

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL

Historic Designation Advisory Board

FINAL REPORT

PROPOSED CHURCH OF OUR SAVIOUR-LEESVILLE HISTORIC DISTRICT

The proposed historic district under study by the Historic Designation Advisory Board consists of a church and parish house located at the southwest corner of Harper and Cadillac. The Church of Our Saviour was built in 1874-75, and the attached parish house in 1895-96, and both buildings have served their original purpose throughout their existence.

BOUNDARIES: The boundaries of the proposed historic district are the same as those of the building lot upon which the building stands, which is described as follows:

Lot 9 of Toms and Butler's Subdivision of Section 1 of the rear concession of Private Claims 257 & 337, as shown in L.3, p. 22, Wayne County plats.

HISTORY: The Church of Our Saviour dates its history to the mid-1860's, when a group of residents of Leesville, a farming and crossroads community centered on the intersection of Harper and Gratiot, began discussion of the formation of an Episcopal mission in their town. This resulted in the establishment of the Gratiot Avenue Mission of St. John's Episcopal Church, which held services in the Leesville school building at Gratiot and Harper. In 1874, the congregation was officially established as the Church of Our Saviour, and on September 28, 1874, the church purchased the lot at the southwest corner of Harper (then Butler) and Cadillac. The sellers of the land, Robert P. Toms, S. Caroline Toms, and Milton H. Butler, stipulated that the property was to be used solely for church purposes, or would revert to them, so the transfer of land must have been, at least in part, a donation.

The new church building, begun in 1874 and completed in 1875, was apparently designed by William Cooper, the eldest son of Henry Cooper, who supplied the bricks for the building. William Cooper was not a trained architect, but had worked in the building trades and had trained himself to design as well as build. Another building -- a farmhouse -- said to have been designed by William Cooper stands on Kresge Avenue at Edgewood.

The new church was built at the southwest corner of Cadillac and Harper, immediately adjoining the intersection of Gratiot and Harper. This area was the town center of the little community of Leesville, named for Charles Lee, who had established himself at what is now Belvidere and Gratiot earlier in the century. Since Leesville was unincorporated, it is difficult to determine exactly what the residents of that time considered as part of their little

town; but it is certain that the Church of Our Saviour is the last remaining building of the town center, which included a general store, butcher shop, and a sawmill.

Another church connected with the history of the town, originally called Lee's Chapel, was located at Gratiot and Cucumber Road, now Georgia Avenue well out of the town center. This congregation was later known as Leesville Methodist Church, and by 1925, as Bethany Methodist. The congregation has now disbanded. Their building remains at Gratiot and Georgia, but was built after Detroit expanded to include Leesville.

