

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

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**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received JUN 18 1984
date entered JUL 19 1984

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic United Congregational Church

and/or common same

2. Location

street & number 877 Park Avenue N/A not for publication

city, town Bridgeport N/A vicinity of

state Connecticut code 09 county Fairfield code 001

3. Classification

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|---|
| Category | Ownership | Status | Present Use | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> district | <input type="checkbox"/> public | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied | <input type="checkbox"/> agriculture | <input type="checkbox"/> museum |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s) | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private | <input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied | <input type="checkbox"/> commercial | <input type="checkbox"/> park |
| <input type="checkbox"/> structure | <input type="checkbox"/> both | <input type="checkbox"/> work in progress | <input type="checkbox"/> educational | <input type="checkbox"/> private residence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> site | Public Acquisition | Accessible | <input type="checkbox"/> entertainment | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religious |
| <input type="checkbox"/> object | <input type="checkbox"/> in process | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted | <input type="checkbox"/> government | <input type="checkbox"/> scientific |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> being considered | <input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted | <input type="checkbox"/> industrial | <input type="checkbox"/> transportation |
| | N/A | <input type="checkbox"/> no | <input type="checkbox"/> military | <input type="checkbox"/> other: |

4. Owner of Property

name United Congregational Church

street & number 877 Park Avenue

city, town Bridgeport N/A vicinity of state Connecticut

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Town Clerk's Office

street & number 45 Lyon Terrace

city, town Bridgeport state Connecticut

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title State Register of Historic Places has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1983 federal state county local

depository for survey records Connecticut Historical Commission, 59 S. Prospect Street

city, town Hartford state Connecticut

7. Description

| | | | |
|---------------|------------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Condition | | Check one | Check one |
| ___ excellent | ___ deteriorated | ___ unaltered | ..XX original site |
| ..XX good | ___ ruins | ..XX altered | ___ moved date |
| ___ fair | ___ unexposed | | |

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The United Congregational Church is a substantial brick Georgian-Revival style structure facing northwest on the southwest corner of the intersection of Park Avenue and State Street in Bridgeport. The church was designed by Allen & Collens of New York and was built in 1925-1926. The site is a flat one and the church faces State Street, with entrances to the chapel and parish house on Park Avenue. To the north from the church porch are visible the landmarks of St. John's Protestant Episcopal Church, a Gothic Revival building, and the Nathaniel Wheeler Memorial Fountain, a Beaux-Arts style design with a mermaid as the central figure.

The main block of the church, the sanctuary (Photograph #1), is symmetrically massed, but the parish house and chapel to the rear of the main block present a less regular appearance. The whole structure is built of brick laid in Flemish bond with cast-stone trim used to enhance the whole design. The main block is two stories high, set on a raised basement, three bays wide, and six bays deep. A gabled standing seam tin roof is set with its gable end facing State Street. A tall and ornate steeple is placed above the central entrance bay. The facade is dominated by a monumental portico supported by four Doric columns. The front facade is the most impressive; a series of shallow stone steps three-quarters the width of the facade lead to the shelter of the two-story portico. The portico is constructed of cast stone and the shallow pediment encloses a beautifully designed sunburst motif executed in high relief. The cornice of the pediment is delicately molded, and modillion blocks with guttae alternate with panelled soffits (Photograph #3). A course of dentils surmounts a frieze ornamented with triglyphs. Under the portico the facade is divided into three sections; the central bay is faced in brick while the side bays are faced with stone. These bays are terminated by two-story high Doric pilasters. The entrance bay is on a monumental scale and the door surround is capped by a round-headed arch (Photograph #2). Brick headers with a stone keystone and imposts emphasize the arch of the door surround. The entrance is recessed, making the molding of the arch and the paired colonnettes flanking the door more dramatic in their impact. A large leaded glass fanlight surmounts a fluted frieze with a projecting central panel with a sunburst motif. The paired double doors have four raised panels arranged in a pleasing design. Below the entry the name and date of construction of the church are incised in the stone of the top step. The side bays also boast handsome arched entrances. The door surrounds are of a simple design in cast stone with a keystone at the center of the round-headed arch. Leaded glass fanlights surmount double paired raised panel doors. Quotations from the Bible are incised in stone panels above each side door. Twelve-over-twelve windows are set above each entrance and illuminate a gallery on the interior. Like the portico, the cornice and gable end of the main facade are ornamented with modillion blocks with guttae. A broad plain stone frieze wraps around the entire building and the corners are quoined. The steeple is square in section at the base while clock faces with stone surrounds face the four compass points. Arched pediments with modillion blocks surmount the clock faces. The second stage of the steeple is frame in contrast to the brick/frame combination of the base. Tall arched louvered openings flanked by Corinthian colonnettes surmounted by urns face the four compass points. The third stage is also of frame construction and is hexagonal in section. Smaller arched windows flanked by free standing Corinthian columns form the bell tower. A molded cornice with modillion blocks surmounts the third stage while the fourth stage is much shorter than the second or third stages. This frame stage has oval windows facing the compass points. The spire is six-sided, rising to a sharp point terminating in a turnip-shaped finial and flaring gracefully at the eaves above the fourth

