

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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RECEIVED MAR 31 1982
DATE ENTERED APR 23 1982

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

HISTORIC

Mather Homestead

AND/OR COMMON

Excelsior Lodge #3 PHA

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

2 Mahl Avenue

N/A NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Hartford,

N/A VICINITY OF

First

STATE

CODE

COUNTY

CODE

Connecticut

09

Hartford

003

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

OWNERSHIP

STATUS

PRESENT USE

DISTRICT

PUBLIC

OCCUPIED

AGRICULTURE

MUSEUM

BUILDING(S)

PRIVATE

UNOCCUPIED

COMMERCIAL

PARK

STRUCTURE

BOTH

WORK IN PROGRESS

EDUCATIONAL

PRIVATE RESIDENCE

SITE

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

ACCESSIBLE

ENTERTAINMENT

RELIGIOUS

OBJECT

IN PROCESS

YES: RESTRICTED

GOVERNMENT

SCIENTIFIC

BEING CONSIDERED

YES: UNRESTRICTED

INDUSTRIAL

TRANSPORTATION

N/A

NO

MILITARY

OTHER: Masonic

Lodge

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

Excelsior Lodge #3 F & A.M.

STREET & NUMBER

2 Mahl Avenue

CITY, TOWN

STATE

Hartford

N/A VICINITY OF

Connecticut 06120

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,

REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Hartford Town Clerk, Municipal Building

STREET & NUMBER

550 Main Street

CITY, TOWN

STATE

Hartford,

Connecticut 06103

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

State Register of Historic Places

DATE

1981

FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

Connecticut Historical Commission

CITY, TOWN

STATE

Hartford,

Connecticut

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION

CHECK ONE

CHECK ONE

EXCELLENT
 GOOD
 FAIR

DETERIORATED
 RUINS
 UNEXPOSED

UNALTERED
 ALTERED

ORIGINAL SITE
 MOVED DATE _____

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Mather Homestead is a two-story brick Greek Revival farmhouse built between 1835 and 1843. The building, though facing Mahl Avenue, originally had a Main Street address before Mahl Avenue was opened in 1893. Main Street, now commercial in use, had been the major rural highway leading from Hartford to Windsor. Mahl Avenue is lined with closely set two-family houses from the 1890's. The setting of the Mather Homestead itself is still quite open; set above the street at the brow of a low rise, it is flanked by empty houselots.

The building has gone through a major use transformation from residential to institutional, reflected in its appearance through the years. The exterior retains most of its original features, while the interior has been extensively altered. From its construction until 1926, it was a residence, from 1926 to 1954, a synagogue, and from 1954 to the present, a Masonic Lodge.

The original appearance of the main block is well documented in a photograph of c. 1905 taken by the Skinner family, who lived there at the time (Photograph 1). Built of red brick with white wooden trim and brownstone sills, the house has a flat-roofed, one-story wooden Doric colonnade running the full width of the facade. In addition to the six freestanding fluted columns, there are two engaged columns on the walls at the ends of the colonnade. The heavy entablature of the portico is echoed at the top of the building by a brick frieze under the eaves. A low hipped roof with a rather prominent cornice crowns the whole. The facade apparently has five structural bays in the Georgian fashion, although the east bay has no windows. Entry was at the center of the facade through a massive paneled door. The two windows to the left of the entry originally ran floor-to-ceiling for entry from the front parlor to the portico.

An ell to the west (Photograph 3) has a gently sloped gabled roof and is set back from the main facade. A square-columned, simple porch runs across its front. A woodshed and carriage house were originally connected to the house, and were removed about 1900.

The original plan of the main block had a central stairway and hall from which opened rooms to either side. On the first floor west was one large sitting room, at the east a double parlor. During the Skinners' tenure (1887 to 1912), the ell contained a kitchen in back and a dining room in front. Upstairs were bedrooms and storerooms.

