



A History of 142 Free Street and Free Street at Congress Square

for the Portland Museum of Art
Portland, Maine

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The Free Street Theater (1830-1835)

Free Street and 142 Free Street are slightly off axis. For the purposes of the following report the Free Street-facing facade of 142 Free Street is the north facade and Free Street runs east-west.

Sometime in 1830, a building was constructed at 142 Free Street in Portland, Maine.¹ Originally built as a theater, it may have been the first theater constructed in Maine.² Some accounts called it the Portland Theater while others referred to it as the Free Street Theater.³ One newspaper noted the cost of the theater building was \$10,000.⁴ Surviving deeds indicate there were many investors involved in the theater enterprise – a January, 1831 mortgage on the property listed twenty-seven grantors, or titleholders, with ownership rights in the theater building and lot.⁵

No drawings or other images of the building have been located, and the written descriptions of the original theater building vary.⁶ The theater was a hipped-roof building set several feet back from the street line. A broad flight of steps ran up to a portico, where three doors led to the vestibule. There were also doors to the basement on either side of the steps. The facade had a recess, and two, large Ionic columns that supported a “heavy” entablature. Above the entablature, there

Free Street Theatre.—The Boston Galaxy has been altogether too obliging to us ‘down Easters.’ Our theatre is not opened; no Poem has been recited, and we are wonder-struck at the marvellous events which, the editor says, have happened in our town. We don’t know here, who is the successful competitor for the Prize Poem, much less that a Poem has been delivered. We learn, however, that the Theatre will be opened to-morrow evening. The *Corps Dramatique* have been here over a week waiting for the finishing of the building which “is being” erected in Free-street. We are told, and we are happy to give such information to our readers, that the reputation, habits, and morality of this company are such as entitle it to the confidence of the public. Such information will be doubly agreeable to the lovers of the Drama with us, for they have so often been visited by Thespian gipsies. The Manager promises in his advertisement to use his best exertions to give satisfaction to the public. We have no doubt he will be successful.

This notice ran in the Portland Advertiser on September 9, 1830. It suggests construction of the Free Street Theater was nearing completion on that date.

1. *Free Street Baptist Church Semi-Centennial 1836-1886*, 74. “Free Street Theater,” *Portland Advertiser* (September 28, 1830) np.
2. Herbert G. Jones, “Nothing Remains on Free Street...” *Portland Press Herald* (26 November, 1939) Section C, 10.
3. Herbert G. Jones, “Nothing Remains on Free Street...” *Portland Press Herald* (26 November, 1939) Section C, 10.
4. “Edwin Forrest Played Here 83 Years Ago,” *Portland Sunday Telegram* (6 February, 1914) 1, “The Saunterer,” *Portland Sunday Telegram* (25 November 1917) 6, and Herbert G. Jones, “Nothing Remains on Free Street...” *Portland Press Herald* (26 November, 1939) Section C, 10.
5. Cumberland County Registry of Deeds, Book 123, page 515.
6. For descriptions of the theater building, see: Herbert G. Jones, “Nothing Remains on Free Street...” *Portland Press Herald* (26 November, 1939) Section C, 10 and “The Saunterer,” *Portland Sunday Telegram* (25 November, 1917) 6.

was a balustrade, also described as “heavy”. There were four chimneys, one at each corner. The side walls had two rows of windows, likely one row for the basement, and the second at the main floor. Each row had six windows.

The Free Street Theater operated for approximately five years. Portland’s proximity to Boston provided access to quality performers. In July 1831, a young Edwin Forrest, who would later become one of the most noted stage actors of the early-nineteenth century, appeared in a series of plays at the Free Street Theater.⁷ Junius Booth, patriarch of the noted family of stage actors, is also believed to have performed there.⁸

As a business enterprise, the Theater appears to have struggled. Various newspapers in the early 1830s noted the re-opening of the theater and the appointment of new managers.⁹ By 1835, the ownership of the theater was divided among three investors: Solomon Mudge, Enoch Mudge, and Nathaniel Jewett.¹⁰

By 1835, the Theater was closed for good. In December, 1835 the theater building was sold to eight Portland residents who were members of the First Baptist Society for \$5,000.¹¹ The men intended to use the theater building as a church.

7. “Edwin Forrest Played Here 83 Years Ago,” *Portland Sunday Telegram* (6 February, 1914) 1.

8. Herbert G. Jones, “Nothing Remains on Free Street...” *Portland Press Herald* (26 November, 1939) Section C, 10.

9. “Re-opening of the Portland Theatre,” *Eastern Argus* (17 June, 1831) 2, *Daily Eastern Argus* (12 June, 1833) 2, and *Daily Eastern Argus* (8 July, 1833) 2.

10. Cumberland County Registry of Deeds, Book 142, Page 412.

11. Cumberland County Registry of Deeds, Book 146, page 14.

The Free Street Baptist Church (1836-1926)

The Free Street Baptist Society was incorporated in January 1836. A building committee was formed, and the building formerly known as the Portland Theater was purchased. The eight men who had bought the Theater in December, 1835 sold the property to the Free Street Baptist Society on January 18, 1836. The deed for the sale of the building to the Society specifically mentioned "...being the lot of land on which the Brick Building called the Theatre now stands..."¹²

The Church made major alteration campaigns to its building every twenty years – in 1836, 1856, and 1876 – that resulted in significant changes to the appearance of the building. A final remodeling in 1926 by the subsequent owner erased all remnants of the earlier church building from the front facade and interior.

In 1836, the building was converted from a theater to the Free Street Baptist Church. Per non-contemporary written accounts, the former theater was altered as follows: the hipped roof was replaced with a gable roof, and the entablature was extended. The earlier windows in the side walls were replaced with taller windows, three openings in each wall. By August 11, 1836 the renovations were completed and the building was dedicated. A small line drawing on John Cullum's 1836 *Map of the City of Portland...* records the earliest appearance of the Church. John Calvin Stevens' conjectural sketch of the Free Street Baptist Church (following page), published in 1886, appears to be based on that small drawing.

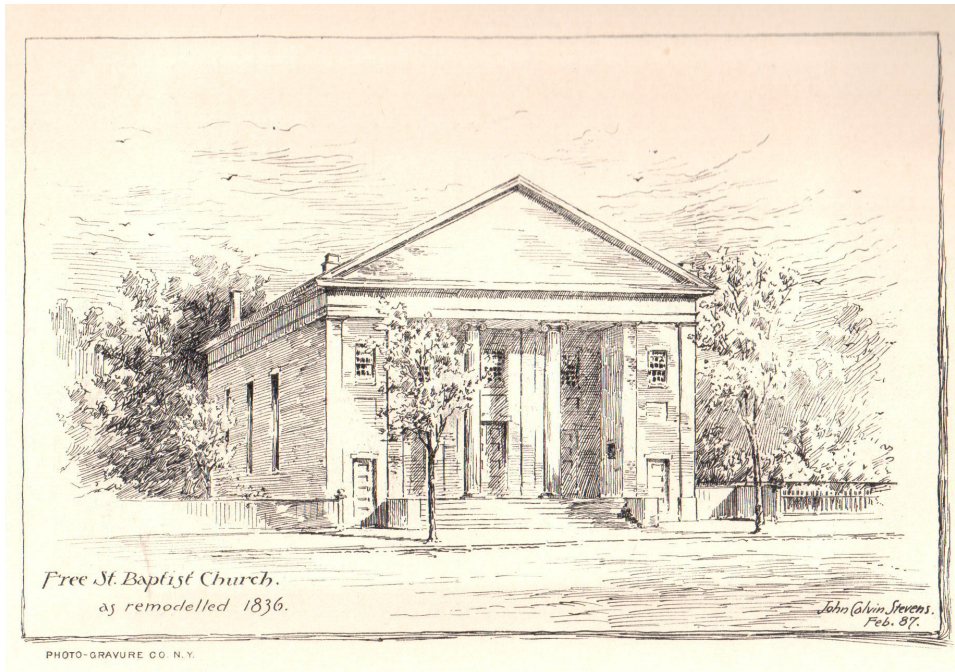
In 1856 the church building was remodeled per the designs of architect Richard Bond (1798-1861). Bond was a Boston-based architect who had designed the Portland Merchant's Exchange (1835-9) prior to receiving the commission for the redesign of the Free Street Baptist Church.¹³

The alterations cost \$15,000¹⁴ and included adding a new "front" to the building which brought the primary facade out to the street line. This new facade was Italianate in style, and included two asymmetrical towers. The taller of the two towers was 185 feet tall and dominated the neighborhood around it. Surviving photographs show a light-colored building, lighter than the brick buildings adjacent to it, indicating the brick structure was painted, or more likely, stuccoed and scored, to imitate stone. Remnants of a stone-colored finish are still visible on the west facade of the building.

