

32-42 MONROE STREET (COMMERCIAL)  
(First Williams Block)  
Detroit  
Wayne County  
Michigan

HABS No. MI-322

HABS  
MICH  
82-DETRO,  
52-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
Mid-Atlantic Regional Office  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106

HABS  
MICH  
82-DETRO,  
52-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

32-42 MONROE AVENUE (Commercial Building)  
(First Williams Block)

HABS No. MI-322

Location: 32-42 Monroe Avenue  
Detroit  
Wayne County  
Michigan

U.S.G.S. Detroit, Michigan Quadrangle  
UTM: 17.331430.4688500

Present

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

Present

Occupant: None

Present Use: None

Significance: The First Williams Block is a rare example of a pre-Civil War commercial building remaining in Detroit. It is also an important example of the work of Sheldon Smith, a member of Detroit's first generation of architects, who was best-known for his commercial block designs. John Constantine Williams, who built this commercial building to develop part of his real estate holdings in Detroit, was a member of one of the city's wealthiest families during the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1859. Two local newspapers, the Detroit Free Press on 15 July 1859 and the Detroit Daily Advertiser of 5 September 1859 reported the progress of construction.
2. Architect: Sheldon Smith (1818-68)  
Sheldon Smith was born in 1818 near Jamestown, New York, moved to Ohio in the 1840s, and completed his first work as an architect in Sandusky, Ohio, in 1853. He received commissions for a number of important structures in Sandusky, including residences, churches, the 5-story West Hotel, and several commercial blocks which featured cast-iron pilasters, window casements, and cornices. Sheldon Smith moved to Detroit around 1855 and spent the rest of his productive career there. The practice of building design in the Midwest prior to 1850s was simply an adjunct of the work of carpenters and masons. Sheldon Smith was therefore part of the first generation of architects in the region, and among the first to practice architecture in Detroit. In addition to the First Williams Block (1859), Smith's other notable designs in Detroit include an elaborate Romanesque-style residence for S. Mandelbaum (1858), the Norman-Style Detroit House of Corrections (1859-61), and the massive Second Empire-style Detroit Opera House (completed in 1869 and destroyed by fire in 1897), which could hold up to 2,500 people. His son, Mortimer L. Smith, joined Sheldon Smith's practice in 1861 and significantly assisted in the design of the Detroit Opera House. Sheldon Smith's son and grandson continued his architectural practice, which in 1907, became the firm of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls, which remains a major Detroit architectural firm today.

A. Physical History (continued):

3. Original and subsequent owners: The following is an incomplete chain of title to the land on which the structure stands. Reference is to the Clerk's Office of the County of Wayne, Michigan.

- 1833 Partition Deed, January 5, 1833, recorded in Liber 5 CR, p. 370.  
Lewis and Elizabeth Cass to John R. Williams.
- 1857 Will, February 10, 1857, recorded in Liber 67, p. 391.  
Estate of John R. Williams, deceased.
- 1859 Report on Partition, August 8, 1859, recorded in Liber 77, p. 236. Theodore Williams, et al to John Charles Devereaux Williams.
- 1885 Warranty Deed, September 5, 1885, recorded in Liber 289, p. 35.  
J.C. Devereaux Williams to Francis Palms.
- 1913 Letter of Trusteeship, April 17, 1913, recorded in Liber 915, p. 327.  
Estate of Francis Palms, deceased.
- 1960 Warranty Deed, July 11, 1970, recorded in Liber 141245, p. 668. The Cortland Enterprises, Inc. to David Rott and Harry Rott.
- 1978 Warranty Deed, September 21, 1978, recorded in Liber 18605, p. 872.  
David and Harry Rott to the City of Detroit

4. Builders, suppliers:

- a. Builder: John Charles Devereaux Williams (1823-91) owned the real estate on which the structure was built, but his older brother, John Constantine Williams (1817-1892) was the builder.

