

PRESTON SCHOOL
(David Preston School)
1251 17th Street, between Fort and Porter Streets
Detroit
Wayne County
Michigan

HABS NO. MI-402

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
Great Lakes Systems Office
1709 Jackson Street
Omaha, NE 68102-2571

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
PRESTON SCHOOL
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I. INTRODUCTION

- Location:** 1251 17th Street, Between Fort and Porter Streets
Detroit, Wayne County, Michigan
- Quad/UTM:** U.S.G.S. Detroit Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator
Coordinates: 17.328980.4687450
- Date of Construction:** 1894
- Present Owner:** City of Detroit
Planning and Development Department
65 Cadillac Square, Suite 1100
Detroit, Michigan 48226
- Present Use:** Vacant
- Significance:** The Preston School is an unusually distinguished expression of the Victorian Romanesque style executed through the medium of an academic building. Designed in 1894 by Malcolmson and Higginbotham, a locally prominent turn-of-the-century architectural firm that designed a number of school buildings for the Detroit School Board, the building is also significant for its association with David Preston, a local banker and philanthropist.
- Historian:** William E. Rutter, Midwest Environmental Consultants, Inc.,
May, 1998

II. HISTORY

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the City of Detroit was experiencing rapid growth that was straining the fabric of its educational system. In 1894 Preston School was constructed to relieve overcrowding at the existing Tappen and Webster Schools. The architectural firm of Malcolmson and Higginbotham designed the school, having served as the Detroit School Board's architect under a renewable annual contract since 1891. The firm completed research into architectural plans for the most progressive schools

built in the nation at that time, and visited numerous structures. Preston School was one of five designed by the firm and built by the school board in 1894, (including Eastern High School, Western High School, Berry School, and Columbian School).

Malcolmson and Higginbotham completed the plans for the 91-foot by 73-foot, two-storey, building. Constructed at a cost of \$22,750, the 8-room school, with a seating capacity of 392, was ready for occupancy in February, 1895. Local contractors involved in the project include M. Blay and Son (masonry) and Vinton and Company (carpentry).¹

The school was named for David Preston, who arrived in Detroit in 1848 and entered into the banking business. A representative of the flourishing wildcat banking era, in 1852 he founded the David Preston Company, which functioned as a private bank until 1885, and was also a partner in the Chicago private bank of Preston, Kean and Company. In 1885, under the banking laws of Michigan, he reorganized the David Preston Company as the Preston Bank of Detroit. Preston was also a philanthropist, emphasizing Methodist causes. He provided generous grants to institutions such as Albion College, and assisted in organization or construction of Methodist churches in Detroit, including the Central Methodist Episcopal Church, Simpson Methodist Episcopal Church, and Cass Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1880, he served as treasurer of a campaign that erased the debt of all Methodist churches in the city. An active prohibitionist, he ran as the Prohibition Party nominee for Governor of Michigan in 1884.

Preston School remained in active service, educating the youth of Detroit for nearly 100 years. In 1957 its status was reduced to that of an annex for Riverside School. Due to declining enrollment, Preston School was closed in 1981. Although no original construction plans or drawings were located, the school's exterior has survived virtually unaltered. The floor plan of the interior remains intact, although the central stairway leading up from the entry facade has been replaced.

Journal of Proceedings on the Board of Education of the City of Detroit, 1893-94.

III. DESCRIPTION

The Preston School represents the Victorian Romanesque style, emphasized in elements such as the round-arched entrances, contrasting texture and color of building materials, and variation in size and shape of fenestration. The two storey building rests on an ashlar limestone foundation, surmounted by a high water table supporting brick curtain walls and shielded by a hipped slate roof.

The principal (east) elevation consists of three bays. The central entrance bay is marked by a projecting single storey, hipped roof, entry porch distinguished by rusticated limestone water table and a large Romanesque round arch. The archivolt of the arch is embellished by bead, astragal, diamond, and egg-and-dart moldings. A rope molding extends across the top of the entrance, surmounted by basket-weave bond brick in which a centrally placed stone plaque states, "DAVID PRESTON SCHOOL, A.D. 1894." This bay's second storey fenestration is composed of recessed paired round arch windows flanked by small rectangular windows. A cast or sculpted likeness of a bearded man, believed to be David Preston, was originally positioned at the convergence of the paired window arches, but has been removed. Large brackets support the hipped entry bay roof. This elevation is strictly symmetrical, with identical, projecting flanking bays whose piercing pattern consists of ranks of four windows on each storey, creating an arcade effect. The limestone sills of the fenestration rest on brick corbels, while the surrounds of basket weave-bond brick are distinguished by the use of paired columns composed of pressed, curved brick between the window voids. Each of the flanking bays rises to a low-pitched hipped roof, carrying to the central roof, whose silhouette is broken by two large chimneys. The paired entry doors are recent vintage steel replacements.

