



First African Baptist Church, 1600-06 Christian Street, circa 1957. Courtesy Temple University Archives.

*For Designation in the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places:*

***The First African Baptist Church  
1600-06 Christian Street***

***“First and Oldest African Baptist Congregation in Philadelphia”***

**NOMINATION OF HISTORIC BUILDING, STRUCTURE, SITE, OR OBJECT  
PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

**SUBMIT ALL ATTACHED MATERIALS ON PAPER AND IN ELECTRONIC FORM ON CD (MS WORD FORMAT)**

**1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE** (must comply with an Office of Property Assessment address)

Street address: 1600-06 Christian Street

Postal code: 19146 Councilmanic District: 2

**2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Historic Name: First African Baptist Church

Common Name: First African Baptist Church

**3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Building       Structure       Site       Object

**4. PROPERTY INFORMATION**

Condition:     excellent     good     fair     poor     ruins

Occupancy:    occupied    vacant    under construction    unknown

Current use: Church

**5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

Please attach a plot plan and written description of the boundary.

**6. DESCRIPTION**

Please attach a description of the historic resource and supplement with current photographs.

**7. SIGNIFICANCE**

Please attach the Statement of Significance.

Period of Significance (from year to year): from 1906 to present

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: Constructed: 1906

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: Watson & Huckel

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: Harry B. Shoemaker & Co.

Original owner: First African Baptist Church

Other significant persons: \_\_\_\_\_

**CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:**

The historic resource satisfies the following criteria for designation (check all that apply):

- (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; or,
- (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; or,
- (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen; or,
- (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or,
- (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif; or,
- (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; or,
- (i) Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in pre-history or history; or
- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

**8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

Please attach a bibliography.

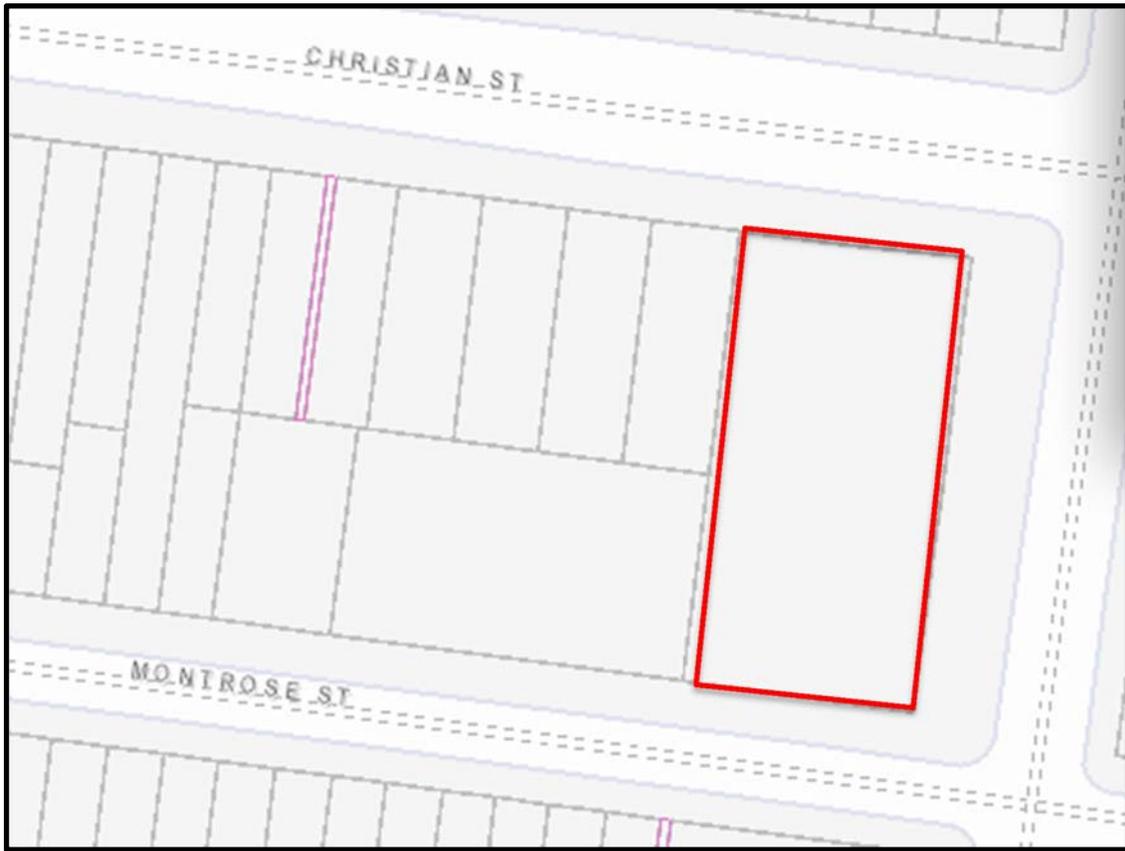
**9. NOMINATOR**

Name with Title Oscar Beisert, Architectural Historian Email Oscar.Beisert@gmail.com  
Organization Off Boundary Preservation Brigade Date 7 April 2015  
Street Address 205 Rochelle Avenue Telephone 717-602-5002  
City, State, and Postal Code Philadelphia, PA 19128  
Nominator  is  is not the property owner.

**PHC USE ONLY**

Date of Receipt: 1 July 2015, edits returned 21 July 2015  
 Correct-Complete  Incorrect-Incomplete Date: 24 July 2015  
Date of Notice Issuance: 24 July 2015  
Property Owner at Time of Notice  
Name: First African Baptist Church  
Address: 1600-06 Christian Street  
  
City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19146  
Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: 16 September 2015  
Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: 9 October 2015  
Date of Final Action: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Designated  Rejected

## 5. Boundary Description



The boundary of the First African Baptist Church at 1600-06 Christian Street encompasses a rectangular lot located on the southwest corner of the intersection of Christian and 16<sup>th</sup> Streets. The parcel contains in front or breadth on Christian Street roughly sixty-seven (67') feet, and of that width extends southwardly between lines parallel and along 16<sup>th</sup> Street one hundred and twenty-nine feet, eight and one-half inches (129'-8-1/2") to Montrose Street, which has the same frontage as Christian. The property is known as Parcel No. 007S03-0011, Office of Property Assessment Account No. 772104000.

## 6. Building Description



Looking southwest.

The First African Baptist Church is located at the southwest corner of 16<sup>th</sup> and Christian Streets, in an urban residential neighborhood of primarily two and three-story Italianate rowhouses. The church, which extends the full depth of the block to Montrose Street, is primarily freestanding, with only a partial connection to an adjoining brownstone-clad townhouse at its northwest corner. The building is clad in uncoursed ashlar and features smooth limestone details. The base of the building features a continuous, uncoursed ashlar watertable capped with a smooth limestone beltcourse. The name of the church is announced by a large, non-historic sign which projects at 45 degrees from the corner of the 16<sup>th</sup> and Christian Street facades.

