

# City of Detroit

## CITY COUNCIL

Historic Designation Advisory Board

### FINAL REPORT

#### PROPOSED BREITMEYER-TOBIN BUILDING HISTORIC DISTRICT

The proposed historic district under study by the Historic Designation Advisory Board consists of a store and office building at the corner of Broadway (formerly Miami) and Gratiot erected by Phillip Breitmeyer and his brothers, Fred and William, as a monument to their father, John Breitmeyer. Located at 1308 Broadway and originally named the Breitmeyer Building, the structure has changed hands twice since it was built and has been known as the Tobin Building, its present name, since 1941.

**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:

*The south 56.65 feet of the west 60.85 feet of Lot 5 and the vacated 10 feet of land in front, Section 9, Governor's and Judge's Plan.*

**HISTORY:** The subject building was designed by the architectural firm of Raseman and Fisher. A permit for the structure was issued on May 12, 1905, and the eight story building was constructed in 1906 at a cost of \$120,000. The building, which was a pioneer office building east of Woodward Avenue in 1906, was built by John Breitmeyer Sons, Florists, the premier florist company in the city of Detroit. Phillip Breitmeyer, its president, served as mayor of Detroit from 1909-10, largely an uneventful term during which he was responsible for the widening of some of Detroit's streets and thoroughfares.

Following his term in office, Phillip Breitmeyer returned to private life continuing his influence as a nationally respected and influential horticulturalist. He re-entered the political arena in 1953, emerging from retirement to become a candidate for Mayor but was defeated by Frank Couzens. In 1957, Mr. Breitmeyer became a candidate for Council and was elected but was defeated for re-election in 1959. Breitmeyer died in April, 1941.

In 1926, the ownership of the building was transferred and the building renamed the Peninsular State Bank Building.

In 1956, with the building approximately 75% vacant, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, eighth floor occupants in the building and an insurance company noted for its willingness to grant small insurance policies to Black people, stopped its practice of sending agents from house-to-house to collect premiums. This led to a steady stream of Blacks entering the building to make payments in person. It is interesting to note that they were made to use a special, non-stop rear elevator to Metropolitan Life's offices. It was about this time that the building first began renting office space to Black tenants, one of the first downtown buildings to do so.

The Penisular State Bank went into receivership in 1941, and for a period of approximately four years the ownership of the building was embroiled in the courts. Benjamin Tobin acquired full ownership of the building in 1944, although the building name had been changed to the Tobin Building as early as 1941.

Faced with a large vacancy rate and the already established precedent of Blacks coming to the building, Ben Tobin undoubtedly saw the solicitation of Black tenants as a potential money-maker. He invited the elite and well-known Black professionals of the city to take office space in the building. Evidence of a policy of renting to Black professionals is provided by a full page advertisement in the *Official Business & Professional Guide of Detroit* (6th edition), copyrighted in 1945. This guide to the Black community carried a full page advertisement for the Tobin Building, with the line "Best Professional Address." As a result, many of Detroit's prominent Black professionals were associated with the Tobin Building.

Included among those who have occupied space in the Tobin Building over the years are: Dr. William H. Lawson and his son, Lloyd, both internationally famed optometrists; the Stewart M. Thompson Tax Service; five judges including Damon Keith; Hobart Taylor, Jr., an attorney who, among his more notable achievements, was Associate General Council to President Lyndon Johnson and later was appointed to the Board of Directors of the World Bank; and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the largest Black union in the United States.

Also maintaining office space in the building was Atty. Charles A. Roxborough. A graduate of Detroit College of Law and active in Detroit civic affairs, he served as clerk for Governor Charles Osborne, was a member of the Wayne County Board of Supervisors, and in 1930 was elected to the Michigan State Senate.

The prestigious and highly respected law firm of Loomis, Jones, Piper and Colden whose members included many prominent attorneys were building tenants. Atty. Lloyd Loomis organized the firm in 1927, and that same year he became the first Black appointed Assistant Prosecuting Attorney for Wayne County. Other achievements by Atty. Loomis include four years service on the Wayne County Board of Supervisors (sponsored by John Lodge) and the prosecution to conviction in the conspiracy trial against Hamtramck municipal officials together with Harry Kelly, who later became governor.

Atty. Charles Jones, also a member of the firm, was also appointed Assistant Prosecutor serving from 1935 to 1944; he continued to practice law, handling many cases, including the Black Legion slayers and some of the cases growing out of the 1944 Detroit race riot. Atty. Jones served on Governor G. Mennen Williams' Civilian Defense Committee and in July 1950 became the first Black appointed Recorder's Court Judge in Michigan history.

Two other legal notables who have maintained offices in the Tobin Building are Atty. Harold E. Bledsoe and Judge Wade McCree.