5. Original plans and construction: No original plans or drawings have been located.

A. Physical History (continued):

6. Alterations and additions: No additions have been made during the life of the building. More than two dozen building permits were issued by the City of Detroit for this building between 1909 and 1979, with most of these involving changes to the storefronts. The original cast-iron Italianate cornice, which is shown in numerous historic photographs, was removed in 1942 (City of Detroit Building Permit No. 14017, issued July 16, 1942).

B. Historical Context:

John Constantine Williams (1817-92) was one of seven sons of John R. Williams (1782-1854), the first elected mayor of Detroit (1824-25) and reputedly the wealthiest man in Michigan at the time of his death in 1854, with most of his wealth in Detroit real estate. In 1858, the Williams children inherited their father's real estate, including property on the east side of Monroe Avenue between Michigan Avenue and Farmer. This was a prime commercial location in the heart of Detroit's business district. John Constantine Williams erected this commercial building and a second, much larger office building adjoining it in 1872-73. He has a real estate office in one of the two buildings from 1859 until the mid-1880s, but moved to Florida in 1875 and lived there until his death in 1892.

This commercial building had retail stores on the first floor and general office space on the upper floors during its first quarter century, but then served as a hotel for most of its remaining life. The Detroit City Directories show the Stanwix Hotel at this location in 1884-86. In September 1889, George H. Gies opened Gies' European Hotel and Restaurant, which occupied the entire building. Gies had operated several taverns along this stretch of Monroe Avenue continuously between 1874 and 1888. Gies's establishment was considered among the most luxurious in Detroit at the time it opened and was an instant success. Gies operated a restaurant on the first floor seating 80, while the second floor had separate parlors for men and women, a ladies' dining room, and a reception area. The upper floors had a total of 52 guest rooms. The building was equipped with a Graves Safety Elevator, the McCormick fire alarm system, and fire escapes.

32-42 MONROE AVENUE (Commercial Building)  
(First Williams Block)  
HABS No. MI-322 (Page 5)

B. Historical Context (continued):

George Gies died in 1891, but his sons, Edward G. and Frank A. Gies, operated the hotel until 1899, and then ran a saloon at the restaurant site until 1908. Gies' Hotel was the site of an early legal challenge to racial segregation in Michigan. William Ferguson (1857-1910), the son of Detroit's first Black doctor, was expelled from Gies' European Hotel in 1889 after refusing to eat in the "Colored" section of the restaurant. He filed a lawsuit, lost, but appealed to the Michigan Supreme Court, which in 1890 ruled that segregation by race in public facilities was illegal. Ferguson later served in the Michigan House of Representatives between 1893 and 1897.

From 1909 through 1917, the Berghoff Hotel occupied the building, with the Berghoff Cafe on the ground floor. The Tuxedo Hotel & Grille Company, which operated the Frontenac Restaurant on the first story, took over the building in 1918. Starting in 1919, the business was known as the Frontenac Hotel, which included the Frontenac Restaurant on the ground floor. The Frontenac Hotel remained in operation until 1960, but by 1940, the restaurant had been replaced by a series of retail shops. Two jewelers and a lunch room occupied the Monroe Avenue frontage between 1940 and 1979, but the rest of the building remained largely vacant above the ground floor between 1960 and 1978, when the City of Detroit became the owner and vacated the entire building.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Williams Block at 32-42 Monroe is significant as one of the few pre-Civil War commercial structures remaining in Detroit, one of two built by John Constantine Williams. It is also significant as an example of the work of Sheldon Smith, one of Detroit's first generation of architects who enjoyed a reputation throughout the region for his commercial block designs. The structure's Italianate style is still viable in the elaborate floral crown moldings over the second and third floor full-arched windows. Originally, the building also had a cast-iron Italianate-style bracketed cornice with an semi-circular pediment over the central section.
2. Condition of fabric: The Monroe Street facade retains much of its original decoration. The roof and interior of the building suffer from water damage and localized fire damage.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The structure is five stories tall, plus basement, and is essentially rectangular in shape. It measures 60 feet wide and 100 feet deep. The Monroe Avenue facade is divided into three vertical bays, each separated by projecting piers containing recessed panels. Above the first story, each bay contains three sets of windows per floor.
2. Foundations: Basement walls are made of brick masonry.
3. Wall construction: Exterior walls are masonry load-bearing and are made of red-colored common brick. Wall ornamentation on the Monroe Street facade consists of brick that is used decoratively to create the piers between bays and to provide an accent above the crowns to many of the rounded-arch windows. Cast iron is used on the semi-circular crowns over the windows, as well as on the capitals and engaged columns that appear on the second through fourth floors. The original capitals and pilasters on the fifth story, visible in historic views, have been removed from the building.

