

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL

36.

Historic Designation Advisory Board

PROPOSED MOST HOLY TRINITY HISTORIC DISTRICT

Final Report

The proposed Most Holy Trinity Historic District consists of the church building at 1062 Porter Street, on the northeast corner of Porter and Sixth Streets, and the Rectory at 1050 Porter Street. The John C. Lodge Freeway is located immediately east of the proposed district; the Michigan State Police parking lot and the Executive Plaza are to its south. To its west and north is Corktown, the oldest existing neighborhood in the City of Detroit. The proposed Most Holy Trinity Historic District is within the Corktown National Register Historic District and the Corktown Citizen's District Council.

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

On the north, the centerline of the alley running east-west between Porter and Labrosse;

On the west, the centerline of Sixth Street;

On the south, the centerline of Porter Street; and

On the east, the east line of Lot 10, Block 53 Forsyth Farm (L13/P85).

HISTORY: Most Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church is historically significant as the focus of the Irish Catholic community on the west side of Detroit and the first English-speaking Catholic parish in the city.

The city of Detroit, although founded in 1701, remained a frontier village until the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The city's geographical location between Lake Huron and Lake Erie became more important with the opening of the Erie Canal in the 1820s. Many Irish immigrants set out for the west and made their homes in Detroit in the late 1830s. By 1850, one in seven people in the city was Irish, and Irish constituted the city's largest national group. Although the Irish were located all over the city, they were heavily concentrated on the west side in the first and eighth wards. In 1853, the eighth ward, which included most of the area now referred to as Corktown, was 47% Irish.

In 1833, English-speaking Catholics gained approval to establish their own parish. Prior to that, English-speaking Catholics worshipped in the basement of St. Anne's, the first Roman Catholic Church in Detroit, and predominantly French. The Rt. Rev. Frederic Rese of Cincinnati was appointed first Bishop of Detroit and the Michigan Territory, arriving in Detroit in 1834. With him came Captain Alpheus White, an Irishman who fought against the British in the War of 1812 in an all Irish company. White followed Rese to Detroit as an architect and builder. White remodelled St. Anne's, then the Cathedral of the diocese. He also enlarged and remodelled the Capitol Building and finished the interior of the city hall. White was a member of the convention framing the constitution for Michigan to become part of the union. He bought the lot on the corner of Cadillac Square and Bates from David Cooper, and conveyed this property to Rev. Rese for the site of the new English-speaking parish.

The task of finding a suitable building for worship was made easier when the old First Protestant Society Church became available. The first Protestant church in Detroit, that of the First Protestant Society, was built in 1819 on the east side of Woodward Avenue about 100' north of Larned. In 1825 the congregation came under Presbyterian influence but used the same building until 1834, when they built a new one on that site. The old wooden church was put up for sale, and was purchased by the Bishop for the new Trinity Parish. In that same year it was put on rollers and moved to the site at the corner of Cadillac Square and Bates.

While the wooden church was in the process of being fitted for Trinity Parish worship, a cholera epidemic hit the city. Approximately 700 victims in two months -- August and September -- were taken. The church was transformed into a hospital, as there was no other in the city at that time. Father Kundig, who later became the pastor at Holy Trinity, did much to alleviate the suffering by visiting the hospital and caring for orphans.

White began changing the temporary hospital back into a church, and on June 14, 1835, Bishop Rese dedicated Most Holy Trinity to Catholic worship. Father Bernard O'Cavanaugh was the first pastor; Father Kundig was the second (1839-42). In 1840, 202 heads of family were listed on the roster at Holy Trinity Parish, most living east of Woodward within walking distance to their church. But by the 1840s the Irish were moving from their poor homes on Woodbridge, Franklin, Larned and Congress west to the area bounded by Vernor Highway on the north, the river on the south, Third Street on the east and Eighth Street on the west.

Meanwhile, the construction of SS. Peter and Paul Cathedral was supposed to replace Holy Trinity as the English-speaking parish, as Holy Trinity had become too small for the city's English-speaking population. SS. Peter and Paul Cathedral was completed in 1848, and for two months the people from Holy Trinity parish worshipped there. However, the influx of Irish made it necessary to retain the Holy Trinity building after all.

So, in 1849, "the wooden church on Cadillac Square was mounted on rollers and hauled to its final resting place, the northeast corner of Sixth and Porter Streets." (Pare, George, The Catholic Church in Detroit, 1951) During the move, the congregation worshipped in the basement of St. Anne's once again.

A few years later, the old wooden church was torn down to make room for the present church building on Porter Street at Sixth Street. Most Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church, built under the guidance of Rev. Peeters, was erected at a cost of \$30,000 commencing in 1855. Patrick C. Keeley (1816-1896) designed the church building, and Stephen Martin was its builder. Partick Keeley was a noted designer of Roman Catholic Churches in New York City, New England and Canada. It is said that at least 500 Catholic churches and cathedrals were built from his plans in New York State alone, exclusive of New York City. Born in Kilkenny, Ireland, Keeley, the son of an architect, came to the United States in 1841 and established a successful practice in Brooklyn, New York. The Jesuit Church of St. Francis Xavier on 16th Street in Manhattan is one of Keeley's most notable designs. He was also responsible for the designs of the Cathedral of S.S. Peter and Paul in Providence, R.I. (1893) and the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston (1867).

The cornerstone of the present Most Holy Trinity Church was laid on October 28, 1855, having been blessed by Bishop Lafevre. It was dedicated on October 29, 1866. Rev. Francis H. Peeters, pastor of Most Holy Trinity (1853-69), oversaw its construction. In 1870, 1,200 families belonged to the church, which was then under the leadership of Father A. F. Bleyenbergh, a scholar and inventor. Although the parish was in financial straits during this time, it persevered.

