

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL

33.

Historic Designation Advisory Board

PROPOSED STATE SAVINGS BANK BUILDING HISTORIC DISTRICT

FINAL REPORT

The proposed State Savings Bank Building Historic District consists of one building at 151 Fort Street. It was designed by Stanford White of the nationally renowned architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White of New York City at the turn of the century. The building includes an addition extending to Congress Street designed in 1915 by the Detroit architects Donaldson & Meier. The State Savings Bank Building is situated on the southeast corner of Fort and Shelby. It is located in the heart of the financial district of downtown Detroit and is one of the lowest buildings in an area of other monumental banking halls and highrise commercial structures.

BOUNDARIES: The proposed district boundaries are outlined in black on the attached map, and are described as follows:

1. *On the north, the centerline of Fort;*
2. *On the south, the centerline of Congress;*
3. *On the west, the centerline of Shelby; and*
4. *On the the east, the east line of lot 14 on the south side of Fort Street, extended north, of the Military Reserve Subdivision (L5/P218), and the east line of lot 15 on the north side of Congress, extended south, of the Military Reserve Subdivision (L5/P218).*

This designation does not include the bridge which connects the State Savings Bank Building to the structure at 601 Shelby, and said bridge is hereby excluded from the designation of the State Savings Bank History District.

HISTORY: The old State Savings Bank building stands on ground that was included in the stockade which surrounded Fort Lernoult, later called Fort Shelby, the English fort that was erected in 1778. Fort Shelby, named for Governor Isaac Shelby of Kentucky, was demolished in 1826.

This land was also part of the Military Reserve, a tract of land bounded by Jefferson Avenue, Michigan Avenue, Griswold Street, and the east side of the Cass Farm. The Military Reserve came into the possession of the Government when the fort was surrounded by the British in 1796 and it remained in the Government's hands until 1824 and 1826, when Congress in two acts gave the entire tract to the City of Detroit.

The State Savings Bank was organized in 1883 with David Hamilton as its first president. When it purchased the site on the southeast corner of Fort and Shelby for \$17,500 in 1898, State Savings Bank was already the largest bank in Detroit. McKim, Mead and White, the pre-eminent Beaux Arts architectural firm from New York City; was chosen to construct the marble Neo Classical State Bank Building, which was completed at an estimated cost of \$200,000 in 1900 (Permit #921, issued to Donaldson & Meier on October 21, 1898).

In 1907 the Peoples Savings Bank merged with the State Savings Bank to form the Peoples State Bank, with George H. Russel as president. The Peoples State Bank has been established in 1871 by wealthy financier and real estate investor, Francis Palms. Palms was the patriarch of an important Detroit family noted for their elaborate early twentieth century building projects, notably the Palms Building on Woodward Avenue. The new Peoples State Bank made its home in the old State Bank Building.

But by 1915, the Peoples State Bank had outgrown its quarters on the corner of Fort and Shelby. The Detroit architects Donaldson and Meier, who oversaw the construction of the original building, were commissioned to design a harmonious addition that more than doubled the size of the original building.

The area of Fort and Congress Streets between Woodward Avenue and Shelby Street had become the financial district of Detroit by 1900 and has remained the center of banking in the city. The construction of the Detroit branch of the Federal Reserve Bank directly across the street from the Peoples State Bank in 1927, where it is still located, reinforced the importance of the corner of Fort and Shelby as the financial heart of the business district.

In 1928 the largest bank merger in the history of the state up to that time took place between the Peoples State Bank of Detroit and Wayne County and Home Savings Bank. They consolidated operations to become Peoples Wayne County Bank. Peoples Wayne County Bank had a branch system of 92 offices and \$313,117,236 in resources.

Peoples Wayne County Bank was dissolved during the Depression, and in 1943 the old State Savings Bank building with its 1915 addition was taken over as the home office of the Manufacturers National Bank which it remained until 1979. Edsel B. Ford, the founder of Manufacturers Bank in 1933, chose its name. Some others associated with Mr. Ford's bank were Wesson Seyburn, John Ballantyne, and Charles H. Hodges. Because the move to the old State Savings Bank building took place during wartime, few alterations to the interior occurred because of the need to conserve building materials.