In November 1926, conversion to a synagogue began. The building was purchased on November 12, and on the 26th a permit for an addition was issued to builder L. Schwinker. Exterior alterations consisted of a small, round-walled addition to the east wall for an ark to hold the Torah scrolls, changes to move the main entry from the central to the west bay of the main block, and a second-story

continued

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW

<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY) Black History
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES 1835-1893; 1926

BUILDER/ARCHITECT Unknown

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Mather Homestead is significant because its history and architecture uniquely chronicle a century-and-a-half of the socioeconomic history of Hartford's North End (criteria A). Four eras of neighborhood history are reflected in the building. First, the house is a rare and fine representative of Hartford's agricultural heritage; William Mather, a scion of a prominent old Yankee family, built the homestead on his farm in about 1840. Second, when the house and land became an entirely residential development in 1893, the homestead represented the transformation of Hartford's outlying districts from farmland to suburb in response to the industrialization of the city. When converted to a synagogue in 1926, it marked the increasing ethnic diversity of the city and the decreasing dominance of the old Yankee families; this neighborhood, in particular, was a center of the Jewish community. The fourth, and most recent change in neighborhood and city character is reflected in the 1954 conversion to a Masonic Temple by a chapter of the black arm of the movement, the Prince Hall Masons. Though the Excelsior Lodge acquired the building less than 50 years ago, its significance could be considered to transcend the 50-year eligibility requirement because the building is the only structure to have been owned by the Lodge, one of the oldest black organizations in Hartford.

The Homestead also has architectural significance (criteria C) as the finest (and one of the only) Greek Revival farmhouses in the city. It also has architectural interest as an example of Eastern European synagogue design adapted to the American scene.

Historical Significance

1. The Mathers: Hartford's Agricultural Character

Prosperous farmer William Mather built his homestead when Main Street was a country road, and open fields stretched to the east and west. Mather was an eighth-generation Yankee, born on November 3, 1800 into a large and prominent family who cultivated extensive acreage in Hartford and Windsor. He married Jane Caroline Holcomb on April 14, 1835. The land on which Mather built his homestead was already owned by his family; title searches fail to reveal exactly when he acquired the land. The 1843 Hartford City Directory is the first documentation citing William Mather as a farmer living at the site. However, because earlier directories do not include any listings at all from outlying neighborhoods, it is not unlikely that he built the house earlier. From the architectural and biographical evidence,

continued

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

1. Rogers, Dixon, and Fitch: History of Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Connecticut. New Haven: Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Connecticut. 1973.
2. Kummer, ed. Hartford Architecture, Volume Three: North and West Neighborhoods. Hartford: Hartford Architecture Conservancy, 1980.
3. Silverman, Morris. Hartford Jews, 1659-1970. Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society, 1970.
4. Interview with Mark Skinner, May 22, 1980. 5. Interview, Arthur Stoltz, July 30, 1981

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY Less than one

QUADRANGLE NAME Hartford North

QUADRANGLE SCALE 1:24,000

UTM REFERENCES

A 18 693070 4627920

B

ZONE EASTING NORTHING

ZONE EASTING NORTHING

C

D

E

F

G

H

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The verbal boundary description is located in Volume 946, p. 577 of the Hartford Land Records.

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Merle Kummer, Staff Director

March 16, 1981

ORGANIZATION

DATE

Hartford Architecture Conservancy

STREET & NUMBER

TELEPHONE

130 Washington Street

203-525-0279

CITY OR TOWN

STATE

Hartford

Connecticut 06106

12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL X

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 March 11, 1982

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

Delores Byers
KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

4/29/82

ATTEST:

DATE

CHIEF OF REGISTRATION

FHR-8-300A
(11/78)

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Surveys (continued)

Hartford Architecture Conservancy Survey of Hartford
Local - 1975-1978

Hartford Architecture Conservancy

Records deposited with:

Stowe-Day Foundation
Hartford, Connecticut

The building is included in one of the survey's published volumes:

Hartford Architecture, Volume Three: North and West Neighborhoods,
Hartford Architecture Conservancy, 1980.

