

# City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL

HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD

204 City-County Building  
Detroit, Michigan 48226

(313) 224-3487

## PROPOSED LITTLE ROCK CHURCH HISTORIC DISTRICT

### Final Report

The Detroit City Council has by resolution charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board with the official study in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act. The proposed district consists of a single property located on the southeast corner of Woodward and Josephine, and is located at 9000 Woodward Avenue in the "Piety Hill" section of North Woodward between the New Center and the Boston-Edison-Arden Park Historic Districts.

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

On the north, the centerline of Josephine

On the east, the centerline of the north-south alley lying 200 feet east of and parallel to Woodward.

On the south, the south line, extended east and west, of Lot 68 of Frazer & McLaughlin's Subdivision, Liber 14 Page 29 Plats.

On the west, the centerline of Woodward Ave.

**HISTORY:** The two congregations which have occupied the edifice located at 9000 Woodward Ave. share the common heritage of a building which reflects Detroit's growth and change. The original congregation, Central-Woodward Christian Church, and the present congregation, Little Rock Missionary Baptist Church, are representative of that change.

Central-Woodward Christian Church originally was a part of the Society of Disciples, a religious sect founded in 1812 by Alexander Campbell, a former member of the Presbyterian faith. Dissatisfied with the teaching of the church, Campbell withdrew from the Presbyterian church. He later formed several congregations which united with the Baptist Association. However, after several major disagreements over doctrine, Campbell and his followers were excluded from the Baptist Church, and formed a separate body who became known as the

Christadelphians. The name derived from the Greek words, Christou Adelphoi meaning, "Brethren of Christ."

The Society of Disciples was first organized in Detroit in 1842 with early meetings being held in the private homes of its members. By 1846 the meetings had moved to a schoolroom on the corner of Congress and Randolph. Between 1851-1863 the society moved several times, holding services in rented buildings which included Mechanics' Hall, Odd Fellows Hall, Fowler's School, and the old City Hall located in Cadillac Square. In 1863 the society purchased its first permanent home, the former Congregational Church located on Jefferson at Beaubien. The society immediately changed its name to the Jefferson Avenue Church of Christ. Eight years later the society moved once again, this time to a frame structure previously owned by the Scotch Presbyterians located on Washington Blvd. and Grand River. The congregation remained at this site for the next twenty years.

The Detroit church spent its first 30 years in struggles and schism-splitting and reuniting. In 1890 the various fractions of the society came together and secured enough monies to build their first permanent edifice. Located on the northeast corner of Ledyard and Second in the then fashionable section of Cass Park the church was named Central Christian Church for its location in the city proper. By the 1920's the neighborhood surrounding the church began to deteriorate and the congregation was once again considering a move. Following the migration of other Protestant groups to the north Woodward area, Central Christian's members decided to build a new edifice on the corner of Woodward and Josephine. This endeavor was made possible through the generous donations of Mrs. Ella Ford and Mr. Phillip H. Gray. Designed by George D. Mason and Company at a cost of \$500,000 Central Woodward Christian Church was dedicated in October, 1928.

The Great Depression began the process of neighborhood change in the North Woodward area, and the housing shortages and influx of workers during World War II contributed to it. By the early 1950's the original congregations located within "Piety Hill" began to sell their structures to black congregations and move to the suburbs. Central Woodward was one of the last to leave the area, moving to Troy in 1978 after selling their building to Little Rock Missionary Baptist Church.

Little Rock Missionary Baptist Church was established in April, 1936 by a band of six individuals under the pastorate of the Rev. Robert E. Tate. Its early meetings were held at 1314 E. Willis, the home of Ozzie Hooks, one of the congregation's founding members. As their membership grew, they soon recognized the need for a larger space. The congregation moved to a new building located at 3734 Russell. The congregation continued to flourish and made great strides under the leadership of Rev. Tate until his death on July 17, 1953. In February, 1954 the Rev. Theodore R. Provost was installed as the new pastor. It was under his

direction that the church relocated to 7639 Mack Ave. Rev. Provost remained at the church until 1959 when he was called to be pastor of a church in California.

During the next decade the church experienced several changes in leadership. Rev. Walter L. LaBeaux served from 1960-1962; he was then replaced by Rev. John Bussell, who served until 1967. And in 1968 the call was extended to Rev. Clarence L. Townsell. In January of the following year, the church relocated to a church building located at 4903 Maxwell, and shortly thereafter the congregation purchased the adjacent parsonage. Rev. Townsell remained pastor of Little Rock until 1971.