3. Wall construction (continued):

Cast iron palmette cresting appears in the middle of the window crowns on the second and third floors. At the parapet level are horizontal recessed panels (two in the central and three in the outer bays) containing floral designs. A fire escape on the rear of the structure extends from the ground to fifth story. Photographic evidence from circa 1908 indicates that an earlier cast-iron fire escape consisting of landings and ladders, supported by brackets at one time, covered the side bays of the Monroe Street facade (see Holleman & Gallagher, Smith, Hinchman & Grylls, p. 30).

4. Structural system, framing: Wooden floor joists and roof rafters bear on interior cast iron beams which, in turn, are supported by cast iron columns and masonry load-bearing exterior walls.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: the Monroe Street facade has five entries. There are two service doors at the rear of the building.
- b. Windows: Ordinary one-over-one double-hung rectangular sash appear on the rear and east sides of the structure. On the Monroe Avenue facade, the rectangular windows are also double-hung and generally of the one-over-one sash variety, with small semi-circular transom lights located in the upper part of the window sections. The most elaborate fenestration occurs in the middle bay where, on the third story, the central window contains a pattern of eight-over-eight-lights.

6. Roof:

- a. Shape: The building has a flat roof with a parapet, and is moderately pitched to the rear.
- b. Cornice: An original cast-iron Italianate-style cornice, with an arched pediment over the middle, is shown in historic photographs. It no longer remains on the building. Cement filler at the parapet level indicates the location of the eight missing large ornamental brackets that once supported the cornice.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: See sketch plans. The first floor is divided into three major spaces. Two smaller commercial spaces, each 20 feet wide and 50 feet deep, flank a large central T-shaped bay, with the base of the stem on Monroe and the top of the "T" running behind the other two segments. The second through fifth floors are virtually identical, with an interior light well surrounded by rooms, with a double-loaded corridor encircling those rooms, and additional rooms facing the southeast and northwest facades, so that each room had at least one outside window to provide natural light.
2. Additional interior description: No recognizable original fabric remains, in large part because of serious fire damage in the southeast half of the building, including the third through fifth stories. Severe water damage, including buckled flooring and ceilings, is evident throughout the building, but is especially severe on the third through fifth stories. Original hardware, fixtures, or furnishings are not extant.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The First Williams Block faces northwest. Prior to the late 1960s, when the commercial buildings on the opposite side of Monroe were demolished, this commercial block faced the Detroit Opera House and several office buildings on the opposite side of Monroe Avenue.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural drawings: None have been found.

B. Historic Views: The best views are found in the collections of Manning Brothers, Commercial Photographers, 26761 John R. Madison Heights, MI 48071. These include views shot in 1908 and 1915. The Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library has overall views of Monroe Avenue.

C. Bibliography

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Detroit, City of. Building Permits. Department of Building and Safety Engineering, City-County Building, Detroit, Michigan 48226.

Wayne County, Register of Deeds. Land Tract Index, International Center Building, Suite 400, 400 Monroe Avenue, Detroit, Michigan 48226.

2. Secondary and published sources:

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Detroit Free Press, 5 September 1859, p. 1, c. 2.

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Detroit Illustrated. The Commercial Metropolis of Michigan. Detroit: H.H. Hook, 1891.

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32-42 MONROE AVENUE (Commercial Building)  
(First Williams Block)  
HABS No. MI-322 (Page 10)

2. Secondary and published sources (continued):

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Polk, Ralph L. and Company. Detroit City Directory. Detroit: R.L. Polk & Company, 1886-1974.