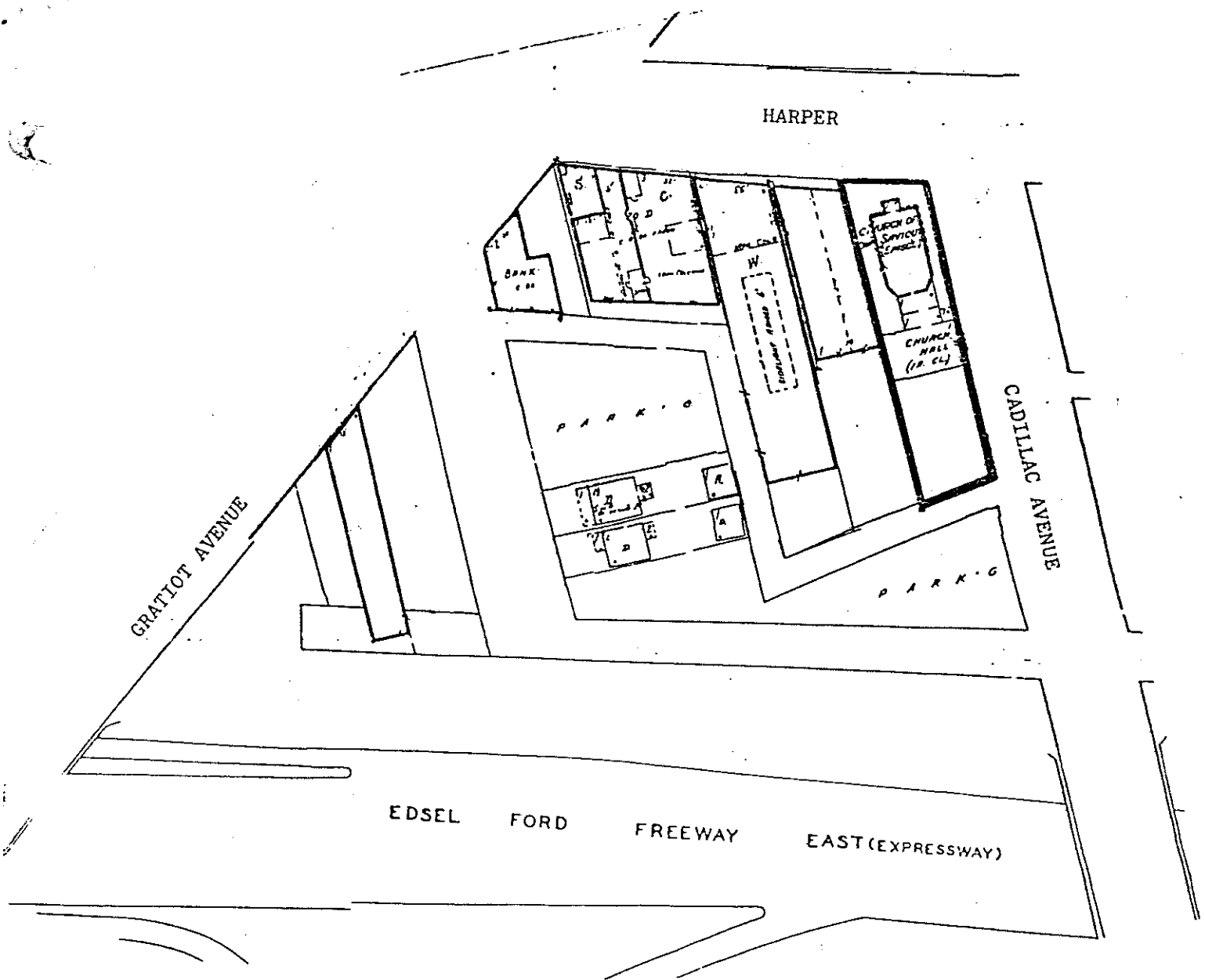
Prior to 1874, Protestants in the Leesville area attended Lee's Chapel, while Catholics travelled out Gratiot to "The Grotto." Residents of an Anglican persuasion were not entirely satisfied, however, with the Methodism of Lee's Chapel, and so the Church of Our Saviour was founded, with Thomas Lee among the founders. In the early years, the church experienced considerable difficulty, since the congregation was so small.

With the coming of the automobile, Detroit experienced boom-town growth. The city rapidly enveloped the Gratiot-Harper area, and the character of old Leesville rapidly disappeared. The name survived for a time on business concerns and a post office branch, but even those names are now gone.

The Church of Our Saviour, therefore, is the last reminder that an independant settlement once existed in a part of Detroit that many would now call "inner city." The church continues to function, though not without difficulty. The growth of the city around the church brought parish prosperity with it; likewise, the changing neighborhood in later years brought difficulties. The church still enjoys the support of long-time parishioners, some of whom have family ties to the Lee family and the founders of the church.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: The buildings of the Church of Our Saviour consist of the main church, which faces Harper, and a frame parish house behind the church, facing Cadillac Boulevard. The church is a simple structure, just as would be expected in a small community such as Leesville. Basically a rectangle, the church has an entrance vestibule (added later) attached at the Harper Avenue side and an apse at the south. The main facade has the entrance vestibule centered, containing a pointed-arch doorway flanked by shallow attached buttresses. The vestibule, like the church, has a triangular gabled roof, with the gable facing Harper. The facade itself has two rather small pointed-arch windows flanking the vestibule, a circular window centered above the vestibule, and shallow attached buttresses at the corners. The windows have hoodmoulds laid in brick. Both the vestibule and main cornices are simply decorated with Victorian brackets. The side elevations have three recessed bays, each containing a pointed-arch window; at the sides of each bay there are Victorian brackets at the cornice. The Parish House to the rear is connected to the church by a one-story frame wing, with a triple window facing Cadillac and an entrance porch at its south end, where it connects to the hall proper. The hall itself also frame, originally had a large round-headed window which extends up into the gable area on the Cadillac facade. The parish house and connecting wing are now covered with aluminum siding and artificial stone.

The church building is relatively unchanged, except for the apparently early addition of the entrance vestibule and the destruction by a storm in 1901 of a small wooden "belfry" located on the roof.



Proposed Church of Our Saviour Historic District
(Proposed district outlined in heavy black)