The north elevation consists of three bays. As with the facade, the central entrance bay is marked by a projecting single storey, hipped roof, entry porch distinguished by a rusticated limestone water table and Romanesque round arch entrance. The projecting entry porch is surmounted by a recessed, round arch, second story window flanked by small rectangular windows. Large brackets support the hipped entry bay roof. The facade's symmetry is created by flanking, identical bays presenting ranks of three windows on each storey, that mimic the arcade effect initiated on the facade. Window surrounds are executed in diamond-bond brick and sills are unembellished limestone. The paired entry doors are recent vintage steel replacements. The south elevation is identical to the north elevation.

The rear (west) elevation also consists of three bays, but lacks a pedestrian entry. Its hipped roof, projecting central bay presents a symmetrical piercing pattern in the basement, first, and second stories, composed of central paired segmental arch windows flanked by smaller, narrow, segmental arch windows. Ornamentation is more restrained than on the other elevations, lacking use of limestone elements except for plain window sills, and employing soldier bond brick in the window hoods. Symmetry is still the rule, with identical flanking bays, whose piercing pattern consists of ranks of four segmental arch windows on each storey. Hipped roof dormers break the roofline above each of the flanking bays, and two large chimneys are centrally positioned on the roof above the central bay.

The floor plan of Preston School emphasizes the functional. Upon leaving the facade entry vestibule, the main double stairway leads up to the first floor central hallway. This stairway was replaced during renovation of the school. The school's side entrances also empty into stairwells that lead down to the basement and up to the first and second floors. The character of the first floor is formed by the central hall, which is spanned by two large arches with decorative capitals. The four classrooms on this floor, all with 13-foot, 8-inch high ceilings, flank the three stairways and occupy the corners of the building. Office space occupies the area opposite the main entry stair at the rear of the building.

Ascending stairwells that continue up from the side entrances, the second story plan is similar to the first, with four large corner classrooms displaying ceiling heights of 12 feet, 8 inches. It differs in the location of two smaller classrooms, centrally placed between the corner rooms, that occur above and in place of the first floor entry stairway and the office and mechanical space. The rooms and halls are purely functional and lack explicit ornamentation.

The basement is reached by descending the side stairwells. It consists of functional space, including the boiler room, storerooms, girls' and boys' lavatories, and offices, all with 9-foot ceilings. The corner rooms are large enough to serve as additional classroom space.

The description of the interior of Preston School is derived from reports completed in 1993 by Charles Merz and in 1996 by Horizon Environmental Corporation. No access was attempted for the current HABS report because the structural assessment completed in 1996 concluded that the roof and attic floor are in danger of imminent collapse, and the building is unsafe for entry.

IV. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. BOOKS

Anonymous, Histories of the Public Schools of Detroit, pp. 984-988, circa 1967. Burton Historical Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit.

Anonymous, Journal of Proceedings of the Board of Education of the City of Detroit, 1893-94: September 14, 1893, pp. 67-68; April 12, 1894, pp. 258-259. Burton Historical Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit.

Anonymous, Journal of Proceedings of the Board of Education of the City of Detroit, 1894: July 20, 1894, pp. 19-20; July 26, 1894, p. 28, p. 32. Burton Historical Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit.

B. PAMPHLETS AND BROCHURES

Anonymous, "Preston Methodist Episcopal Church, Dedication of Chapel," April 22, 1888. Burton Historical Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit.

Anonymous, "Preston National Bank," 1887. Burton Historical Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit.

C. NEWSPAPERS

Obituary, "David Preston," April 25, 1887, The Detroit News. Burton Historical Collections, Detroit Public Library, Detroit.

D. REPORTS

Merz, Charles F., "Feasibility Study for the Adaptive Reuse of Housing or the Demolition of the Preston School," October, 1993. Planning and Development Department, City of Detroit.

Horizon Environmental Corporation, "Structural Inspection of the Preston School Building, Ste. Anne's Gate Project," August, 1996. Planning and Development Department, City of Detroit.