12. Cumberland County Registry of Deeds, Book 143, page 446.

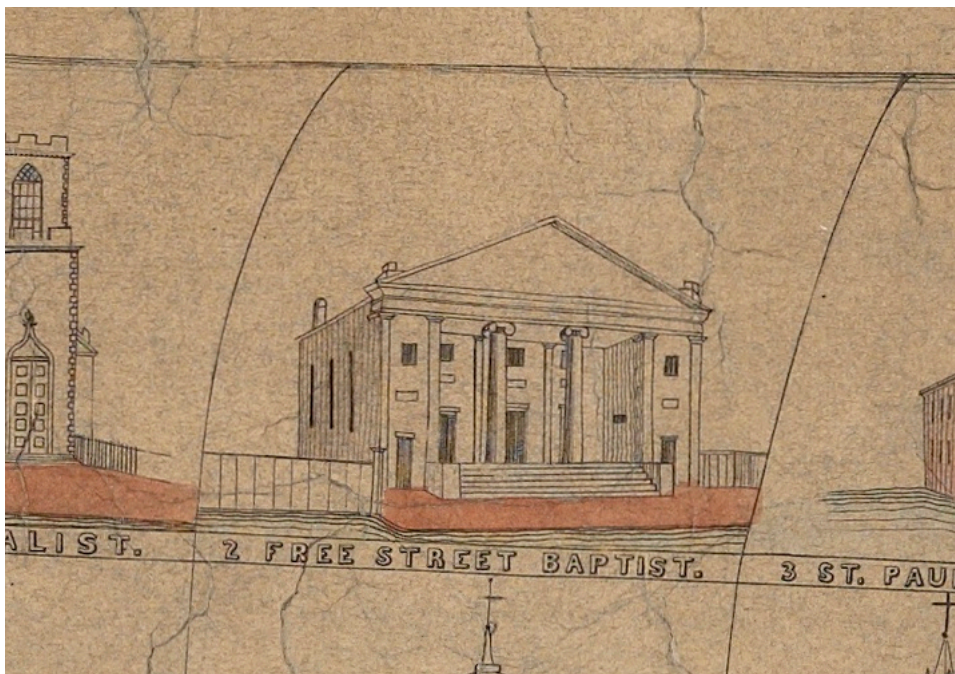
13. Stephen Jerome, "Richard Bond," *Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine* (Volume V, No. 2) 1988.

14. William Willis, *The History of Portland* (Somersworth, NH: New Hampshire Publishing Company, 1972) 691.



In 1887, architect John Calvin Stevens made this sketch of the Free Street Baptist Church as he believed it would have appeared in 1836.

Source: *Free Street Baptist Church Semi-Centennial 1836-1886.*



This drawing of the Free Street Baptist Church was included on John Cullum's 1836 map of Portland. It likely was the source for John Calvin Stevens' 1887 sketch of the Church (above).

Source: *John Cullum, A Map of the City of Portland with its Latest Improvements..., 1836.*



These finish remnants found on the west facade record the stone color that was once found on the exterior of the Free Street Baptist Church.

In March, 1876 a fierce gale damaged the original spire.¹⁵ The spire and its base were removed and replaced with a shorter, eight-sided, curved dome roof on a new base (see photographs, next page).

In 1887, the Free Street Baptist Church spent \$6,500 on a “thorough improving” of the Church and a few years after that, stained glass windows were installed in the building.¹⁶ In 1894, five-sixths of the lath-and-plaster ceiling fell down, including the furring, landing on and damaging some of the pews.¹⁷

In 1922, the Free Street Baptist Church and the First Free Baptist Church merged and formed the Immanuel Baptist Church. The newly formed congregation decided to build a new, shared church at the corner of Deering and High Streets. On October 15, 1926, the Immanuel Baptist Church sold its building at 142 Free Street to the Portland Chamber of Commerce (“the Chamber”).¹⁸ As part of the sale agreement, the Church retained ownership of the stained glass windows, organ, and pews that were then in the building.¹⁹

15. *Free Street Baptist Church Semi-Centennial 1836-1886*, 79.

16. “A Fall in Plaster,” *The Portland Daily Press* (25 October, 1894) 8.

17. “A Fall in Plaster,” *The Portland Daily Press* (25 October, 1894) 8.

18. The Chamber of Commerce has had several names over its existence including the Chamber of Commerce of Portland and the Chamber of Commerce of the Greater Portland Region. For the purposes of this report, “Chamber of Commerce” will be used.

19. Cumberland County Registry of Deeds, Deed dated October 31, 1991, Book 1246, page 482.

Right: The Free Street Baptist Church as it appeared after architect Richard Bond's 1856 redesign was complete. Below: The Free Street Baptist Church as it appeared after the spire was removed in 1876. In both images, the only building shown that still stands today is the Hay Building, the two-story "flat iron" building to the left of the Church.





This interior view of the Free Street Baptist Church was published in 1887.

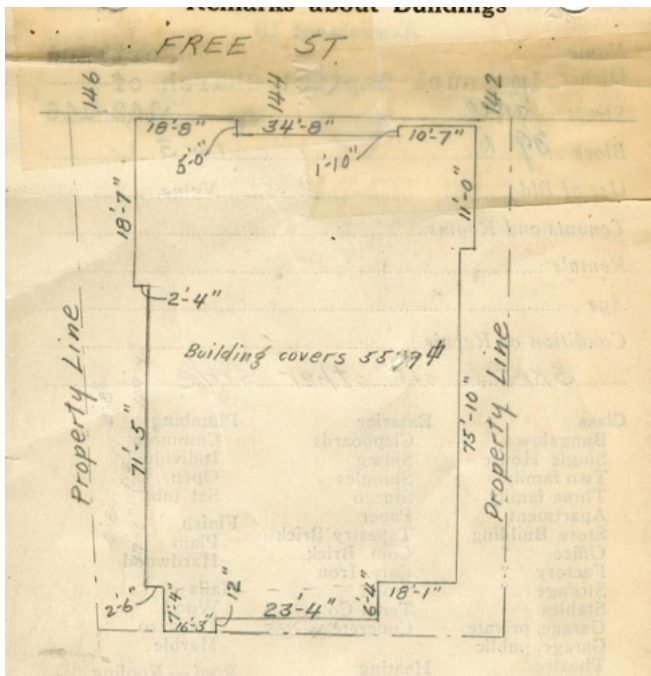
Source: Free Street Baptist Church Semi-Centennial 1836-1886.

Chamber of Commerce (1926-1991)

In 1926, the Chamber of Commerce bought 142 Free Street²⁰ and announced plans to renovate it for their new home. The Chamber retained architects John Calvin Stevens and John Howard Stevens to convert the former church into the Chamber's new headquarters.²¹ The contractors for the work were W. W. Cunningham & Sons.

As noted by the press, the remodeled building retained little of its appearance from its days as a church. The two projecting towers on the Free Street facade were removed, and northernmost fifteen feet of the building (at Free Street) were rebuilt. The front facade of the building, likely stuccoed to resemble stone in its Church days, was completely removed and replaced with a new facade of exposed brick. The new facade had a portico supported on four concrete columns between two brick piers.

The extant building bears so little resemblance to the earlier Free Street Baptist Church that it is difficult to see how the Church was remodeled rather than completely replaced. Comparison of the building footprints as recorded in the 1924 assessor's sketch of the building footprint and the footprint in the current assessor's database show the basic dimensions are roughly the same. Photographs of the east facade from 1925 and 1958 (see photographs on following page) show the window openings on that wall were retained (new lintels were added in 1926) as was part of the cornice. Remnants of a stone-colored finish remain on the exterior face of the west wall (see photograph, page 7) but very little else of the building's past as a Church building appears to have survived.



This sketch floor plan was included in the City of Portland's 1924 assessment card for 142 Free Street.

Source: City of Portland - Planning & Development Department.

20. Cumberland County Registry of Deeds, Book 9779, page 254.

21. Drawings for the Stevens' alterations are not known to have survived. They are not in the collections of the Maine Historical Society. Requests to the Avery Library at Columbia University were not returned.



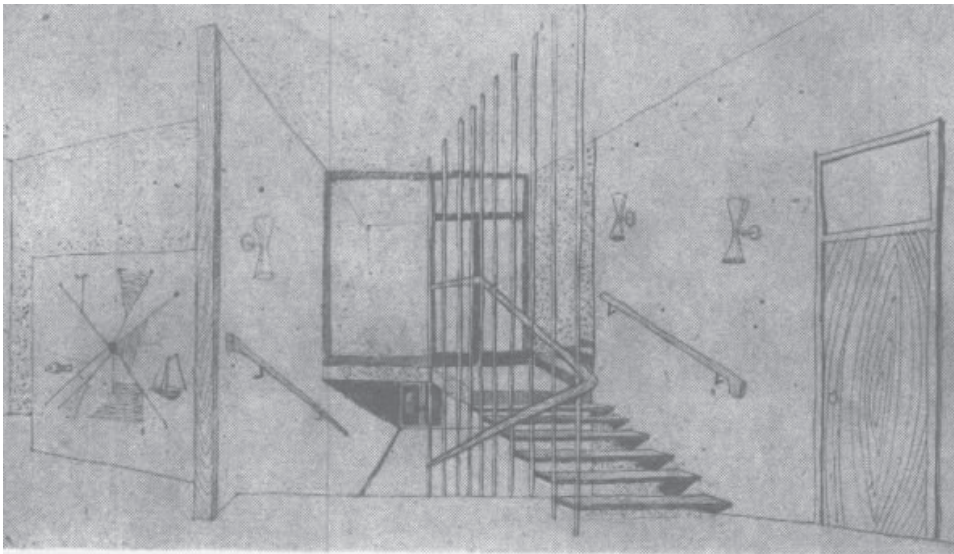
The Free Street Baptist Church in 1925 (above) and the Chamber of Commerce in 1958 (below). Without these two views to compare, it is difficult to see how the Church building was remodeled into the Chamber. The Free Street end of the building (at the right in these images) was completely replaced, and the brick walls are a different color.

