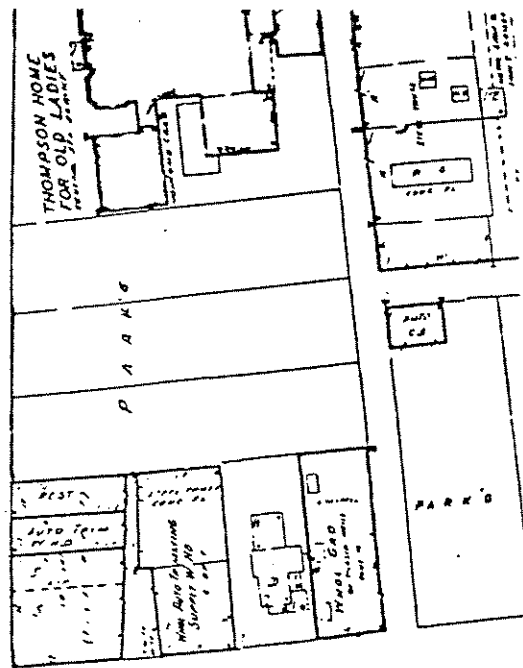
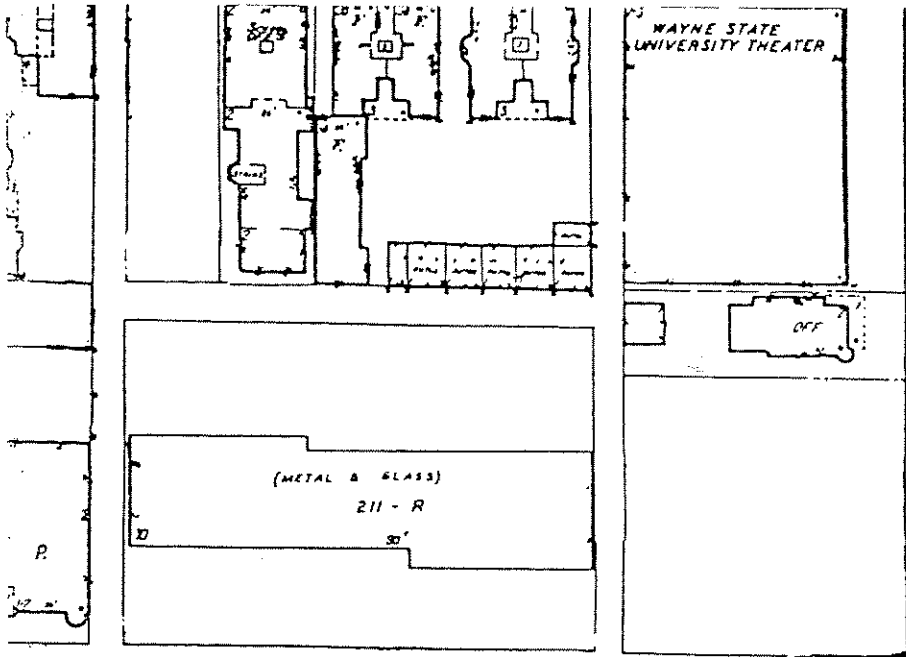
The nave, flanked by an aisle on either side, is also articulated into bays by spur buttresses. Each of the five bays per side contains one large pointed arch window with Medieval tracery. The rectangular clerestory windows above are divided into three sections by tracery.

The interior of the church reflects the handicraft ethic popular in Neo-Gothic architecture. The pitched roof of the nave is supported on exposed wood beams and trusses. Brick-organge tiles are laid down the central aisle of the church while the floor to the sides is wood. Original oak pews are still in place. The light-colored brick walls appear rough and unpressed to create a handcrafted effect. A brightly colored stained glass window punctures the northwest wall over the balcony in the narthex, brightening the otherwise somber space. The organ case stands in the east end of the apse.