Rev. Jim Holley was called to be pastor of Little Rock Missionary Baptist Church in June, 1972. Under his leadership the congregation continued to grow, and within seven years the congregation was faced once again with growing pains. The need for larger facilities led the congregation to the city's "street of churches," and to the building once occupied by Central Woodward Christian Church. The congregation of Little Rock moved into the edifice at 9000 Woodward in August 1979, and was able to pay off the mortgage within ten years. A major renovation of the building interior was completed in 1990. These changes included a number of new stained glassed windows, pastors office study, choir loft, pulpit area, lower auditorium, kitchen and lavatories.

Today Little Rock Missionary continues to reach out and serve the citizens of Detroit through community programs such as; Shoes for Children, Drug Abuse Referral Center, Legal Aid, and Jail Ministry.

#### **ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION:**

The building of Little Rock Baptist Church is an outstanding example of the "Modern Gothic" movement of the first third of the twentieth century. Built in 1927-28 to designs of George D. Mason & Co., the building reflects clearly the leadership of Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue in the movement to create buildings based in tradition, but designed for the time. Goodhue's principles of a modern architecture based on tradition were in opposition to the "International Style" of Gropius and Mies, or the "organic" architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright; these movements advocate the abandonment of all design based on the past. Goodhue's premature death contributed to the victory of the non-traditional movement, but the rise of postmodernism in recent years has revived many of Goodhue's principles.

While Goodhue's work was not based solely on the Gothic tradition, most of his churches were in that mode and were very influential. Little Rock Baptist reflects that influence very clearly in its use of the virtually standard low nave arcade/tall clerestory nave elevation, in the almost naturalistic massing of its facade, and in the integral use of sculpture which "grows

out" of the architectural elements. The dedication booklet states, "The endeavor...has been to produce a building of English Gothic architecture, handling it in a modern way, breaking away in many cases from precedent." This statement could almost be a standard for the American Modern Gothic. The church's standing at the time was demonstrated by an award for design excellence from the American Institute of Architects.

The church is built of Indiana limestone with a slate roof; leaded windows, both clear and stained, fill the openings, and copper trim is used. The alley wall is brick.

The corner site of the church had as its southern boundary the Jewish Community Center property, now Considine Recreation Center. The designers of the church placed the nave well over to the south on the lot, abutting the next property at the rear, so as to maintain maximum light and air for the low elements which flank the church on its north and the church house to the north and east. A tower marks the intersection of the main sanctuary and the church house.

The facade of the nave is simple in arrangement; two massive buttress forms flank the single arch of the entry and the single large window above. The buttressed corners tep back and near the top contain niches on the front; figures of the four evangleists mask the transitional corners where the buttress forms change to an octagonal plan; and the tops have Gothic openwork parapets. Between the buttresses, the main entry consists of two deeply recessed doors divided by a trumeau and surmounted by a divided tympanum with blind tracery. The rounded arch of the entrance opening has ribs which disappear in typical Modern Gothic fashion into the splayed side walls of the recess. Above, a pierced stone rail fronts the base of the large window, divided by a sort of trumeau which is surmounted by a fully developed rose window set into the tracery of the center two lancets. Again, the ribbing of the arch blends into the splayed sides of the window opening. The hipped roof is screened by a parapet of Gothic arches with a niche centered.

Flanking the nave along its north side are the chapel, a low structure which opens into the nave through the arches of the nave arcade, and the Gray Room, adjacent to the narthex and the rear of the chapel; this contains an older window of "Suffer the Little Children. To the rear of the nave on its north and east sides are office and church house structures containing extensive dining and recreation facilities. The tower which stands at the intersection of nave and church house is typical in its solid, planar walls broken only by one large pointed opening in each face.

The nave has four windows towards the rear on either side in the nave elevation; the two bays closest to the chancel are open to galleries within in a sort of pseudo-transept. On the north, this gallery contains two older stained glass windows, rather

surprisingly showing Washington and Lincoln. On the south, the window openings are blank, as the church abuts the adjoining property at this point. On the south side of the nave, the low side aisle is narrow and serves only as access to the pews in the nave; on the north, the aisle serves as a dividing element between nave and chapel.

The eight nave windows and the large west window have recently been filled with an extensive program of new stained glass by Anchor Glass Co. of Detroit, devoted to the Stations of the Cross. The chapel windows are likewise new, and contain symbols of the apostles. Forward of the south side gallery is a new window of the "African-American Pulpit" showing Black pastors ranging in date from Richard Allen to a "pastor of the future"; in the rear of the south gallery is another new window, devoted to symbols of the ministries of the church. This program of new stained glass has added considerable color to a sanctuary previously served almost exclusively with colorless glass; even the older Washington and Lincoln windows are recessed at the rear of a gallery and so added little to the view from the west entrance. The new glass is said to constitute the largest such program in Detroit for over twenty years.