### North (Christian Street) Elevation

The north, or Christian Street, elevation serves as the primary façade of the church. It is divided into three masses: a large, square tower at the northeast corner; a central gable-front section that holds the main sanctuary space; and a smaller, lower, square turret at the northwest corner. The large corner tower dominates the northeast corner at 16<sup>th</sup> and Christian Streets. As a result of damage from several storms, the tower has been reduced in height, and is currently topped with a simple, squared stone cap. Each corner of the tower is articulated by a shallow, narrow, setback buttress, which culminate at approximately the height of the second floor window in a small, stylized limestone pinnacle and finial. At the base of the tower, just above the watertable, is a cornerstone with the name of the church, date that

the church was organized, and date of construction. Adjacent to the cornerstone is the primary entrance, a pointed-arch doorway articulated by a smooth limestone surround, and accessed via three stone steps. Within the opening is a pair of rectangular wooden doors with ornamental strap hinges, and a decorative pointed-arch transom. Above the entrance is a single, pointed-arch strained-glass window, defined by ashlar voussoirs and a smooth limestone sill. Evidence of a third-floor window is present in the form of an infilled opening and sill. The tower historically extended much higher and featured a dramatic bell tower with pointed-arch openings and decorative tracery and was topped with a castellated parapet and corner spires.

To the west of the tower is the gable-front portion of the building, which is recessed slightly from its flanking turrets. At the ground level, this portion of the building features four basement window openings set within the watertable, and capped with the limestone beltcourse that runs the entire length of the façade. The symmetrical, rectangular openings feature a pattern of single, double, double, single. The easternmost single window has been infilled with non-historic glass block and a brick sill. At the first floor level are two sets of stained-glass windows which align with the double windows below. These rectangular sets of windows feature smooth limestone lintels and sills. Above these windows is a large, pointed-arch stained-glass window that serves the main sanctuary space. The arched window is surrounded by ashlar voussoirs and features a smooth limestone sill. At the attic level, just below the peak of the roof, are three rectangular louvered openings, the center one of which is taller than the flanking openings. Although the openings are separated by areas of ashlar, they feature a continuous limestone sill. The limestone lintels are connected, but jog up and around the center opening. The gable is topped with a stone OMEGA finial.

At the northwestern corner of the façade is a lower, square turret. The ground floor of the turret features a secondary entrance, with a narrower door and transom with similar detailing to the primary entrance. The pointed-arched opening is accessed by two stone or concrete steps, and is topped with ashlar voussoirs. At the second floor level is a narrow, pointed-arch stained-glass window with ashlar voussoirs and a limestone sill. The top of the turret ends several feet below the gable roof of the sanctuary, and features an ashlar parapet which rises from a small limestone cornice supported by widely-spaced limestone dentils.

### **East (16<sup>th</sup> Street) Elevation**

The east, or 16<sup>th</sup> Street, elevation is divided into three masses. Moving from north to south (or visually right to left), the façade features: the eastern and southern facades of the northeast tower; a 1.5-story, four-bay side elevation, which terminates in a slightly projecting entrance bay with a castellated parapet; and, at the corner of 16<sup>th</sup> and Montrose Streets, a front-gable section, which extends westward to create a T-intersection with the roof of the primary gable-front portion of the building that fronts on 16<sup>th</sup> Street. The eastern elevation of the northeast tower features three openings: a basement-level window in the watertable, below the limestone

beltcourse; a rectangular stained-glass window with limestone lintel and sill at the first-floor level; and a pointed-arch window with ashlar voussoirs and a limestone sill at the second-floor level. Evidence of a third-floor window is present in the form of changes in the masonry pointing and a stone sill. A portion of the southern elevation of the tower is visible above the tall, 1.5-story section of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street façade. This portion of the tower features no penetrations.

To the south of the tower is a 1.5-story section that features four bays of stained-glass windows. At the ground-level, there are four, square, stained-glass basement windows set within the watertable. These windows are topped by the limestone beltcourse, and feature bluestone sills. The outer two windows are widely spaced, while the inner two windows are more closely spaced. The most prominent features of this portion of the building are the four, pointed-arch, stained-glass windows that dominate the upper 1.5 floors of the façade. These windows are aligned with the basement windows. They are topped with ashlar voussoirs and feature limestone sills. Immediately to the south of the fourth window is a shallow projecting entrance bay accessed via a non-historic set of steps and ADA-accessible ramp with black metal railing, constructed between 2007 and 2009. The pointed-arch doorway resembles, but is slightly narrower than, the primary entrance on Christian Street. The opening is articulated by a limestone surround, within which is set a double-door with elaborate strap hinges and an intricate transom. Centered above the entrance is a single, rectangular window with a limestone lintel and sill. Just above the lintel is a limestone cornice supported by thick, widely-spaced dentils. A simple, castellated ashlar parapet rises above the limestone cornice.

Visible from a distance, but not readily visible from the pedestrian view along 16<sup>th</sup> Street, is the clerestory of the main sanctuary space, which rises above and behind the 1.5-story portion of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street elevation. The clerestory wall features four arched windows with hood molding. The windows are separated by blind tracery over a smoothly-finished wall. The gable roof features a simple denticulated cornice. At the southern end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street façade, at the corner of 16<sup>th</sup> and Montrose Streets, is a gable-front portion of the elevation. This symmetrical portion of the façade features three bays of windows—a wide central bay dominated by a two-story, stained-glass window, and flanked by identical, narrower bays of single windows. The bays are separated by shallow, narrow buttresses matching those on the northeast corner tower. The flanking bays each feature three aligned windows: a rectangular basement window with limestone lintel and bluestone sill; a rectangular, stained-glass, first-floor window with limestone lintel and sill; and a pointed-arch stained-glass window at the second-floor level with a limestone sill and ashlar voussoir surround. Unlike the other basement windows on the 16<sup>th</sup> Street and Christian Street facades, the windows on this portion of the building feature thick limestone lintels set beneath the limestone beltcourse that caps the watertable. The wide, central bay features two rectangular basement windows with limestone lintels and bluestone sills. The dominant feature of this portion of the building is the two-story, segmental-arched, stained-glass window that aligns with the basement windows below. The window features a limestone sill and is topped with ashlar voussoirs. At the attic level, centered below the peak of the gable, are

three louvered openings like those along the Christian Street façade—a taller central opening flanked by two shorter openings. The gable is capped with stone coping and topped with a decorative, stone finial.

