

HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPPORT

FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH

(Written Fall, 1990)

I. NAME

Historic: First Unitarian Church

Common: Same

II. LOCATION

Street Address: 1342 North Astor Street

Legal Description: Tax Key No. 360-0472-100

PARTITION OF THE EST HALF OF SW ¼ SEC 21-7-22 BLOCK 18 COM NW COR SD BLK 18-TH S 120'-TH W 81' TH N 16'-TH E 6'-TH N 44'-TH W 45'-TH N 60' TO BEG.

III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

IV. OWNER

Trustees of the First Unitarian Society
1342 North Astor Street
Milwaukee, WI 53202

V. YEAR BUILT

1891-1892

Architects: George B. Ferry and Alfred C. Clas

VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

First Unitarian Church is located at the southeast corner of North Astor Street and East Ogden Avenue in a residential area at the northeastern edge of the central business district. It is sited close to the sidewalk behind a narrow grass lawn and the building occupies almost its entire lot.

The church is an L-shaped, steeply gabled, random ashlar limestone clad structure of Neo-Gothic design. It has architecturally treated elevations facing north to Ogden Avenue and west to Astor Street. The south and east sides are largely obscured from view by the adjoining buildings. The Ogden Avenue and Astor Street elevations are of about equal importance architecturally.

The Astor Street elevation is the façade of the church portion of the structure. It is composed of a low first story that rises into a very broad, steep gable. The buttressed, low eaved, first floor level is fenestrated with a four-arch, Gothic arcaded treatment that extends completely across the front. The two end bays of the arcade are filled with traceried leaded glass windows with stone spandrel panels, while the center two bays of the arcade serve as the portals to a deeply recessed porch within which are set the two sets of entranced doors to the church auditorium. The top of the arcade is accented with a continuous, thin, Gothic, limestone hood mould. The tall, gabled wall above the arcade is pierced by a large Gothic-arched, traceried, leaded-glass window. A thin, limestone, hood mould outlines the arch of the window. Flanking this large central window is a pair of small lancet windows, while a third even smaller lancet-arched slit window is located in the peak of the gable above the central window. The gable parapet has a flat stone coping.

The north or Ogden Avenue elevation is more complex in composition. Unlike the flat gabled Astor Street façade, this side is picturesquely massed with a projecting gabled bay at its west end, three bays of lancet-arched stained glass windows separated by massive buttresses surmounted by three tall, narrow, steeply gabled dormers with traceried gable ornaments and a square bell tower projecting at its east and abutting the gabled parish house wing. A variety of Gothic arched, windows and dormers fenestrate the north elevation, the focal point of which is the bell tower. The tower is a low, squatty, heavily buttressed structure that rises in three stages to a slate-clad broach spire with louvered and traceried lucarnes on each side. At the base of the tower is a pair of arched wooden doors mounted with ornamental iron strap hinges. The parish house wing abuts the tower to the east. It is gabled and fenestrated with five lancet-arched windows on the first story surmounted by a large Gothic-arched, traceried window in the gable.

The east elevation has a low-eaved first story divided into equal bays with buttresses. The steeply sloped roof is fenestrated with tall, gabled dormers clad in pebble dash stucco. The south elevation is utilitarian in character.

VII. SIGNIFICANCE

First Unitarian Church is architecturally significant as a fine example of a Neo-Gothic style church illustrating the trend away from the flamboyant High Victorian Gothic mode to the more archeologically correct English Parish Gothic type of church architecture that came into vogue in the early twentieth century. It is a major work by one of Milwaukee's most important architectural firms of the 1890s and early 1900s. The structure was designated a Milwaukee Landmark in 1967 and listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1974.