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stage. The spire is surmounted by a double cross pointing toward all the compass points and a golden ball symbolizing the world.

The Park Avenue elevation (Photographs #1 & #4) is graced by five great arched windows two stories high with stone keystones and imposts. A pedimented entrance is located on street level near the front of the church. A sash window with a stone block sill is set above the entrance and the entrance bay is separated from the rest of the composition by a vertical band of quoins. A projecting one-story flat-roofed entrance pavilion is set below the sixth bay. This entrance marks the termination of the main block. The one-story brick gable-roofed chapel is located directly behind the Park Avenue entrance to the sanctuary. The chapel is four bays deep with arched window surrounds with recessed sash windows. Behind the chapel is the parish house (Photograph #4). The section fronting on Park Avenue is two stories tall with a hipped standing seam tin roof. The parish house is five bays wide with a generous arched entry. Like the main entrance, the surround is molded in a wide band above a fanlight transom. Side lights flank the double doors.

The west elevation (Photograph #5), fronting on the church parking lot, is the most irregular of all the elevations. The main block design is similar to that of the Park Avenue elevation. A small gabled-roof two-story wing projects slightly from the level of the main block to the rear of the last bay of the main block. This wing is five bays wide with a ground floor entrance on the south end. A larger two-story gable-roofed wing four bays wide stands at right angles to the main block at the rear of the church. These two small wings are part of the parish house/Sunday School complex of the church.

On the interior the finish of the main block is of the most interest. The main entrance leads into a vestibule with stairs rising to a gallery that stretches across the front of the church. The sanctuary is large, light and airy with a main aisle leading to a communion table and parallel barrel vaulted side aisles. Stained glass windows from the congregation's old North Church are set behind the simple but elegant altar. The minister's stall was given by Mrs. William Horace Day, in memory of her husband, the first pastor of the United Congregational Church.

A door to the left of the altar leads to the Colonial Revival Howland Memorial Chapel. The chapel, although smaller than the main sanctuary, is rich in molded window and door surrounds and is far less austere than the main sanctuary. Box-like Colonial Revival pews are used in this room.

The parish house at the rear has an L-shaped central corridor and a stair leading to the second floor near the Park Avenue entrance. It houses the church office, pastor's study, Sunday School and meeting rooms for the church. Although this section contains little architectural detail it is an unusual survival in that it has been little changed since the building's construction.

8. Significance

| Period | Areas of Significance—Check and justify below | | | |
|-------------------|---|------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| prehistoric | archeology-prehistoric | community planning | landscape architecture | religion |
| 1400-1499 | archeology-historic | conservation | law | science |
| 1500-1599 | agriculture | economics | literature | sculpture |
| 1600-1699 | ..XX architecture | education | military | social/ |
| 1700-1799 | art | engineering | music | humanitarian |
| 1800-1899 | commerce | exploration/settlement | philosophy | theater |
| ..XX 1900- | communications | industry | politics/government | transportation |
| | | invention | | other (specify) |

Criterion A & C

Specific dates 1924-1926 **Builder/Architect** Allen & Collens

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The United Congregational Church in its various forms has played an important role in the religious history of the Bridgeport community for nearly three hundred years. (Criterion A) The present church, a handsome example of the Georgian Revival style, dating from 1926, was designed by the firm of Allen & Collens, of New York, designers of the Cloisters Museum at Fort Tryon Park, New York City. (Criterion C)

The United Congregational Church is a good representative example of a church designed in the Georgian Revival style. The church's architects, Allen & Collens, a leading New York firm in the early twentieth century, are however best known for their Gothic Revival designs. Most notable of the firm's works are the reconstructed Cloisters at Fort Tryon Park and a Gothic Revival hall at Vassar College, in Poughkeepsie, New York.