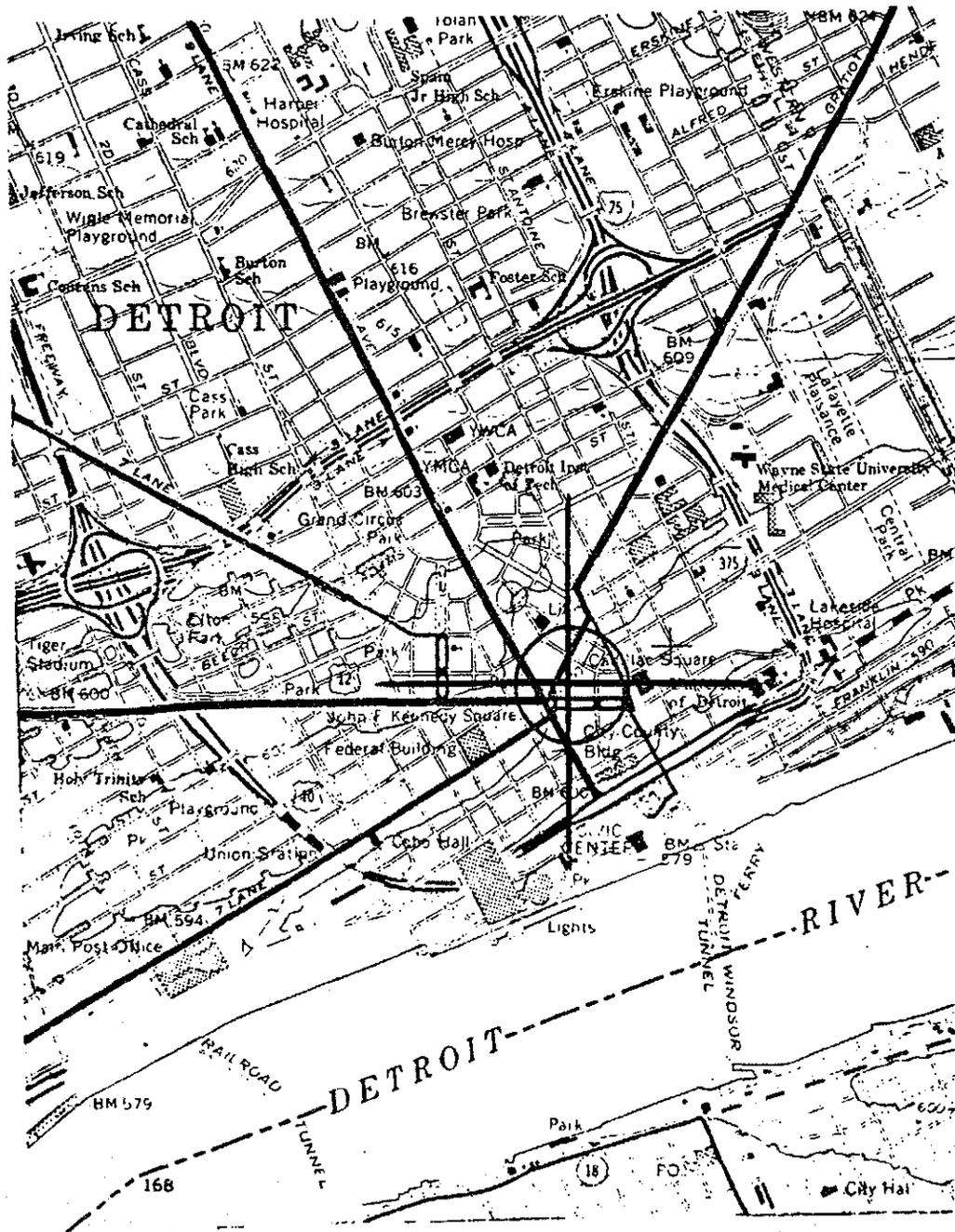
Sanborn Map and Publishing Company. Insurance Maps of Detroit, Michigan. New York: Sanborn Map and Publishing Company, 1884, 1897, 1897-1919, 1921, 1921-61, and 1979.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

