

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL

Historic Designation Advisory Board

PROPOSED SWEETEST HEART OF MARY ROMAN CATHOLIC PARISH HISTORIC DISTRICT

FINAL REPORT

The proposed historic district under study by the Historic Designation Advisory Board consists of a single property located on the northeast corner of East Canfield and Russell. The property contains Sweetest Heart of Mary R.C. Church, Sweetest Heart of Mary R.C. School, the Rectory and the Sister's Home. The property, at 4440 Russell, is in the Forest Park Urban Renewal area.

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

Beginning at the point of intersection of the centerline of East Canfield and Russell, proceeding northerly along the centerline of Russell to its intersection with the north boundary (extended westward and eastward) of Lot 4 of the subdivision of Lots 12, 13, 14, and 15 of E. Robinson's subdivision of Out Lots 15 and 16 of the Guoin Farm, (L18 P35) to its intersection with the centerline of the alley running north-south between the east boundary of Lots 1, 2, and 3 of the aforementioned subdivision and the west boundary of Lot 2 of the subdivision of Lots from 1 to 11 and 16 to 22 inclusive and the private alley in re thereof of E. Robinson's sub of Out Lots 15 and 16 of the Guoin Farm (L13 P62); from that point of intersection north along said centerline of alley to its intersection with the centerline of the alley running east-west between the north boundary of Lot 1 and the south boundaries of Lots 2 through 7 of the subdivision cited above as being found at L13 P62; thence westerly along the centerline of said alley to its intersection with the centerline of the alley running north-south between the east boundaries of Lots 1 and 7 of the subdivision cited above as being found at L13 P62 and the west boundaries of Lots 6 through 13 of Freud and Schulte's subdivision of Lots 1 through 5 of the Riopelle Farm between Fremont and Farnsworth Streets (L7 P17); thence proceeding southerly along the centerline of said alley (extended southward) to its intersection with the north boundary of Lot 1 of Freud and Schulte's sub aforementioned; thence eastward along said north boundary of Lot 1; thence southerly along the east boundary (extended southward) of Lot 1 of Freud and Schulte's subdivision to its intersection with the centerline of East Canfield; thence westerly along the centerline of East Canfield to the point of beginning.

HISTORY: Sweetest Heart of Mary Roman Catholic Church achieves significance as a pivotal parish in the development of both the Polish Community of Detroit and the city's Catholic Diocese. The structure is also noteworthy as one of Detroit's more striking remaining examples of Late Gothic Revival church architecture.

The history of Sweetest Heart of Mary is deeply rooted in the development of Detroit's early Polish communities. Most of the first Polish immigration to this area during the mid-nineteenth century came from Prussian-occupied north Poland. Bilingual because of the German occupation, these immigrants tended to gravitate towards German parishes such as St. Joseph's located on Detroit's near east side. However, when the Polish parishioners learned that they were to be restricted to a localized section of the new St. Joseph's Church, approximately 300 families decided to start a church of their own. The construction of their house of worship, St. Albertus, coincided with the arrival in 1882 of Father Dominick Kolasinski, a Krakow priest who contributed significantly to the development of both St. Albertus and Sweetest Heart of Mary.

St. Albertus, a locally designated historic district also listed on the National Register, was completed in 1885 at a cost which exceeded original estimates by approximately \$20,000.

Father Kolasinski was dismissed from St. Albertus by Detroit Bishop Borgess following charges of financial mismanagement and immoral conduct which were filed by a group of disgruntled Kaazub parishioners. When supporters of Kolasinski tried to prevent a new priest from entering St. Albertus, riots broke out, and animosities subsided only after Father Kolasinski left Detroit in April of 1886 for a new parish in North Dakota. Nonetheless, Father Kolasinski's supporters seceded and formed their own church community. When Kolasinski returned to Detroit permanently in December of 1888, he became pastor of the new parish, Sweetest Heart of Mary, without episcopal approval.

The Detroit architectural firm of Spier & Rohms received a permit to construct a schoolhouse on March 1, 1889 at a cost of \$15,000. Four months later, Eugene and Matilda Robinson sold this land on the northeast corner of East Canfield and Russell to Sweetest Heart of Mary Roman Catholic Parish for \$13,500. Situated on what was then called Fremont Street (later changed to Canfield), the schoolhouse originally housed a school, a rectory, and a 60' by 60' chapel. An addition to the schoolhouse was built c. 1902. The main church building, with a seating capacity of 2,000, was completed in 1893 at a cost of \$125,000 (permit #1213, 8/11/90); the first mass was held on Christmas Eve, 1893. Also designed by Spier & Rohms, the contractors included Rogers, Smith & McDonald for the stonework and Leonard Price for the brickwork.

