

Poletown Historic District, Chene Street Commercial District  
Chene Street between Interstate 94  
and Grand Boulevard

Detroit  
Wayne County  
Michigan

HABS No. MI-275-15

HABS  
MICH.  
82-D-ETRO,  
46-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
MID-ATLANTIC REGION NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19106

HABS  
MICH,  
82-DETROIT  
46-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
POLETOWN HISTORIC DISTRICT, CHENE STREET COMMERCIAL DISTRICT HABS No. MI-275-15

Location: Chene Street between Interstate 94 and Grand Boulevard  
Detroit  
Wayne County  
Michigan

Present Owner:

City of Detroit, Department of Community and  
Economic Development  
150 Michigan Avenue  
Detroit  
Michigan 48226

Present Use: Demolished in 1981

Significance:

The Chene Street Commercial District achieves its significance from its role as an early Polish immigrant community in Detroit. Polish settlement along the street began in the 1860's and was greatly accelerated with the construction of streetcar lines along Chene Street in the 1890's. The variety of functions served, as reflected through the architecture, suggests the degree of self sufficiency achieved by this community.

PART I - HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The Chene Street Commercial District is that portion of Chene Street north of interstate 94 (Ford Expressway) and south of Grand Boulevard. It is historically significant as the northern extremity of an early, Polish community in Detroit. Chene Street was platted in 1857 and named after an earlier settler, Gabriel Chene. Polish settlement along the street began in the 1860's and was greatly accelerated with the construction of streetcar lines. The opening of the Chene Street railway in August of 1889, and its electrification in the mid-1890's provided ready transportation to the northern edges of the city and hastened settlement in the area.

The opening of Grand Boulevard running east/west, also helped shape the community. The idea for such a thoroughfare had originated with Edward Chope in 1876 and had the support of many prominent citizens. The project began in 1883, and the first house was built on the boulevard in 1884. Even though the boulevard was to eventually extend over 11 miles, ninety percent of the cost of its construction was paid for by private donations. Neither building restrictions nor a building line were adopted when the boulevard first opened, so that it never wholly acquired the stately appearance envisioned by its originators. Grand Boulevard, however, did connect the area with Woodward and with Belle Isle, but until the advent of the automobile the thoroughfare was little used. By 1900, the Beltline Railroad spur established rail lines of the community. Industrial corridors developed alongside railroads and the residential area within those two corridors began to fill up from the south as industry attracted a stream of European immigrants to the location.

The rapid growth of the auto industry had a direct impact on the Chene Street Commercial District and by 1920 this neighborhood and others assumed their basic size and shape. The most dramatic growth resulted from the opening of Dodge Main auto production plant in 1914. By 1920 it employed roughly 18,000 workers. At that time, the major industrial establishments within the study area employed close to 30,000 workers. Surrounding the area were other sources of employment, including the Hudson and the Packard industrial plants in the eastern corridor along the Beltline Railroad and the cigar factories where thousands of women found work. Taken together, these establishments offered the jobs which had lured thousands upon thousands of European immigrants to Detroit.

From 1910 to 1950 the district maintained a strong Polish identity. The Polish language was exclusively spoken and often published. The names of buildings tell of an era of Polish pride and confidence in an alien land; Zabawski, Shrebnik, Wojcik. The Halicki Agency, a steamship agency, was instrumental as an intermediary between the immigrants and the outside world. From this location (6407 Chene), the Polish Daily News was started. The Chene Trombly Market (6357 Chene), a highly Polish-ethnic grocery store, was in operation for over 50 years. As an ethnic enclave the Poletown district, and Chene Street in particular, achieved a remarkable degree of self-sufficiency. These tendencies were remarked upon by the Detroit Free Press as early as the 1870's.

Within two or three years about fifty Polish families have settled by themselves in the northeastern suburbs, at the end of Riopelle Street, and have stores and shops of their own so that they need not trade out of the community. A fine large church is up, enclosed and almost finished inside. "Poletown"

is the name given the new village.

