

# City of Detroit

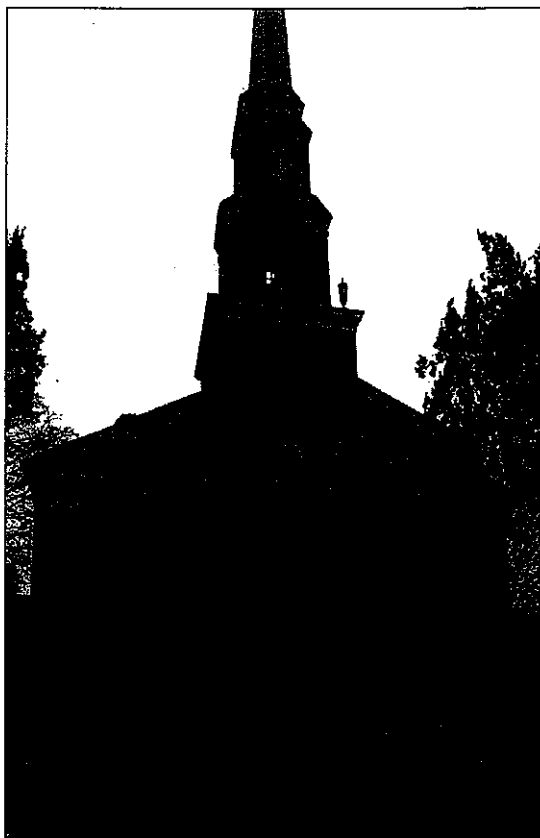
## CITY COUNCIL

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### **Final Report:**

## **Proposed Bushnell Congregational Church Historic District 15000 Southfield Freeway**

By a resolution dated February 8, 2011, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Bushnell Congregational Church Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed Bushnell Congregational Church Historic District consists of one contributing building located on the eastern Southfield Freeway service drive,

approximately one block south of Grand River Avenue. The site has been owned and occupied by Bushnell Congregational Church since the congregation was founded in 1926; the current building dates from 1939.

## **BOUNDARIES**

The boundaries of the proposed Bushnell Congregational Church Historic District are outlined in bold lines on the attached map, and are as follows:

On the south, the centerline of Tournier Avenue;

On the west, the centerline of the east service drive of the Southfield Freeway;

On the north, the centerline of the alley running east-west between the east service drive of the Southfield Freeway and Archdale Avenue;

On the east, the eastern boundary line of lots 35 through 53 of the Thomas Sherwood Subdivision, Liber 38, Page 82, Wayne County Records 22/28.

## **BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION**

The boundaries described above delineate the parcel presently and historically associated with Bushnell Congregational Church. The proposed district is bounded on the south by Tournier Street, west by the Southfield Freeway service drive, on the north by a public alley, and on the east by residential lots immediately adjacent to the church property.

## **HISTORY**

Bushnell Congregational Church, established in 1926, became by the 1950s the largest Congregational church in Detroit and one of the largest in the United States. Its present building, located on what was then Mill Road (now the Southfield Freeway) just south of Grand River Avenue, was completed in 1939, with additions made in 1948, 1953, and 1958. Its growth, both in terms of the size of its building and in membership, are reflective of the development of the surrounding Detroit neighborhoods: Rosedale Park, to the west, and Grandmont-Rosedale, to the east.

Congregationalism arose in the seventeenth century out of the Protestant Nonconformist response to the creation of the Church of England, and Congregational churches were established by Puritan and Pilgrim settlers in New England. Congregational churches have a history of autonomy and democratic governance. In the United States, they have

often been on the forefront of social movements such as abolitionism and the women's suffrage movement.

In 1924 the Detroit Council of Churches asked the Rev. Irving W. Stuart, superintendent of the Detroit Congregational Union, to establish a Congregational church in the rapidly-growing northwestern portion of Detroit. At the time, the land surrounding the intersection of Grand River Avenue and what is now the Southfield Freeway had recently been annexed by the city from Redford Township. Although the area was still somewhat rural in character, it was rapidly being developed with the establishment of subdivisions such as Rosedale Park, North Rosedale Park, and Grandmont-Rosedale. A small congregation, led by Stuart, met at the home of Mrs. and Mr. Walter Phipps in North Rosedale Park on December 11, 1924. By January 5, 1925, a group of about forty people were meeting at the newly-constructed District #2 School on Grand River Avenue. This building, which still stands, was at the time administered by Redford Union Schools; it was acquired by the Detroit Board of Education in 1926 and renamed Thomas Edison School in 1929.