Spier & Rohms was a prolific Detroit architectural firm that received many commissions for train stations from the Michigan Central and Grand Trunk Railroads, including the handsome stations in Ann Arbor, Battle Creek, Niles, Lansing and Grand Rapids. William C. Rohms was born in Gottingen, Germany, and was trained at Hanover Polytechnicum. He ventured to Detroit in 1883 and worked in the offices of Detroit architects Gordon W. Lloyd and Elijah E. Myers. In 1884 he formed a partnership with Frederick H. Spier, who came to Detroit to monitor the construction of the German medieval style Michigan Central Station on Third Avenue and Jefferson for architect Cyrus L. W. Eidlitz of New York.

During the late 1890's a major financial crisis was averted after many parishioners took out second mortgages on their homes in order to raise sufficient funds to save the church. Exhausted by this financial crisis and by the series of hearings which eventually cleared him of the charges responsible for his dismissal in 1885, Father Kolasinski died in 1898. Still plagued with financial woes into

the beginning of the twentieth century, the parish was successfully sued for \$13,545.20 in payment by the Wells Glass Company of Illinois in 1907.

During the troubled years of the 1890's, the Sweetest Heart of Mary parish acquired an 1894 Austin organ. Now the oldest electro-pneumatic action organ in the state, it is also one of the nation's few remaining instruments of this type. Detroit was a major organ manufacturing center during the 1890's, and Sweetest Heart received the second organ built by the newly organized Austin Organ Company. The firm, now located in Hartford, Connecticut, has developed into a major producer of custom-built pipe organs in America.

The Rectory, or priest's residence, just north of the church on Russell, was constructed in 1900 by John Kaczmarek, a mason and bricklayer, at a cost of \$7,000 (permit #195, 5/17/1900). The Sister's home was constructed for the parish by John Finn & Son at a cost of \$35,000 in 1923 (permit #12072, 6/13/23). Legal ownership of Sweetest Heart of Mary Parish was transferred to the Diocese of Detroit in 1960, although it had been a parish of the Diocese since 1894. Once the heart of a thriving, self-sufficient Polish community, Sweetest Heart of Mary is presently located in the middle of an urban renewal area. The congregation now has 530 registered members.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: Sweetest Heart of Mary is a typical cruciform plan church built of painted red brick with stone trim and a patterned slate roof. The main west facade is distinguished by a stone base topped by a quatrefoil frieze over the main portal and twin buttressed towers surmounted by octagonal spires. Sweetest Heart's 217' spires house three large bells, cast in St. Louis in 1889 to be placed in the bell tower of the school, tuned G#, D#, and F#. A smaller spire marks the intersection of the nave with the transept.

Several motifs unify the composition of the ediface: alternating patterns of pinnacles and decorated gables define the bases of the main spires; the gable ornamentation, consisting primarily of blind serrated lancets, is repeated on the four larger gables which mark the ends of the nave and transepts; the pointed gable shape is echoed not only on the spires and the roof, but also on the side buttressing and above all of the portals; lancet windows fenestrate the towers, the gables, and the main three-portal facade; and circles dominate the tracery of the tower windows and the smaller windows of the north and south facades. Gables, pinnacled buttresses, and angled side entrances provide the nave facades with a multiplicity of line and form. Much of this detailing derives from northern European precedents; the combination a French front and a German nave reflects the late Victorian propensity towards the use of a multiplicity of forms.

Following the example of churches of northwestern Poland and northern Germany, the interior of Sweetest Heart is characteristic of the "hall church" design, with high vaulted ceilings and slightly lower vaulted side aisles, which became the hallmark of the Late Gothic in Germany. The ceiling is supported by columns faced with plaster colonettes and topped by gold leaf Corinthian capitals. Between the ribs of the vaulting are paintings in a Byzantine style. The sanctuary, which was enlarged and repainted in the early twentieth century, contains a large marble altar with a life size statue of the Virgin Mary. The stained glass windows reflect the circle and six-pointed star motifs of the exterior tracery.