### **South (Montrose Street) Elevation**

The south facade along Montrose Street is the side elevation of the gable-front portion of the building fronting on 16<sup>th</sup> Street. Like the other two facades, the south façade is clad in uncoursed ashlar and features an ashlar watertable capped with a smooth limestone beltcourse. The façade is four bays wide, featuring from west to east (or left to right) a single bay with a pedestrian door at the first floor, with a single, pointed-arch opening above, followed by three bays of paired windows at the basement, first, and second floors. The pedestrian door is accessed by five stone or concrete steps and features a non-historic, flat metal door mounted by a single-lite transom and flat limestone lintel. Aligned above the doorway is a single, pointed-arch window opening with a limestone sill and topped with ashlar voussoirs. The window has been boarded up from the interior, with only the wooden frame remaining. The other three bays of windows along this façade feature identical pairs of windows at each floor. Each bay features two rectangular basement windows set within the watertable, and topped with a thick limestone lintel. At the first-floor level, each bay features a pair of rectangular, stained-glass windows with limestone lintels and sills. Aligned above the lower level windows, the upper floor features two pointed-arch, stained-glass upper-floor windows at each bay. These windows are topped with ashlar voussoirs and have limestone lintels. The façade is topped with a simple metal cornice and pole gutter. Beyond the roofline rises the pointed clerestory of the main sanctuary space. The clerestory is clad in vertical panels and features three louvered openings identical to those found on the opposite end of the gable.

### **West Elevation**

The west elevation of the First African Baptist Church is the only semi-attached elevation of the building. The north half of the west façade is attached at the first two floors at the height of the western turret. Visible from the south on Montrose Street through an adjacent parking lot, the west elevation is the only undressed elevation of the building. The ashlar of the south façade keys into the simple red brick of the western façade. The most prominent aspect of this elevation is the gable end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street gable portion of the building, which connects at its northern end to a two-story portion of the building. The two-story section is only semi-exposed before it disappears behind an adjacent building. This plane of the building features seven rectangular basement/ground floor windows of varying widths; four identical, rectangular, first-floor windows; five pointed-arch windows at the second-floor level, and two rectangular attic windows centered beneath the gable. Beyond this plane rises a tall brick chimney, and behind that, the clerestory of the main sanctuary space. The clerestory is decorated with blind tracery and features arched windows with hood molding. It is topped with a simple denticulated cornice. The clerestory continues the length of the building back to the main Christian Street façade, and is separated from the adjacent building by five feet.

Between the uppermost part of the facade and the roofline, likely of metal which has minimal detail. Recessed from the facade within the roof is the south facing gable of the clerestory, which is finished in what appears to be copper and/or another kind of original metal material that is designed to emulate a board-and-batten fascia. At the center of this elevation is a duplication of the three-part aperture containing louvered vents at the primary, north and the east elevations.

The western elevation is only visible for a few feet and features red brick cladding. There are roughly fourteen apertures at this elevation, but the design is related to former structures on the site that are no longer present.



Looking south.



Looking south.



Looking southeast.



Looking south.



Looking northwest.



Looking west.



Looking west.



Looking southwest.



Looking northeast.



Looking south.



Looking southwest.



Looking west.



First African Baptist Church, Christian and 16<sup>th</sup> Streets, circa 1957. Courtesy Temple University Archives.

## **7. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

First African Baptist Church, 1600-06 Christian Street, is a significant resource that merits designation by the Philadelphia Historical Commission and inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. Located at the southwest corner of Christian and 16<sup>th</sup> Streets in southwest Center City or the “Graduate Hospital” neighborhood, First African Baptist Church satisfies Criteria for Designation (a) and (j).

(a) Has significant character, interest, or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth, or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past;

(j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

The building at the southwest corner of Christian and 16<sup>th</sup> Streets was constructed in 1906, and is significant as the one of the oldest purpose-built African American houses of worship in Philadelphia, as well as the only extant building representing the oldest African Baptist congregation—First African Baptist, which was the fifth African American congregation to be founded in Philadelphia. The building at 1600-06 Christian Street is the longest home of the congregation, who has worshiped in this space for over 100 years. Furthermore, the building represents an important community center in the local community from 1906 through the early twenty-first century.

**Criteria A and J: Constructed in 1906 and designed by the important architectural firm of Watson & Huckel, the First African Baptist Church at 1600-06 Christian Street has been home to the first and oldest African Baptist congregation in Philadelphia for over 100 years. The building is also one of the few examples from its period of a purpose-built, architect-designed church for an African American congregation. Furthermore the building is the only extant resource that represents the history of this important congregation. In addition, since 1906, the First African Baptist Church has been a major community center in the neighborhood, which was for decades home to a large African American population.**

**Note: While the building is significant under the criteria related to architecture, we have chosen to concentrate on Criteria A and J due to the removal of the tower. The fact that the building was a purpose-built house of worship for an African American congregation and designed by an important architect is relevant to its significance under Criteria A and J.**

### **Birth of the African American Church**

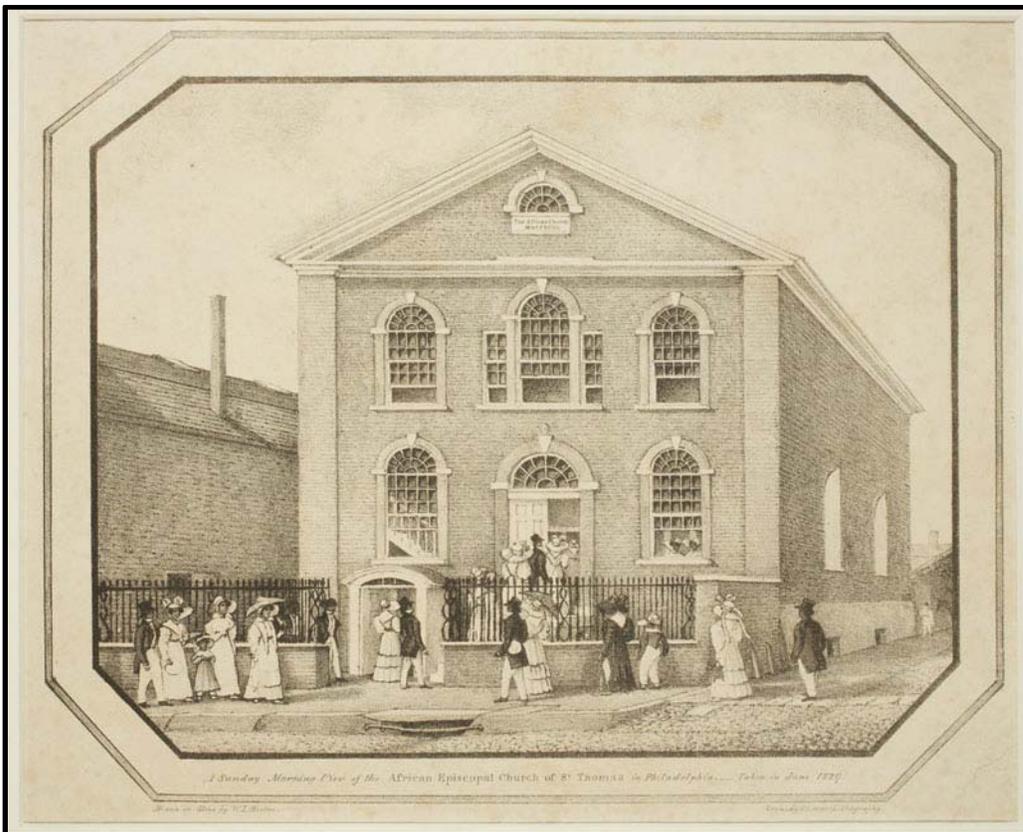
African American Christianity in the United States can trace its origin to the Great Awakening. Between 1740 and 1790, charismatic revivalists toured the colonies, preaching messages of salvation for all, a movement that became known as the Great Awakening. The Great Awakening made a particularly profound impact on Philadelphia because eighteenth-century Philadelphia was home to one of the largest free African American communities in the country.<sup>1</sup> The movement, which embraced men and women of all races and regardless of background, resonated with African Americans in particular. Historians suspect that the fervor of the Great

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<sup>1</sup> Edward D. Smith, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Rise of Black Churches in Eastern American Cities, 1740-1877* (Washington, D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 23-28.