Entry from the Woodward doors leads into the narthex, panelled and with a decorative plasterwork ceiling; the west gallery is above. The main and side aisles are entered through three sets of double doors. The main nave is characterized by the low rounded arches of the arcade, the tall windows above, and the arched timber ceiling, decorated in polychrome. The raised choir platform has some modern furnishings required to replace originals removed by the former owners. The east end of the church is dominated by the large organ case in dark wood and zinc pipes, a typical example of the time with many dummy pipes of apparently the same size and pitch; the organ itself was removed at the time of sale. A window high in the east wall remains filled with colorless glass. Below, the Baptistry is at the rear of the choir platform, the arch opening into it surely derived from some tomb or chantry chapel in an English church.

Although there have been alterations to the interior, in the form of replacement of some furnishings, the installation of modern glass, and the repainting in blue, the interior of Little Rock remains an outstanding example of the "Modern Gothic" as applied to the non-liturgical church.

The original office and recreation spaces share many of the characteristics of the church itself, derived loosely from English precedent and often involving panelling, fireplaces, leaded glass in bay windows, and other elements of the typical vocabulary of the style. One particularly noteworthy example is the art tile fireplace in the room called the "Beginner's Room" in the dedicatation booklet.

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

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The membership of the Historic Designation Advisory Board for the study of the proposed Little Rock Missionary Baptist Historic District is:

Ms. Florence (Peggy) LaRose,  
Chairperson

Mr. Henry Hagood,  
ex officio

Mr. Calvin Jackson,  
Vice-Chairperson

Mr. Ron Hewitt,  
ex officio

Mr. Gordon Bugbee,  
Secretary/Treasurer

Ms. Marsha Bruhn,  
ex officio

Mrs. Helen N. Brown  
Beulah Croxford

Ms. Maud Lyons,  
ex officio

Mr. De Witt Dykes

Mr. Aubin Williams,  
ad hoc

Dr. Marie M. Gardner

Rev. Jim Holley,  
ad hoc

Mr. Norman Rebert

LITTLE ROCK MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH (CENTRAL-WOODWARD CHRISTIAN  
CHRUCH)

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Obituary-Gray, John S., July 7, 1906

Central-Woodward Christian Church, Dedication Booklet, Oct. 14,  
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Mitchell, Detroit History and Commerce,  
"Gray, John S," p. 109

Little Rock Missionary Baptist Church, Stained Glass Window  
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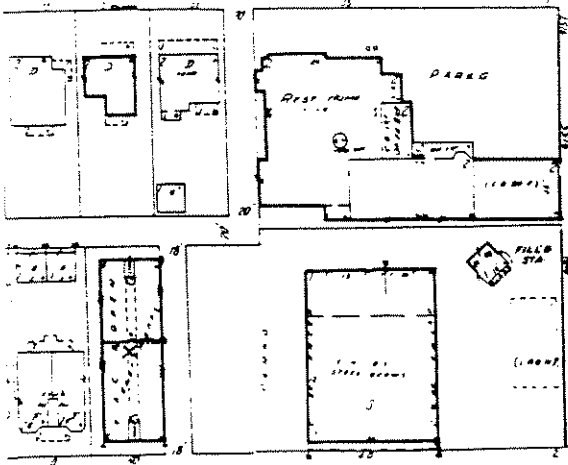
Pamphlet, "Little Rock Missionary Baptist Church"

Detroit Public Library, Burton Collection, Reading Room File,  
"Central-Woodward Christian Church"

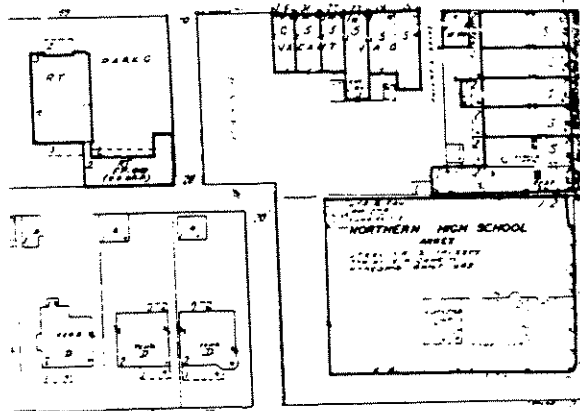
LITTLE ROCK CHURCH HISTORIC DISTRICT

(Proposed boundaries outlined in heavy black)

