

FINAL HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

ST. JOSEPH ORPHANAGE

I. NAME

Historic: St. Joseph Orphanage

Common Name: South Day Care Center of St. Joseph

II. LOCATION

3249 South 18th Street

Legal description:

Morgandale in NE ¼ SEC 18-6-22 Block 9 Lots 1 Thru 6 & Lots 35 THRU 40 & Vac Alley ADJ SD Lots Blk 9 & all Vac St ADJ Lots 1 THRU 6 Blk 9 & Lots 1 THRU 40 Blk 10 & Vac Alley ADJ SD Lots Blk 10 & E 10' Vac St ADJ Lots 21 thru 34 Blk 10 & W 30' Vac St Adj Lots 1 thru 20 Blk 10

Tax Key No: 535-0751-110

III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

IV. OWNER

The Felician Sisters of America, Inc.
Chicago Province
3249 S. 18th Street
Milwaukee WI 53215

V. YEAR BUILT:

1907
Addition 1929

ARCHITECT:

Herman J. Esser (1907)
Francis Gurda (1929)

VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

St. Joseph's Orphanage is located on the city's south side on two city blocks south of Oklahoma Avenue and bounded by W. Euclid and W. Ohio Avenues and South 18th and

South 20th Streets. The building fronts east along South 18th street and is set behind a small landscaped area. South 18th street has been vacated and now serves as a parking lot in front of the building. The south and north lot lines are demarcated by chain link fencing which enclose play areas and parking areas.

St. Joseph's Orphanage is a three and a half story, solid masonry structure with raised basement and gabled roof. The long structure features a front gabled center pavilion crowned by a cupola. The entrance is located within this pavilion and is highlighted by ornamental corbelling and an arched opening. Similar pavilions are located at the north and south ends of the structure and likewise project slightly from the main body of the building. They too are crowned with front gables. The four-over four sashes are regularly spaced across the building's façade on each story. Some have been replaced by new single paned sash. Each window is accented by a bold keystone much in the manner that architect Esser treated the façade of the Johnson Controls Building downtown a few years earlier. The roof features pairs of gabled dormers to either side of the entry pavilion and broad chimneys extend from the north and south sides of the roof. Trim is executed in stone and sheet metal. Palladian windows grace each of the gabled areas. A smaller wing is located at the north end of the building and is attached to the main structure by a narrow connector thought to have been built or enlarged in 1929. This wing repeats the gabled roofline and ornamental work and regular fenestration of the main structure. Since it extends west beyond the west wall of the main building and since the southernmost pavilion also extends slightly beyond the west wall a courtyard like effect is created at the orphanage's rear. The building's other elevations at the north, south and west are articulated in the same manner as the main façade. There appear to be no major changes to the building from the time it was illustrated in the 1907 *Milwaukee Sentinel*. The one change seems to be the construction of an additional story to the small wing at the north side of the structure. Permit records do not reflect when this happened and the addition probably occurred before the neighborhood was annexed to the city in 1924. Only one of the two garages still stands on the grounds and the root cellar and children's playhouse have been removed. Playground equipment stands in the south side yard of the grounds in connection with the building's current use as a day care center.

VII. SIGNIFICANCE

St. Joseph Orphanage is significant as one of only two historic extant orphanage buildings in Milwaukee and one of the major Polish social institutions in the city. At the time of its construction, St. Joseph's was only the fifth institution in the country devoted to the care of orphans of Polish ethnicity after Detroit, Buffalo, Chicago and Manitowoc. Of the early Catholic orphanage buildings only St. Vincent's Infants Asylum is older, having been constructed in 1878. The desire for an institution to care for their orphans came in the wake of strong sense of Polish nationalism. This manifested itself in the role that Milwaukee Poles took in lobbying for an American bishop of Polish ethnicity, and in the demand that the Milwaukee Public Schools offer Polish in the schools just like it offered German language courses. Despite the industrious nature of the local Poles, most were considered of the "less well to do class" and it was remarkable that the various parishes pulled together enough financial resources to construct this institution. St. Joseph Orphanage made a big impact on the community, caring for at least 4,000 children over its history.