The Polish settlement on the north end of Russell Street has lately received quite a number of recruits from over the sea, who brought considerable cash with them, and will use it to build themselves houses.

Additionally the variety of churches served as cornerstones of the Polish community. These churches represented a major outlay of money from a people generally struggling to establish themselves in America.

The Depression brought especially hard times to an area so dependent on the auto industry. The 1930's also were a time of intense struggle between workers and management in the auto and related industries. Those struggles that occurred in this area are particularly noteworthy because of the significant role played by the ethnic community in support of the cigar worker's strike and the auto workers' strikes. In this respect, Poletown was integral to the evolution of organized labor in Detroit. The several bars and two union offices (6331 and 6501 Chene) in the Chene Street Commercial District provided forums for organizational activities. As unifying forces in the community, the labor unions reinforced the hope for a better life.

For recreation, the Chene Street Commercial District offered a variety of diversions. The Bernhardt Theatre (6469 Chene), now demolished, staged vaudeville entertainment from 1915 to 1922. The Home Theatre, designed by Stratton, Goettesleben, Von Schneider and now demolished, provided theatrical cinema entertainment from 1912 to 1963. Many bars also stand along this northern section of Chene Street. The Chene-Adele Bar (6311 Chene), The Dash Club (6331 Chene) and Jim Herron's Cocktail Lounge (6490 Chene) are all noted night spots. Several restaurants are also situated in the district, such as the Metropole Restaurant (6555 Chene), The Rainbow Restaurant (6218 Chene), and the White Tower Restaurant (6520 Chene).

With World War II came a return to full employment. Employment at Dodge Main reached 40,000 during the war, and many women went to work in factories. However, the post-war boom which transformed American life, largely passed the older working class areas and left them as declining back waters.

The 1950's generally were very hard on the area. The strong ethnic and mutually supportive character of the community survived World War II and received a new infusion of refugees from eastern Europe in the war's aftermath. However significant this may have been (and there is some disagreement), the influx ended in the early part of the decade. The outward movement of jobs and people to the suburbs left behind an aging population, and as the older industries declined the migration accelerated. Other changes also occurred. Home owning tended to decline while renting increased. Blacks, many of whom had been displaced by urban renewal projects to the south of Gratiot, began to move into the area in significant numbers. One of the earliest churches bought by a black congregation was the Free Methodist Church at Chene and Trombly, renamed by the new owners as Rose of Sharon Church of God in Christ in 1950.

To the people of the area, the event which triggered the economic and social decline of Street Commercial District was the construction of the Ford Expressway (Interstate 94).

The clearing of land and freeway construction took a long time and involved extensive litigation, delays, and speculation. The last family was not relocated until March 1955. The Expressway removed a large section of the Chene commercial strip between Harper and Piquette and displaced a large number of families. Additionally it created a physical barrier between the northern and southern ends of what had been a cohesive and interactive community and commercial area.

#### PART II - DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION

The Chene Street Commercial District, consisting of 37 structures is part of a larger National Register district known as Chene Street Historic District, including 214 structures - The Chene Street Commercial District is only the northern section of Chene Street between Interstate 94 (Ford Expressway) to Grand Boulevard. (See sketch)

The district, as the name implies, is primarily commercial, and many structures feature commercial sssh or large plate glass windows. Additionally, the first floors of non-commercial structures have been modified or modernized to serve a commercial function or as storefronts. Above the commercial storefronts, the second floors often serve a residential function for merchants over their respective businesses. Although the initial development of the street was of a commercial nature, there were a few residential structures erected. One that remains is the Stephen Bielecki residence. Additionally, Graylawn Apartments, an eight story structure at the north end of the district contains 104 housing units.

Stylistically the district contains a diverse collection of buildings. Their scale, massing and facade treatment create a contrast along the streetscape. The Graylawn Apartments and Kuehn Building, opposing one another across Chene Street, create a visual gateway when entering the Street from Grand Boulevard.