Source: *Portland Evening Express*, May 31, 1958.



In addition to the exterior changes, the interior was remodeled. Although no architectural drawings have been located, the fenestration of the side walls suggests the north end of the building was divided into two floors, likely office space, while the south end was a double-height space. A “hard fuel” (coal) steam heating system was installed. During the sixty-five years the Chamber owned 142 Free Street, it continued to make small improvements and upgrades to the building. In 1941, an internal stair at the rear of the building that connected the first floor and basement was “floored over.”²²

In 1959, the Chamber remodeled the interior of the building.²³ In June of that year, the Chamber applied for a building permit to make \$54,700 in alterations “as per plans.” The contractor was Samuel Aceto & Co. Inc.²⁴ As part of the alterations, the coal-fired steam heating system was converted to oil.²⁵ In 1966, the Chamber completed a “brightening” of the exterior of 142 Free Street. The work included painting and repointing and cost \$15,000.²⁶ In January, 1972 the Chamber applied for a building permit to complete \$85,000 worth of renovation and alteration work “as per plan.” The referenced plan has not survived.²⁷ The inspector noted steel beams were installed in the basement. As part of that project, the Chamber installed air-conditioning in the building.²⁸



This rendering shows the interior design proposed for the Chamber of Commerce building in 1959. It is not known if the design was executed.

Source: Portland Evening Express, April 17, 1959.

22. Permitting and Inspections, Permit number 1919, dated December 9, 1941.

23. “Older than it Looks,” *Evening Express* (14 January 1966) 7.

24. The referenced plans were not included with the building permit. Permitting and Inspections, Permit number 749, dated June 17, 1959.

25. Permitting and Inspections, Permit number 848, dated July 7, 1959.

26. “Older than it Looks,” *Evening Express* (14 January 1966) 7.

27. Permitting and Inspections, Permit number 0112, dated January 21, 1972.

28. Permitting and Inspections, Permit number 0168, dated February 8, 1972.



142 Free Street (left) and the former WCTU building at 150 Free Street (right) on January 30, 1980. The WCTU building was torn down later that year.

Source: Portland Press Herald Still-Film Negatives Collection, Portland Public Library.

Throughout the 1980s, the Chamber reported financial difficulties. In October 1981, the Chamber of Commerce announced a “cash flow” problem of \$100,000. Most of the shortfall was due to cuts in federal programs that had covered salaries for clerical staff.²⁹

In June, 1982 the Chamber announced a deficit of \$65,000. The shortage was to be covered by bank loans, with refinancing of the mortgage on 142 Free Street listed as a possible longer-term solution.³⁰ By 1990, the Chamber had decided to sell their building. Chamber President Bill Nugent said the building was too big for their needs, and had deteriorated over the years. He also noted that while the building had lowered ceilings, the original ceilings were about thirty feet high and “nicely decorated.”³¹ On October 31, 1991 the Chamber sold 142 Free Street to the Children’s Museum of Maine.³²

29. Frank Sleeper, “Chamber problem: \$100,000,” *Evening Express* (26 October, 1981) 1.

30. Frank Sleeper, “Chamber shows \$65,000 Deficit,” *Evening Express* 7 (May, 1982) 1

31. “Chamber Puts Building up for Sale,” *Evening Express* (9 January, 1990) 16.

32. Cumberland County Registry of Deeds, Book 9770, page 254.

The Children's Museum of Maine (1991- 2019)

The next owner of 142 Free Street was The Children's Museum of Maine. As did prior owners, the Children's Museum made alterations to the building to accommodate their activities. The renovations were extensive and included complete demolition of the interior and alterations to the exterior.

The Children's Museum worked with architect Stephen Blatt, structural engineers Pinkham & Greer, and Wright-Ryan Construction to renovate the building. On his website, Stephen Blatt notes the Chamber of Commerce building was "...severely dilapidated...." prior to the renovations. The construction cost was 1.1 million.³³

The primary, Free Street-facing facade saw few changes. The primary entry door and the transom over it were removed and replaced with a modern frame, transom, and door of metal. On the east facade, the fenestration was altered. During the Chamber of Commerce's ownership, the south end of the facade had three, double height window openings with wood sash. The northernmost window was removed, the opening was infilled with brick, and two, smaller windows



Left: Only one of the ca. 1926 double-height wood windows survives in the building. Below: the extant entry door and transom are late-twentieth century replacement.



33. City of Portland, Permitting and Inspections, Permit No. 923937, issued July 21, 1992.

installed in the infilled portion. A new, double-height window was installed between the surviving two windows at the south end.

An eight-sided cupola was placed on the ridge of the roof and a large, shed-roofed dormer and three skylights were installed on the east roof slope. The cornice south of the downspout was removed and replaced with a new cornice that was to match the existing (see diagram, following page).³⁴ Other changes to the exterior of the building included a new addition to the south facade for an egress stair.

The renovations for the future Children's Museum occurred in 1992, two years after Portland enacted its historic preservation ordinance. A 1997 building permit noted the building was "Not in District or Landmark" and "Does not Require Review."³⁵ Had the alterations been reviewed for compliance with historic preservation standards, it is likely that most of the exterior alterations, including the addition of a large cupola and a large dormer in locations so highly visible from a public way (Free Street); alteration of the fenestration on the east facade; and replacement of the ca. 1926 windows would have been denied.

The interior of the building was completely gutted in 1992. The demolition work included removing the existing wood roof trusses and replacing them with a steel roof frame. A steel "superstructure" was also added to the building. A new, interior stair enclosed in modern masonry walls was constructed in the northwest corner of the building. An elevator was added as well.

No historic floor, wall, or ceiling finishes survive today. It is likely that any that had survived were removed as part of the 1990s work. Records in the City of Portland's building permit files indicate concrete slabs were poured for the basement, first, and second floors.³⁶ As seen from the interior of the building, the existing floors are poured in modern, corrugated pans, confirming that all of the floor framing and flooring was replaced as well. A sprinkler system was installed throughout the building.³⁷

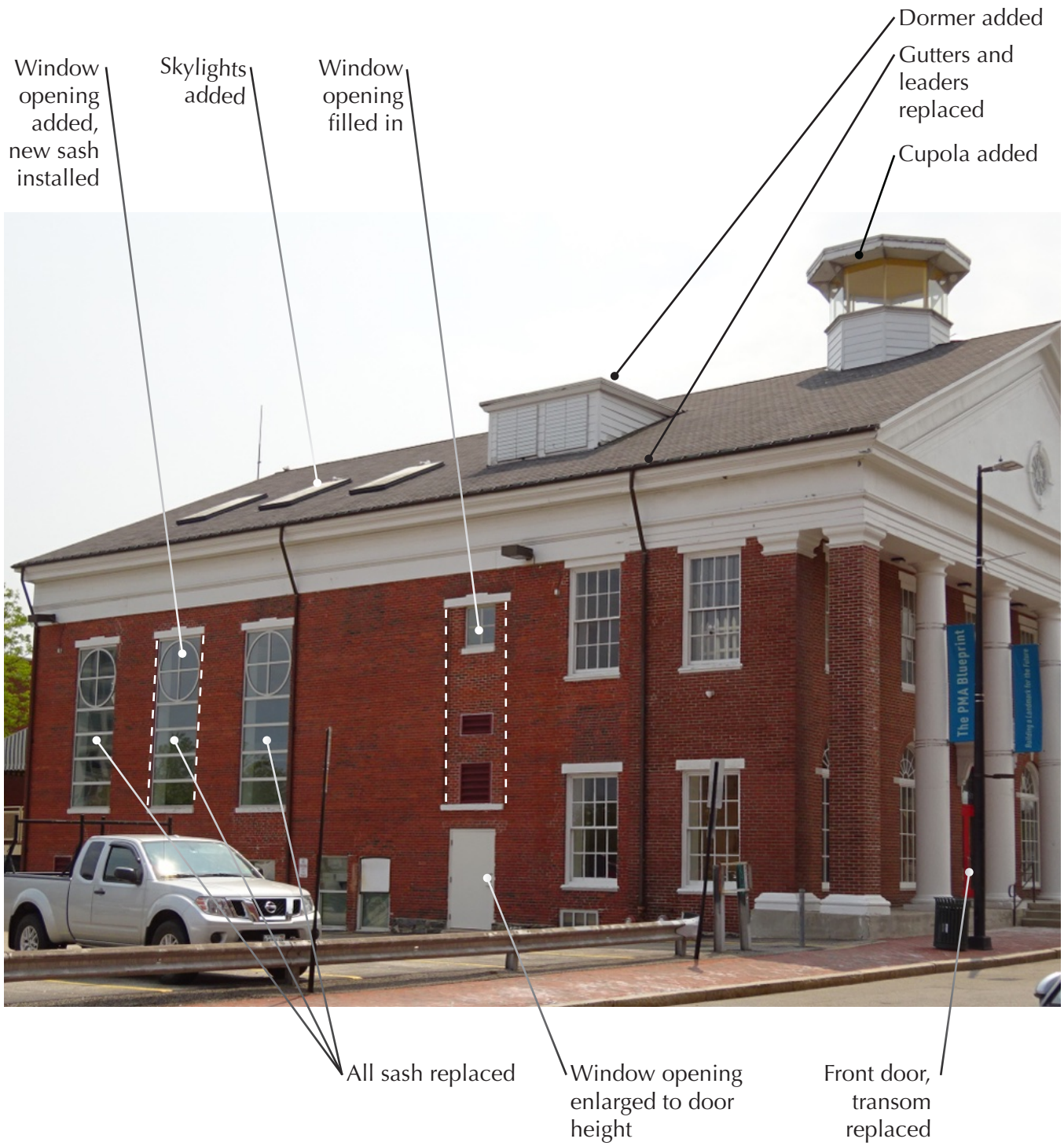
In 2017, the Children's Museum and Theater of Maine announced its plans to relocate to a new, larger building at Thompson's Point in Portland. The new building was to include 30,000 square feet of space, while the building at 142 Free Street had only 18,000. On October 15, 2019, the Children's Museum sold the building at 142 Free Street to its neighbor, the Portland Museum of Art.