Father Bleydenbergh, pastor at Most Holy Trinity Church from 1869 to 1884, is credited with one of the earliest working electric lights to appear in Michigan (Most Holy Trinity Church, 100 Anniversary, March 17, 1955). "At 5 o'clock mass on Christmas morning in 1875 an electric light shown over high altar, the initial such illumination in the city, most likely the state." (Most Holy Trinity Church, March 17, 1972) It is uncertain whether this was one of Fr. Bleydenbergh's products, although in the early 1880's his inventions did light the midnight mass scenes.

Meanwhile, the Most Holy Trinity Church School was expanding to meet the needs of the growing community. It had been operating since 1838, first in the basement of St. Anne's and later in the basement of the church at Porter and Sixth Streets. In 1854 a boys school was operated in a new structure just east of the present rectory. Four years later, the first unit of a "new" school was built on the north side of Porter west of Seventh Street, now Brooklyn, to serve as a school for girls.

That school, known as Trinity School, was built at a cost of \$5,000. It was enlarged in 1864, and was further enlarged in 1875. The school was free to all children belonging to the parish and 50¢ a month to outsiders. It had an enrollment of 960 pupils in 1877. In 1964, this school was replaced by a new school on the south side of Labrosse near Sixth Street under Father Clement Kern.

Most Holy Trinity's first parsonage was built in 1852; Rev. Patrick V. Donahoe was its first occupant. In style, it was a brick detached Greek Revival townhouse resembling the four of this kind left in Corktown today. It was replaced in 1886 by the present Romanesque Revival building built by Dean Brothers (6-30-1886, permit #722) immediately east of the church under the direction of Father Doman (1884-87). It was designed by the well-known Detroit firm of Mason and Rice (1879-1898). Among their other notable commissions are the Grand Hotel on Mackinaw Island (1887) and Trinity Episcopal Church in Detroit (1893).

Father James (commonly called Dean) Savage followed Father Doman and resided in the rectory for 40 years. In 1964 the park on the corner of Trumbull and Abbot was named in his honor.

Over the years a number of Irish-Catholic charitable organizations were associated with Most Holy Trinity Church. These include St. Elizabeth Benevolent Society, St. Mary's Benevolent Society (1887), and Naturalization Society of Detroit (1853), a social organization encouraging emigrants to take advantage of the facilities at Holy Trinity.

Although the Irish population in Corktown dwindled through the twentieth century, Holy Trinity remained the center of Irish culture in the city. In 1913 there were 3,100 Catholics in Holy Trinity Parish. In the 1920s Maltese and Spanish-speaking people began to settle in Corktown; by the 1950s Most Holy Trinity was the largest Latino parish in the city. During that decade, Father Clement Kern, pastor at Holy Trinity from 1943-1978, became known for his work with the poor of Corktown. He became a local legend for his ability to obtain volunteer medical help, legal and social services for his parishners.

Urban renewal in the 1950s and 60s split the parish. Construction of the Lodge Freeway and creation of the West Side Industrial Park forced people west, with the result being St. Anne's at Lafayette and 18th Street overtaking Holy Trinity as the largest Latino parish.

Today, Most Holy Trinity parish is still an integral part of the Corktown neighborhood and the Irish heritage in the Detroit area. This is evidenced by "Sharin' o' the Green", the St. Patrick's Day annual celebration that began in Victorian times and continues today.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Most Holy Trinity Church was designed by Patrick Keeley in the Gothic Revival style, a style characterized by the pointed arch. According to a contemporary article in the Advertiser (9-17-1855), Holy Trinity was to be built in the "Elizabethan style." In actuality, it is reflective of the Early English Decorated period, one of the few in Detroit. It is an orange brick building measuring 128' X 73' with 30 foot high side walls. The height of its main feature, the central bell tower and steeple, is 170' tall.

The facade of Holy Trinity is composed of a central buttressed tower containing the main entrance into the narthex. It is flanked by a secondary entrance on each side. Each of the three openings has a pointed arch stained glass transom above the natural wood double doors. The foundations and trim are of smooth limestone, as is the cornerstone laid in 1855 at the southwest corner of the building.

Lancet windows containing geometric tracery are located above the three entrances of the front facade and along the east and west elevations. Louvred lancet openings in groupings of three puncture the top section of the bell tower, and a decorative brick corbel table embellishes the area above. A copper clad steeple rises from the tower. Originally covered with slate, the steeply pitched roof of the church is now covered with deep green asphalt shingles.

Wooden trim of the church is painted green, including the denticulated cornice along the side elevations. Both the church and the rectory were painted white with green trim in the 1950s and, consequently, sandblasted to expose the natural brick in the 1970s.

Since the parish was not a wealthy one when the Holy Trinity was built, it lacked in decoration when it opened in the late 1850s. The interior was designed to accommodate 1,134 parishners, and it was gradually fitted to suit their needs.

In plan, Holy Trinity is of the "hall church" type, with side aisles almost as tall as the nave and no clerestory. Its walls were articulated to resemble large blocks of regularly laid stone. Originally painted in a dark tone, they are now painted white and have modern paneling as wainscoting below. Clustered wooden columns separate the nave from the side aisles. They were once marblized but are now also painted white. Capitals vary from column to column; they all bear floral motifs. One capital has shamrock ornamentation, referring back to the church's Irish beginnings.

The nine lancet windows of the side aisles contain geometrically designed stained glass with the names of donors on their lower panels. The large window at the north end was donated by the Altar Society and depicts the Crucifixion and the Last Supper.