St. Joseph's Orphanage is also significant as a work by the prominent local architect Herman

J. Esser. Esser's work included some of the largest and most impressive office buildings, commercial buildings, institutional and industrial buildings in the city including the Public Service Building at 321 W. Michigan Street, the river façade of Gimbel's Department Store downtown and the Robert A. Johnston Co. Building at 4023 W. National. St. Joseph's Orphanage is a fine example of an institutional building designed in the simplified Colonial Revival/Georgian Revival Style, a style that was considered more modern and forward-looking than the fussier Queen Anne or Romanesque that preceded it. Hallmarks of the style include the pedimented pavilions, the Palladian windows and the domed cupola.

VIII. HISTORY

The Poles made up the second largest group of Catholic immigrants in Wisconsin in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This was reflected in the population of Milwaukee where the Poles represented over 10% of the city by 1906 and numbered some 70,000 by 1910. By 1940 that number had grown to 120,000 which made Milwaukee the seventh largest Polish center in the United States. Most Poles settled south of Greenfield Avenue near to the industrial jobs and just south of neighborhoods already built up by the Germans and Scandinavian immigrants. Since most of Milwaukee's Poles had roots in that portion of Poland governed by Germany, they were able to work within the German political primacy here and shared a strong sense of nationalistic pride. Part of this pride expressed itself in the numerous cultural organizations such as singing societies and theatrical groups, as well as militia companies and Polish language newspapers. By 1910 there were over 100 of these institutions in the local Polish community.

The church was central to the lives of the Polish immigrants and they generously supported their churches out of their meager incomes. In 1906 there were eight Polish parishes in the city in contrast to fourteen German, nine English language, two Bohemian one Slavonic and one Italian parish. The splendor of the Polish churches contrasts with the modest character of the cottage neighborhoods that surround them and serve as a testament to the religious devotion of the Poles. The importance of their culture and their growing political clout in Milwaukee came to a head in Milwaukee during 1906 with the demand for Polish language in the public schools. The *Catholic Citizen* reported that the Poles wanted equal rights with the Germans, and German was offered in the public schools. As a compromise, the school board allowed the teaching of Polish language in any public school in the 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th grades where there were at least 100 pupils of Polish ethnicity enrolled. The new program started February 4, 1907 and was cited in the *Catholic Citizen* as the only program in the country to offer Polish language classes in the public schools. It was in this same year that Poles were lobbying for a Polish Bishop to represent their needs. It is no surprise then that Milwaukee Poles became active in the quest for a local institution to house Polish orphaned children.

A few such institutions already existed in the city but were not considered suitable by the Polish community. St. Rose's was established as St. Rose's Female Orphan Asylum and was supported by the English speaking Catholics of the diocese of Milwaukee. The orphanage was first located adjacent to St. John's Cathedral. A branch of the orphanage, St. Joseph's Asylum, was founded in 1861 to care for girls under the age of five. St. Joseph's moved to the North Point area in 1861. St. Joseph's was phased out when St. Vincent's Infants Asylum was established. St. Rose's moved onto the North Point site in 1883 and constructed a big facility there. By the early 1970's foster care replaced many of the traditional functions of the orphanage and St. Rose's opened a residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed girls at

a different location. The building at North Point was demolished in March of 1973 for the expansion of St. Mary's Hospital.

St. Aemilian Orphanage was established for boys in 1849 and supported by German speaking Catholics. The institution was located on the St. Francis Seminary grounds in its early years then moved to Wauwatosa at North 60th Street and West Lloyd Streets where it occupied a former Lutheran Seminary. The institution later moved to a brand new facility at 8901 W. Capitol Drive in the 1950's or 1960's and the old buildings were demolished.

St. Vincent's Infant Asylum was established in 1877 and moved to Greenfield Avenue on the city's south side in 1879. There nuns from the order of the Sisters of Charity cared for small children up to the age of seven. The Charles Gombert designed building with its addition designed by E. T. Mix is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places and is the oldest extant orphanage building in the city. St. Vincent's closed in 1958 and the building has since housed offices for various social service agencies.

The Milwaukee Orphan Asylum was established in 1850 as the Milwaukee Protestant Orphan Asylum. The institution was housed in a variety of locations over its lifetime including a site on Marshall Street, a former residence at the east end of Juneau Avenue, and its last location at North Point. Members of the community who were of various Protestant denominations supported the institution. It later evolved into the Lakeside Children's Center which provided residential treatment for severely disturbed children. The historic building, designed by local architect James Douglas, was razed in 1950, replaced by a series of low scale residential style buildings.