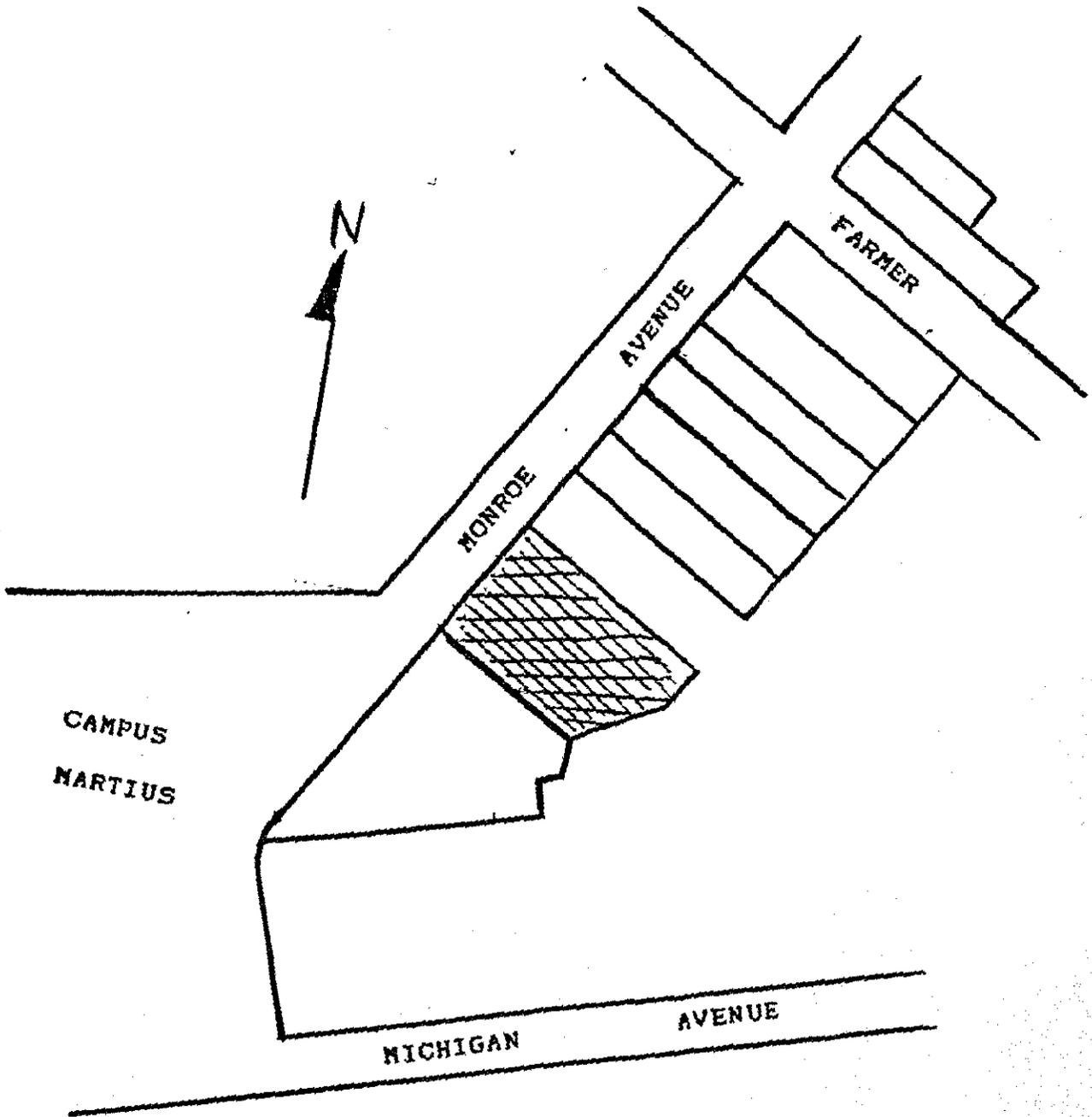
Prepared by: Charles K. Hyde  
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Affiliation: Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan  
Date: July-August 1969