Atty. Bledsoe's achievements and firsts during his lifetime are too numerous to recount, but a small sampling would include: first Black attorney on the State Attorney General's staff (appointed in 1934); as a member of the law firm of Lewis & Roulette conducted the successful defense of Dr. Ossian Sweet and his family. In 1932, together with Charles Diggs, Sr. and Joseph Craigen, founded the Michigan Federated Democratic Club, the first Black Democratic organization

in the nation. This organization was largely responsible for persuading Black voters in the state to change from Republican to Democratic which contributed to the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as president. He was a member of the commission which wrote the Michigan Unemployment Compensation Act and a member of the Corrections Commission and the Commission on Labor and Industry. Further, he was elected to the Constitutional Convention in 1963 to write Michigan's new constitution, which, when accepted, included his Declaration of Rights and the proposition of a Civil Rights Commission. Atty. Bledsoe died in April, 1974.

Atty. Wade McCree, then a staff attorney with the law firm of Bledsoe, Craigen and Simmons, was greatly influenced by Atty. Bledsoe. In fact, when McCree was first approached regarding accepting an appointment to the Wayne County Circuit Court bench in 1954, it was with Atty. Bledsoe's encouragement and blessing that he accepted, thereby becoming the first of his race to serve on that court. Judge McCree's accomplishments to date include serving as U. S. District Judge; he has been a member of the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals since 1966, and presently is Solicitor General of the United States, in which position he argues the government position in cases coming before the U.S. Supreme Court. Most recently Judge McCree's name has been mentioned as a possible nominee to the Supreme Court.

*PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:* The subject building is an eight story, steel-frame office and commercial structure. The building represents well the Beaux-Arts style as applied to "tall" buildings at the turn of the century, and has suffered relatively little alteration. Because of its corner location, the building has two main facades; its location on Pingree Square makes it highly visible from the south.

Retail space occupies most of the first floor, with storefronts on both Gratiot and Broadway. The lobby entrance for the upper office floors is at the northwest corner on Broadway.

The curtain walls of the main facades make use of red brick and cream terra-cotta in a color scheme common for Beaux-Arts buildings of the period; the first floor storefronts and building entrance have been refaced, mostly in black glass. The second floor is faced entirely with terra-cotta; above, the walls are brick with terra-cotta ornament. The fourth through the sixth floors repeat the same arrangement: double sash in the corner bays with terra-cotta surrounds, and single sash arranged two to a bay in the central portion. A terra-cotta course provides horizontal accents at window sill level. A terra-cotta dentil cornice at the seventh floor sill level divides the upper facades; the window patterns of the floors below are repeated, but the double sash at the seventh floor corners have only lintel and keystone of terra-cotta while the windows of the central bays of the seventh and eighth floor are recessed behind two-story tall engaged Ionic columns. The corner double windows on the eighth floor are flanked by cartouches of terra-cotta, which appear to support an entablature of terra-cotta, which also rests on the engaged columns. The entablature is crowned with a dentil and modillion cornice in metal--a rare survival in Detroit.

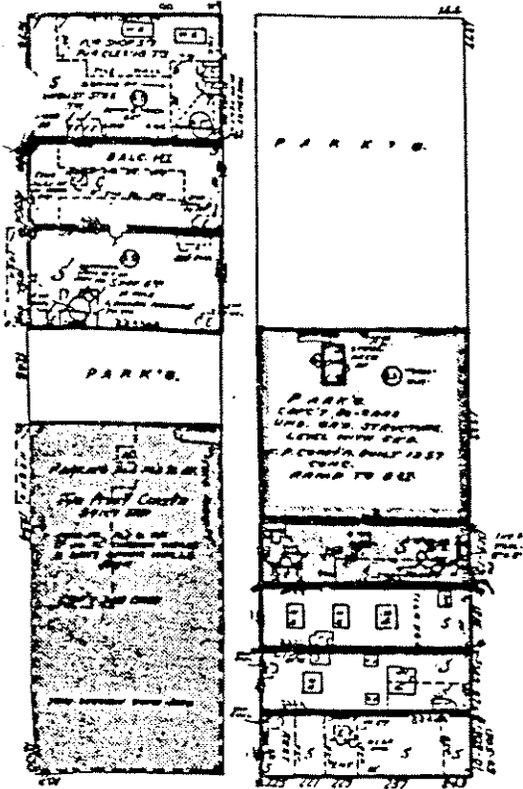
Alterations to the building center around the ground floor facades, where the storefronts are altered as noted above, and an elaborate pedimented doorway

leading to the elevator lobby has been removed and replaced with a simple, modern doorway. Marks on the terra-cotta between the central second floor windows mark the location of ornate console brackets which once supported a balcony below the third floor windows. Although the loss of the balconies is regrettable, the alterations were done carefully, and except for the color change where the brackets were once located, the casual viewer would be unaware of the change. All of these alterations were carried out prior to 1945, when a photograph of the building as it looks today appeared in the advertisement mentioned above.

