

# HISTORIC PRESERVATION STUDY REPORT

## JEFFERSON HALL

(Written Winter, 1984)

### I. NAME

Historic: Jefferson Hall

Common: Same

### II. LOCATION

Street Address: 2617 West Fond du Lac Avenue

Tax Key Number: 325-1005-000

Legal Description: Re-Subd of Lots 1 to 7 etc in Dahlman & Kilian#s Subd in SW ¼ Sec 18-7-22  
Block 1 Lots 6-7 & 8

### III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

### IV. OWNER

Milwaukee Community Activity Center, Inc.  
2617 West Fond du Lac Avenue  
Milwaukee, WI 53206

### V. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Jefferson Hall is a two-story, flat-roofed, steel-framed, red brick, limestone trimmed, Federal Revival style structure. Since it is part of a continuous row of commercial buildings, only the Fond du Lac Avenue elevation is architecturally designed. To the east of the main building is a simple, two-story, brick addition constructed in 1940 with bands of large steel casement windows facing Fond du Lac Avenue.

The main block, constructed in 1928, consists of five bays with a projecting central pavilion containing the entrance. A metal canopy that is surmounted by a limestone enframed Palladian-motif window with a blind fan shelters the two sets of double, plate-glass and aluminum doors. Four bays of flat head tripartite wooden windows flanking the entrance pavilion on the first story level are surmounted by arched tripartite windows with limestone hood molds unified by a molded limestone belt course at the second story level.

The interior originally contained an auditorium, gymnasium, bowling alley and clubrooms.

## **VI. SIGNIFICANCE**

Date of Construction: 1928

Architect: Grassold and Johnson

Jefferson Hall is historically significant as the home of an important social and cultural organization, and Freie Gemeinde Society, that made notable contributions to the intellectual and political life of Milwaukee from 1867 to the mid-twentieth century. The building is of minor architectural importance.

## **VII. HISTORY**

Jefferson Hall was built in 1928 to the designs of architects Grassold and Johnson as the second permanent home of the Freie Gemeinde Society. The Society had been housed since 1870 in a brick Italianate style structure at North 4<sup>th</sup> and West State streets. This structure was sold by the Society and demolished in 1923 to make way for the present Milwaukee Journal Building.

The Society was founded in 1867 by a group of leading Milwaukee German-American intellectuals to provide a forum for progressive thought. The Society vigorously opposed religious and political dogma and encouraged radical intellectuals and social activists to lecture in Milwaukee. Among the many distinguished guest speakers were Robert Ingersoll, Clarence Darrow, Margaret Sanger, Emma Goldman and Milwaukee educator Peter Englemann. In addition to debates and lectures, parties, dances, theatrical and musical events were held by the Society. The hall was also used for meetings of civic, social and labor organizations. When the new hall was built in 1928, it was named in honor of Thomas Jefferson, an admired free thinker of American intellectual history.

In the decades following their move to Fond du Lac Avenue, the Freie Gemeinde Society was sustained by unwavering support as the primary exponent for liberal and progressive thought in Milwaukee. During the depression years and World War II, the society reached a new level of prominence with the publication of "Das Freie Wort," the "Voice of Freedom." Begun in 1931, it was a German-English newsletter that was produced monthly with articles contributed by known local, national and international humanists of the period. It had one of the widest circulations of any of the similar free-thought organizations in the United States. "Voice of Freedom" was published well into the mid-1970s and was discontinued just prior to the group's disbanding.

The ethnic make-up of the society during this period was almost all German-Americans. Minutes, correspondence and all records were in the German language. The society was not only a center for free thought, but also strove to maintain the legacy of Milwaukee's Germanic heritage by the exclusive use of the language. Fearing their reputation as a peace-seeking group would be damaged by the rise of Adolph Hitler in Germany and the atrocities that would follow, the Society with its very German membership was among the first to denounce the Fuhrer and the government of the Third Reich. Having prevailed the attacks levied on the Society during World War II, it emerged in the 1950s as a national leader in the formation of the American Rationalist Federation. The Milwaukee groups along with seven others in cities across the country were the charter members. The primary impetus for the federation was to combat the growing surge of "McCarthyism" that was seen as a direct threat to the civil liberties of all Americans.

The Freie Gemeinde Society remained active through the 1960's, but succumbed to changing intellectual and social tastes in the 1970's and disbanded in 1977. Jefferson Hall was subsequently sold to a developer for adoptive reuse as an entertainment facility. It is currently used as a community center.

## **VIII. STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that Jefferson Hall be designated as a historic structure because of its important role in the intellectual, social and political life of Milwaukee in the early twentieth century.

## **IX. PRESERVATION GUIDELINES**

The following preservation guidelines represent the principle 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. These guidelines shall be applicable only to Jefferson Hall. Nothing in these guidelines shall be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance or restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements.

### **A. Roof**

Retain the existing building height and roof shape. Avoid placing dormers, skylights or solar panels on roof surfaces that will visually intrude on the Fond du Lac Avenue elevation. Avoid making changes to the roof shape that would alter the building height and roofline.

### **B. Openings**

1. Retain the locations and style of window and door openings and the number and configuration of panes, sash materials, lintels, and sills on the Fond du Lac Avenue elevation. Avoid making additional openings or changes in the principle elevations by enlarging or reducing window or door openings to fit new stock window sash or new stock door sizes.
2. Respect the stylistic period of the structure. If replacement of window sash or doors is necessary, the replacement should duplicate the appearance and design of the original window sash or door. Avoid using inappropriate sash and door replacements such as unpainted galvanized aluminum storm and screen window combinations. Avoid the filling-in or covering of openings with inappropriate materials such as glass block or the installation of plastic or metal strip awnings or fake shutters that are not in proportion to the openings or that are historically out of character with the structure. Avoid using modern style window units such as horizontal sliding sash in place of casement sash or the substitution of units with glazing configurations not appropriate to the style of the building.

### **C. Exterior Finishes**

1. Masonry

- a. Unpainted brick or stone should not be painted or covered. Avoid painting or covering natural stone. This is likely to be 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 not used when the building was constructed.
- c. 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. 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 marble.
- 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, such as artificial cast stone or fake brick veneer.

D. Trim and Ornamentation

1. Retain trim and decorative ornamentation including pilasters, capitals, cornices, copings, belt courses and decorative panels. Avoid the indiscriminate removal of trim and decorative ornament that is essential to the maintenance of the buildings historic character and appearance.
2. Repair or replace, where necessary, deteriorated materials with new material that duplicates the old as closely as possible. Avoid using replacement materials that do not accurately reproduce the appearance or the original material.

E. Canopy

Retain the existing metal canopy. If replacement is necessary, the replacement should duplicate the appearance and design of either the original or the existing canopy.

F. Signs

The installation of any permanent exterior sign other than those now in existence 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.