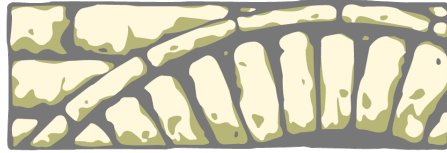


MADISON TRUST



for Historic Preservation

Advocacy Opinion

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Filene House Threatened

By John Rolling

In 1950, the Filene House at 1617 Sherman Ave. was dedicated by US President Harry Truman as the national headquarters of Credit Union National Association. Over the next 29 years, the Filene House office building housed the staffs of CUNA and its affiliates while they promoted the spread of the credit union movement across North America and the wider world.

In 2022, Chicago-based Vermillion Development proposes the demolition of the historic home of credit-unionism and redevelopment of the 8-acre site with a rental apartment project of 445 units.

I am currently preparing a nomination for City of Madison Landmark designation for Filene House. Grounds for landmarking are the building's association with the national/international credit union movement that has been based in Madison for nearly eight decades. A secondary basis for landmarking is the building's association with President Truman's May 1950 visit to Madison. Truman's dedication address linked the new building and the cooperative movement it represented with his initiative to extend American financial and technical aid to developing countries as part of the campaign to contain communism. Indeed, during the years while CUNA occupied Filene House, expansion of credit unionism to Latin America, the Caribbean Asia and Africa was a major focus (frequently in association with US Aid for International Development programs).

Credit Union National Association was created in 1935 with the purpose to promote the growth of credit unionism in the United States. Its activities would include lobbying at the state and federal levels, training for local credit union staff and members, supplying common forms and printing services, and providing insurance against borrower default due to death/disability.

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Head shot of Edward Filene above building, CUNA's monthly magazine, *The Bridge*, June 1950

A number of factors were responsible for Madison's choice as the site for CUNA headquarters. Wisconsin's state government was a leader in authorizing credit unions (1913). Madison's progressive reputation was considered a plus. Edward Filene, first president of CUNA, had a personal connection with UW President Glenn Frank. Frank had served as Filene's secretary earlier in his career. Several letters between Frank and Filene from early 1935 underscore the importance of this relationship in Madison's becoming CUNA's home.

CUNA first operated from rental buildings. In 1940, it purchased the 8-acre Sherman

Avenue site previously occupied by Hausmann Brewery's Malt House. Funding for the land purchase was partially underwritten by local Madison credit unions. The City of Madison facilitated CUNA's land purchase by buying excess land from the CUNA site to extend city parkland. While construction of Filene House was planned in 1941, World War II and shortages in the war's aftermath caused CUNA to begin construction only in 1949. At the building's dedication in May 1950, it was named in honor of Filene, the Boston department store owner who had been a founder of one of the first statewide credit unions in the United States (Massachusetts Credit Union 1914) and who had sponsored, both financially and through personal efforts, the promotion of credit unions through CUNA's predecessor, the Credit Union National Extension Bureau through the 1920s and early 1930s.

CUNA and its affiliates (CUNA Supply Group, CUNA Mutual Insurance Society) moved into Filene House in June 1950. CUNA itself, renamed CUNA International Inc. in 1965, along with CUNA Supply Group remained at Filene House through the 1970's. The insurance company, CUMIS, (which grew from 41 employees to 237 during the 1950s), moved to a new, larger campus on Mineral Point Road in 1960. Credit Union International and CUNA Supply followed CUMIS out to the west side location in 1979.

During the 29-year period when CUNA/CUNA International headquartered at Filene House, the number of US member credit unions increased from about 12,000 to 22,000 while credit union membership grew from under 5 million to over 45 million. This was also the period when CUNA's international activity blossomed. CUNA created a World

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Extension Division in 1953, working with the US government and international organizations to promote the growth of credit unions in Latin America, Asia, Africa and the Caribbean.

The building is a two-story steel frame structure over perimeter concrete foundation. The roof is flat. Exterior walls are two-toned brick. The original building measures 101 feet by 148 feet for 29,896 square feet. Floor heights are 14 feet. Additions were made to the south and north sides in 1966. Each is two stories, steel frame with brick exterior walls consistent with the original. An eastern (rear) addition from 2000 is of similar construction and serves as an entry from the concrete-paved open parking lot. With these later additions, the building now contains just under 47,000 square feet.