In a series of meetings on May 25 and September 22, 1925, members of the congregation, along with representatives of the Detroit Congregational Union, arranged for the establishment of a permanent church. A Board of Trustees was created, the land for the present Bushnell Congregational Church site was purchased at a cost of \$10,000, and an additional \$3,000 was set aside for the construction of a temporary building. A sod-turning ceremony for the new site was held on November 29, 1925.

On December 1, 1925 a constitution and by-laws were created for the newly-founded congregation. It was named Bushnell Congregational Church, after Horace Bushnell (1802-1876), a Congregational minister and theologian from Hartford, Connecticut. Stuart presided over a service on January 3, 1926, formally dedicating the new congregation. 131 charter members attended, along with twenty-nine children who were baptized during the service. The Rev. Eddy Treat of Salisbury Connecticut was called to become the first pastor of Bushnell Congregational Church on May 2, 1926. He would retain that position until 1955.

In the spring of 1937 the members of Bushnell Congregational Church sponsored a drive to raise funds for the construction of a permanent building. A groundbreaking ceremony for the new \$75,000 structure was held on January 1, 1939. The new church building, with a capacity of 350, was opened that year, its sanctuary having been completed with no mortgage. The first services in the new building were held on September 10, 1939. Three frame buildings that had been previously constructed on the site were retained and used for Sunday school and other community functions.

The new church building was formally dedicated on October 15, 1939 in a service that included such ecumenical guests as Rabbi Leo M. Franklin of Detroit's Temple Beth El and the Rev. Kirk B. O'Ferrall of the city's St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral. Preaching on

that Sunday was the Rev. Russell J. Clinchy of Hartford, Connecticut. It was the second Congregational church to be established in Detroit, following First Congregational Church, which was founded at Woodward and Forest Avenues in 1852.

Over the next two decades, the surrounding Rosedale Park and Grandmont-Rosedale communities grew in population and became home to many wealthy Detroit residents. These were prosperous years for Bushnell Congregational Church as membership increased and new additions were made to the church building. The Fellowship Hall, added in 1948, is used for community meetings and events and includes a large kitchen and stage. Additional offices and classrooms were added when an educational wing was completed in 1953.



Bushnell Congregational Church, April 1954. Photo: Wayne State University Virtual Motor City.

The Rev. Benton S. Gaskell succeeded Treat as pastor, and under his leadership, the congregation continued to grow. Bushnell Congregational Church was now the largest Congregational church in Detroit and the ninth largest in the United States. The building's present configuration was reached with a final addition, constructed in 1958, and church membership peaked in 1959 at 2650.

The 1950s and 1960s at Bushnell Congregational Church were marked by an ongoing concern with issues of social justice. Essays printed in the *Spokesman*, the church's weekly newsletter begun during Treat's tenure as pastor and continued into the 1960s, encourage church members to inform themselves and take action on a variety of

issues. During 1953 and 1954 Gaskell and the assistant pastor, the Rev. John B. Forsyth, frequently advocated for continued United States involvement in the United Nations, cautioned against McCarthyism's threat to civil liberties and opined on the topic of nuclear disarmament.<sup>1</sup> The church also encouraged federal assistance for those without access to health insurance.<sup>2</sup>

During the late 1950s the all-white<sup>3</sup> congregation began to involve itself in the Civil Rights Movement. It opposed poll taxes and literacy tests as a qualification for voter registration. The church also provided financial support to Koinonia Farm, a racially-integrated Christian farming community near Americus, Georgia that withstood a boycott that had been called by the local Chamber of Commerce, a bombing, and acts of violence

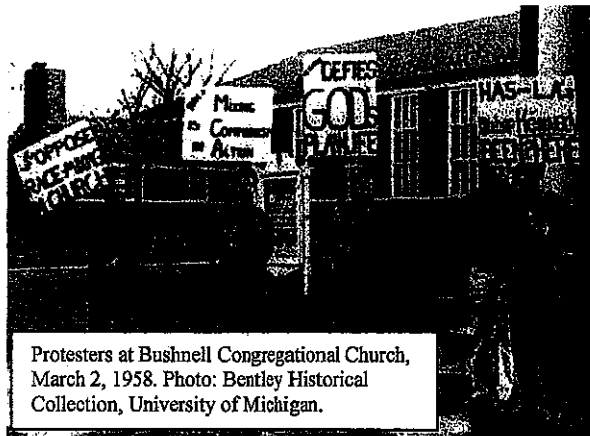
<sup>1</sup> *Spokesman*, 16 Nov. 1953; 4 Jan. 1954; 29 Mar. 1954; 20 May 1954; 30 Sept. 1954; 21 Oct. 1954.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 Mar. 1954.

