

HISTORIC PRESERVATION STUDY REPORT
GRAND AVENUE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
(Written Winter 1982)

I. NAME

Historic: Grand Avenue Congregational Church

Common: Same

II. LOCATION

2133 West Wisconsin Avenue

Legal Property Description: Grand Ave Heights in SW ¼ Sec 30-7-22 Block 1 Lot 3-W 35'
Lot 2-E 35' Lot 4

Tax Key Number: 400-0502-000

III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

IV. OWNER

Grand Avenue Congregational Church
c/o Harrison Henry
2133 West Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53233

V. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Grand Avenue Congregational Church is a Victorian Romanesque edifice constructed of cream brick and trimmed extensively with cut, buff-colored limestone. The church is located 1-1/2 miles west of downtown Milwaukee on Wisconsin Avenue and is a prominent, visual landmark in the neighborhood. It is cruciform in plan and measures 100 feet wide by 84 feet long with the portion extending towards Wisconsin Avenue measuring 60 feet wide by 52 feet long.

The façade facing Wisconsin Avenue divided into three sections by substantial buttresses capped with small, corbelled turrets with tall, pyramidal roofs. The ground hugging character of the structure is further emphasized by the battered walls. At the center of this façade is the main entry. It is a broad, segmental arched opening of cut stone with double, panel wood doors inset with stained glass panels and a stained glass transom. Above this is a colossal arched window that is divided into thirds by heavy incised, stone mullions with stained glass panels set between the members. The original effect of the window is now somewhat compromised by the grid work of protective translucent panels that now cover it. Set in the

masonry, high in the gable, is the abbreviated name, "GRAND AVE. CONGRE'L CHURCH," in carved stone letters.

Flanking the center portion are twin, two-story towers. The upper levels have paired windows articulated with granite colonnettes with Romanesque stone capitals. On the lower levels are additional entries. They are round-arched openings with deep, set wood, panel doors and stained glass transoms. On the east tower the entry opens to the east and on the west tower the entry opens onto Wisconsin Avenue. The side elevations of the main block are divided into bays with decorative buttresses flanking paired, round-arched windows inset with stained glass.

The roof treatment is steeply pitched, intersecting gables with limestone copings and covered with slate. The roof of the main block is pierced with a single gabled dormer on each side that is faced with fish scale shingles.

Since its construction in 1887 this edifice has been in continuous use by its original congregation and has been very well preserved. The only known alterations were unobtrusive changes made to the rear entries.

VI. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Date Built: 1887

Architect: Edward Townsend Mix

The Grand Avenue Congregational Church is significant for both its architectural and historical associations. Architecturally, it is significant as a highly unusual example of a Victorian Romanesque style church designed by a prominent Milwaukee architect, Edward Townsend Mix. Historically, the Grand Avenue Congregational Church has been locally important for its long tradition of community service and frequent use by individuals and organizations needing a public form to express their views.

VII. HISTORY

The Grand Avenue Congregational Church traces its origins to First Congregational Church (now Plymouth Congregational) founded in 1841. This was Milwaukee's first permanent Congregational church started after an earlier group of Congregationalists had met in 1837, but disbanded within a few months. At the center of this pioneer church was the anti-slavery issue. Both First Congregational and the First Presbyterian Church served as open forums for the denouncement of this social evil. By 1846, both churches had decided that the church was no longer the place for political issues to be publicly discussed. The denial of a public forum was seen a serious setback for the anti-slavery movement and a year later the Free Congregational Church was founded largely by parishioners from First Congregational and First Presbyterian.

The first permanent church building was erected in 1848 on North Broadway between Mason and Wells Streets. The house on the site was moved to the rear of the lot and was used as Milwaukee Female Seminary by Mrs. Lucy Parsons. She was the wife of the church's pastor and her school would later merge with Downer College at Fox Lake, Wisconsin as Milwaukee Downer College. It was a highly respected private woman's college and the former buildings are extant on the campus of UWM. In 1852 the church purchased the former first

Congregation Church building at what is now North 2nd Street and West Wisconsin Avenue. Renamed Spring Street Congregational Church it remained here until 1854 when the building was sold to the Methodist Society. The church did not have an official meeting place until 1859 when their new church building at 6th and Wisconsin was completed. In 1881 the church was renamed Grand Avenue Congregational Church. Their move in 1887 to the present church building at 21st and Wisconsin was a result of the central business district replacing the residential neighborhood that had moved progressively west along Wisconsin Avenue.