All of these institutions were originally privately funded, and relied on donations, fairs, bazaars, and fund raising picnics for their operating expenses. Eventually they came to receive some public funding, from the county as early as 1907, and later by the Community Chest, a predecessor to the United Way. Catholic Charities and various Ladies Aid societies also supported the Catholic institutions.

With the rapid growth and dense development of the South Side Polish community, efforts began to establish a home for orphaned children of Polish ethnicity around 1906. The efforts were spearheaded by Rev. (later Monsignor) Hyacinth Gulski, pastor of St. Hyacinth Catholic Church. To quote Mother Superior Degetante of the Felician Sisters of Detroit: "We have found a great need for a Polish orphanage in Milwaukee. We find that our Polish children are scattered among orphanages of the Irish, German and English management, and while these institutions are good, the management is not satisfying to us. The children soon forget their mother tongue and their mother country. We want them remember the language of their fathers and the history of their country. That is why we have come".

The Felician Sisters O.S.F. was an order of nuns established in Warsaw, Poland on November 21, 1855 by Sophia Truszkowska (1825-1899), a young woman of noble birth who devoted her life to the poor. She later took the name of Sister Mary Angela. Sophia joined the St. Vincent de Paul Society and the Franciscan Third Order and with a cousin opened a small asylum for homeless children and aged women. After several other women joined her, the family became known as the Sisters of St. Felix of Cantalice, after the patron saint of children and the infirm. Efforts in Warsaw consisted of an orphanage and school for poor girls, a home for aged women, a clinic, and a catechetical center. When the community tended the wounded insurgents during the Polish armed revolt of 1863, the Russian government that ruled over that part of partitioned

Poland suppressed the Felicians. The 200 sisters were ordered to return to their families. The Felicians revived a year later in the Austrian section of Poland and took charge of various institutions in Krakow.

The order extended its work to the United States in 1874 in response to the requests of a young missionary, Father Joseph Dabrowski, who was ministering to the immigrant Poles in Polonia, Wisconsin. Five Felician nuns settled in Polonia and opened a parochial school and soon had schools in Illinois, Michigan, New York, Maryland and Pennsylvania. The motherhouse was transferred from Wisconsin to Detroit in 1882 where they also opened an orphanage for girls. By 1899 the US branch of the Felicians had almost 400 sisters and conducted 40 schools and institutions in 11 states from Wisconsin to Massachusetts. The order by 1963 included 3,900 sisters serving 14 archdioceses and 51 dioceses in 30 states and the District of Columbia. Primarily devoted to teaching, the order in the US staffed some 283 elementary schools, 33 high schools, and one senior college. Their social service institutions included 6 child care facilities, 8 nurseries, and a home for mentally deficient children; 3 residences for young women, 2 homes for the aged, 1 maternity home for unwed mothers, 9 general hospitals and 2 schools of nursing. The American Provinces also extended their work into Canada, Mexico, and South America. By the 1960's their services extended to all Catholics regardless of race or ethnicity.

The *Milwaukee Sentinel* indicated in 1907 that the Felician Order "has been one of the most successful sisterhoods in the Roman Catholic Church in the management of such institutions and the bringing up of destitute and abandoned children." The Felician Sisters were thus the obvious choice to run the orphanage that the Milwaukee Poles envisioned.

Between August 20, 1906 and September 19, 1906 the Felicians purchased 10 parcels of land comprising nearly 10 acres in the Morgandale Subdivision which was located just outside south of Oklahoma Avenue just south of the city limits. The land cost over \$14,000 according to the deeds and consisted of 80 lots on two blocks in the subdivision bounded by Euclid, Ohio, South 18th (originally 13th Avenue) and South 20th (originally 15th Avenue) Streets. The area was described as having "a commanding view over the entire south side and the surroundings being pure and healthful and the air free from all contamination." The property was also praised for having "good drainage". Funds to purchase the land were made available through a benefactor in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Ground breaking for the building took place on Monday April 15, 1907 but due to the "blinding snow storm raging at the time" and the thick layer of snow on the ground the symbolic turning over of a spadeful of earth was dispensed with. Ceremonies included a blessing by Rev. Hyacinth Gulski of St. Hyacinth Church. He was attended by priests from St. Vincent's, St. Francis, St. Hyacinth's and St. Hedwig's. Architect Herman Esser and the contractor Frank Niezorawski also were in attendance.

