

HISTORIC PRESERVATION STUDY REPORT

ST. BENEDICT THE MOOR ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

(Written Fall 1997)

I. NAME

Historic: St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church

Common: St. Ben's Roman Catholic Church

II. LOCATION

924 West State Street

Tax Key: 391-0258-211

Legal Description: COMPRISING ONLY THE LAND THE CHURCH STRUCTURE OCCUPIES. SURVEY AND SUBD INTO CITY LOTS OF THE N 30 ACRES ETC IN THE NW ¼ SEC 29-7-22. BLOCK 198 PART BEG AT SE COR SD BLK 198 TH NWLY ALG N LI W STATE ST 228.25' -TH N 95.85' -TH W 14.16' -TH N 32.3' M/L-TH E 4.8' M/L-TH N 10.6' M/L-TH E 89.48' - TH S TO THE N LI W STATE ST.

III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

IV. OWNER

Capuchin Fathers
1740 Mount Elliot Avenue
Detroit, MI 48207

Local contacts: Rev. Michael Sullivan
Pastor
St. Benedict the Moor Church
1015 N. 9th St.
Milwaukee, WI 53233

V. YEAR BUILT

1923

Architect: Erhard Brielmeier and Sons

VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church is sited on a berm almost a full story above the sidewalk in the Civic Center portion of Milwaukee's Central Business District across the street from the county courthouse and the municipal justice center complex. The building is set back from the sidewalk behind an architecturally articulated monumental staircase. To the east of the church is a parking lot; while to the west is the six-story former St. Anthony's Hospital building. Neither of these properties is included in this nomination.

The church is a rectangular, two-story, brown brick, gable-roofed structure of Lombard Romanesque design. The north, east and west elevations are fairly utilitarian in character, while the south elevation is handsomely and formally articulated as the building's façade.

The façade is composed of a broad, slightly projecting central bay containing the two arched entrance portals in its first story, surmounted by a large circular window. Above the circular, stained glass, second story window, the attic story rises above the roof to form a richly corbelled gabled parapet.

The narrow single bays flanking the projecting central bay are fenestrated with small arched one-over-one windows. Brick corbelling embellishes the raking gables, which project slightly above the tile roof to form low parapet walls.

The east and west elevations are nearly identical. The east elevation consists of seven bays defined by projecting piers. The central five bays each have a pair of tall basement level windows surmounted by pairs of story-and-a-half tall arched auditorium windows. The north and south end bays each have three tiers of windows defining the basement, first and second story levels. A corbel table frieze trims the eaves. The west elevation is similar.

The only other ornamental feature is the copper clad open belfry located at the peak of the tile roof toward the rear of the building.

VII. SIGNIFICANCE

St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church is historically significant as the last surviving historic church building in Milwaukee originally built to house an African-American congregation and the first and only Roman Catholic congregation in Wisconsin established virtually the last physical reminder that Milwaukee's African-American community originally inhabited the western portion of the central business district and that this area remained its heart until well into the twentieth century. St. Benedict's is architecturally significant as a fine example of early twentieth century Lombard Romanesque style ecclesiastical architecture by one of the Midwest's most prolific and prominent church architects, Erhard Brielmeier and Sons.

VIII. HISTORY

Roman Catholic missionary work among Milwaukee's African-American community began in 1886 through the efforts of Charles Boettinger. About 140 persons worshipped at St. Gall's Church on West Michigan Street and later at Holy Name Church in the 1000 block of West State Street. The initial group diminished over time and it was not until 1908 that efforts were again made to bring African-Americans into the Catholic Church. These efforts were spearheaded by a layman, C. Lincoln Valle of Chicago, who moved to Milwaukee on August 25, 1908 with the specific intention of leading Milwaukee's Black residents to the Roman Catholic Church. As part of his efforts, Valle also began publishing *The Catholic Truth*, patterned after a paper of the same name in Chicago. At this time the Roman Catholic Church

had a policy against proselytizing for members, but would provide sacramental services and instruction for those interested in joining the church. In response to Valle's requests, Old St. Mary's Church made its school hall available for meetings of Valle's group. Later St. Mary's clergy attended to the spiritual needs of the mission when the 50 to 60 member group rented a store in the 900 block of North 4th Street to use as a gathering place.

On May 27, 1909 the group leased a building at 536 West State Street, across from the Auditorium building, and in June of that year the chapel was dedicated to St. Benedict the Moor, a Black Franciscan Father who lived in Sicily 450 years ago. The Capuchin brothers, headquartered at their monastery at North 4th and West Brown Streets, began attending to the spiritual needs of the group when St. Mary's clergy were unavailable and formally accepted full responsibility for the Mission on January 16, 1911. By this action St. Benedict's came to be staffed and financially supported by the capuchin order rather than the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, although it was understood that the mission could revert to the Archdiocese upon the latter's request.