34. City of Portland, Permitting and Inspections, 142 Free Street file, undated elevation drawing.

35. City of Portland, Permitting and Inspections, Permit No. 971138, issued October 20, 1997.

36. City of Portland, Permitting and Inspections, 142 Free Street file, Con Test Lab, Inc. "Report of Compressive Strength..."

37. City of Portland, Permitting and Inspections, Permit 924219, Issued October 8, 1992. Letter, P. Samuel Hoffses to Sprinkler Systems Inc., October 8, 1992. Inspections Department.



Exterior alterations to 142 Free Street made for the Children's Museum in the early 1990s.

Renovations made by the Children's Museum in the early 1990s included gutting the interior of the building. Today, no historic interior finishes remain. Note the modern steel framing and skylights in the image at right.



Free Street

The earliest section of Free Street, originally called Love Lane, was laid out in 1772. Initially, it extended only from Center Street to Middle Street – Free Street once ended where it now intersects Cross Street. In 1783, Free Street was extended westward to meet the intersection of Congress and High Streets, which became its western terminus. The newly built section, wider than the original part, was called Windmill Lane, after the windmill that once stood at the top of the hill. In 1788 the original portion of the road was widened to align with the newer section, and the entire street was renamed Free Street.¹ The intersection of Congress, High, and Free Streets is known as Congress Square.

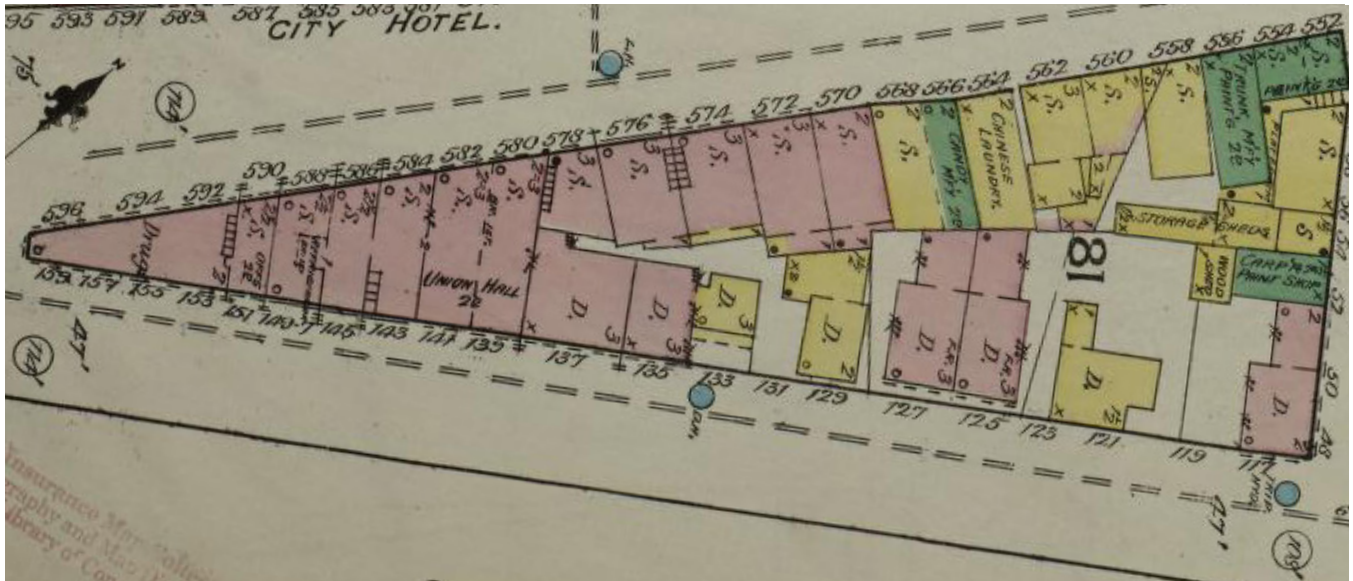
By the early-nineteenth century, Congress Square was a wealthy residential neighborhood lined with some of Portland's finest homes. Noted residences here included the Cobb Mansion, a ca. 1801 Federal-style home designed by Alexander Parris at present-day 7 Congress Square. Further down High Street and on Spring Street were the twin mansions of Stephen McLellan (116 High Street, 1800) and Major Hugh McLellan (107 Spring Street, ca. 1801). The latter was designed by John Kimball, Sr. At the corner of High and Congress Streets was the ca. 1837 Nathaniel Warren mansion, a brick Greek Revival building with an angled facade and two-story porch on columns. As one moved eastward along Free Street, the houses were somewhat smaller, and typically built in simpler versions of the Federal and Greek Revival styles. These residences were a mix of brick and frame construction, and some were freestanding, while others were duplexes or row-houses. Both the north and south sides of Free Street were still largely residential as late as 1886 (see maps and images, following pages).



The south side of Free Street was once lined with brick homes such as this one that stood at 134 Free.

Source: Maine Historical Society. For study purposes only / not for publication.

1. "Free Street Dates Back to Before Revolution," *Portland Sunday Telegram* (16 December, 1917) 5.



As seen in the Sanborn map of 1886, the north side of Free Street east of Congress Square was still largely residential as late as 1886. On the north side of the street (above) all of the structures east of the "Union Hall" were "dwellings" (labeled "D" on the map).

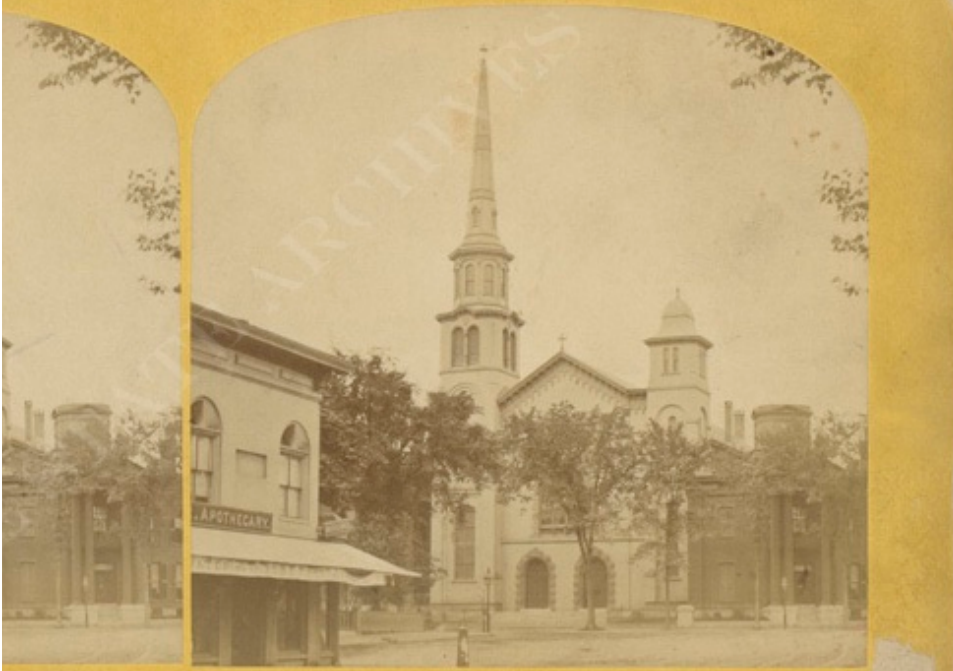
Source: Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Portland, Cumberland County, Maine, Plate 12 (above) and Plate 24 (below). 1886.