VIII. HISTORY

On August 18, 1841 a notice in the *Milwaukee Courier* invited interested persons to meet for the purpose of establishing a formal Unitarian Congregation. Following a series of twelve inspirational addresses by Rev. Joseph Harrington of Chicago, the congregation was formally organized with forty members in 1842. A Greek Revival style church building was constructed the following year at a cost of \$2,500 at the northwest corner of Second Street and Wisconsin Avenue. Financial difficulties resulted in the mortgage being foreclosed upon in 1849 and the church was sold to the newly organized congregation of St. James Episcopal Church, which moved the building to St. James' present site near North Ninth Street and West Wisconsin Avenue. From 1849 to 1856 the fledgling congregation's membership decreased, partially as a result of discontent with the minister's anti-slavery stance. Without a church of their own, services were held from time to time at the courthouse. Interest in the congregation revived in

156, and a second church was constructed at 1038 North Cass Street. It was dedicated on March 15, 1957 with twenty-eight families in the congregation. After that, the congregation grew so rapidly that an addition to the church was constructed in 1858 and by 1865 the church debt had been paid off. Unable to maintain financial stability, however, the congregation was forced to vacate its building in 1875 and temporarily rent it to the Olivet Congregational Society. The Unitarians were able to carry out successful social programs despite their sometimes precarious financial conditions. Members of the church were responsible for founding the Wisconsin Humane Society in 1879 and initiating other projects including Friendship House, the Industrial School for Girls, Lakeside Children's Center, the Protestant Home for the Aged, and the Visiting Nurse Association. In 1890 the old church building on Cass Street was sold to T.A. Chapman, whose home adjoined the church, and plans were made for the erection of a new \$50,000 building. The present English Gothic style structure at 1342 North Astor Street, designed by the firm of Ferry and Clas, was dedicated on May 15, 1892. The membership has remained stable despite the fact that most members live a considerable distance away from the church. The need for a suburban congregation led to the establishment of the Unitarian Church West in the 1950s in Brookfield.

The Architects

George B. Ferry (February 7, 1851 – January 29, 1918) was born and educated in Springfield, Massachusetts, and studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1871 and 1872 after which he began his architectural career in his hometown. A year following his 1880 marriage to Springfield resident Cora Frances Phillips, Ferry moved to Milwaukee and established his practice. One of his prominent works during the 1880's was the clubhouse for the Woman's Club of Wisconsin on East Kilbourn Avenue. In 1890 Ferry went into partnership with Alfred C. Clas and the two had offices on Broadway between Wisconsin Avenue and East Mason Streets. During their partnership, which lasted until 1912, the two were responsible for many major architectural projects including the Milwaukee Public Library and Museum, the Northwestern National Insurance Company Headquarters in Milwaukee, the State Masonic Building on Jefferson Street (razed), the Frederick Pabst residence, the Buena Vista Flats (now part of the Cudahy Tower Condominium) and the Milwaukee Auditorium building.

After the dissolution of the partnership with Clas, Ferry retained the offices on Broadway and continued in practice until about 1916. Ferry was instrumental in organizing Wisconsin's first architectural association and was also a member of the organizational committee that framed the by-laws and constitution of the American Institute of Architects. He was chairman of Milwaukee's building code commission for four years, president of the Milwaukee Art Commission and a member of the National Academy of Sciences.

Throughout his life, Ferry lived at a variety of residences including North Seventeenth Street, East Kilbourn Avenue, Farwell Avenue, Woodland Court and Prospect Avenue. He last lived on Cambridge Avenue. While his wife and daughter were away in New York, Ferry died at the residence of his son, Robert P. Ferry who was then living at 1502 East Royall Place. His passing on Tuesday, January 29, 1918 was the result of grippe complicated by an infection of the heart. Upon his death, George B. Ferry was cited as an ideal architect, extremely well educated, well read, and artistic, and a profession. His former partner, Alfred C. Clas, stated that Ferry "was one of the best designers ever in Milwaukee, an architect of exceptional good judgment and of very artistic temperament."