The Graylawn Apartment building erected in 1923, as designed by architectural engineer, J.A. Martin, utilizes mild Neo-Classical elements such as columns, stone entablatures and balustrades. The National Bank of Detroit at Milwaukee Ave. is significant for its sensitive scale, dentilled cornice and Greek fretwork. The Merchants' and Mechanics' Bank features a parapet with balustrade and dentilled cornice as well. The yellow brick Zabawski Building is architecturally distinctive for its low segmental arch entry and use of terra-cotta panels and swags.

The F.W. Woolworth Building, (6453 Chene Street) constructed in 1929, is a particularly ornate example of Art-Deco design featuring double-hued diaper patterning, plate glass windows and a parapet.

The White Tower Restaurant (6520 Chene Street) utilizes large tiles and angular arrangement of facades to create an Art Moderne effect.

One Gothic structure, the Rose of Sharon Church of God in Christ (6401 Chene), displays vernacular Gothic styling with ornate bargeboards and lancet windows.

Stylistically the district is not cohesive at all, further emphasized by the disruption of Street facades due to vacant lots or boarded facades on vacant structures. The district does, however, possess elements from a number of periods, slightly modified to reflect a distinctive community's aesthetic and cultural tastes through architecture.

Project Information:

The development of the Central Industrial Park in the area of the Chene Street Commercial District was supported with money provided by H.U.D., requiring mitigative documentation under Section 106 of the Historic Preservation Act. Documentation was prepared by:

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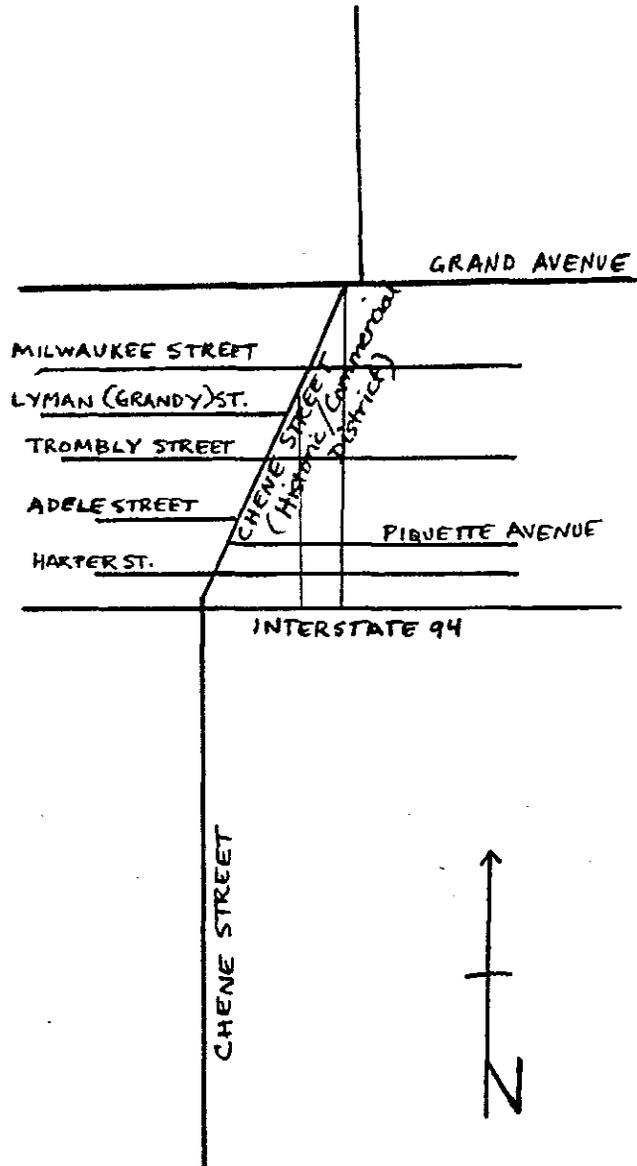
for:

City of Detroit  
Community and Economic Development  
150 Michigan Avenue  
Detroit , Michigan 48226