The State Bank building had been in continuous banking use for 80 years until the structure was acquired by 151 Partnership for use by Silvers, Inc., an office supply company. The new firm has sensitively rehabilitated the structure for use as an office supply showroom without altering its important architectural features. The building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION: The State Savings Bank is architecturally significant as an accomplished example of turn-of-the-century Beaux Arts classical design by master architects McKim, Mead and White of New York. Considered to be an important design by the firm, it was published in their monograph in 1915. This is the only major structure in Michigan designed by this office, which was considered to be the pre-eminent American architectural firm of its period.

The actual construction was overseen by the locally esteemed Detroit architects Donaldson and Meier. In 1916, when it was enlarged, John M. Donaldson of that firm, who had been trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, was hired to design the addition. He slavishly copied the design of the earlier structure, which was

attributed to Stanford White in the firm's monograph, with the result that the addition is indistinguishable from the original construction.

The State Savings Bank Building is a long, low, rectangular white marble-faced building measuring 100' X 296' with a low hip roof concealed by a roof balustrade. The lot slopes dramatically toward the south with the result being that the main floor of the Congress Street elevation is raised a full story above the sidewalk on a plain granite base.

The building has exposed elevations facing Shelby, Fort and Congress Streets. The east side abuts the Penobscot Building. The principle elevation faces Fort Street. It is a three-bay composition composed of an Ionic portico in antis flanked by two bays of monumentally-treated round-headed fenestration. The tri-partite window units containing two levels of sash are set within colossal marble arches with keystones. The portico, with two free-standing fluted Ionic columns, shelters the modern style main entrance. The entrance wall within the portico was remodelled about 1950 and features a plain, polished marble facing surrounding a glass and aluminum door unit with transom. A modern style aluminum clock-face is set into the marble over the door. Above the portico and the continuous modillion cornice, a free-standing classical sculptural group caps the parapet wall. It is composed of a pair of classically draped female figures representing Industry and Commerce flanking a scrolled cartouche emblazoned with an amorial motif. Cornucopias of high relief fruits and vegetables and a garland swag complete the grouping.

The Shelby Street elevation is composed of 11 bays of colossal arcaded fenestration identical to the fenestration on the Fort Street facade. The middle bay is set off from the flanking ten bays by rusticated masonry piers providing a central focal point for the otherwise repetitious composition. The southernmost bay is pierced at the first story level by a modern aluminum and glass skywalk spanning Shelby Street to a neighboring building.

The Congress Street elevation is raised a full-story above the sidewalk on a plain, gray-pink marble base pierced with large plate glass windows. The sidewalk level originally contained rental offices occupied by brokerage houses although this space is now used for retailing by the present owner. The upper part of the facade is merely a three-bay repetition of the design of the Shelby Street elevation, with three colossal marble arches fitted with bronze window units at the main and second floor levels.

The Fort Street entrance leads into the 1900 McKim, Mead and White portion of the structure. The square, domed vestibule is sheathed in white Norwegian marble with the dome ornamented with mosaics and bronze grilles.

The banking hall occupies virtually the entire floor area of the building extending from Fort to Congress Streets. A two-story vaulted arcade spans the juncture of the original 1900 section and the 1915 addition dividing the vast hall into two areas. Both of the spaces are identical in treatment with arcaded Norwegian marble walls fitted with bronze window units at the second floor to screen the mezzanine offices that encircle the banking room. Fluted Ionic pilasters and

egg-and-dart moldings enrich the arcading. Above a restrained denticulated entablature with a rosette frieze is a panelled ceiling. The room has always been finished in white to match the marble floor and walls. The tellers cages and bank fixtures have been removed to accommodate the structure's current use as an office supply store showroom, although the original white marble classical style vault built within the central bay of the arcade dividing the banking hall, and the round clock suspended from the ceiling above it, remain from the original furnishings. A broad staircase, now fitted with an escalator, leads from the main floor down to the Congress Street entrance.

Elsewhere in the building there are numerous offices. Only the Board Room and the Executive Committee Room are architecturally distinguished. Both are panelled in mahogany. The original carved wood mantels were removed in the mid-1970s to the new executive offices of the Manufacturers National Bank.

RECOMMENDATION: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that the City Council establish the State Savings Bank Building Historic District, with the design treatment level of rehabilitation. A draft ordinance for the establishment of the district is attached for consideration of the City Council.