Awakening's revival meetings resonated with African Americans because to a degree, the meetings resembled those of their West African ancestors because of the incorporation of emotional experiences such as dancing and shouting as a natural part of the worship service.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the egalitarian values underlying the spirit of the Great Awakening, established religious institutions remained reluctant to grant African American congregants the full rights and responsibilities possessed by their white counterparts. This fostered the sentiment from which separate African American denominations and congregations grew. Because the Methodist and Baptist denominations are less hierarchical and emphasized formal education of clergy less so than other denominations, most African American converts joined either Methodist or Baptist congregations that were predominantly white.<sup>3</sup>



*A Sunday Morning View of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in Philadelphia.* Lithograph by W. L. Breton (Philadelphia, 1823). Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

America's independent African American church was born in Philadelphia when in 1787 a group of African American worshippers led by Richard Allen left the predominately white St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church to found a separate, independent African American denomination. Allen was born into slavery in

<sup>2</sup> Smith, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, 30–31.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, 31–33.

Delaware on the estate of attorney Benjamin Chew, who later served as Chief Justice of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, as well as the owner of Cliveden in Germantown. Six years after Allen bought his freedom in 1780, he and another member of St. George's, Absalom Jones, founded the Free African Society.<sup>4</sup> In 1787, African American worshippers of St. George's were relegated to standing along the back wall while pews were reserved for white members. According to Allen's memoirs, on a Sunday in 1787, the church's sexton asked African American members to vacate the main floor to worship in the gallery above. While praying on the main floor, Absalom Jones and William White were forcibly removed despite their protests, as they had been kneeling in prayer. This incident motivated many of St. George's African American worshippers to leave the church permanently and established a congregation of forty-two African American Christians, in which worship could be conducted freely.<sup>5</sup>

Consisting of former members of St. George's, the newly formed group contemplated Methodism. However, unable to reach a consensus, the members split into two independent churches in 1794: St. Thomas Episcopal Church and Bethel Church. Notably, St. Thomas, led by Absalom Jones, opted to join an existing denomination while Bethel, led by Richard Allen, retained its stronghold. In 1816, Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church—a separate, independent African American denomination. The African Methodist Episcopal Church, known commonly as the A.M.E. Church, is the oldest independent African American denomination in the world.<sup>6</sup>

In the two decades following the establishment of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas and Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, three other African American churches were founded in Philadelphia, including Zoar Methodist Episcopal Church (1796), First African Presbyterian Church (1807), and First African Baptist Church (1809).<sup>7</sup>

### **First African Baptist Church—the Oldest African American Baptist Congregation in Philadelphia**

Until 1809, African American Baptists in Philadelphia worshipped in primarily white Baptist congregations. First African Baptist Church was established on June 19, 1809 by thirteen former congregants of the primarily-white First Baptist Church of Philadelphia.<sup>8</sup> These individuals had “come to Philadelphia from the eastern shore of Virginia to escape the cruel treatment of slave masters.”<sup>9</sup> First African Baptist Church's founding members had seen their Methodist Episcopal

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<sup>4</sup> Cyril E. Griffith, “Richard Allen: The First Prominent Black Religious Leader in Pennsylvania” in John M. Coleman, Robert G. Christ, and John B. Frantz eds., *Pennsylvania Religious Leaders*, Pennsylvania Historic Studies Series 16 (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania Historical Association, 1986), 11–12.

<sup>5</sup> Griffith, “Richard Allen,” 12.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, 3135–37.

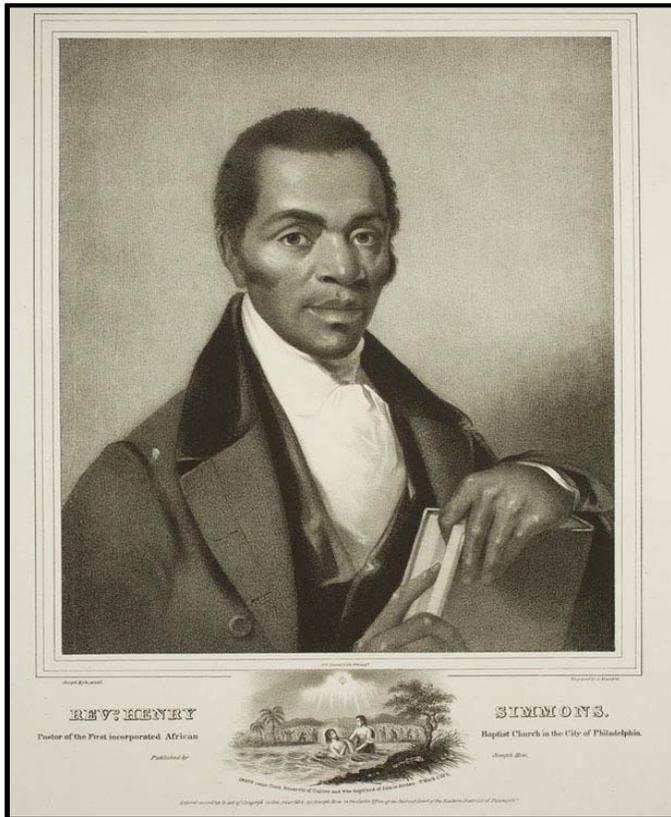
<sup>7</sup> National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, African American Churches of Philadelphia, 1787–1949.

<sup>8</sup> Charles H. Brooks, *Official History of the First African Baptist Church* (Philadelphia: 1977), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Brooks, *Official History*, 1–3.

counterparts establish a separate African American denomination in response to the original denomination's failure to grant African American members full rights and responsibilities.