Throughout its history, Grand Avenue Congregational Church has been distinguished by ministerial leaders whose efforts have significantly contributed to Milwaukee's cultural and social development. The first of these was the Reverend Dr. William P. Love, who came to the pastorate in 1857. He was the leader of the abolitionist cause in the Midwest and his determination to make the church a place available to public meetings earned the church a reputation for being responsive to sensitive social issues. In 1881 came Reverend Dr. George H. Ide. It was Dr. Ide who pushed for the construction of the present church with its expansive vestibule and auditorium to accommodate the large public gatherings. His greatest contribution was the establishment of the West Side Literary Society. During its peak years from 1894 to 1899 hundreds of people from all denominations and faiths attended the free lectures and the discussions of classical literature. Dr. Ide continued as the pastor until his death in 1903. A third important pastor was Reverend Dr. Charles H. Beale who served until his retirement in 1924. Dr. Beale was a national figure in the Congregational Church in America and an important spokesman for Milwaukee's progressive movement. During his pastorate the church's outstanding music program was established. Milwaukee's first vested choir was organized in 1913 as a non-denominational body of professional voices under the direction of Professor Miessner, Dean of Milwaukee of Milwaukee Music School (now UWM). Many area church choirs copied their techniques and arrangements. Another first was the first Christmas candlelight service in Milwaukee held at the church in 1918. A fourth important pastor was Dr. Beale's son, Arthur. He assumed the pastorate upon the death of his father until 1934. He was significant to the church for holding it together during the worst years of the Great Depression. During this time the church saw its membership rise to a peak of 1,500 people with little or no financial loss.

In the last 35 years, Grand Avenue Congregational Church as continued to maintain the principals upon which it was founded. The most important event during this period was its selection as the site of Dr. Martin Luther King's speech when he visited Milwaukee in 1957. Because of its declining enrollment, in 1981 there were 270 members, the church has had to refocus many of its programs, but continues as a forum for free public speech.

VIII. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends the Grand Avenue Congregational Church be designated a historic structure in accordance with provisions of Section 2-335 of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinances.

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 the Grand Avenue Congregational Church. Nothing in these guidelines shall be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance of documented original elements.

A. Roofs

1. Retain the original roof shape. Dormers, skylights and solar collector panels may be added to roof surfaces if they do not visually intrude upon those elevations visible from the public right-of-way. Avoid making changes to the roof shape that would alter the building height, roofline, pitch or gable orientation.
2. Retain the original roofing materials, wherever possible. Avoid using new roofing materials that are inappropriate to the style and period of the building.
3. Replace deteriorated roof coverings with new materials that match the old in size, shape, color and texture. Avoid replacing deteriorated roof covering with new materials that differ to such an extent from the old in size, shape, color and texture so that the appearance of the building is altered.

B. Materials

1. Masonry
 - a. Unpainted brick or stone should not be painted or covered. Avoid painting or covering natural stone and unpainted brick. This is 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.

2. Wood

- a. Retain original material, whenever possible. Avoid the indiscriminate removal of architectural features that in, in most cases, an essential part of the building's character and appearance.
- b. Repair 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 such as artificial stone, brick veneer, asbestos or asphalt shingles, vinyl or aluminum siding.

C. Windows and Doors

1. Retain existing window and door openings that are on the north, east and west elevations. Retain the original configuration of panes, sash, doors, lintels, keystones, sills pediments, hoods, doors, and hardware. Avoid making additional openings or changes in the principal elevations 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. Avoid discarding original doors and door hardware when they can be repaired or reused.
2. Respect the stylistic period the building represents. 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 or openings with inappropriate materials like glass block or the installation of plastic or metal strip awnings for fake shutters that are not in proportion to the openings or that are historically out of character with the building. Avoid using modern style window units such as horizontal sliding sash in place of double-hung sash or the substitution of units with glazing configurations not appropriate to the style of the building.

D. Porches, Trim and Ornamentation

1. Retain porches and steps visible from the public right-of-way that are historically and architecturally appropriate to the building. Avoid altering porches and steps by enclosing open porches or by removing original architectural features.
2. Retain trim and decorative ornamentation including copings, cornices, finials, columns, capitals or decorative panels. Avoid the removal of trim and decorative ornamentation that is essential to the maintenance of the building's historic character and appearance.
3. Repair or replace, where necessary, deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the old as closely as possible. Avoid using replacement materials that do not accurately reproduce the appearance of the original material.

E. Additions

The north, east and west elevations are integral to the structure's architectural significance. No additions may be made to these elevations. Additions to the south elevation 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 all elevations.

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.