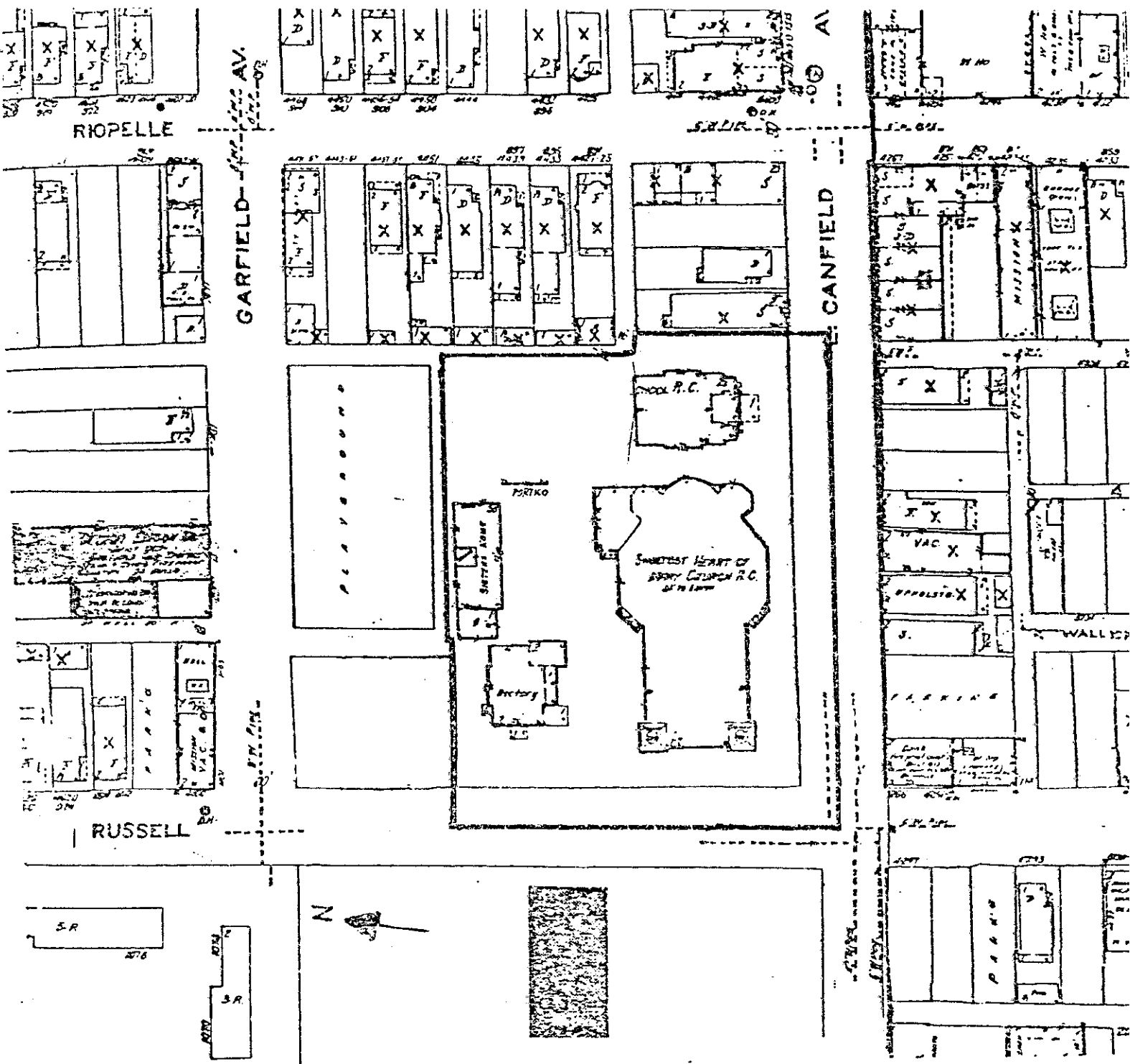
The six-pointed star highlights the tracery of the window above the main west portal. The church's elaborate stained glass windows, manufactured by a local Detroit glass firm, were awarded prizes at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The transept windows feature lancet tracery topped by a stone transom. Chandeliers, possibly by Tiffany, hang from the nave aisles and date from 1918, as do the altar lights. The pews are oak. Alterations to the altar were made in 1939.

On the site with the church proper are three related buildings: the 1889 schoolhouse facing Canfield with a c.1902 addition, the rectory constructed in 1900 to the north of the church on Russell, and the convent, constructed in 1923, between the rectory and the church addition. The most noteworthy of the three buildings is the schoolhouse. The oldest section is of brick, with a high stone basement, and is two stories high with an extremely high attic story where the sisters once resided. Its projecting front facade features rounded corners, foliated capitals, and a porch with two entrances. The projecting tower was originally four stories tall. The early twentieth century addition consists of a large three-story rectangular brick building with a pedimented Ionic stone portico on the central projecting bay and an ornamental box cornice. The third story is defined by a stringcourse and windows decorated with round arch architraves and keystones. The roof is hipped and the central bay is distinguished by a gabled dormer. The older section of the school is to undergo conversion to a church hall, while the early twentieth century addition is in the process of demolition. However, its Ionic portico will be retained as an entranceway into a proposed parking lot.

The convent is also a three-story rectangular brick building; the central section has a truncated hipped roof while the side blocks have gabled roofs and eyebrow dormers. The rectory, a two-story brick building, features ornamental brickwork on its quoins and architraves. The roof is both hipped and gabled; the main (west) facade possesses a columned porch and gabled dormer. The entire complex is landscaped with small trees and bushes and is protected by a stone and wrought iron fence.

Sweetest Heart of Mary Church has a reputation as the largest church in the city of Detroit and as the largest double spire church in Michigan.

RECOMMENDATION: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that the City Council establish the Sweetest Heart of Mary Historic District, with the design treatment level of rehabilitation. A draft ordinance for the establishment of the district is attached for the consideration of the City Council.



Proposed Sweetest Heart of Mary R.C. Parish Historic District

(Proposed district outlined in Black)