African American Baptists faced discrimination as well, but its split, in comparison to that of the Methodist Episcopal Church, was less controversial. According to Charles H. Brooks' *Official History of the First African Baptist Church, Philadelphia*, "It is beyond controversy that the relation of the white and colored members of the First Baptist Church was of the most cordial and Christian manner."<sup>10</sup> In fact, First Baptist Church of Philadelphia granted each of the thirteen founding members of First African Baptist Church voluntary letters of dismissal to establish an independent African American congregation "under the care and protection of their Mother Church."<sup>11</sup> At the Philadelphia Baptist Association's annual meeting in October 1809, First African Baptist Church was welcomed as a member. It became the fifth African American church in Philadelphia, as well as the first African American Baptist church in Philadelphia and Pennsylvania.<sup>12</sup>



The Revd. Henry Simmons, Pastor of the First Incorporated African Baptist Church in the City of Philadelphia. Lithograph by Albert Newsam after an oil painting by Joseph Kyle (Philadelphia, 1838). Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>10</sup> Brooks, *Official History*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Brooks, *Official History*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, African American Churches of Philadelphia, 1787–1949.

Under the leadership of first pastor Reverend Henry Simmons, the young congregation acquired a lot at 10th and Vine Streets in the Spring Garden District of Philadelphia. The lot measured twenty-six feet in width and thirty-seven feet in length.<sup>13</sup> Upon this ground the congregation built its first house of worship, a small wood-frame building. Cunningham served the church from 1809 until 1813. The congregation's second pastor, Reverend John King, orchestrated two moves during his tenure from 1813 to 1832, abandoning their original building early in their history. King, an ordained white minister from Virginia, guided the congregation's move to De Friese's Court (11th Street, near Vine Street) in 1813 and to Haviland Place (8th Street, below Vine Street) in 1825.<sup>14</sup>



Old Mother Church, Cherry Street. Courtesy the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

It is the story of First African Baptist Church's third pastor that exemplifies the congregation's unwavering dedication to its faith and its people. This story is summarized on the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission's (PHMC)

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<sup>13</sup> Brooks, *Official History*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Brooks, *Official History*, 4.

historical marker that stands outside the Christian Street entrance of the church's current building. Born into slavery, Virginian James Burrows became pastor of First African Baptist Church in 1832 when cousins Samuel Bivens and John Bivens volunteered themselves as collateral in exchange for Burrows' freedom. Burrows planned to earn the amount necessary to purchase his cousins' freedom, and then return to Northampton County, Virginia to preach. In 1833, Burrows did so, freeing the Bivens cousins; but, instead of returning to Virginia, he remained in Philadelphia. Under Burrow's pastorate (1832–1844), the fledgling congregation grew from sixty members to 252 members, organizing a Sunday School in the process.<sup>15</sup>

Following Burrows, Rev. Richard Vaughn (1846–1857), Rev. James Underdew (1859–1863), and Rev. Theodore Doughty Miller (1864–1897) each served as pastor of the congregation.<sup>16</sup> In 1867, under the pastorate of Rev. Miller, the church purchased a house of worship in which it would remain for nearly forty years. The property, located on the north side of Cherry Street between 10th and 11th Streets, was flanked at its north and west property lines by a court formed by Wheat Street (now Clifton Street). Here, the congregation moved into an existing brick Greek Revival style building that had been built by a white Reformed Presbyterian congregation, which incidentally was the only church in Philadelphia to allow the famous British Abolitionist George Thompson speak in 1834.<sup>17</sup>

By 1899, First African Baptist Church had outgrown the Cherry Street church. In part, this was due to the strong leadership of Rev. William A. Creditt, pastor from 1897 to 1915. Because the landlocked church could not be enlarged, the congregation came to the decision, after two years of careful deliberation, to relocate.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, the church chose to relocate to southwest Center City. Originally a distinct municipality called Moyamensing, southwest Center City was already home to many African Americans. By 1837, 18% of the area's African American population lived in Moyamensing, which was surpassed only by the city proper (62%).<sup>19</sup> By 1849, 21% of the city's African American churches were located in Moyamensing.<sup>20</sup> The northern end of this neighborhood was covered in W.E.B. Du Bois' famous study of the African Americans in the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward, published by the University of Pennsylvania in 1899.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Brooks, *Official History*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Brooks, *Official History*, 9–14.

<sup>17</sup> Brooks, *Official History*, 51–52; William P. White and William H. Scott, *The Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia: A Camera and Pen Sketch of Each Presbyterian Church and Institution in the City* (Philadelphia: Allen, Lane & Scott, 1894), 235.

<sup>18</sup> Brooks, *Official History*, 21.

<sup>19</sup> *Statistical Inquiry Into the Condition of the People of Color of the City and Districts of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Kite & Walton, 1849), 29.

<sup>20</sup> National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, African American Churches of Philadelphia, 1787–1949.

<sup>21</sup> W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, Series in Political Economy and Public Law, no. 14 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1899).

### **First African Baptist Church, 16<sup>th</sup> and Christian Streets**

In 1902, the congregation purchased a lot measuring sixty-seven feet wide by one hundred twenty-nine and a half feet deep at the southwest corner of 16th and Christian Streets, which contained two buildings—1606 Christian Street, a single row house on the west side of the lot and 1604 Christian Street, a small brick building.<sup>22</sup> The remainder of the lot was “virgin soil, orchard.”<sup>23</sup> The lot was sold to the First African Baptist Church of Philadelphia on December 30th, 1902 from the estate of brick manufacturer, James J. Milnamow.<sup>24</sup> Milnamow who had purchased the property from William Armstrong, Jr. in 1882, had lived with his family at 1606 Christian Street and died in 1897.<sup>25</sup> The church paid \$16,500 for the new lot. Five years later, the church sold its Cherry Street building for \$30,000 to the Farm Journal Company, which had already acquired lots adjacent to the church in order to assemble a site for a large printing plant.<sup>26</sup>



The Oldest Living Members, 1922. Courtesy the New York Public Library.