Work on the building began as soon as weather allowed. As part of the process the nuns petitioned the court to vacate South 19th Street (14th Avenue) as it would bisect their land. The hearing was held on July 25, 1907 and the court made a favorable ruling on December 17, 1907 by which time the building was almost complete.

The seven Polish parishes banded together to raise the required money to complete the orphanage (accounts cite figures of \$50,000, \$90,000, and \$100,000) but as the newspapers indicated "a majority of the Poles in Milwaukee belong to the less well to do class". That they

were able to succeed is a testament to their fortitude and determination. In conjunction with the second anniversary of the unveiling of the Koszciusko monument a weeklong bazaar was held at the South Side Armory (razed) beginning on August 18, 1907. The event was heralded as one of the largest events held on the south side and was accompanied by competitive drills between the various Polish military companies. The fair netted between \$6,000 and \$7,000 for the cause. Additional donations must have assisted the nuns since their order prohibited them from going into debt for any of their projects.

Architect Esser's plans called for a building that had a frontage of 250 feet with a depth of 180 feet. Red vitrous brick was used and trimmed with stone. Cornices were to be of galvanized iron and the roof of slate. Frank Niezorawski, the prosperous mason contractor from the Brady street neighborhood, was given the contract for the mason work, while Richard Riesen did the carpentry, W.H. Halsey the plumbing, and Gawin Brothers the iron work and slate roofing.

The basement of the orphanage was designed to house the kitchens, children's dining room, play room, bakery, laundry, bathrooms and toilet rooms. The first floor housed the office, reception hall, waiting room, three classrooms, kindergarten, chapel, infirmary, needle room for the girls and a nurse's room with bath. The second floor had three dormitories with 75 beds, children's wardrobes, and wash rooms with the center part of the building occupied by the resident nuns. Their suite contained a sitting room, four sleeping rooms, and toilets and baths.

The building was designed so that the boys and girls would be kept as separate as possible with no communication between the sexes. Boys occupied the south wing while the girls had the north wing. To promote this separation, there were separate dining rooms, toilet and bathrooms. The orphanage was built pretty much as illustrated in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* on Saturday April 13, 1907. The building fronts on South 18th Street and consists of a center front gabled pavilion flanked by end pavilions that run perpendicular to the main façade. A small two-story hip roof structure was once located at the north end of the complex attached to the north wing and appears in the architect's rendering as well as the fire insurance maps. The maps indicate that the building had a basement coal bin, laundry, schoolrooms and dormitories. This structure may have been altered or rebuilt at some time. Since the neighborhood was not annexed to the City of Milwaukee until 1924 there are no permit records for the early years of the building. A 1929 permit indicated a small 10 foot 9 inch by 32-foot addition to the complex was designed by local architect Francis Gurda. Most permit records reflect changes in plumbing, electrical and partitions. In 1964 an auditorium on the second floor was converted into sleeping rooms, a kitchen and bath and recreation area. Fire insurance maps also indicate that a two-story dwelling was once connected to the south wing of the building by way of a passageway. There was also a root cellar and two garages on the premises as well as a one-story playhouse for the children. To the rear or west of the property the maps indicate "cultivated land beyond".

St. Joseph's Orphanage was dedicated on March 19, 1908 at the chapel within the building. By this time the first 25 orphans had been settled onto the premises and were being cared for by seven Felician nuns. In 1928 St. Joseph's was caring for some 263 orphans with 27 Felician sisters in residence. By and large, St. Joseph's Orphanage had the largest population of Catholic orphans in the city. St. Rose's in 1928 was caring for 108 girls, and St. Vincent's had 90 for example. In 1946 St. Joseph's even took in 34 orphans (13 boys and 21 girls) from war torn Poland which increased the population at the institution to almost 200. A critique of the city's orphanages in 1949 showed that again, St. Joseph's had the lion share of orphans in Milwaukee: St. Joseph's (179); St. Aemilian's (65); St. Joseph Home of St. Theresa (71); St. Vincent's (87);