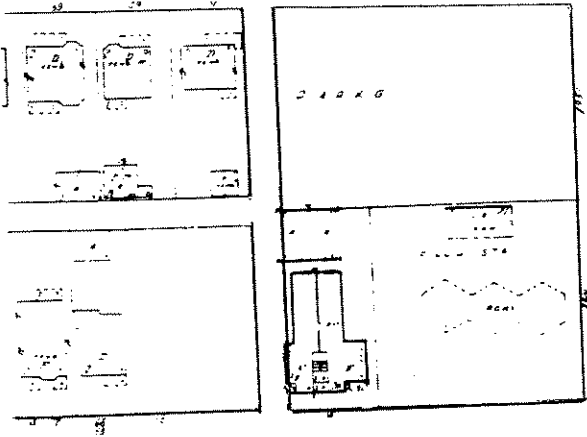
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CLAIRMOUNT AV.



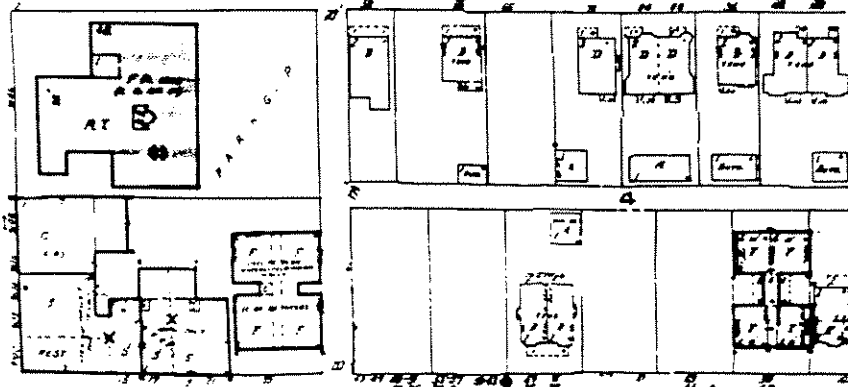
TAYLOR AV.



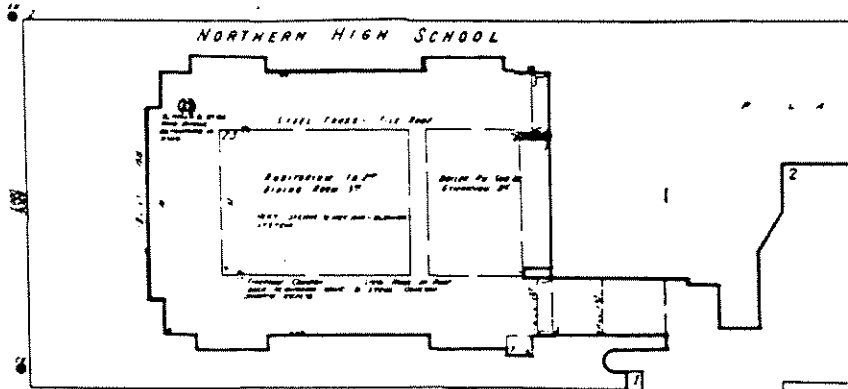
HAZELWOOD AV.



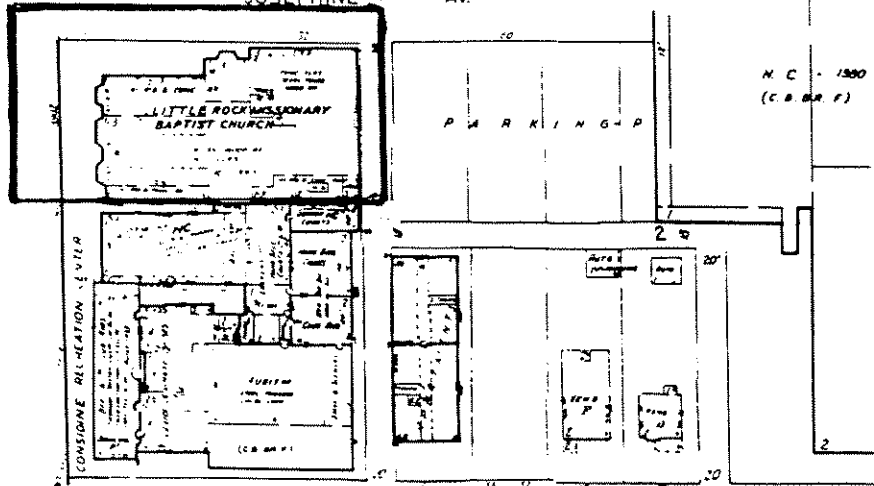
LEICESTER CT.



OWEN AV.



JOSEPHINE AV.



N. C. - 1880  
(C. B. BR. F.)

HOLBROOK AV.