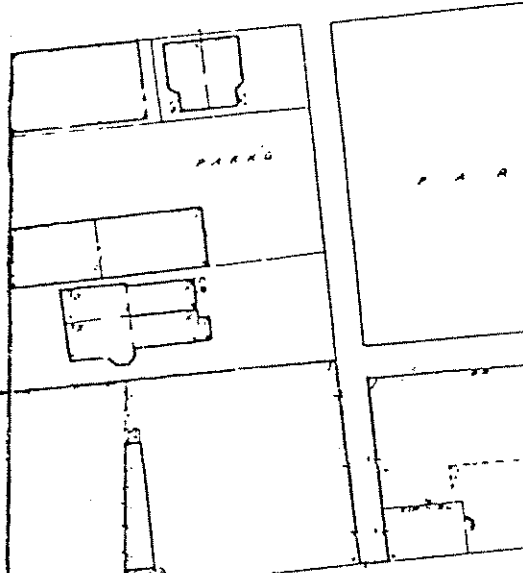
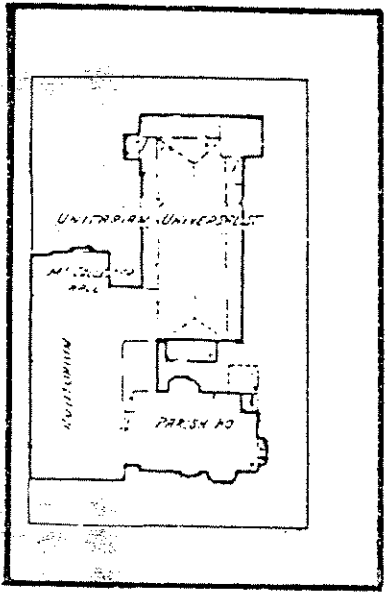
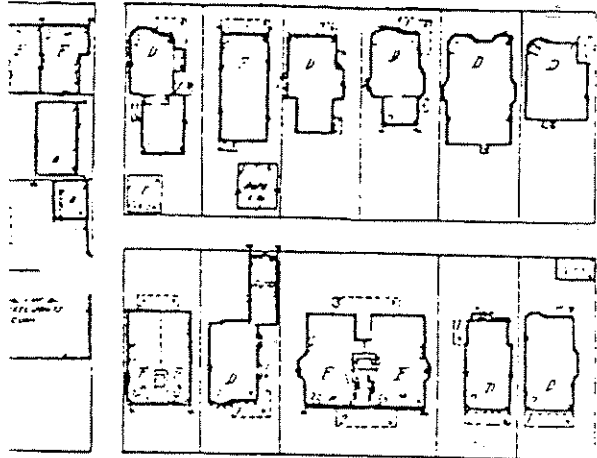
Attached to the west side of the parish house (the McAdow House) is McCollester Hall, a two-story, red brick meeting hall and classroom space. This Tudor-style church hall, built in 1917, has limestone window surrounds, coping and quoins. The limestone matches the stone facing of the church structure while the red brick closely corresponds to the brick of the parish house (McAdow House). The facade of McCollester Hall contains a massive central gabled stone entrance flanked by single windows and surmounted by a bank of casement windows at the second-story. The original entrance is now permanently glazed for use as a window. The interior has been completely remodelled.

The Unitarian-Universalist Church values its property--the McAdow House, the church, and McCollester Hall--for its historic and architectural merit and has carefully maintained it. The slate roof of the McAdow House has been properly repaired; experts have been employed to restore its stained glass windows; and a program exists to refurbish the interior of the house by installing period light fixtures and appropriate furnishings. The stained glass windows of the church structure are being properly protected from vandals.

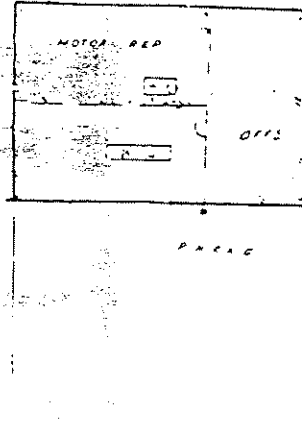
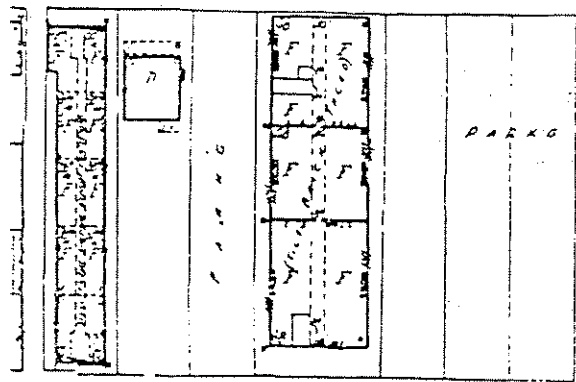
RECOMMENDATION: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that the City Council establish the First Unitarian-Universalist Church Historic District, with the design treatment level of rehabilitation. A draft ordinance for the establishment of the district is attached for the consideration of City Council.



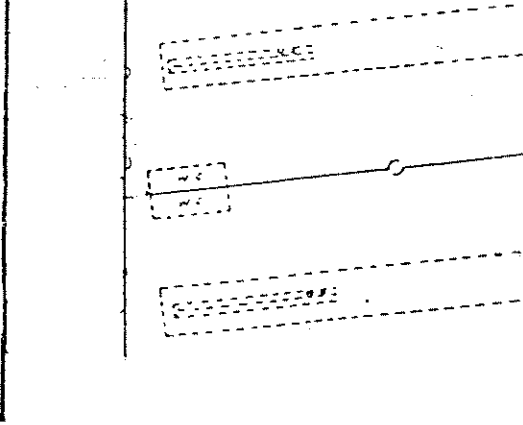
W. FOREST AV.



PRENTIS AV.



CASS



Proposed First Unitarian-Universalist Historic District
(Proposed district outlined in heavy black)