Most of Bridgeport's large churches were built in the late nineteenth century, so the United Congregational Church is distinctive because it was the city's last major church building to be constructed before the depression. The changing trends in church architecture are evident in the design of the building, and United Congregational's ordered and controlled facade with its crisp Classical detail contrasts strongly with the other two neighboring churches, St. John's Episcopal Church, a Gothic Revival structure built in 1873-1875 one block to the north, and the First Baptist Church, built in the Romanesque style in 1892-1894 one block north east of the United Congregational Church.

The United Congregational Church's design is of fine quality; the massing, proportions and use of detail is satisfying and handsome. The simple box-like brick form, capped by a gable roof is enhanced by the restrained use of elegant Classical details. The effect is solid without being ponderous and the architect's expertise, as well as that of the builders, is evident.

The settlement of the area which later became known as Bridgeport occurred c. 1665; within twenty-five years residents made their first efforts to establish a local church. By June 13, 1695, the first meeting house was completed on what is today Park Avenue and Worth Street. The community, known during this early period as Stratfield, prospered and the first meeting house was replaced c. 1717 by a more ambitious structure. Built on the northwest corner of Park and North avenues, the church measured 48' x 38' and in 1718 a gallery was added. No pews graced the interior at first, but these, along with a steeple and bell, were added as the century progressed.

The United Congregational Church has been during its long history generally fortunate in its pastors, and a number of them achieved distinguished reputations. In the mid-eighteenth century one of the first of these, Lyman Hall, proved unsatisfactory to the Stratfield congregation. Hall was a Yale graduate and after he was ordained he served the Stratfield church as pastor from 1749 until 1751. He was dismissed by the Stratfield church and later moved to Fairfield, where he taught school and studied medicine.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Curtiss, Lucy S. Two Hundred and Fifty Years: The Story of the United Congregational Church of Bridgeport 1695-1945, Bridgeport: 1945, by church.

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property approx. 2 acres

Quadrangle name Bridgeport

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UTM References

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Verbal boundary description and justification

A description of the boundaries of the property may be found in Volume 614, Page 19 of the Bridgeport Land Records at the Town Clerk's Office, 45 Lyon Street, Bridgeport, CT

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state N/A code county code

state N/A code county code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Kate Ohno, Preservation Consultant edited by: John Herzan, National Register Coordinator

organization Connecticut Historical Commission date May 1983

street & number 59 S. Prospect Street telephone (203) 566-3005

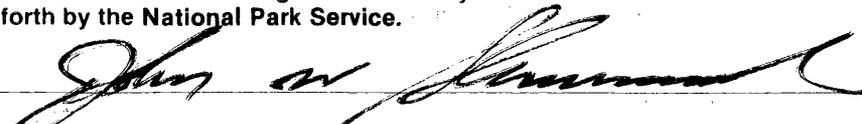
city or town Hartford state Connecticut

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

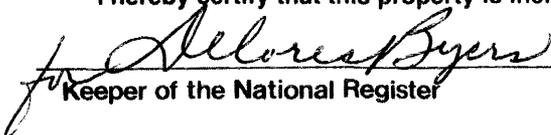
As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature 

title Director, Connecticut Historical Commission date 6/7/84

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register


Keeper of the National Register

Entered in the National Register date 7/19/84

Attest: _____ date _____

Chief of Registration

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He carried his practice of medicine to Georgia and later represented that state at the Continental Congress of 1775 and became one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Hall's lasting interest in politics led him to the highest office in state government, that of governor of Georgia. Another prominent eighteenth century pastor of the Stratfield Church was Reverend Samuel Blatchford. Blatchford was a founder of the Missionary Society of Connecticut, established in 1798 while Blatchford was pastor of the Stratfield church.¹

Nearly one hundred years passed between the construction of the church on Park and North avenues and the dedication in 1807 of a new church under the ministry of Reverend Elijah Waterman. The change in location to Broad Street reflected the increasing importance of the area nearest the water. In 1805 Ezra Hubbell deeded a lot to the church of Broad Street facing Bank Street. The Hubbells were longtime members and staunch supporters of the church. The frame church with its proud steeple was larger and more pretentious than the 1717 church, reflecting not only growth in the church membership, and increasing prosperity, but also the focusing of attention on an urban congregation rather than the more widely scattered and more rurally oriented congregation which the two previous churches had been built to serve. Within fifteen years of its completion a new bell was installed to call the congregation to worship. The future of the church at the time of the construction of the new structure on Broad Street seemed bright, but the nineteenth century was fated to bring difficulties and division to the congregation. Progressive missionary and temperance movements emerging from the Second Awakening proved a powerful divisive force in the congregation. Reverend John Blatchford, a "new school" minister, espoused these movements and approximately half the congregation agreed with his ideas while the other half found that they could not accept them. In 1830 the society divided, giving \$2,000 to the splinter group to erect a new house of worship. A site was chosen on the corner of Broad and Gilbert streets and while the second church was under construction the members met for worship at the High School House on State Street. A new sanctuary was dedicated in November, 1830, and Dr. Nathaniel Hewitt answered the call of the new church to be its pastor. Dr. Hewitt was an organizer of the British and Foreign Temperance Society. The old Congregational church was known as the "North Church" while the newer structure on Broad and Gilbert Streets was known as the "South Church." Shortly after the formation of the South Church the size of the congregation was reduced when seventy-eight members withdrew to form a Presbyterian church. Dr. Hewitt left at the same time to become pastor of the newly formed church.²