32-42 Monroe Avenue (Commercial Building)  
(First Williams Block)  
HABS No. MI-322 (Page 11)

DETROIT, MICHIGAN QUADRANGLE  
UTM: 17.331430.4688500

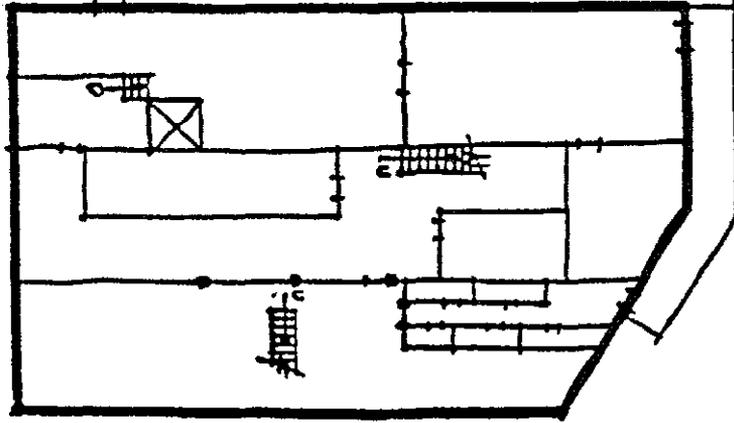


32-42 MONROE AVENUE (Commercial Building)  
(First Williams Block)  
HABS No. MI-322 (Page 12)

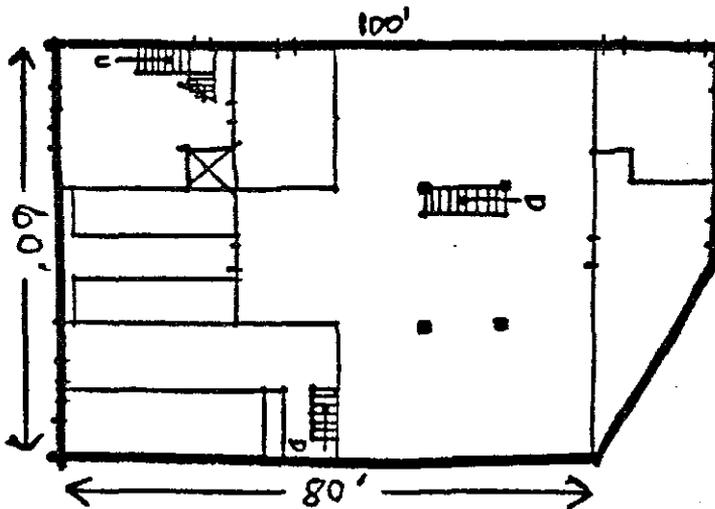


32-42 MONROE AVENUE (Commercial Building)  
(First Williams Block)  
HABS No. MI-322 (Page 13)

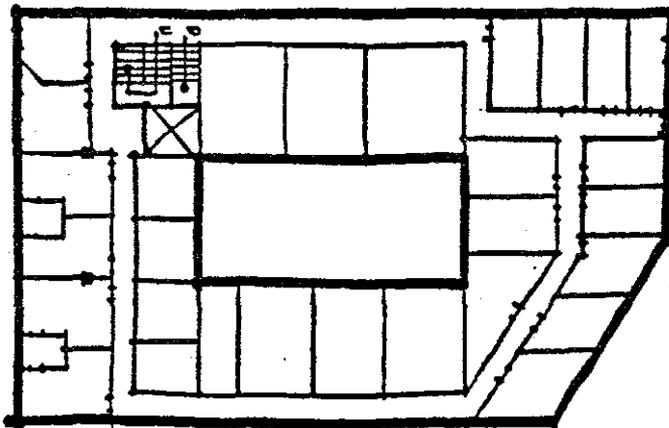
B



1st



2nd - 5th



EXISTING FLOOR PLANS