Alfred Charles Clas (December 26, 1858 – July 8, 1942) was born in Sauk City, Wisconsin, the son of German immigrants Adam and Magdalene (Ernst) Clas. He was educated in his hometown and after graduating from high school served a short-term appointment as a

messenger boy in the State Senate. Clas subsequently apprenticed with an architect and also received two years of practical instruction in building construction. In 1879 he went to Stockton, California and worked in an architect's office there for almost two years. Clas then returned to Wisconsin and settled in Milwaukee. From about 1880-1884 he worked his way up from draftsman to architect in the offices of James Douglas. From 1885 to 1886 the two were in partnership, but Clas left in 1887 to set up his own architectural practice in offices on Milwaukee Street. Several years later Clas went into partnership with George B. Ferry who had been practicing in Milwaukee since 1881. The two carried on a very successful business from 1890 through 1912 and were responsible for a number of civic and institutional structures as well as residence.

In the early decades of this century, Alfred Clas was very much involved with civic projects and took an active part in planning Milwaukee's Civic Center, the beautification of the Milwaukee River and the development of Lincoln Memorial Drive and Parkway. He also laid out many of the city's boulevards, planned and supervised the construction of many of the city's park buildings and served on the City Board of Park Commissioners and the County Parks Commission and served as president of the Metropolitan Park Commission.

After dissolving his partnership with Ferry in 1912, Clas continued in partnership with his son, Angelo Robert Clas from 1912 to 1921 and later with another son, Rubens Frederick Clas and John S. Shepard under the name Clas, Shepard and Clas from 1921 and 1931. After Shepard left, the firm became Clas and Clas once again. Their offices had remained in the Colby-Abbot Building since 1914. Alfred Clas remained active in the practice into 1933 after which time a corporation was established, Clas and Clas, Inc. Clas apparently retired from active participation at that time although he served as president of the corporation through at least 1936. The corporation was continued under Rubens Clas into the 1940s. Following his retirement, Clas and his second wife, Lucille, spent most of their time in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. After Lucille's death in 1949, Clas made his home with his son, Rubens. His last year was spent at the Masonic Home in Dousman where he was under care for complications following a fall on the ice. Clas died of those complications on July 8, 1942 at the age of 82. Following Masonic funeral services at the Weiss Funeral Home in Milwaukee's Lower East Side, Clas' cremated remains were buried in Sauk City.

First Unitarian Church is a fine example of the work of this firm in its 1890 heyday. The design reflects knowledge of the trend toward historicism by the leading American architectural firms of the period. It also exemplifies the growing popularity of the English Gothic style. For Ferry and Clas, however, First Unitarian is an unusual foray into the Gothic mode by a firm whose reputation was made by its monumental Neo-classical style buildings.

IX. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the First Unitarian Church 1342 North Astor Street, be designated as a City of Milwaukee Historic Structure as a result of its fulfillment of criteria e-1, 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 restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements.

A. Roofs

Retain the roof shape and dormers. Skylights and solar collector panels may be added to roof surfaces if they are not visible from the street. Avoid making changes to the roof shape that would alter the building height, roofline or pitch.

B. Materials

1. Masonry

- a. Unpainted stone should not be painted or covered. Avoid painting or covering natural stone. This is historically incorrect and could cause irreversible damage if it was decided to remove the paint or coating 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.
- c. Clean masonry only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method possible. Sandblasting limestone surfaces is prohibited. This method of cleaning erodes the surface of the material and accelerates deterioration. 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.
- d. 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.
- e. Repair the pebble dash stucco with a stucco mixture duplicating the original as closely as possible in appearance and texture.

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, doors and hardware, except as necessary to restore the building to its 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. Use storm windows or protective glazing that have glazing configurations similar to the prime windows and that obscure the prime windows as little as possible.
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 glass-block or concrete block. Avoid using modern style window units in place of the existing sash or the substitution of units with glazing configurations not appropriate to the style of the building.

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, color and appearance.

E. Additions

The north, east and west elevations and roofline are integral to the structure's architectural significance. Additions require the approval of the Commission. Approval shall be based upon the height, roof configuration, fenestration, scale, design, color and materials and the degree to which it visually intrudes upon the principal elevations.

F. Signs/Exterior Lighting

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 and lighting fixtures shall be compatible with the historic architectural character of the building.