Photograph of the area around Congress Square ca. 1885.

Source: Maine Historical Society. For study purposes only / not for publication.



The former First Universalist Church / Congress Square Church on High Street and the Nathaniel Warren mansion to its right. The Hay Building is visible in the foreground.

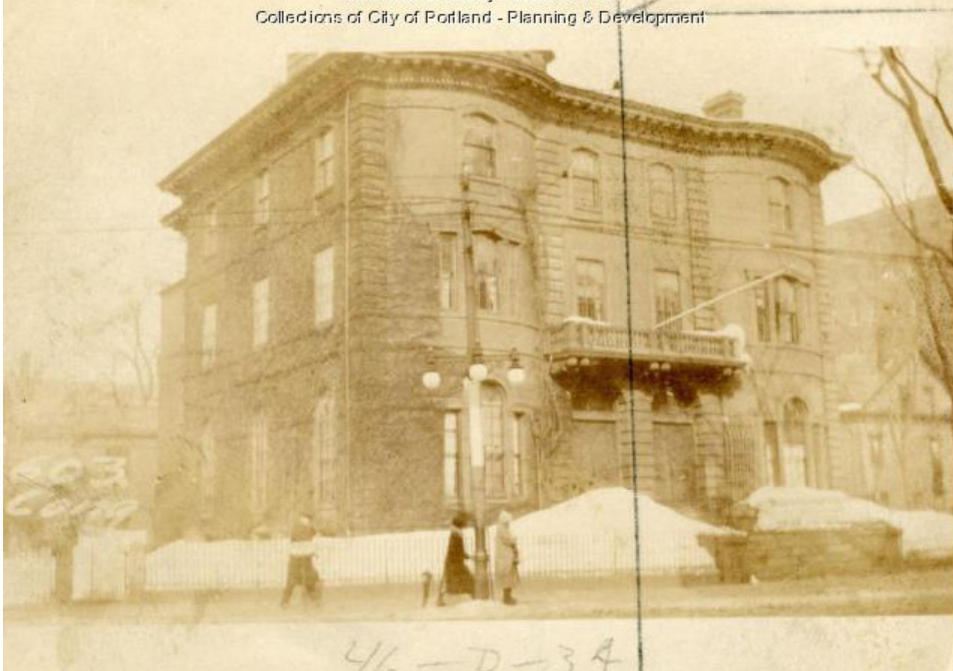
Source: Stereoview Photograph Collection, Maine State Archives.

Large churches were built between the residences, including the High Street Congregational Church at 115 High Street (ca. 1831) and the Free Street Baptist Church, which took over and remodeled a former theater at 142 Free Street in 1836. The streets were lined with trees, and the overall feeling was one of prosperity and elegance. Commercial activities were found on nearby Congress Street, in small-scale buildings. The Hay Building (ca. 1922, third story added 1922) at 594 Congress Street is typical of the retail buildings that lined Congress Street during the early- to mid-nineteenth century.



An early view of Congress Street, immediately east of Congress Square. The street is lined with small-scale, two- and three-story commercial buildings.

Source: Stereoview Photograph Collection, Maine State Archives.



The Libby Mansion in 1924.

Source: City of Portland - Planning & Development Department.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the area remained fashionable and more large residences were built, in the Italianate, Second Empire, and Queen Anne styles. The Libby Mansion, at the northwest corner of Congress and High, was among the grandest. Designed in 1853 by architect Charles Alexander, it was actually a double house. 126 High Street was another double residence, this one in the Greek Revival Style. The brick house had a hipped roof that extended over engaged side porches, and was supported on two-story tall columns.

Existing churches were remodeled, and new ones constructed. The Baptists remodeled their Free Street church in 1859, adding a tall spire and Italianate facade over their existing building. The Universalists constructed a large church, known as the Congress Square Church, in 1865 at 1 Congress Square. The Congregational Church on High Street was updated to a Gothic Revival style in 1869.

Most of Free Street was spared by Portland's Great Fire of 1866. Only the eastern-most end, the commercial area at Middle Street, was lost. This block was quickly rebuilt after the fire, and today remains a well-preserved block of commercial buildings built in a range of architectural styles popular in the 1870s.

The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century saw extensive changes to the formerly genteel and largely residential neighborhood around Congress Square. As the neighborhood became less fashionable, many of the mansions that lined Congress and High Streets were divided into apartments or converted for civic and charitable uses. Some of the homes were demolished and replaced by larger, commercial structures.



Congress Square after 1897. The Cobb Mansion that stood at the corner has been demolished and the YMCA/Libby Building constructed in its place. The brick Nathaniel Warren Mansion still stands at the right.

Source: Collection of the author.



Congress Square after 1920. The Nathaniel Warren mansion that stood at the corner has been demolished and the Shwartz Building constructed in its place. The postmark on the rear of the card is May 6, 1926.

Source: Collection of the author.



As the neighborhood around Congress Square became less fashionable, the once-grand homes were re-purposed. By 1924, this large duplex home at 126 High Street had an addition for retail spaces at street level and was divided into apartments at the upper floors.

Source: City of Portland - Planning & Development Department.

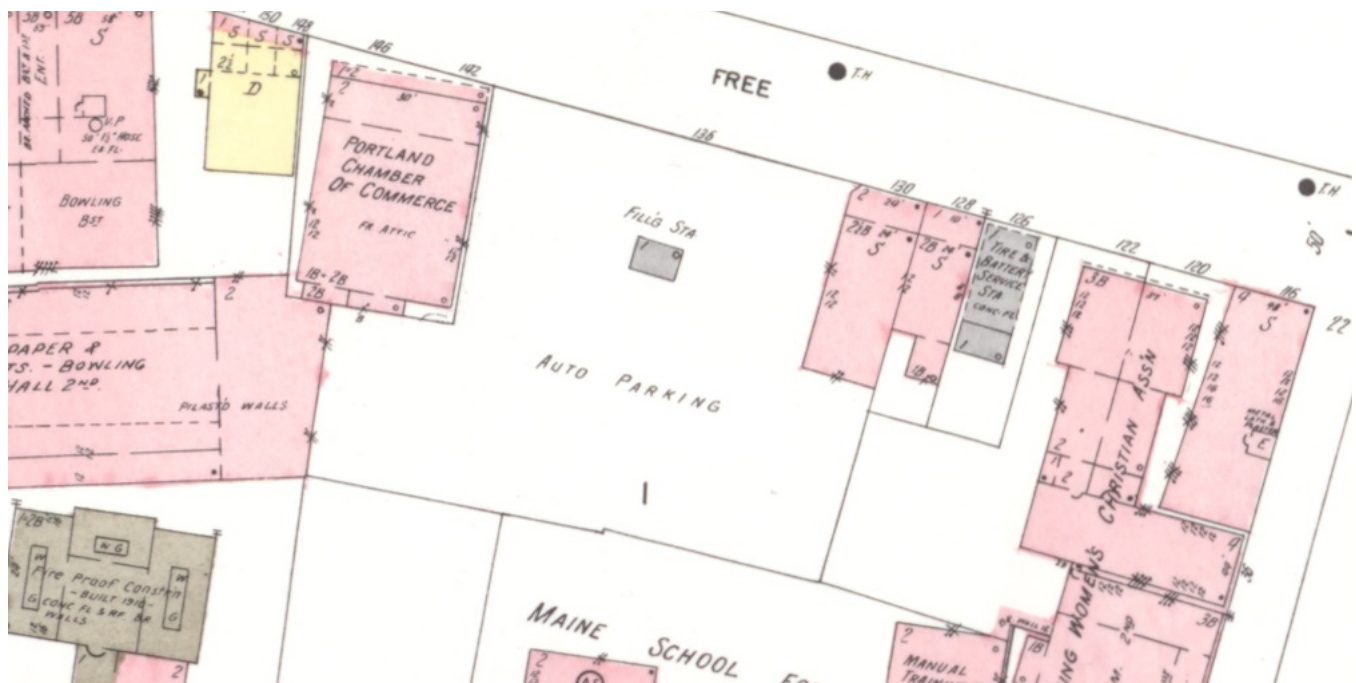
The 1886 Sanborn map recorded that the Cobb Mansion (7 Congress Square) was then home to the Cumberland Club. By 1890, the Cumberland Club had moved to the Stephen McLellan Mansion (116 High Street). The Cobb Mansion was demolished and replaced in 1897 by a five-story tall brick building for the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). In 1908, Margaret Mussey Sweat donated the Hugh McLellan Mansion (107 Spring Street) to the Portland Society of Art and it was converted into a museum. The Nathaniel Warren Mansion at 1 Congress Square was replaced by the Shwartz Building, a four-story brick commercial building with a round tower, in 1920. Across Congress Street, the Libby Mansion was demolished and replaced by the State Theater building.