The Capuchins under the temporary pastor, Fr. Paul Reichertz, began work to find St. Benedict's a permanent home, and after much racial prejudice and obstructionist tactics, the building at 1041 North 9th Street was purchased on November 7, 1911 and remodeled as a chapel. Fr. Cyril Kufner was appointed pastor in 1912, and another building was purchased on the same block to serve as a school, which opened on September 4, 1912 with nine pupils under the care of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Fr. Stephen Eckert became the mission's first resident pastor in 1913 and was known for his exceptional devotion to his congregation and the African-American community in general as well as for this deep spirituality. To counteract the adverse effects of being raised in poor, single-parent households and growing lack of supervision of children in the city's African-American community, Eckert started a boarding school at St. Benedict's, the first co-educational parochial boarding school in the Midwest. Attendance grew to 73 children in 1914, of which 36 were boarding students, some coming from out-of-state. Funds to operate the chapel and school and to board the students came from various raffles, special social events and concerts, and the direct soliciting of funds from other parishes and even well to do Milwaukeeans.

The need for better accommodations for the students led the Capuchins to temporarily relocate the boarding school to today's Sturtevant, Wisconsin in 1920 when the Dominican Sisters of Racine offered the use of their vacated complex to St. Benedict's. Although enrollment grew to 120 students, St. Benedict's had to return to Milwaukee in the fall of 1921 when the nuns decided to sell the property. The Dominicans from Racine eventually took over the teaching duties at Milwaukee.

Fr. Stephen Eckert died in 1923, as the Mission was entering a period of remarkable expansion. After being given permission to build a new chapel and hospice. St. Benedict's purchased land on North 10th Street and secured the services of the architectural firm of E. Brielmaier & Sons to design the new chapel, although funds for its construction had not yet been secured. Opposition from the City Land Commission and Archbishop Messmer stalled the project at first, but the Capuchins convinced the city that their chapel would not hinder the Civic Center and County Courthouse project then underway across West State Street. The Archbishop's concerns about having to take over a costly building project should the Capuchins run into financial difficulties were allayed when the Capuchin Order formalized their administration of the Mission through a canonical transfer, approved by the Pope, in 1923. By this action, St. Benedict's was removed from Archdiocesan authority, which relieved the Archdiocese of any potential financial burdens.

That same summer, Ernest G. Miller, president of Miller Brewing Company, fortuitously stopped at St. Benedict's rectory after noticing that construction had begun on a building near his brewery. When he found out that the money had not yet been raised for the new chapel, he pledged his financial support to build it, a pledge that would ultimately total over \$63,000. The new Chapel, of Lombard Romanesque design, was built facing West State Street and was dedicated on March 2, 1924. Later that year Miller contributed \$100,000 toward the purchase of the vacated Marquette University High School and grounds located a block away at the northwest corner of North 10th and West State Streets. St. Benedict's constructed an addition to the old Marquette building and used it for classrooms, a student dining area, and as living quarters for the Dominican nuns. The school opened in its new building in September of 1925 with 185 students. Mr. Miller died shortly afterwards, bequeathing \$200,000 to the congregation. By the early 1930s the school was averaging 220 to 260 students per year. Around 1937 a high school was opened as well, and the boarding was dropped. Enrollment at the high school declined in the early 1950s, but had stabilized at something over 70 students by the late 1950s.

The Capuchins also turned their attention to health care and built a 42-bed hospital costing \$98,190 on North 10th Street next to the church. It was designed by the architectural firm of E. Brielmaier & Sons and was dedicated on May 10, 1931 under the patronage of St. Anthony of Padua. The Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception were retained to staff the health care facility. The building was enlarged to the south in 1945, more than doubling the building's size, and occupying the site where St. Benedict's rectory had once stood.

The 1960s brought significant changes to St. Benedict's congregation. The city's new freeway system took the site of the school forcing the high school to close in 1964 when it had an enrollment of 84 pupils. The grade school closed in 1967 when it had 205 students. The hospital was transferred by the Capuchins to an independent non-profit group in 1966, which provided emergency care and drug and alcoholism treatment. The former hospital is now used as the Community Work Release Center and also houses the County Medical Examiner's offices.

Much of the original African-American congregation of St. Benedict's dispersed to other Catholic parishes as urban renewal and freeway construction destroyed the historic heart of the Black community causing it to disperse more widely throughout the city. It appeared that St. Benedict's would close. A meal program for the poor and homeless was then begun in the church basement, and members of the Justice and Peace movement began worshipping at St. Ben's. The congregation began to grow, and today numbers close to 200 members. In contrast to the past, most of the current members are Caucasian. St. Benedict's now sponsors a jail chaplainry program as one of its chief functions in addition to the large meal program.

The Architect – Erhard Brielmaier (January 7, 1841-August 29, 1917)

Erhard Brielmaier was born in Neufra, Wurtemberg, Germany on January 7, 1841 and came to this country with his parents when he was 9 years old. The family settled in Ohio, and Erhard learned how to draft plans and building from his father. Brielmaier married Theresa Haag in 1860, and the couple moved to Piqua, Ohio in 1865 where he opened an architectural office. They subsequently moved to Milwaukee in 1874 and within a few years Brielmaier's reputation as a church architect brought him commissions from all over the country. During his 50-year career, he reportedly designed over 800 churches, more than any other architect in the country, in every state of the United States and some in Canada.

