

Final Historic Designation Study Report

St. Stephen's Roman Catholic Church

I. NAME

Historic: St. Stephen's Roman Catholic Church

Common: Same

II. LOCATION

5880 S. Howell Ave.

13th Aldermanic District, Alderman Jeffrey A. Pawlinski

Tax Key No.: 673-9999-110 X

Legal Description: Lands in NW and SW 1/4 sec 33-6-22 Com N LI & 727' W of NE COR OF SW 1/4 SEC 33-6-22-TH S 247.5'-TH W 1626.12' M/L TH N 247.5'-TH W 300' TO W LI SD SW 1/4 SEC-TH N ALG W LI NW 1/4 Sec 33-6-22 165' M/L-TH E 1330' M/L-TH S 165' M/L TON LI SD SW 1/4 SEC-TH E ALG SD N LI 596.42' TO BEG EXC THAT PART TAKEN FOR S. HOWELL AVE.

III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

IV. OWNER

St. Stephen's Congregation
c/o Fr. Joseph Aufdermauer
5880 S. Howell Ave.
Milwaukee, WI 53207-6296

V. YEAR BUILT:

1884

Architect:

Adolphus Druiding, Chicago

VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

St. Stephen's Church is an eye-catching structure associated with a pioneer, German-American farming community. The church complex is spread out on a large lot and located next to

Milwaukee's General Mitchell International Airport about 8 miles south of the city's central business district. Howell Avenue in the vicinity of the church complex has a suburban character with a few early twentieth century bungalows and various types of modern commercial structures that are fanned out on large lots. Directly across the street from the church at 5905 S. Howell Ave. is the New Coeln House (ca. 1862-1869) that is a National Register-listed, Italianate style commercial building and one of the pivotal historic structures associated with the German immigrant farmers who settled the surrounding area.

The church, situated about 500 feet east of South Howell Ave. and nearly surrounded by an asphalt parking lot, is a large, symmetrical, cream brick, Victorian Gothic Revival style structure that features a soaring tower centered on the front elevation. In keeping with a centuries-old tradition of church architecture, the building was constructed so that its altar end faces east. St. Stephen's symmetrical massing and its impressive central steeple are features strongly associated with German-inspired church design in Wisconsin. A rectory designed in a simplified English Cottage style of architecture is attached to the south elevation of the church. A large, non-contributing, contemporary style school is located about 150 feet east of the church and rectory.

The principal elevation of the church, which faces S. Howell Ave., is composed of a gabled facade with a soaring, square central tower that is surmounted by a faceted spire. The facade is fenestrated with large, pointed arch, regularly placed, art glass windows. The gable is trimmed with extensive ornamental brick corbelling which is a feature strongly associated with churches built for German-American clients in this area. The tower is topped with an eight-sided, slate-roofed spire that is surmounted by a Roman style sheet metal cross. A pair of double leaf entry doors is centered on the each of the three sides of the tower that project beyond the main, gabled block of the church. Each set of doors is surrounded with outstanding carved limestone trim and bold, German-style, corbelled ornamental brickwork.

The side elevations facing north and south are similar in character and each is composed of five bays of pointed arch, regularly placed, art glass windows. Each window opening is trimmed with an ornamental brick hood molding and a tooled limestone keystone at the apex of the arch. The eaves are trimmed with bold ornamental brick corbelling. The rear elevation facing east is an almost featureless brick wall with the exception of two projecting brick pilasters that divide the wall into three equal bays.

The exterior of the church has remained nearly intact over the years although the original wooden spire was rebuilt and slightly altered at the base from its original helmet shape to its present flared design. This alteration, done to repair fire damage in 1908, does not detract from the character of the building and it has acquired architectural significance as a reminder of a pivotal event in the building's history.

The interior of the church was meticulously reconstructed twice following major fires that occurred in 1908 and 1926. After the first fire, only the sturdy, exterior brick walls remained standing but the congregation decided to restore the structure to its former Victorian splendor. Following the second fire the congregation again rebuilt the interior but this time added the extraordinary, carved wooden altar furnishings that are still there today. The furnishings embody the richly carved, flamboyant character that is associated with German-inspired Gothic design.

A cream brick rectory, designed in a simplified English cottage style of architecture, and built during the late 1920s, is connected to a rear bay of the church's south elevation. The rectory is situated and constructed in a manner that does not significantly alter the original character of the church building. The side gables of the rectory are trimmed with dressed limestone corbels and

the eaves of the roof are embellished with handsome, high-quality copper gutters that feature decorative end caps. The rectory was apparently built after the 1926 fire on the limestone foundation of a freestanding, late 19th century structure.

VII. SIGNIFICANCE

St. Stephen's is architecturally and historically significant to the City of Milwaukee for the following reasons:

- It is the city's only remaining Victorian Gothic style cream brick church that was built specifically for a Roman Catholic parish. All of the city's other remaining cream brick, Victorian Gothic style churches were built for Protestant congregations.
- It is a fine example of German-influenced Gothic revival church architecture and the largest and most outstanding structure ever built by German Americans in the former town of New Coeln.
- It is the only known example in Milwaukee of the design work of Adolphus Druiding who was an important nineteenth century Chicago architect.