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porch above the colonnade (Photograph 2). On the inside, almost the entire main block was opened into a two-story high sanctuary space with a gallery for women around the north, west, and east walls. Men entered at the first floor through a doorway created from the westernmost window. The other floor-to-ceiling window and the original door opening were converted into windows with normal-height sills. Women entered from above after climbing a new exterior stairway which led up to the second-story porch. A kitchen was created at the western part of the second floor. Interiors were extremely simple, with standard 1920's moldings and painted plaster walls. The new front door, with its paneling of octagonal pattern, is the most distinctive decorative detail of the 1926-27 renovation.

When Excelsior Lodge took over the building in 1954, the exterior was left untouched. Few changes, except for new interior stairs and kitchen alterations, were made to the interior. The Lodge did, however, extensively renovate the basement into storage space and meeting rooms.

The original heavy timber mortise-and-tenon floor framing is still visible in some areas of the basement. Some joists in the main section are hand-hewn, and under the ell, the joists are half-logs, squared off only at the top to support the floorboards. Three iron tie bars, dating from before 1905, are visible on the exterior, one between the first and second floors, and two under the frieze (Photograph 4).

The masonry structure and roof appear to be in excellent condition. Exterior wooden elements and interior finishes have experienced some deterioration. The exterior is now painted white.

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it is most likely that Mather constructed the house shortly after his marriage in 1835.

The homestead is Hartford's most dramatic remaining structure that represents the wealth generated from the rye and Indian corn grown in the Connecticut Valley before 1850. William Mather's holdings comprised a number of acres to the south, east, and north of the house, and his extensive orchards behind the house remained productive into the 20th century. Family wills show that the Mathers invested their cash in bank, insurance, and rail stock, but William remained a working farmer until his death in 1863.

William's widow, Jane Holcomb Mather, was a prominent citizen in her own right. After William's death, she kept the estate going and lived in the homestead with their son, John, until her own death in 1886. A devoted Episcopalian, she was the major force in establishing the first Episcopal Parish in the North End. She donated a tract of her Main Street land for the construction of St. Thomas Church (now Union Baptist) as a memorial to her husband and to Bishop Thomas Brownell, and the church was completed in 1871.

2. The Mahl Development: Growth of the Industrial Suburb and Ethnic Change

When Jane Mather died in 1886, the growth in Hartford's population was making her farmland increasingly valuable for residential development. By 1869, a horse-drawn street railway had started operating on Main Street, and by Mrs. Mather's death, the area was an easy commute from downtown businesses.

In 1887, Charles Skinner, an insurance clerk, rented the house from Timothy Mather and moved in his growing family. A half-dozen years later, a real estate developer named Frederick Mahl purchased most of the Mather estate, including the house. In 1898, he sold the house and houselot to Skinner, by which time the neighborhood had been completely transformed. In five years, Mahl had opened a street (named, not surprisingly, Mahl Avenue), divided it into houselots, and built an entire street of densely set 2½-story houses.

The residential transformation has two facets of significance: it reflects first the extraordinary population growth in the city due to industrialization, and second, the increasing ethnic diversity of that population. While Hartford's industrialization had begun about 1850 with gunmaking and machine manufacturing,

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the 1890s showed tremendous growth in manufacturing, commerce, and insurance. This business expansion, coupled with an unprecedented influx of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, led to a huge increase in the amount of city land developed for residences. Fredierick Mahl was himself a German immigrant, and many of the families who lived in his new Mahl Avenue development were German and/or Jewish.

The Skinner family lived in the house until 1912, and in 1916 sold it to a Jewish family, the Harry Lutwacks. By that time, the Northeast neighborhood was dominated by Jews, who had begun to establish themselves in the commercial life of the city.

3. Congregation Chevre Kadishe Teferes Israel: Coming of Age of the Immigrant Community

The conversion of the house to a syangogue reflects the strengthening of Hartford's Jewish Community during the 1920s: increasingly, religious and cultural institutions were moving out of rented quarters and into permanent homes. Between 1923 and 1930, three brand-new synagogues were constructed in the North End, the Mather house converted to a fourth, and a fifth, the impressive Temple Beth Israel, built in suburban West Hartford.