While these changes marked a shift towards larger, commercial structures, the new buildings were typically executed in brick and granite with traditional styles and details. The area around Congress Square was no longer a wealthy residential neighborhood, and instead was transitioning into a vibrant, commercial area of hotels, theaters, restaurants, and shopping. This trend continued until the Great Depression halted nearly all development in Portland.

Congress Square Declines

After World War II, Portland, like many older cities, struggled to redefine itself and compete with suburban, automobile-based development. Civic leaders took on a number of efforts, including slum-clearing and redevelopment studies, plans, and projects intended to improve living conditions, modernize the city, and attract investment and redevelopment.

Among the most far reaching was "Patterns for Progress," an urban renewal plan written in 1967 that sought to create a ring of high-speed roads to move cars around the central core of the Portland peninsula. This resulted in the widening of Franklin and Spring Streets to create "arterials." Spring Street, which had previously ended at Center Street, was also extended to Middle Street. High and State Streets became one-way streets, increasing traffic speeds and affecting the character of these historic neighborhoods. Large areas on Cumberland Avenue and near Monument Square were razed to create open space for development. Some of these projects, such as One City Center, took decades to materialize. Others, such as the "Downtown Project No. 1," a proposed fifteen-story residential tower on Cumberland Avenue, never happened and that land is largely still a surface parking lot.



The south side of Free Street in 1954. Automobiles have arrived, and the residences at 126, 134, and 136 Free Street have been torn down for parking lots and auto-repair buildings. One-story additions for commercial uses have been added to the fronts of 128 and 130 Free Street and the former WCTU building at 150 Free Street.

Source: Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Portland, Cumberland County, Maine, Plate 29. 1954.



Looking west on Free Street, 1924. The Jefferson Theater is in the foreground and the tower on the Free Street Baptist Church is visible in the background.

Source: City of Portland - Planning & Development Department.

Even before the official urban renewal efforts began, Free Street's streetscape near Congress Square was already being lost to modern development and the increased demand for parking. Portland's 1924 tax photographs record an intact streetscape along the south side of Free Street, from Oak Street to High Street. At the southeast corner of Free and Oak was the Jefferson Theater, a ca. 1897 five-story brick theater, while an early-twentieth century commercial building occupied the southwest corner (116 Free Street, extant). Between the commercial building and the Free Street Baptist Church was a row of seven two- and three-story tall brick residences dating to the mid-nineteenth century. An eighth house, a wood-framed building at 150 Free Street later owned by the Women' Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), stood between the Church and the YMCA.

The north side of Free Street, while more commercial, was also intact. This side was dominated by the elaborate brick and terracotta facade of the Baxter Memorial Building. Although this was actually the back of the building – the building's address was 562 Congress Street – the Free Street facade was nonetheless detailed with arches over the windows, belt courses, and swags, all of terracotta.

Shortly after 1924, Free Street began to change rapidly. In 1926, the Free Street Baptist Church was altered to its present, portico-front form. In 1933, the Jefferson Theater at the southeast corner of Free and Oak was torn down. In 1947, a modern, nearly windowless block of blonde brick – a Sears Roebuck store – was built on its site. Across the street, in 1954-5, all of the historic details were stripped off of the Congress Street and Free Street facades of the Baxter Memorial, and modern windows were installed.



The Jefferson Theater stood on the southeast corner of Free and Oak Streets. It was demolished in 1933.

Source: Collection of the author.

The south side of Free Street was also severely altered. The 1954 Sanborn map and an aerial photograph taken in 1960 (see photograph, page 30) records that only five of eight houses (120, 124, 128, 130, and 150 Free) remained on the south side of Free Street by that time. 126 Free Street had already been torn down and replaced with a concrete building used for “Tire and Battery” service. 130 Free and 150 Free were both heavily altered, with commercial additions on their primary facades. The rest of the block was an open parking lot with a filling station. Thus, much of this loss occurred prior to the implementation of official urban renewal projects in the area. Today, only a single, heavily altered former residence remains (128 Free Street).

Removal of historic buildings on Congress Square continued through the 1970s and 1980s. The former Universalist Church (128-32 High Street / 1 Congress Square) and the Greek Revival duplex next to it (126 High Street) were demolished to build a new studio building and parking lot for WCSH in 1977. In 1980, the former YMCA building at 7 Congress Square and the small, wood-framed building immediately east of the YMCA were torn down. In 1983, the Payson Wing of the Portland Museum of Art was built on those lots. On High Street, the former High Street Congregational Church appears to have been altered into a commercial building by 1924 before it was eventually demolished sometime before 1972. Today, none of the churches that once lined Congress Square remain.



This Sears Roebuck store was built on the site of the Jefferson Theater. This photograph was taken in 1947.

Source: Portland Press Herald Still-Film Negatives Collection, Portland Public Library.



The former Sears Roebuck store in 2023.



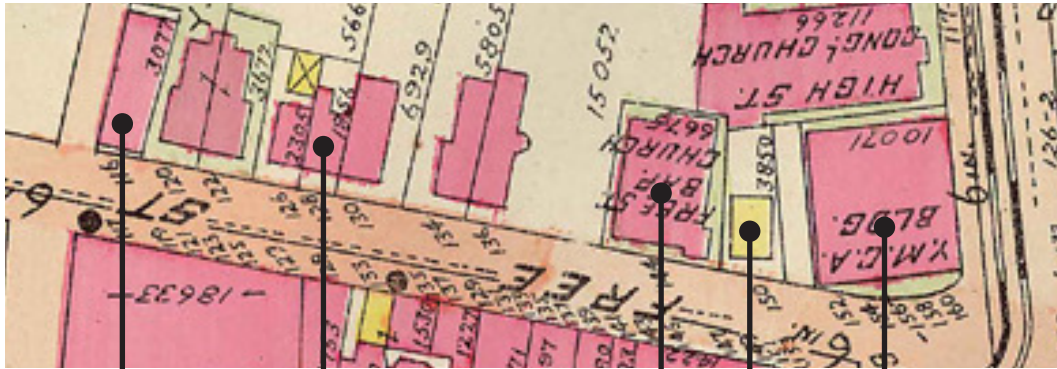
An aerial view of Congress Square taken in 1960. Much of the south side of Free Street is already a parking lot.

Source: Portland Press Herald Still-Film Negatives Collection, Portland Public Library.



An aerial view of Spring Street taken in 1972. Spring Street has been widened, and the Holiday Inn is visible. The rear walls of 142 Free Street and the Libby Building are visible at the left edge of the photograph. The building south of the Libby Building - originally a Congregational Church, later a recreation building - has been demolished. Much of the south side of Free Street remains an open parking lot.

Source: Portland Press Herald Still-Film Negatives Collection, Portland Public Library.



Comparison of ca. 2022 aerial photograph of Free Street (middle image) with the 1914 Richards Standard Atlas of the City of Portland reveals how few buildings remain on the south side (top image) of Free Street.

South Side of Free Street in 1924

116 Free Street



120-24 Free Street
Demolished after 1960



126 Free Street

Demolished before 1954

128 Free Street

Extant; altered and non-contributing

130 Free Street

Demolished after 1975

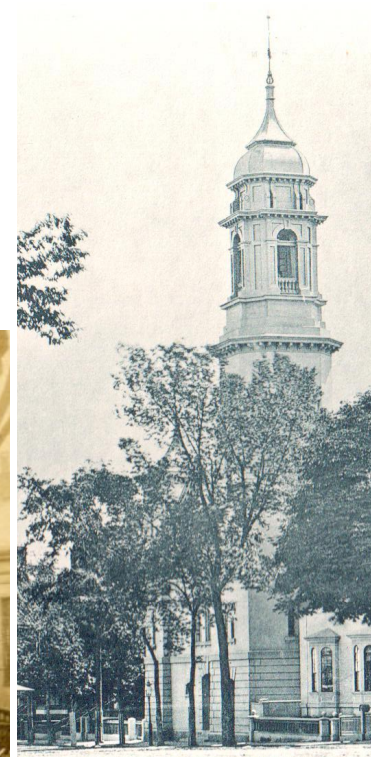


134-6 Free Street

Demolished before 1960



142 Free Street



7 Congress Square



150 Free Street



116 Free Street



120-24 Free Street
(parking lot)



126 Free Street
(parking lot)



128 Free Street
(extant;
non-contributing)



134-6 Free Street
(parking lot)