By the mid-nineteenth century the old North Church was found to be inadequate for the congregation's needs and in 1848 a drive to raise funds to build a new church was begun. Under the leadership of the Reverend St. John Page (pastor from 1847 until 1853) a \$25,000 brick church was erected in the Gothic Revival style.³ The Gothic Revival style became by the mid-nineteenth century the preferred style for churches. Enthusiasm for the style was encouraged by the Cambridge Camden Society, founded in England for the advancement of Medieval art and architecture, and in the United States the appropriateness of the style for church buildings was confirmed by the popularity of the works of Richard Upjohn. The Rev. George Ayliffe Poole said: "A Gothic Church, in its perfection, is an exposition of

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the distinctive doctrines of Christianity, clothed upon with a material form; and is, as Coleridge has more forcibly expressed it, 'the petrification of our religion.'⁴ Although most of the first churches to be designed in the Gothic Revival style were built for Episcopal congregations, the style was soon adopted by other denominations, as evidenced by the construction of the North Church. The new North Church was built on the same site as the earlier Broad Street sanctuary and was dedicated in 1850. The old frame church was moved to the north edge of the lot and continued to be used for meeting even after the new church was under construction. The frame church was later sold to Christ Church and was moved to John Street. Unfortunately, it was destroyed by fire shortly after the move. The new brick Gothic Revival church was enhanced by a spire which was later removed when it was found to be unsafe. This building was used until the 1910s and photographic documentation of its appearance exists although it was demolished c. 1916.⁵

By the early 1860s the South Church also felt the need for a new church building. The old frame structure was moved to a vacant lot across the street, and once again the old site was reused. The new brick church with a steeple and bell was completed and dedicated in January, 1862. It was remodeled in 1895 and continued to be used until the construction of the present church in 1926.⁶

The late nineteenth century marked a period of intense missionary activity by both churches. Although the churches remained divided, they cooperated on a number of community service projects and as early as the 1870s this cooperation was a harbinger of their twentieth century merger. After the Civil War the new industrial settlements in East Bridgeport grew rapidly; one member from each church agreed to pay the rent of Bethesda Chapel for one year if a church was organized to meet the needs of these new settlements. The Park Street Congregational Church was founded in 1870 as a direct outgrowth of these efforts. In 1866 a Sunday School was organized by the members of the North Church in the north end of Bridgeport. Later, this led to the organization of the Olivet Church. In 1894 the King's Highway Church was organized through the efforts of the North, South and Park Street churches, and in the following year the North and South churches helped to establish the Swedish Congregational Church. Bethany Chapel, like the Park Street Church, grew out of a Sunday School begun in 1893 on upper Main Street. In 1896 Bethany Chapel and the Italian Congregational Church were incorporated as the Congregational Union of Bridgeport by all the Congregational churches of the city. In 1930 Bethany was incorporated as an independent church. The rapid growth of Bridgeport dictated the need for these new churches in the new neighborhoods of the city; both blue and white collar workers benefitted from the expansion of the North and South churches' ministry.⁷

By the early twentieth century the need was felt for a large central church and in 1912 a merger between the North and South churches was proposed to avoid duplication of effort and equipment, but support for the measure was lacking. On June 20, 1915, a special meeting was held and a committee appointed to make enquiries of the North Church with regard to union. By January 17, 1916, a joint committee from both churches submitted a detailed plan of union. This plan was adopted. The question of the location of the United Congregational Church was a difficult one. Finally, it was decided that a new building would be erected on the site of the North Church while the old brick North Church would be demolished.