The architectural and historic importance of St. Stephen's church makes it an irreplaceable part of the city's unique and nationally significant collection of churches. For years the church has been a cherished visual marker and in 1980 St. Stephen's was designated a Milwaukee Landmark by the city's old Landmarks Commission. That designation, done prior to the adoption of the current Historic Preservation Ordinance, is honorary in nature and neither protects the building from indiscriminate demolition nor grants the Historic Preservation Commission the right to review any significant exterior changes.

In terms of the building's significance to German ethnic architectural history, the Wisconsin Cultural Resource Management Plan, published by the State Historical Society, has identified a need to preserve nineteenth century, German-American rural architectural traditions of which St. Stephen's Church is a fine example. The plan further states a need to preserve properties such as St. Stephen's that are the only remaining structures associated with German settlement in a particular locality.

VIII. HISTORY

New Coeln was established as a small outpost on the trail between Milwaukee and Racine around 1845 by German immigrants who had come mainly from the Rhineland area of Southern Germany. The settlers were proud of their heritage and named their village after the German city of Koln (Coeln in English) or Cologne as it is known today. The German city is known for its extraordinary cathedral that embodies two of the hallmark features of German Gothic churches--a soaring central steeple and symmetrical massing--that also are pivotal features of St. Stephen's in Milwaukee.

St. Stephen's Church, standing near the center of a large, rural-like lot, is an inspiring reminder of the German farming community that thrived in its shadows more than a century ago. This imposing structure is the largest building ever constructed in the former Town of New Coeln which ceased to exist during the 1950s after its remaining lands were annexed to the Cities of Milwaukee and Oak Creek. St. Stephen's is also a testament to the extraordinary efforts made by the congregation to preserve and rebuild the church in the aftermath of two major, early twentieth century fires. The fact that St. Stephen's was sensitively rebuilt after each blaze is compelling

evidence of the powerful sentiments that existed among the parishioners to preserve their church and religious traditions.

The village of New Coeln and the rich farmlands that surrounded it were settled almost exclusively by German immigrants who were Roman Catholics although a group of German Protestants established a Lutheran Church during the late 1840s at the south end of the township. Shortly after establishing the village and beginning their farmsteads, the German Catholic newcomers persuaded Rev. Michael Heis of St. Francis Seminary to visit the community once a month and conduct mass in the cabin of Mr. Hubert Niesser. Two years later, in January of 1847, the New Coeln churchgoers formally established St. Stephen's parish at its present location on a large tract of donated farmland. The same year the parishioners completed work on a small, 30' x 40' wooden church and Rev. H. S. Kendeler was named the first permanent pastor.

The church was enlarged in 1853 and 1861 and served the growing parish until the spring of 1884 when the present brick Gothic revival church building was completed. With its soaring central steeple the new church was visible for miles around, and, to the German-American farmers who worked in the surrounding fields, the building was a constant reminder of their religious traditions and the homeland many of them had left behind in the Old World.

During the nineteenth century New Coeln grew quickly to respond to the needs of the farming community around it. The town's location on the main road between Milwaukee and Racine also made it a popular stopover for travelers. At its zenith, the New Coeln community was relatively self-sufficient and it included a shoemaker, a blacksmith, two saloons, a post office and a school. The peak population of downtown New Coeln was probably never more than 100 and that number does not include the farm families who lived nearby.

St. Stephen's church complex is located at what would have been the northern terminus of the village business district which stretched out along S. Howell Ave. between the church and the present day intersection with E. College Ave. Directly across the street from St. Stephen's at 5905 S. Howell Ave. is the New Coeln House, a national register-listed structure, which was a popular eating and drinking establishment when it was built in the 1860s and still is today. Both the church complex and the New Coeln house are situated on large lots and retain some of their original, rural character despite the fact that these structures are now completely surrounded by the post-World War II sprawl of greater Milwaukee.

New Coeln went into a gradual decline during the early twentieth century and it remained a somewhat isolated community until after World War II. During the 1950s the unincorporated little village began to shrink in size as its farm fields were annexed by the City of Milwaukee and surrounding suburbs to accommodate the construction of new residential subdivisions and the expansion of Milwaukee's Mitchell International Airport. New Coeln went out of existence after its last tract of land was annexed in the late 1950s.

Architect:

St. Stephen's church is a fine example of the early design work of a prominent Chicago architect, Adolphus Druiding, who made a specialty of designing large churches and related ecclesiastical structures for central European ethnic congregations. Most of his extant work is in Chicago and St. Stephen's is presently the only Milwaukee structure that he is known to have designed. Druiding was at the zenith of his professional career from the late 1880s to 1899 and St. Stephen's church, built in 1884, dates from the period just before his rise to prominence in Chicago.

Druiding's known body of church design work in Chicago ranks among some of that city's best ethnic architecture. St. Hedwig's Roman Catholic Church (1899), located at 2100-12 W. Webster on Chicago's near north side, is acknowledged to be one of the architect's finest designs. In 1899 the plans for this magnificent Polish Baroque revival church won a gold medal during an architects' design competition in Munich, Germany. It was Druiding's last known major project, however, and he is believed to have died shortly after that.