March 1981

POLETOWN HISTORIC DISTRICT, CHENE  
STREET COMMERCIAL DISTRICT

Chene Street between Interstate 94 and Grand Avenue



(Interstate 94)

**LIST OF CHENE STREET STRUCTURES FROM THE EDESEL FORD FREEWAY NORTH  
TO EAST GRAND BOULEVARD**

| <u>Building Name</u>                        | <u>Address</u>           | <u>Function</u>       |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| X-Way Chene Shell Service                   | 6080                     | Service Station       |
| Boron Oil                                   | 6081                     | Service Station       |
|   | Piquette Ave. Intersects |                       |
| Church of Jesus Our Lord<br>Apostolic Faith | 6202-6210                | Church and Residences |
| Supreme Business Service                    | 6212-6214                | Accountant's Office   |
| Rainbow Restaurant                          | 6218                     | Restaurant            |
| Fool's Gold Custom Bump Shop                | 6224                     | Auto Body Shop        |
| Bielecki, Stephani Residence                | 6230                     | House                 |
| Freeway Beverage Center                     | 6237                     | Party Store           |
| Chene-Adele Bar                             | 6251-6259                | Bar and Residences    |
|   | Adele Ave. Intersects    |                       |
| Zygmunt Wojcik, Locksmith                   | 6302                     | Commercial            |
| Valente's Men's Formal Wear                 | 6305                     | Clothing Store        |
| Feldman Electric                            | 6308                     | Industrial            |
| The Dress Shop                              | 6312                     | Clothing Store        |
| Otto's Barber Shop                          | 6320-6322                | Barber Shop           |
| Watt's Inn Tavern                           | 6324-6326                | Bar and Residence     |
| B. Zabawski Commercial Bldg.                | 6330-6332                | Office Building       |
| Dash Club and UAW AM<br>Local 835           | 6331                     | Bar and Office        |
| Wayne County Florists                       | 6337                     | Florist               |
| Davis City Wide Food Service                | 6343-6345                | Grocery               |
| Drew Lounge and Recreation                  | 6355-6357                | Grocery and Residence |

CONTINUED...

(Interstate 94)

**LIST OF CHENE STREET STRUCTURES FROM THE EDSSEL FORD FREEWAY NORTH  
TO EAST GRAND BOULEVARD (Continued)**

| <u>Building Name</u>                           | <u>Address</u>            | <u>Function</u>                   |
|--|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Chene Trombly Market                           | 6355-6357                 | Grocery and Residence             |
|  | Trombly Intersects        |                                   |
| Rose of Sharon Church of God                   | 6401                      | Church                            |
| Halicki Agency                                 | 6407-6409                 | Insurance Agency<br>and Residence |
| The Glorious Church of<br>God Apostolic        | 6408-6410                 | Church                            |
| Clark Oil                                      | 6422                      | Service Station                   |
|  | Grandy Ave. Intersects    |                                   |
| F.W. Woolworth                                 | 6453                      | Department Store                  |
| AAA Commercial Vacuum<br>and Polishing Company | 6464                      | Store                             |
| Merchant's and Mechanics<br>Bank               | 6490                      | Bank                              |
| National Bank of Detroit                       | 6499                      | Bank                              |
|  | Milwaukee Ave. Intersects |                                   |
| Hospital Drugs and Dodge<br>Local 2            | 6501                      | Drugstore and Offices             |
| Hupp Building                                  | 6517-6523                 | Office and Commercial             |
| White Tower Restaurant                         | 6520                      | Restaurant                        |
| Martin, Chas., Barber Shop                     | 6522                      | Barber Shop                       |
| Kuehn Building                                 | 6538-6540                 | Office Building                   |
| Graylawn Apartments                            | 6551-6581                 | Residential and Commercial        |

ADDENDUM TO:  
POLETOWN HISTORIC DISTRICT, CHENE STREET  
COMMERCIAL DISTRICT  
Chene Street between Interstate 94 & Grand Boulevard  
Detroit  
Wayne County  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
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