In 1926, two small religious organizations of Russian immigrants decided to pool their resources and buy the building for a synagogue. Chevre Kadishe was an organization of orthodox Jews from Wolkowysk formed in 1906 to carry out the traditional burial rites; Teferes Israel was a congregation of immigrants from Ludmir.

Community members underook the renovations, outlined earlier in the Description section. Architecturally, they followed a traditional Ashkenazi plan: an ark for the Sacred Torah scrolls on the east wall, and a platform (now removed) in the center of the room for reading the Torah. In accordance with Orthodox tradition, men and women sat separately. Seating for the men was on the first floor, and for women in a gallery on the second floor. The lack of decorative detailing also reflects traditional practice: not only were "graven images" forbidden by Biblical law, but decorative features of any sort had traditionally been out of the price range of most Eastern European Jewish communities. The building displays the continuation of European practice in synagogue design: adapting local materials and designs to traditional uses (Criteria C).

4. Excelsior Lodge, Prince Hall: Freemasonry and the Black Community

In 1954, Excelsior Lodge purchased the building from Chevre Kadishe Teferes Israel, who moved to a new synagogue on Blue Hills Avenue. Right after World

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War II, the Northeast neighborhood began attracting upwardly mobile black families, as it had attracted Jewish families a generation before; meanwhile, the Jewish population began a major shift toward the newest sections of Hartford and suburban towns.

Because the building is the only structure to have been owned by the Lodge, which was chartered in 1859, it can be considered to have additional historic significance (criteria A) from its associations with this important black movement. The movement originated in Boston in 1784 when a free black, Prince Hall, was granted a charter for a black Masonic chapter; since then, American Freemasonry has had two separate arms, a black and a white. In keeping with the Enlightenment ideals of early Freemasonry, Prince Hall lodges have traditionally been forces in the black community for equal education, civil rights, and social welfare.

From its inception on May 14, 1859, Hartford's Excelsior Lodge included among its members many leaders of Hartford's black community. Early efforts of Lodge members focused on education for black children. James Ralston, a leader in both state and local Masonic activities, was the force behind the "Ralston Petition," presented to the State Legislature in 1868, which moved the assembly to open State public schools to black children. Throughout the Lodge's history, its membership has included prominent local educators, professionals, and politicians. During its tenure in the Mather house, the Lodge has been active in contributing to civil rights causes as well as the civic and charitable activities more typical of contemporary American Freemasonry.

Architectural Significance

The Mather Homestead has two levels of architectural significance, as mentioned earlier: as an example of the Greek Revival style and also of synagogue design. Section 3 of this essay delineates the significance of the synagogue conversion; this section will briefly discuss the house as a Greek Revival design.

The Mather Homestead is the finest remaining Greek Revival farmhouse in Hartford, and one of the few remaining high-style Greek Revival residences in the city; another, the Ellery Hills house of c. 1840, is an imposing townhouse already listed in the National Register. Very little architecture of any sort from before 1850 has survived Hartford's successive redevelopments, and the Mather house has survived largely because of its outlying location and successful conversion to institutional use.

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The house represents an early stage in the adoption of the Greek Revival style in Hartford. In plan, it was basically a five-bay, central hall house of traditional Connecticut Valley Georgian- or Federal-period design. Modifications in proportions, massing, and detailing, however, reflect the growing acceptance of the Greek Revival. The five-bay facade has lost its fifth window, on the east bay, and the composition is dominated by a one-story Greek Doric colonnade running the width of the facade. The roof is not gabled, as in earlier periods, but rather takes a low, hipped form in keeping with the more massive, lithic proportions of the Greek Revival. The detailing is simple and bold, and includes a complete entablature at the colonnade echoed by a frieze and cornice at the top. Though the second-story porch and ark addition are very noticeable, the carefully balanced, gracefully proportioned original design still dominates the ensemble, adding its architectural significance as one of the few remaining buildings of its period in Hartford.