<sup>3</sup> Robin Meyers, personal interview.

and vandalism by Ku Klux Klan members. According to Gaskell, Koinonia Farm “resemble[d], in certain definite ways, the first-century churches which the New Testament describes.”<sup>4</sup>

Occasionally, views of the church leadership caused the congregation to be at odds with members of the surrounding community. On March 2, 1958 the Gaskell invited the Rev. Albert B. Cleage, Jr., a prominent African American minister and pastor of Central Congregational Church (now known as the Shrine of the Black Madonna) and his choir to conduct a service at Bushnell Congregational Church. A group of nearby residents gathered outside to protest, carrying signs with messages such as “We oppose race mixing in church,” and handing out leaflets opposing all forms of integration.<sup>5</sup> The leadership of Bushnell Congregational Church received numerous phone calls and letters opposing the exchange. Forsyth noted that “it was clear that these did not come from members of our congregation,” and observed an overwhelmingly positive response by members of the congregation to Cleage’s service. Still, Forsyth reminded the congregation that “the findings of science” confirm that all races are equal, and criticized the “hypocrisy” of various forms of housing discrimination of that prevented African Americans from residing in the area served by Bushnell Congregational Church.”<sup>6</sup>



Protesters at Bushnell Congregational Church, March 2, 1958. Photo: Bentley Historical Collection, University of Michigan.

In the summer of 1963, Forsyth participated in the Walk to Freedom march along Woodward Avenue organized by the Rev. C. L. Franklin of New Bethel Baptist Church and featuring an address by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Forsyth also wrote in support of King’s March on Washington. According to Forsyth, “We are moving toward an entirely integrated society in the United States, as I have heard many of you remark from time to time. We have no choice about this. Our only choice is whether we will accept it with gladness as something which must happen because it is right.”<sup>7</sup>

Still, by the late 1970s many church members lived or worked in Detroit’s suburbs, a result of the “white flight” from many of Detroit’s neighborhoods during that time. Membership had been in decline since the early 1960s, and the congregation became divided over a proposal to sell the building altogether to purchase a site outside the city.

<sup>4</sup> *Spokesman*, 23 Jan. 1958.

<sup>5</sup> Gerald L. K. Smith Papers, Bentley Historical Library, Box 100.

<sup>6</sup> *Spokesman*, 27 Feb. 1958.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 Sept. 1963.

After a vote of church members in 1979, the building was listed for sale, and suburban church members began meeting in a rented facility in Novi in 1980.<sup>8</sup>

When a purchase offer for the Detroit site was received, however, the congregation voted at its January 23, 1983 meeting not to accept it. A new pastor, the Rev. Robin Meyers, originally from Oklahoma City, had assumed leadership of the church. Under his direction, the church was able to recruit a significant number of new members as well as reverse a budget deficit that had troubled the church during the previous decade.<sup>9</sup> Bushnell Congregational Church abandoned its original plan to sell its Detroit building to finance the construction of a new building in a suburban location, and instead maintained two locations simultaneously. This second location, on Meadowbrook Road in Novi, was known as Bushnell West. Soon, it established itself as a separate entity, known as Meadowbrook Congregational Church.

The pattern of growth at Bushnell Congregational Church, established in the early 1980s, continues to this day. Its current pastor, the Rev. Roy Isaac, has led the congregation since 2002.

## **ARCHITECTURE**

The proposed Bushnell Congregational Church Historic District consists of a single building, located on the east side of what is now the Southfield Freeway service drive, just south of Grand River Avenue. It is in the Grandmont-Rosedale community, approximately ten miles northwest of downtown Detroit. The church building occupies an E-shaped footprint, and is surrounded by open space and a parking area.

Although the entire building was designed at one time, it was erected in phases, the first of which broke ground in 1936 and opened in 1939. The building was completed in 1956, and has undergone only minor alterations since that time.

The architects of Bushnell Congregational Church were Herman & Simons, a firm founded in Detroit in 1919 and headquartered on West Lafayette Boulevard downtown. Its principals were Aloys Frank Herman, formerly a designer for C. Howard Crane, and Howard Thomas Simons, from the firm of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls. Other works by Herman & Simons include Assumption Grotto Roman Catholic Church (1928) on Gratiot Avenue, the Sojourner Truth Homes (1941) on Nevada Avenue and SS. Peter and Paul Orthodox Cathedral and school (1948 and 1937, respectively) on Gilbert Street.

While Gothic-inspired designs dominated mid-twentieth century church architecture in the Detroit area, Bushnell Congregational Church is one of a significant minority of Colonial Revival church buildings from that era. Bushnell Congregational Church,

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<sup>8</sup> "Congregation Deeply Split on Leaving Detroit for Novi," *Detroit Free Press*, 20 Jan. 1983: 3A+.