The Brielmaiers raised 13 children and also adopted another child from Erhard's cousin's family. Of his nine sons, five went into the architectural firm, which was known as E. Brielmaier & Sons by 1887. Erhard died on August 29, 1917 at the age of 76. Brielmaier and his wife are buried in Calvary Cemetery near the chapel he designed there. Joseph M., Bernard A. (Ben), and Leo A. stayed in the firm the longest. The architectural practice was last known as Brielmaier Scherer & Scherer beginning in 1959. The last son to remain active, Leo A., retired from the firm in 1966 and died in 1969. The Scherer's retained the Brielmaier name through 1979, and their practice closed in 1984.

Brielmaier's contribution to the Old World character of Milwaukee lies mostly in the design of religious structures that emulate the European churches of our immigrant ancestors, especially those of German and Polish ethnicity. St. Josaphat's Basilica in Milwaukee (1896-1901), designed for the South Side Polish community, was Erhard Brielmaier's masterpiece. His firm also designed St. Casimir's Church (Polish), St. Michael's Church (German), and the beautiful woodcarvings of St. Anthony's Church (German), St. George Melkite Church (Syrian), as well as the gatehouse and chapel at Calvary Cemetery, the Grutza/Leszczynski building at 610 W. Lincoln, which reflects the boldness of Polish Baroque architecture, and the Rudzinski Building at 55-29 W. Mitchell Street.

IX. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the St. Benedict Roman Catholic Church at 924 W. State Street be studied for possible designation as a City of Milwaukee Historic Structure as a result of its possible fulfillment of criteria e-1, e-2, e-5 and e-6 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 308-81(2)(e), of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinances.

X. PRESERVATION GUIDELINES

The following preservation guidelines represent the principal concerns of the Historic Preservation Commission regarding this historic designation. However, the Commission reserves the right to make final decisions based upon particular design submissions. Nothing in these guidelines shall be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance or the restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements.

A. Roofs

Retain the original roof shape. Avoid making changes to the roof shape that would alter the building height, roofline or pitch. Retain the historic roofing materials on the church if at all possible.

B. Materials

1. Masonry

- a. Unpainted brick or stone should not be painted or covered. This is historically incorrect and could cause irreversible damage if it was decided to remove the paint at a later date.
- b. Repoint defective mortar by duplicating the original in color, style, texture and strength. Avoid using mortar colors and pointing styles that were unavailable or were not used when the building was constructed.

- b. Clean masonry only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method possible. Sandblasting brick or stone surfaces is prohibited. This method of cleaning erodes the surface of the material and accelerates deterioration and the accumulation of dirt on the exterior of the building. Avoid the indiscriminate use of chemical products that could have an adverse reaction with the masonry materials, such as the use of acid on limestone or terra cotta.
- c. Repair or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the old as closely as possible. Avoid using new material that is inappropriate or was unavailable when the building was constructed.

2. Wood/Metal

- a. Retain original material, whenever possible. Avoid removing architectural features that are essential to maintaining the building's character and appearance.
- b. Retain or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the appearance of the old as closely as possible. Avoid covering architectural features with new materials that are inappropriate or were unavailable when the building was constructed.

C. Windows and Doors

- 1. Retain existing window and door openings. Retain the existing configuration of panes, sash, surrounds and sills, except as necessary to restore to the original condition. Avoid making additional openings or changes in existing fenestration by enlarging or reducing window or door openings to fit new stock window sash or new stock door sizes. Avoid changing the size or configuration of windowpanes or sash.
- 2. Respect the building's stylistic period. If the replacement of doors or window sash is necessary, the replacement should duplicate the appearance and design of the original window sash or door. Avoid using inappropriate sash and door replacements. Avoid the filling in or covering of openings with inappropriate materials such as concrete block or glass block. Avoid using modern style window units such as horizontal sliding sash in place of double-hung sash or the substitution of units with glazing configurations not appropriate to the style of the building. The leaded glass windows in the church should not be altered or removed except for restoration.

D. Trim and Ornamentation

There should be no changes to the existing trim or ornamentation except as necessary to restore the building to its original condition. Replacement features shall match the original member in scale, design and appearance, but not necessarily in material.

E. Additions

The south and east elevations of the church building are integral to the structure's architectural significance. Additions are not recommended and require the approval of the Commission. Approval shall be based upon the addition's design compatibility with the building in terms of height, roof configuration, fenestration, scale, design and materials, and the degree to which it visually intrudes upon the principal elevation.

F. Signs

The installation of any permanent exterior sign shall require the approval of the Commission. Approval will be based on the compatibility of the proposed sign with the historic and architectural character of the building.

G. Site Features

New plant materials, fencing, paving and lighting fixtures shall be compatible with the historic architectural character of the building.