142 Free Street



150 Free Street / 7 Congress Square

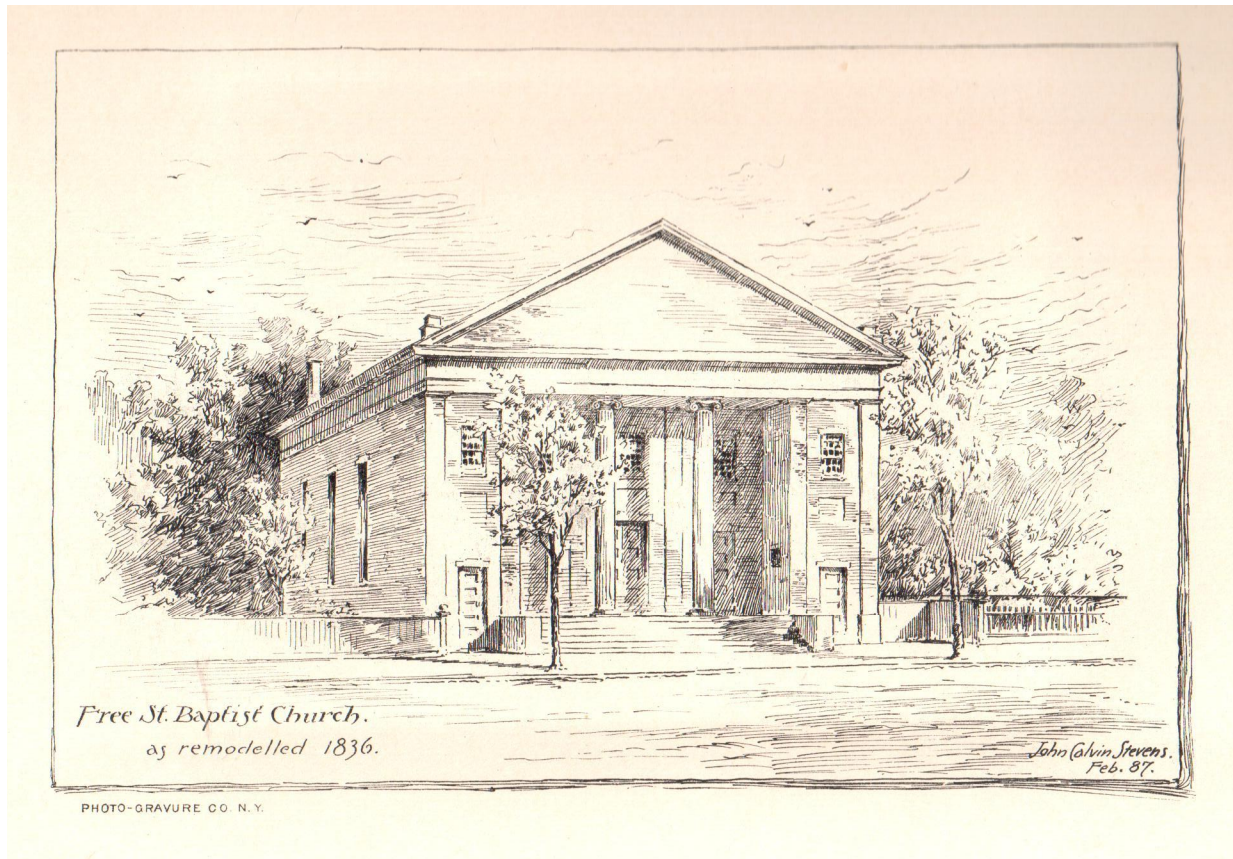
South Side of Free Street in 2023

This demolition did not occur without objection. The widening of Spring Street in 1970 and the loss of the historic houses on its south side were one of several events that led to the nomination of the Spring Street Historic District to the National Register in 1970 and passage of a Historic Preservation Ordinance by the City of Portland in 1990. Unfortunately, the damage to the portion of Free Street adjacent to Congress Square was already done. The Spring Street National Register District nomination acknowledged the loss in the Description section and noted "This is an active section of modern day Portland, yet this district retains the flavor and appearance of an older time. There are only a few modern structures and these front on streets such as Congress and Free which are commercial...an urban renewal project has leveled a section giving rise to the location of a new Sears-Roebuck store and parking area, on the eastern part of Spring Street. Some cleared land lies vacant. With the exceptions of the above the remaining district contains a great many old, but proud, structurally sound residences..."



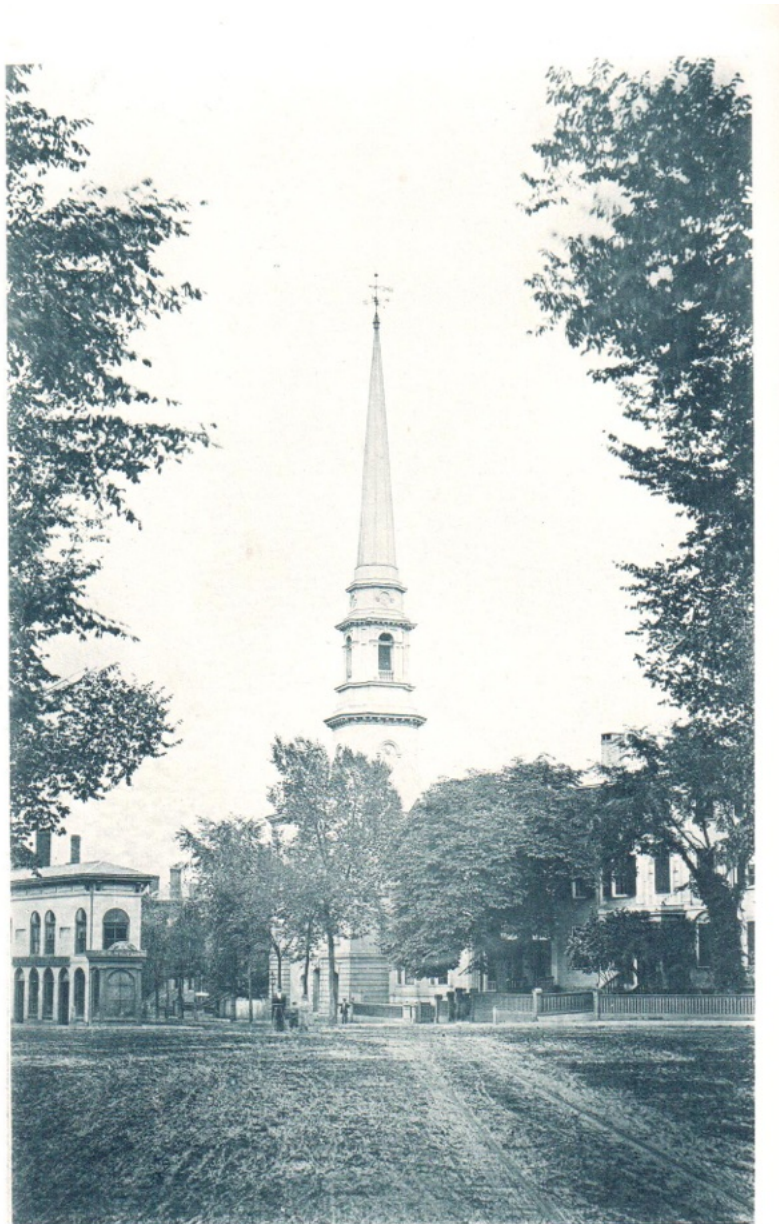
142 Free Street, the former WCTU building at 150 Free Street, and the YMCA / Libby Building in 1978. The Libby Building and WCTU building were torn down in 1980.

Source: Portland Press Herald Still-Film Negatives Collection, Portland Public Library.



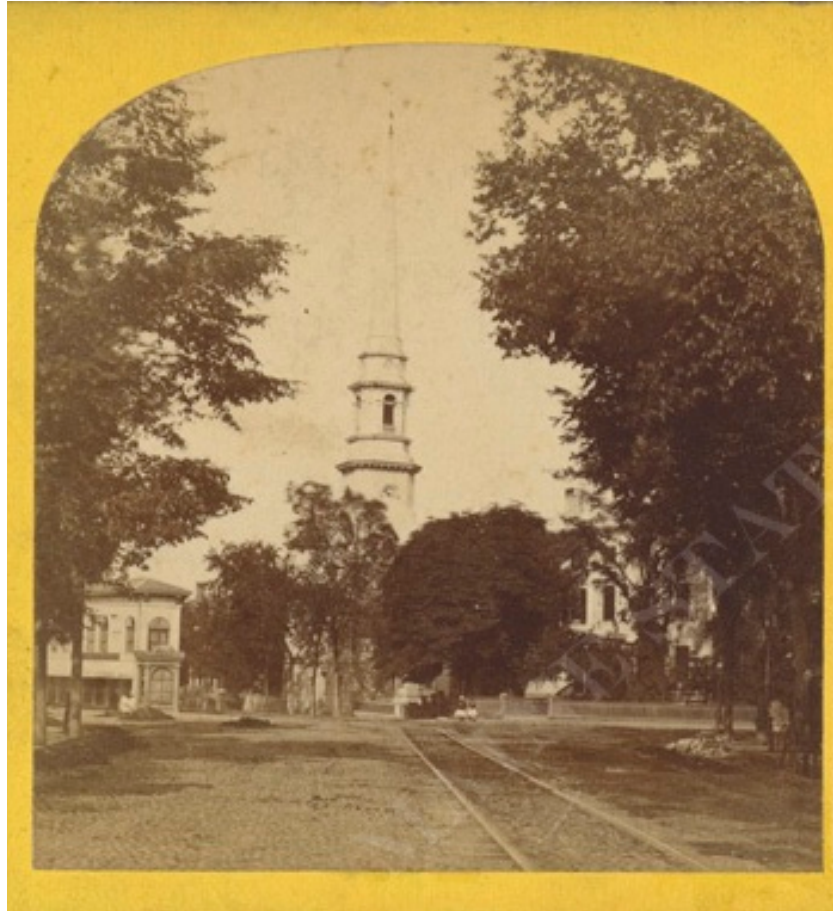
John Calvin Steven's sketch of the possible appearance of the Free Street Baptist Church prior to the 1856 remodeling campaign.