E. PLANS AND DRAWINGS

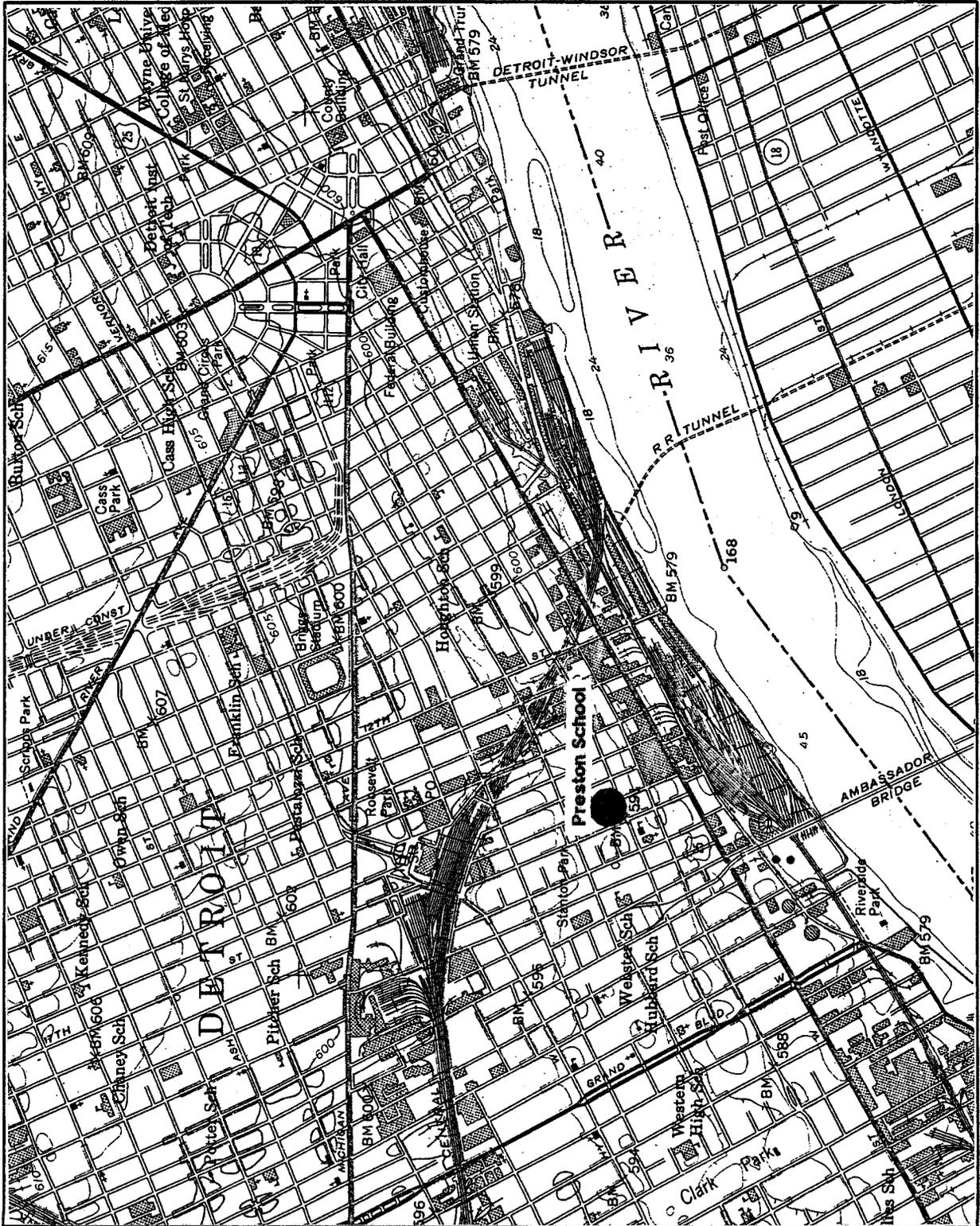
Floor Plans and Measured Drawings, September 3, 1993, Merz and Associates, Architects, 553 East Jefferson Avenue, Detroit, Michigan, 48226.

V. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Preston School will be demolished during site preparation for the construction of St. Anne's Elderly Cooperative Apartments. The project will be financed by a Section 202 Capital Advance from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, possibly augmented by funds from the City of Detroit's HOME program. The apartments will be owned by the Ste. Anne's Non-Profit Housing Corporation.

LOCATION MAP

Preston School
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FIELD RECORDS

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National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001