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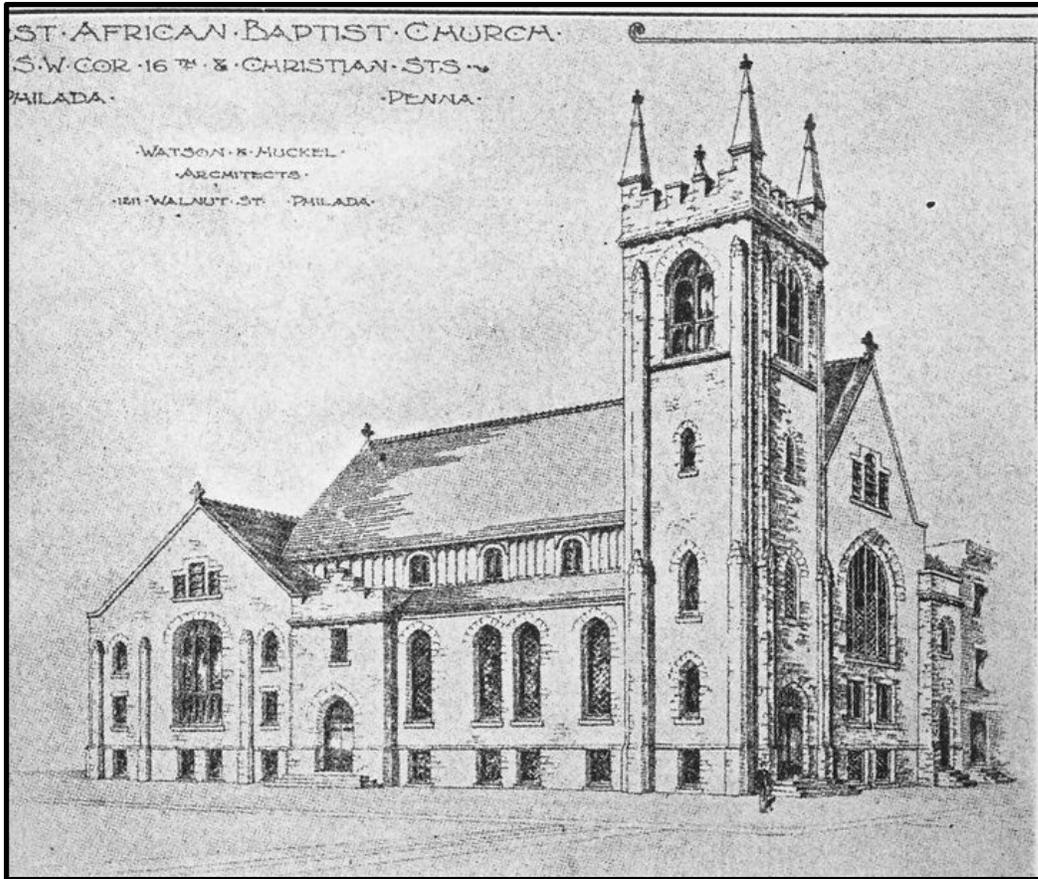
<sup>22</sup> Brooks, *Official History*, 52. and George W. Bromley and Walker S. Bromley, *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: G.W. Bromley & Co., 1895), plate 3.

<sup>23</sup> Brooks, *Official History*, 52.

<sup>24</sup> Deed: Jacob J. Hitschler and Charles A. Young, executors of the will of James Milnamow, to The First African Baptist Church of Philadelphia, 30 December 1902, Deed Book W.S.V., No. 135, p. 490, City Archives of Philadelphia (hereafter CAP).

<sup>25</sup> Deed: Hitschler and others to First African Baptist, 1902, CAP; *The Clay Worker*, 28 (October 1897): 27–28; *Boyd's Philadelphia Blue Book: The Fashionable Private Address Directory and Ladies' Visiting & Shopping Guide of Philadelphia and Surroundings* (Philadelphia: C.E. Howe & Co., 1887), 369.

<sup>26</sup> Brooks, *Official History*, 52; “The Latest News in Real Estate: First African Baptist Church on Cherry Street Has Changed Hands—Frank Marrin Disposes of West Philadelphia Lots,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 21 October 1907.

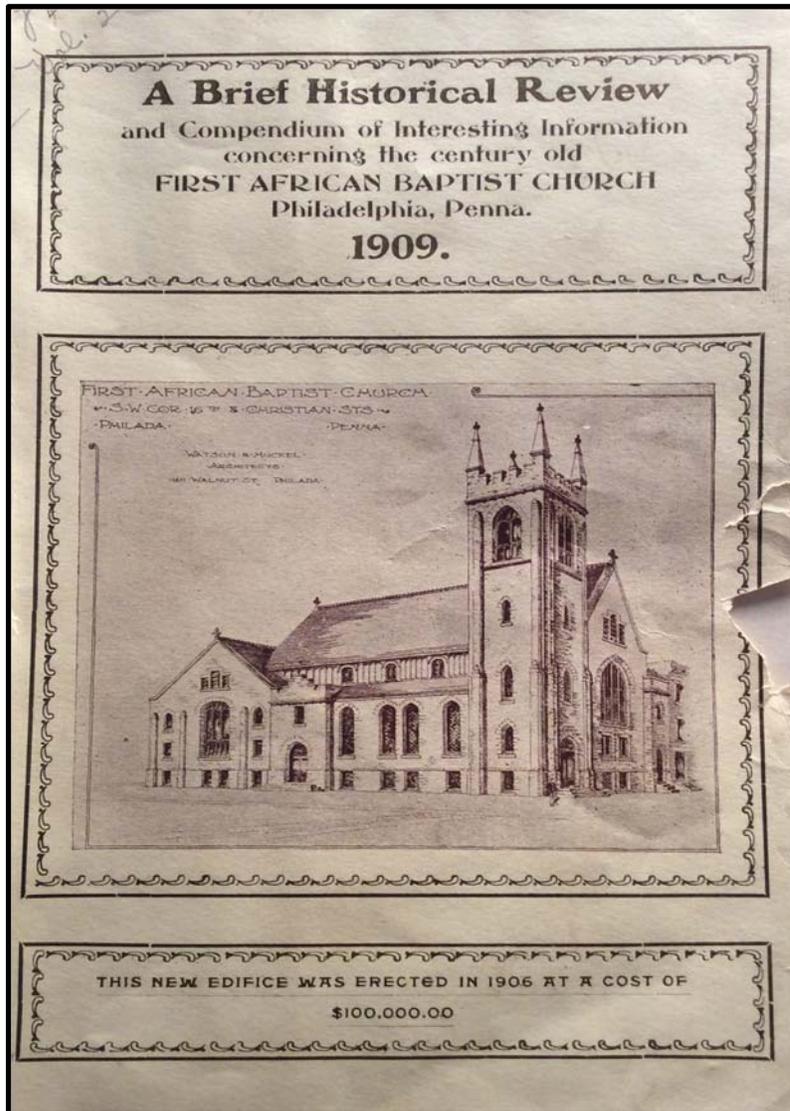


Architectural drawings showing the façade of the First African Baptist Church, circa 1904. Courtesy the New York Public Library.

Christian Street, an important thoroughfare, was lined with three-story brick row houses featuring architectural embellishments associated with the upper middle class, with church buildings dotting the landscape. In 1895, there were seven churches fronting on Christian Street, which stood along the eleven blocks between Broad Street to the east and Grays Ferry Avenue to the west including: Broad Street Methodist Episcopal Church (southwest corner of Broad and Christian Streets); 8th United Presbyterian Church (northeast corner of 15th and Christian Streets); Tabor Presbyterian Church (southwest corner of 18th and Christian Streets); St. Charles Borromeo Roman Catholic Church (southwest corner of 20th and Christian Streets); Church of the Holy Apostles (southeast corner of 21st and Christian Streets); Pilgrim Baptist Church (2200 block of Christian Street); and a Methodist Episcopal Church (2400 block of Christian Street). Of these seven churches only three are extant. The blocks to the north, south, east, and west of the lot at the southwest corner of 16th and Christian Streets were lined with mostly simpler two-story brick row houses that are typically associated with the working class.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Bromley, *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia* (1895), plates 3, 23.