The Law, Law, Potter and Nystrom architectural firm designed the original building. The successor firm Potter-Lawson designed all three additions. The building's style has been described as "stripped classism." The building's design was intentionally simple. CUNA's leadership at the time felt that the cooperative's member-owners would expect no "ostentatious display," and that "The result [should be] a modern, functional building, with no expensive frills..."¹

The building was dedicated on May 14, 1950. The occasion culminated the annual meeting of CUNA's member credit unions. CUNA officials invited President Harry Truman to attend the dedication. To their apparent surprise, he accepted. Truman had scheduled a trip to the west coast earlier. Among other items on his trip agenda was the need to drum up public support for his Point IV program, "a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas."²



Crowd at Cornerstone Laying Ceremony, CUNA's monthly magazine, *The Bridge*, June 1950

Truman delivered his dedication speech to some 5,000 credit union delegates meeting at the University of Wisconsin Fieldhouse. The speech was broadcast nationally over the NBC radio network and it was reprinted in its entirety not only by Madison's

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¹ Source: J. Carroll Moody and Gilbert C. Fite, *The Credit Union Movement: Origins and Development 1850-1980*, p. 301.

² Source: Truman Inaugural Address January 20, 1949.

Wisconsin State Journal but also by the New York Times. Truman lauded credit unions as part of larger cooperative movement. He linked the credit union organization principles of self-help, mutual assistance and democratic control to his administration's efforts to marshal a "great cooperative effort to preserve freedom and achieve peace in the world."³ In this, he was referring to the recent passage of the Act for International Development, which budgeted \$34.5 Million for technical assistance to developing countries.

After the speech, Truman and his entourage, including Wisconsin Governor Oscar Rennebohm, Madison's mayor and the UW president as well as Mrs. Truman and daughter Margaret, motorcaded to Filene House where a crowd estimated at 9,000 witnessed the president help lay the building's cornerstone.

The Truman visit and the Filene House dedication was given extensive coverage in the local press. Most was positive. However, the Wisconsin State Journal (May 15, 1950) editorialized that the speech "...was a faintly disguised piece of pressure-making for his program to pour more millions of dollars into underdeveloped areas of the world." And "...the technique the president used here, the trick of seizing upon the opportunity to pay rightful praise to the Credit Union National Association...and attempting to transfer its praiseworthy record of cooperation into a swift pitch for his own Point 4 program was something else again."

Despite the State Journal's negative stance, CUNA did embrace Point IV and subsequent US government efforts to enlist the credit union movement in international development work. In 1953, CUNA's Board of Directors resolved "That CUNA shall undertake to influence increasingly the growth of international understanding and peace through participation in international programs with constructive, self-help objectives related to ours, such as Mutual Security Administration's Point IV Program, CARE and UNESCO. Management is specifically authorized to enlist CUNA as a sponsoring member of CARE and as a participant in Point IV and UNESCO conferences to which it may be invited."⁴

To my mind, Filene House clearly deserves Landmark status due to its important role in the development of the national and international credit union movement. Our city is proud to have been CUNA and affiliates home since 1935. Recognition for Filene House is a fitting recognition of that pride.

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³ Source: Harry S. Truman, Address at the Dedication of the Credit Union National Association's Filene House, Madison, Wisconsin.

⁴ Source: Moody and Fite, The Credit Union Movement, p. 239.

At its November 14 meeting, the Landmarks Commission adopted a finding that Filene House has historic value. That finding has been passed on to the Madison Plan Commission which has approval authority for demolitions. This opinion, however, is merely advisory. The Plan Commission can ignore it. Landmarks designation, on the other hand, would put the demolition decision back into the hands of the Landmarks Commission.

I intend to submit the formal Landmarks nomination in time for Landmarks Commission review at its January 9, 2023, meeting. I ask you to support this nomination through appearance at this (virtual) meeting. The public is invited to express its support verbally or in writing (landmarkscommission@cityofmadison.com). Go to the [Landmarks Commission meeting page](#) for information on meeting registration (will be posted closer to meeting date) and where to send comments. I also welcome hearing from anyone with additional information about Filene House, especially during the period 1950-1979.

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Filene House by John Rolling, November 22, 2022