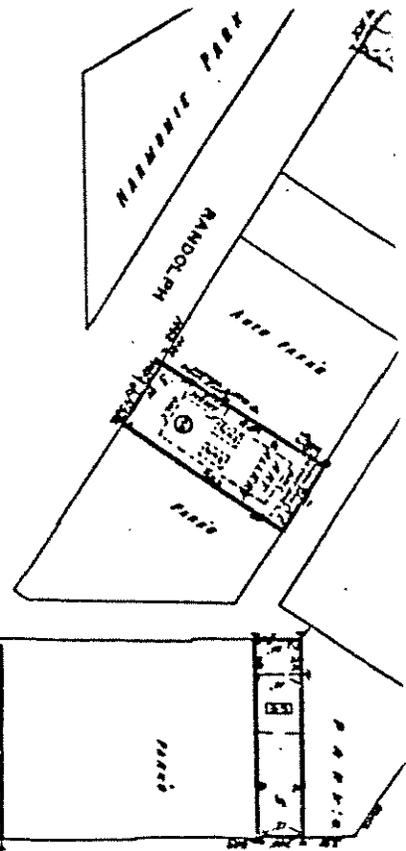
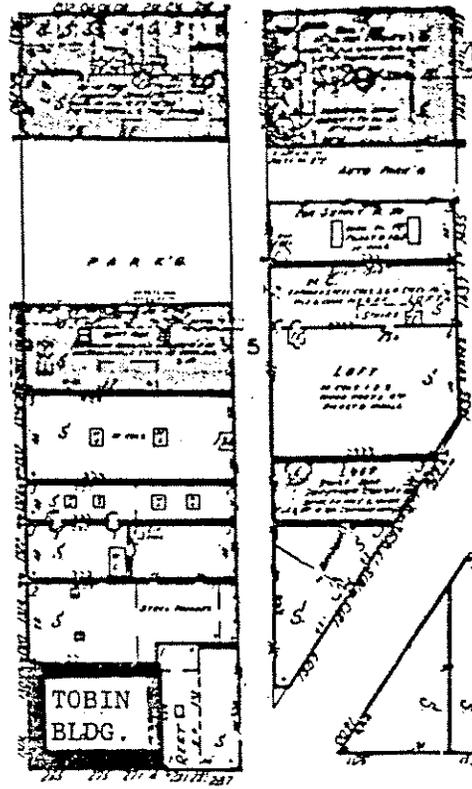
*RECOMMENDATION:* The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that City Council establish the Breitmeyer-Tobin Building Historic District, with the Design Treatment Level of Rehabilitation.

*COMMENTS RECEIVED:* The minutes of the Advisory Board's public hearing on the proposed designation are attached. The Advisory Board has also received a letter (copy attached) from John J. Davey, attorney for the Tobin Building Corporation, indicating the support of the stockholders of the owning company for designation of the building.

LIBRARY AV.

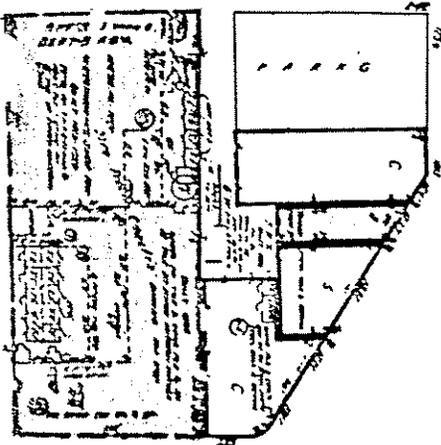


BROADWAY



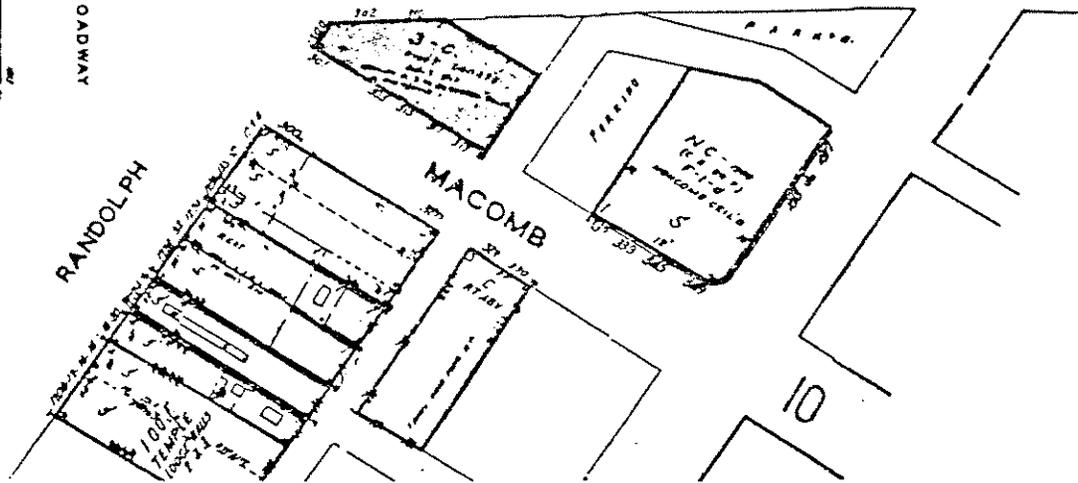
GRATIOT AV.

LIBRARY AV.



PINEBEE SQUARE

BROADWAY



PROPOSED TOBIN BUILDING HISTORIC DISTRICT  
 (Boundaries outlined in heavy black lines.)