The congregation commissioned the Philadelphia firm of Watson & Huckel (fl. 1902–1917) to design a Gothic Revival style church and school.<sup>28</sup> The contract was awarded to the firm on June 8, 1904.<sup>29</sup> The firm of Watson & Huckel designed many churches due to the fact that its principals, Frank R. Watson and Samuel Huckel, Jr. gained valuable experience under Catholic church architect Edwin Forrest Durang and Protestant church architect Benjamin D. Price respectively. First African Baptist Church is among the firm’s earliest works. In addition, Watson & Huckel designed civic buildings throughout the Northeast, including Union Station in Worcester, Massachusetts and Cumberland County Courthouse in Bridgeton, New Jersey.<sup>30</sup>



Brief Historical Review of First African Baptist. Courtesy the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>28</sup> "The Latest News in Real Estate. Contract Closed for New \$40,000 Stone Baptist Church 16th and Christian Sts," *Philadelphia Inquirer*. 21 September 1905.

<sup>29</sup> *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide*, 16 October 1904, 687

<sup>30</sup> *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*, s.v. "Watson & Huckel (fl. 1902–1917)," by Sandra L. Tatman, accessed June 23, 2015, [https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar\\_display.cfm/111087](https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/111087).

Built by Harry B. Shoemaker and Company at a cost of \$100,000, First African Baptist Church's current building was completed in 1906, three years before its hundredth anniversary.<sup>31</sup> Anticipating the need to commemorate this milestone, Rev. William A. Creditt designed four stained glass windows specifically for the building. The windows, which are visible from the 16th Street façade, "eloquently name the struggles, achievements and history of the congregation for the past 100 years."<sup>32</sup> The building also featured a 96-foot tall bell tower that joined its two main elevations at the southwest corner of 16th and Christian Streets. In the early 2000s the tower succumbed to damage caused by a lightning strike in the 1950s and Hurricane Floyd in 1999.<sup>33</sup> Though missing its tower, the words printed in a 1912 biographical sketch of Rev. Creditt ring true today: "This edifice is finest among colored people in the city of Philadelphia and one of the finest in the country..."<sup>34</sup>

Following Rev. William A. Creditt, five pastors served First African Baptist Church during the twentieth century including Rev. William A. Harrod (1916-1947), Rev. D. Manning Jackson (1949-1950), Rev. Charles Sumner Lee (1951-1974), Rev. William O. Jackson (1974-1976), Rev. Randall McCaskill (1976-1979), and Rev. Elvis L. Turner Sr. (1981-2000).<sup>35</sup> Rev. Charles Sumner Lee is particularly notable. Born in Washington D.C., Lee's family appears to have moved to Philadelphia when he was a child, as he was always considered "a son of First African Baptist Church." Lee eventually became a pastor and led the Kaighn Avenue Baptist Church in Camden, NJ. In 1951, he was "called to service" by his home church, First African Baptist.<sup>36</sup> According to a 1959 history of the church authored by the church's History Committee, "His administration in the First African Baptist Church was one that was characterized by radical change and the subsequent upheaval that too often follows every change in stable situations. There was a loss of membership from the congregation at this time."<sup>37</sup> Lee reversed this trend of loss by growing the church from 1,000 members to 1,700 members. Also under Lee, the building was restored; the interior and exterior were repainted, wood window frames were replaced, the stained glass windows were repaired, and a new pipe organ and speakers were installed. In addition, the church renovated the annex containing office and meeting spaces at 1608 Christian Street. The church had acquired the annex, a three-story brownstone-faced rowhouse in the early twentieth century.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Note: While Philadelphia Architects and Buildings (PAB) references Kendrick & Roberts as the building contractors, both the *Official History* and the *Philadelphia Tribune* call out Shoemaker as the builder.

<sup>32</sup> Brooks, *Official History*, 74; "First African Baptist Church Observes 150th Anniversary," *Philadelphia Tribune*. Philadelphia: 13 January 1959; and Brooks, *Official History*, 21-22.

<sup>33</sup> "Praying for a Church's Survival at First African Baptist, Congregants Reflect On Its Past and Strive to Ensure Its Future," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 23 March 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Charles F. White, *Who's Who in Philadelphia: Thirty Biographical Sketches of Philadelphia Colored People, Selected from Among the Most Useful and Practical, Illustrating What is Being Done Among Them in the City, Together with Cuts and Information of Some of Their Leading Institutions and Organizations* (Philadelphia: The A.M.E. Book Concern, 1912), 46.

<sup>35</sup> First African Baptist Church History Committee, *History of The First African Baptist Church* (Philadelphia: 1959).

<sup>36</sup> History Committee, *History of The First African Baptist Church*.

<sup>37</sup> History Committee, *History of The First African Baptist Church*.

<sup>38</sup> History Committee, *History of The First African Baptist Church*.

Due to the nature of First African Baptist's urban setting, the church building itself was landlocked by rowhouses and other components of the urban fabric. Because of this, the congregation acquired several buildings in the neighborhood, which it used in the manner of ancillary buildings. Around the time of its move to South Philadelphia, the congregation purchased a parsonage at 628 South 19<sup>th</sup> Street (at 19th and Bainbridge Streets). This property was sold in 1916 when the church purchased a second parsonage at 1839 Christian Street. This property was later sold.<sup>39</sup> In addition, during Rev. Charles Sumner Lee's tenure as pastor, the church purchased a rowhouse at 1612 Christian Street as an investment.<sup>40</sup> This property was later sold as well. The church has retained ownership of one of the properties it has owned over the years, the annex at 1608 Christian Street.<sup>41</sup> The annex is the most visually distinctive row house on the block as it is the only brownstone faced building on the block and features an intricate pressed tin cornice. While the annex may be eligible for listing in the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, it is not subject to this nomination.