Source: *Free Street Baptist Church Semi-Centennial 1836-1886*. Collection of the author.



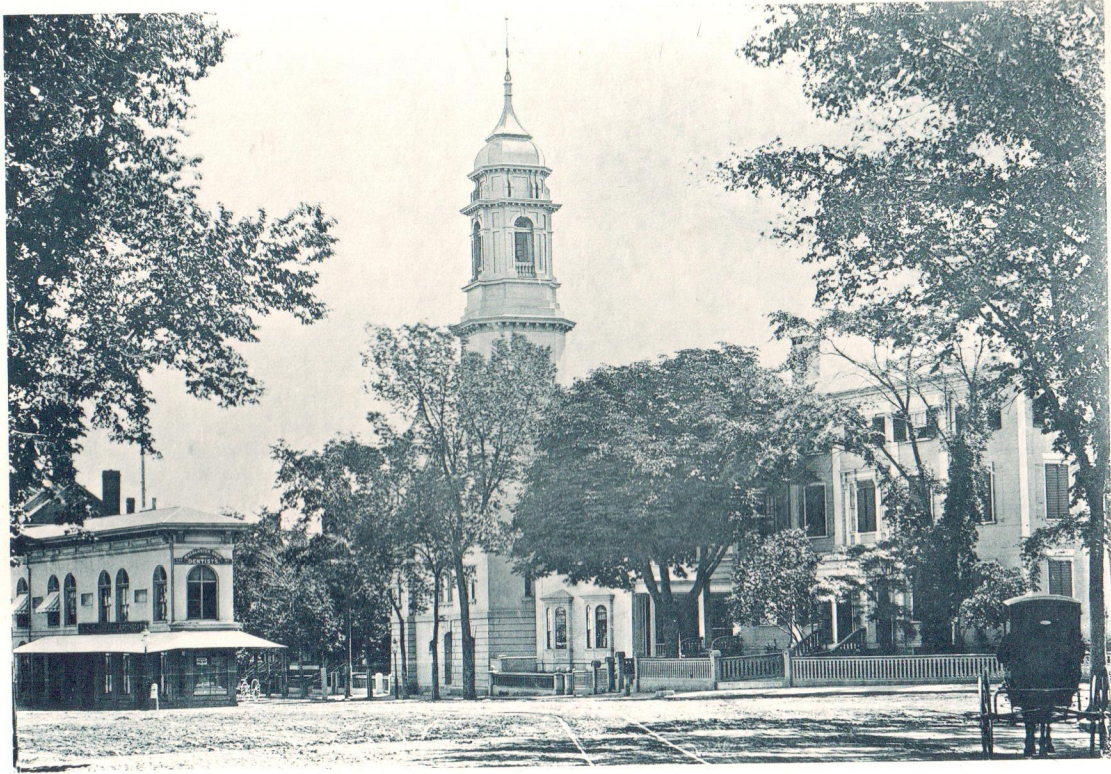
An early photograph of the Free Street Baptist Church - note the original, ca. 1856 steeple is still in place. The Hay Building is only two stories high.

Source: *Free Street Baptist Church Semi-Centennial 1836-1886*. Collection of the author.



An early stereoview photograph of the Free Street Baptist Church. The original, ca. 1856 steeple is still in place.

Source: Stereoview Photograph Collection, Maine State Archives.



The Free Street Baptist Church, sometime after 1876.

Source: *Free Street Baptist Church Semi-Centennial 1836-1886*. Collection of the author.



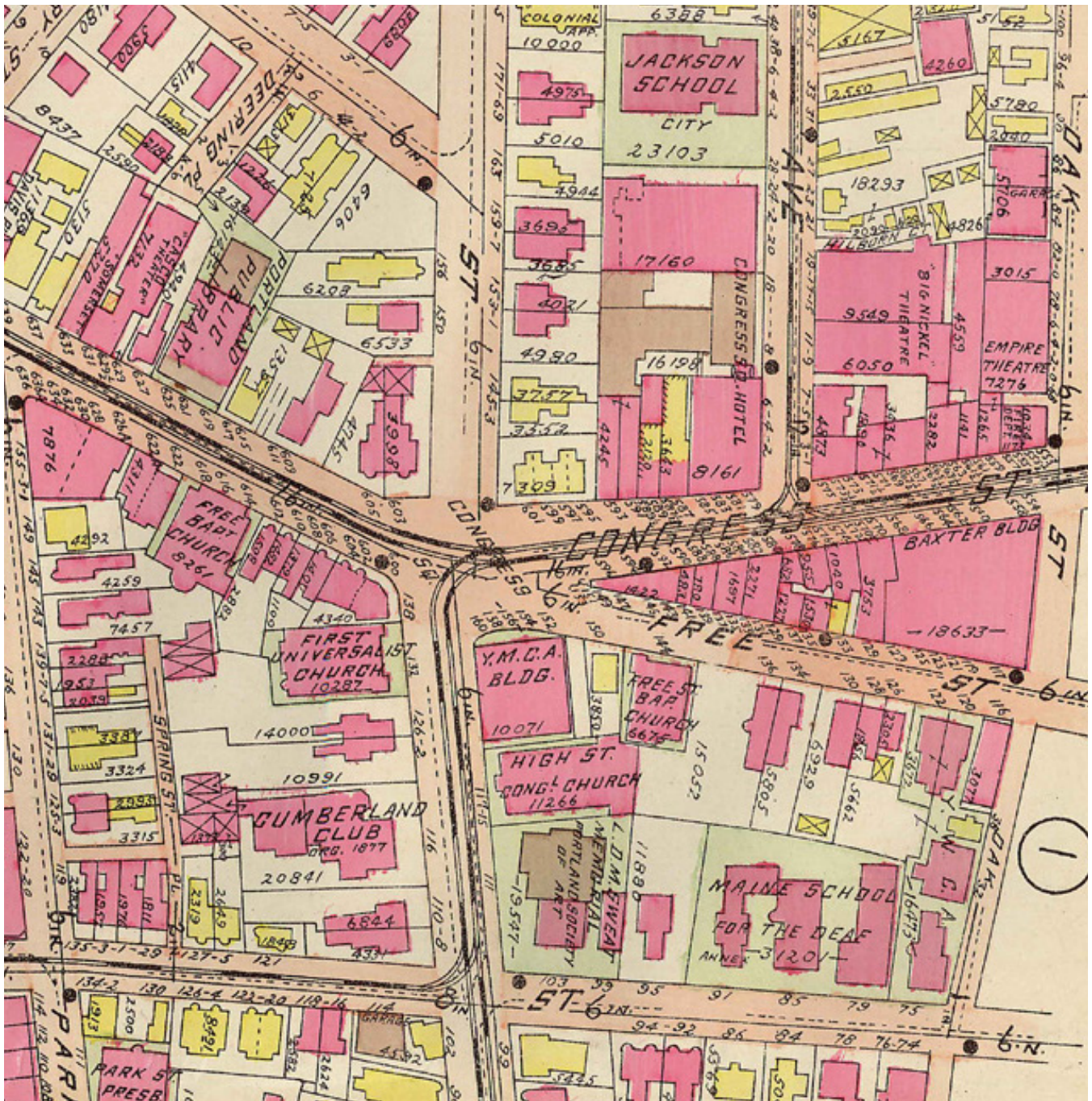
An 1882 map of Congress Square.

Source: *Revaluation Plans City of Portland, 1882*. Plate 39. Portland Public Library.



Congress Square in the early-twentieth century, showing the ca. 1897 YMCA/Libby Building at the center, and the Free Street Baptist Church at the left. The spire of the High Street Congregational Church is visible at the right, behind the Libby Building. This image was published in 1908.

Source: *In and About Portland*, 1908. Library of Congress.



Congress Square in 1914. The wood-framed Matthew Cobb Mansion has been replaced by the YMCA / Libby Building. The Free Street Baptist Church at 142 Free Street retains its towers.

Source: *Richards Standard Atlas of the City of Portland...*, 1914. Portland Public Library.

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