Lakeside Children's Center (47); Lutheran Friend's Society (56). Post World War II society took a new look at the traditional orphanage and found them to be too restrictive, too old fashioned and too institutionalized. Foster home care was seen at the time to be the more humane way to care for parentless children and most of the orphanages phased out their work in the 1950' and 1960's or went on to specialize in the residential care of children with special needs. St. Joseph's Orphanage was part of this evolution and by the 1960's the number of children at the facility averaged around fifty. The orphanage discontinued its original mission in 1967 and on September 6th of that year opened a day care center on the premises known as the South Day Care Center of St. Joseph. The Felician Sisters of Wisconsin that had legal title to the premises transferred the property to the Felician Sisters of the United States of America, Inc. Chicago Province in 1982.

The building has always been maintained in excellent condition, and an inspection by the Department of Social Adjustment in 1939 cited St. Joseph's for its very clean and well-ventilated condition. The building stands today in much its original condition with the only changes occurring to some of the out buildings. Due to the construction of St. Francis Hospital on the two blocks immediately east of the orphanage in the 1950's South 18th Street has now been vacated between the two complexes. A residential facility for senior citizens now occupies the west portion of the grounds where there was once cultivated land. St. Joseph's is a unique physical embodiment of the good works of the Felician Sisters, the determination of Milwaukee's Polish community and the design skills of well-known local architect Herman J. Esser. It has stood as a neighborhood landmark for over 90 years, a reminder of society's resolution that homeless children be given shelter and humane treatment. Institutions like St. Joseph's have played an important role in the community and should not be forgotten.

The Architect

Herman J. Esser (1865-1957) was born in Madison, Wisconsin, and spent almost his entire career designing buildings in the Milwaukee area. He graduated from Cornell University in 1888 and then trained in several architectural firms in New York City. Esser had previously worked as a draftsman in the H.C. Koch & Co. (1884-1889) architectural firm, in Milwaukee and was later made a partner (1890-1899) in the same firm, where he co-designed a number of landmark Milwaukee Buildings. After parting company with the H.C. Koch Co., Esser started his own architectural business which he ran for more than thirty-five years, before he retired in 1937.

Although Esser was responsible for designing a number of residential and small office properties, it is undoubtedly his work with large-scale office buildings, commercial buildings and warehouses which make his work worthy of protection. During his time as a partner at H.C. Koch Co., he was involved in the design of the Pfister Hotel (1890-93) at 424 E. Wisconsin Avenue, The Milwaukee Protestant Home (1892) at 2449 North Downer Avenue, Milwaukee City Hall (1893) at 200 East Wells Street, Commission Row (1894-95) at 317 North Broadway, the Wellauer and Hoffmann Co. building (1893-94) at 246 North Broadway, the Wisconsin Industrial School Addition (1895), and Gesu Church (1892, 1902) at 1201 West Wisconsin Avenue. Esser later went on to design the triple-arched entrance portico for Gesu in 1902. Nearly all of these buildings are located in what can be considered the downtown portion of Milwaukee and represented significant additions to the existing development in the area.

Esser designed a number of notable local buildings from the offices of his own architectural firm, including the Milwaukee Electric Railway and Light Co. building (1900) at 108 East Wells Street., the Johnson Service Company Building (1903) at 507 East Michigan Street, the St. Hedwig Church Rectory (1903) at 1716 North Humboldt Avenue, the Wisconsin Electric Power Co. building (1903-05/1926) also known as the Public Service Building at 231 West Michigan Street, the Stroh Building (1910) also known as the American Appraisal Building at 525 East Michigan Street, the Van Dyke Knitting Co. building (1913) at 2102 West Pierce Street, the Cutler-Hammer Manufacturing Co. building (1917) at 1222 West St. Paul, the Gimbel Brothers downtown store (1919) at 106 West Wisconsin Avenue, and the Robert A. Johnston Co. building (1920) at 4023 West National Avenue. He designed at least ten large-scale buildings that used reinforced concrete as the major structural material, which places him among the leading Milwaukee architects whose work brought the city into an age of modern building technology in the early twentieth-century. Esser's work undoubtedly helped to shape the architectural character of downtown Milwaukee.