Another splendid Chicago example of the architect's work is St. John Cantius Church (1893-98), located at 821 N. Carpenter St., which is regarded as one of the city's masterpieces of Polish-inspired Baroque revival style church architecture. The massive stone church seats more than 2,000 and all of its art glass windows, incidentally, were made by the Gawin Co. of Milwaukee.

Exactly how and why the German farming community in the little town of New Coeln retained a Chicago-architect to design their church is not yet known although Druiding may have had a business or social connection with the Milwaukee art glass firm that supplied the windows for St. John Cantius Church. Research is continuing into Druiding's work and his possible association with projects and individuals in the Milwaukee area.

Milwaukee Cream Brick:

St. Stephen's church is among the dwindling number of structures made from Milwaukee's unique cream-colored brick that is an inseparable part of the city's history. In the late nineteenth century, the large number of buildings in Milwaukee made from the impressive, golden-colored brick earned the city its "Cream City" nickname. Cream brick, however, has not been made since the 1920s making the remaining structures made of this material an increasingly valuable part of the city's architectural history and its civic pride.

Milwaukee's first brickyard began operating in 1835 or 1836. The first brick makers actually expected red brick to result from firing the red-brown Milwaukee clay, but an unusually high content of calcium and magnesium in the clay gave the brick a unique soft yellow color instead. The cream brick, as it became to be known, grew in popularity in Milwaukee and the city's brick makers were justly proud of their unique product.

In May of 1859, the schooner M. S. Scott sailed from Milwaukee to Hamburg, Germany carrying, among other things, samples of Milwaukee's cream brick to the mayor of Hamburg. The Germans were impressed with the Milwaukee brick and imported a quantity of it for use in ornamenting new buildings. It is not known if there are any buildings surviving in Germany today that feature Milwaukee's Cream Brick. The popularity of Milwaukee's cream brick was reflected by the fact that as late as the 1920s, a large paint manufacturer, headquartered in the eastern U. S., Pittsburgh Paint and Glass, sold ready-mixed house paint in a cream color called "Milwaukee brick."

IX. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that St. Stephen's Roman Catholic Church be considered for designation as a City of Milwaukee Historic Structure as a result of its fulfillment of criteria e-4, e-5, e-6 and e-9 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 308-81(2)(e) of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinances.

.e-4. Its portrayal of the environment of a group of people in an era of history characterized by a

distinctive architectural style.

- e.5 Its embodiment of distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen.
- e-6. Its identification as the work of an artist, architect, interior designer, craftsman, or master builder whose individual works have influenced the development of the City of Milwaukee, State of Wisconsin or the United States.
- e-9. Its unique location as a singular physical characteristic which represents an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community or the City of Milwaukee.

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 or deteriorated 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 and other abrasive blasting to brick or stone surfaces is prohibited. These methods of cleaning erode the surface of the material and accelerate 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.
- d. Repair or replace deteriorated material with new materials that duplicate 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 doors. Avoid using inappropriate sash and replacements. Avoid the filling-in or covering of openings with inappropriate materials such as concrete block or glass block. Avoid using modern style 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

All 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. No internally illuminated box sign will be approved.

G. Site features

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

H. Guidelines for New Construction

It is important that new construction be designed so as to be as sympathetic as possible with the character of the church.

1. Siting

New construction must respect the historic siting of the church. It should be accomplished so as to maintain the appearance of the church from the street as freestanding structures in a landscaped setting.

2. Scale

Overall building height and bulk, the expression of major building divisions including foundation, body and roof, and individual building components such as overhangs and fenestration that are in proximity to a historic building must be compatible to and sympathetic with the design of the church.

3. Form

The massing of new construction must be compatible with the goal of maintaining the integrity of the church as a distinct freestanding structure. The profiles of roofs and building elements that project and recede from the main historic church should express the same continuity established by the historic building if they are in proximity to it.

4. Materials

The building materials that are visible from the public right-of-way and in proximity to the church should be consistent with the colors, textures, proportions and combinations of cladding materials used on the church. The physical composition of the materials may be different from that of the historic materials, but the same appearance should be maintained.

I. Guidelines For Demolition

Although demolition is not encouraged and is generally not permissible, there may be instances when demolition may be acceptable if approved by the Historic Preservation Commission. The following guidelines, with those found in subsection 9(h) of the ordinance, shall be taken into consideration by the Commission when reviewing demolition requests.

1. Condition

Demolition requests may be granted when it can be clearly demonstrated that the condition of a building or a portion thereof is such that it constitutes an immediate threat to health and safety and is beyond hope of repair.

2. Importance

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building is of historical or architectural significance or displays a quality of material and craftsmanship that does not exist in other structures in the area.

3. Location

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building contributes to the neighborhood and the general street appearance and has a positive effect on other buildings in the area.

4. Potential for Restoration

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building is beyond economically feasible repair

5. Additions

Consideration will be given to whether or not the proposed demolition is a later addition that is not in keeping with original design of the structure or does not contribute to its character.