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Worship services would be held at the South Church until the new building was completed. Demolition of the North Church was begun under the pastorate of Dr. William Horace Day and the building fund included \$100,000. Because of the difficulties of building during the First World War and because of the expanded duties of the pastor and many members of the congregation during the war years plans to begin construction were abandoned until the end of the war. After the cessation of hostilities the plans for a new church were re-examined. The former site of the North Church was then found to be too small. The neighborhood had a strong commercial character and there was no room for expansion of the church or for parking. The decision was made to sell the lot and in the spring of 1924 another lot was purchased on the corner of Park Avenue and State Street.⁸ This area had been earmarked in the mid 1910s by the City Plan Commission to house a new park, a municipal complex and a new post office.⁹ The only part of this design that was built was the Nathaniel Wheeler Memorial Fountain, a Beaux-Arts-style fountain at the intersection of Fairfield and Park Avenues, intended to complement the landscaped park-like traffic islands around which the public library, the city club, city hall, the municipal firehouse and the post office were to be grouped. St. John's Protestant Episcopal Church, built at the corner of Fairfield and Park Avenues in the early 1870s, was to be the only older structure incorporated in the design. The monumental intersection was intended to be the gateway to downtown Bridgeport, so the United Congregational Church's choice of a building site was easily comprehensible in 1924. If the municipal complex had been built as planned the Congregational Church would have faced the Episcopal Church across the landscaped traffic islands, balancing the massive library and city hall complexes on the other sides of the square.

On December 2, 1924, ground was broken at the new site. The building committee consisted of Herman K. Beach, chairman, James D. Skinner, Willis F. Hobbs, James G. Ludlum, and Wilbur A. Smith. The firm of Allen & Collens of New York was chosen to execute the design of the church and Charles Collens was the supervising architect. This firm was also responsible for the design of Riverside Church and the reassembled Cloisters, both in New York.¹⁰ The church was built in the Georgian Revival style. The Georgian style was derived from the Classical, Renaissance, and Baroque forms, and was a popular style during the pre-Revolutionary period of the thirteen colonies. Loosely adapted and revived in the early twentieth century, the style not only carried the appeal of classical forms, but also the nostalgia value of a dynamic period in United States history. This historical appeal was particularly apt for the design of the United Congregational Church, for it recalled a time before the congregation was divided by doctrinal conflicts in the early nineteenth century and it symbolized the unity of belief and effort of an earlier period, a unity that the congregation hoped to revive in the united church.

On May 10, 1925, the cornerstone of the new church was laid and on February 14, 1926, the last service was held in the old South Church. The first meeting in the new church was held on May 16, 1926, and on June 13, 1926, it was formally dedicated.¹¹

The Rev. Dr. William Horace Day was the pastor of the church during its construction and is viewed today as one of the church's most outstanding leaders. Certainly his role in the union of the two congregations and the building of the new church plays no little part in this reputation, but Dr. Day was also active in promoting interdenominational cooperation

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worldwide. In 1917 he was elected moderator of the National Council of Congregational Churches and later he served on various commissions of the Federal Council of Churches. Dr. Day was also active in the promotion of the World Council of Churches.¹²

Since 1695 the Congregational churches of Bridgeport have played an active role in the community at large. A number of prominent people have been associated with the church during its history, most notably its pastors. What its pastors have achieved while associated with the church and even after such ties have been broken certainly reflects well on the church and its mission. The church's missionary efforts, particularly in the late nineteenth century, resulted in tangible benefits for the entire city. Today, the symmetrically proportioned Georgian Revival church stands much as it did when it was built in the mid 1920s. Both the interior and the exterior remain substantially unchanged. It is a fine example of the Georgian Revival style as designed by a distinguished firm of New York architects.

End Notes

¹Curtiss, Lucy S. Two Hundred & Fifty Years The Story of the United Congregational Church of Bridgeport 1695-1945 (Bridgeport: by the church, 1945) pp. 1, 12-13, 23, 36, 52-53.

²Ibid., pp. 54, 56, 75-76, 78.

³Ibid., p. 81.

⁴Loth, Calder and Trousdale, Julius Sadler, Jr. The Only Proper Style Gothic Architecture in America (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), p. 60.

⁵Curtiss, The United Congregational Church of Bridgeport, p. 81.

⁶Ibid., p. 91.

⁷Ibid., pp. 93-94, 96-97.

⁸Ibid., pp. 110-112, 116, 119, 121.

⁹Nolen, John. Better City Planning for Bridgeport (Bridgeport: by the city of Bridgeport, 1916), pp. 17, 30.

¹⁰Curtiss, The United Congregational Church of Bridgeport, p. 121.

¹¹Ibid., p. 122-124.

¹²Ibid., p. 129.