<sup>9</sup> "Bushnell to Keep Church in Detroit," *Detroit Free Press*, 24 Jan. 1983: 3A+.

however, is particularly significant as an early example of this style. Other noteworthy Colonial Revival church buildings in the region were constructed in the postwar years, including several by architect David H. Williams: Mayflower Congregational Church (1949) on Curtis Street, Boulevard Congregational Church (c. 1950) on Joy Road, and Grosse Pointe Congregational Church in Grosse Pointe Farms.

Colonial Revival – with its roots in early American Georgian and Adam-style architecture – is a style ideally suited to Congregationalism, with its origins in the Puritan and Pilgrim denominations of seventeenth-century New England. The simplicity of form and materials inherent in Colonial Revival architecture is also somewhat consistent with a Modern design aesthetic that was proliferating in the mid-twentieth century – a factor which contributed to the increasing popularity of that style in the postwar years.<sup>10</sup>

Bushnell Congregational Church is also significant among Colonial Revival structures for its size – having accommodated one of the largest Congregational churches in the country during the 1950s – and for its outstanding degree of historic integrity, both exterior and interior.

In overall massing, the building consists of a front-gabled central sanctuary (the first unit of the structure to be completed and opened) flanked by two-story, side-gabled wings housing offices and classrooms, a chapel, and a large multipurpose room, known as the Fellowship Hall. The structure is clad in red-brown Flemish-bond brickwork with white Vermont marble trim. Multilight wooden sash and casement windows, set with original rose-tinted glass, are found on all elevations, typically resting on a stone sill course. The entire building is topped by a slate roof.

The façade (west elevation) of the central sanctuary is dominated by a full-height portico defined by a denticulated pediment resting on simplified Corinthian columns and pilasters. Incised in its frieze are the words, “BUSHNELL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH.” Above, the steeple consists of a square brick base, upon which rests an eight-faceted classical lantern surmounted by a louvered belfry topped by a steep spire bearing a cross. Beneath, a broken-scroll pediment surrounds a wooden double door with transom.

The building's front-gabled central sanctuary projects almost to the street, while the side-gabled wings feature a significant setback behind a broad grassy lawn. The north and south elevations of the central sanctuary feature large sash windows with arched heads.

On the façade (west elevation) of the building's south wing, a side entrance projects forward. It features a pedimented gable and a doorway with transom recessed beneath a broken pediment.

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<sup>10</sup> C. Eric Johannesen, “A Study of the Trends in Church Architecture in Detroit, 1946-1951” (M. A. Thesis, Wayne University, 1951).

The building's north wing is divided between its slightly-recessed, gable-roofed, two-story office section and its Fellowship Hall (the final section of the building to be completed), which is a tall single story in height and features a hip roof. The office section is more domestic in appearance, with a large, seven-faceted, mullioned bay window, as well as two large, brick, slope chimneys. The Fellowship Hall features large, rectangular, mullioned windows with multiple casements. It is accessed by an entrance featuring a rectangular door surround topped by a triangular pediment. Above the entrance, a stone panel, incised in simple script, reads "Fellowship Hall."

The north and south ends of the building's façade are anchored by unfenestrated, front-gabled projecting end bays featuring cornice returns and brick end chimneys.

On the interior, Bushnell Congregational Church displays a remarkable degree of historic integrity. Oak woodwork, parquet flooring, wainscot paneling, and fixtures such as lighting, church pews, and hand-lettered signs remain in a well-maintained, original condition.

## **CRITERIA**

The proposed historic district appears to meet the first and third criteria contained in Section 25-2-2: (1) Sites, buildings, structures, or archeological sites where cultural, social, spiritual, economic, political or architectural history of the community, city, state or nation is particularly reflected or exemplified; (3) Buildings or structures which embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural specimen, inherently valuable as a representation of a period, style or method of construction.

## **COMPOSITION OF THE HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD**

The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine appointed members and three *ex-officio* members, all residents of Detroit. The appointed members are: Kwaku Atara, Melanie A. Bazil, Robert Cosgrove, Keith A. Dye, Zene' Frances Fogel-Gibson, Edward Francis, Calvin Jackson, Harriet Johnson and Doris Rhea. The *ex-officio* members, who may be represented by members of their staff, are: the Director of the Historical Department, the Director of the City Planning Commission, and the Director of the Planning and Development Department.

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*Spokesman*, Bushnell Congregational Church.

# Proposed Bushnell Congregational Church Historic District