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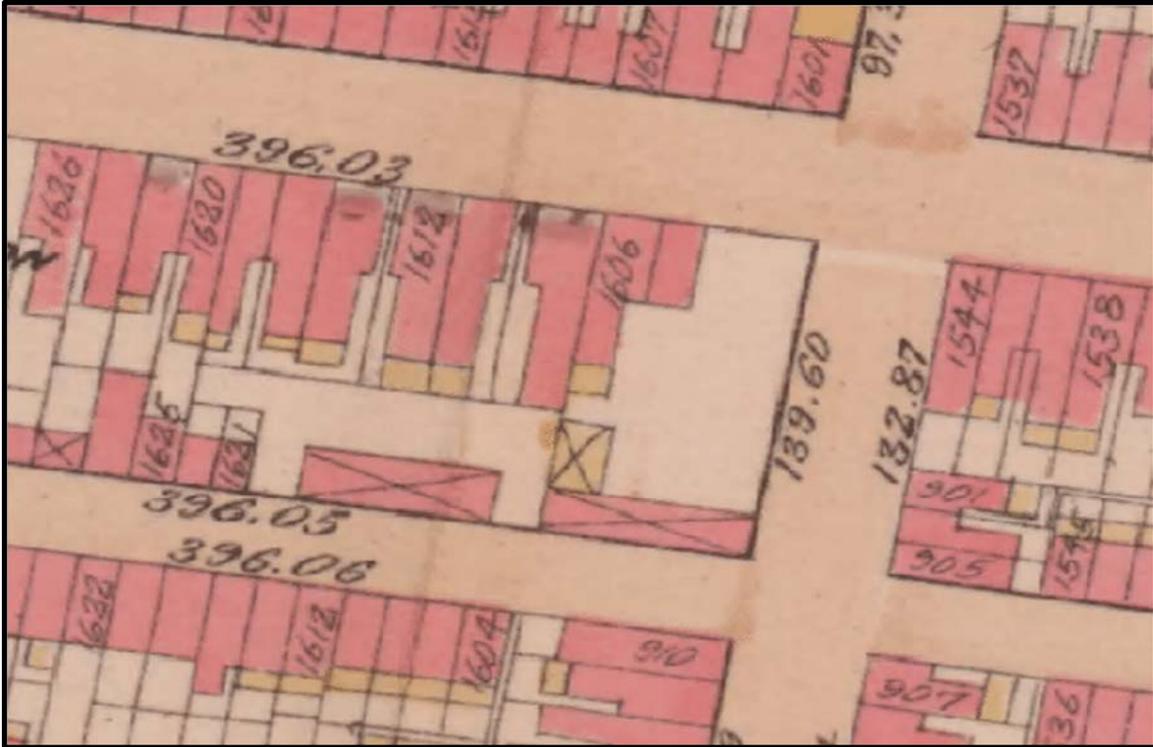
<sup>39</sup> Brooks, *Official History*, 93–94.

<sup>40</sup> History Committee, *History of The First African Baptist Church*.

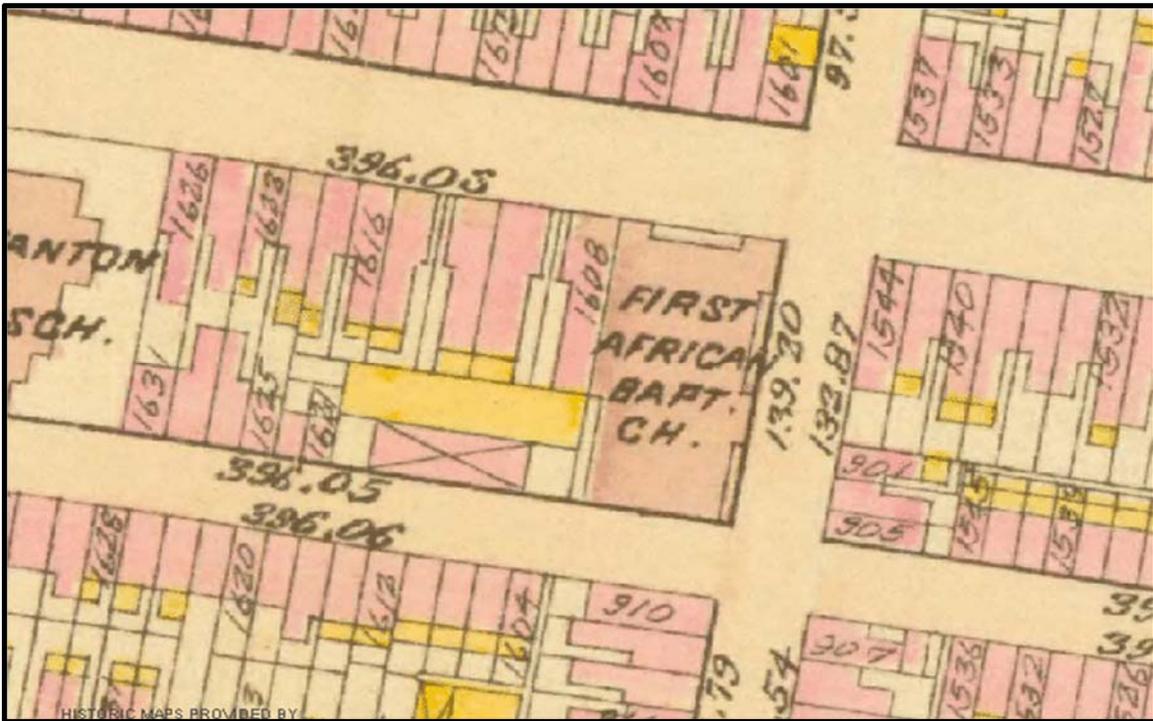
<sup>41</sup> City of Philadelphia Office of Property Assessment, Property Search, accessed 26 June 2015, <http://property.phila.gov/>



African American congregants leaving Sunday services, circa 1920s. Courtesy the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.



1895 Philadelphia Atlas, G.W. Bromley. Courtesy Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network.<sup>42</sup>



1910 Philadelphia Atlas, G.W. Bromley. Courtesy Greater Philadelphia Geo History Network.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Bromley, George W. and Walker S. Bromley. *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: G.W. Bromley & Co., 1895.

<sup>43</sup> Bromley, George W. and Walker S. Bromley. *Atlas of the City of Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: G.W. Bromley & Co., 1910.

### **First African Baptist Church, An Integral Part of the Community**

In Philadelphia, the role of the African American church has evolved over time. Until recent history, African American churches served as places of sanctuary in a primarily white, racially-divided city. They existed to provide for their members those amenities that they had been denied as members of white churches rather than to challenge the status quo. This changed during the second half of the twentieth century when African American churches became not only neighborhood anchors that delivered quality of life sustaining programming, but also the focal point for the fight against racial injustice. These venues enabled the African American community at-large to protest and advocate for civil rights in the post-WWII period. These churches, including both congregations that had built houses of worship or purchased existing buildings, gained momentum during this period due unto to the influx of thousands of African Americans departing the rural South for the industrialized, urban North.<sup>44</sup> In fact, the Baptist denomination experienced more growth than any other denomination during this period in Philadelphia. Between 1880 and 1916, the Baptist denomination saw at least sixteen churches move into larger buildings, most of these built by the churches themselves, and new congregations open their doors. Many of these new congregations were planted by older, established churches such as First African Baptist Church.<sup>45</sup> First African Baptist exemplifies this shift in role.

Throughout the twentieth century, the thousand-plus member church fostered community cohesion by fostering the establishment of numerous clubs that benefitted both the church and the public by supplementing existing programming in the community.<sup>46</sup> These organizations included: the Benevolent Board; the Board of Mothers; the Book Band Society; the Busy Bee Society; the Centurion Club; the Cherry Blossoms; the Cherry Memorial Athletic Club; the Colonial Circle; the Cosmopolitan Club; the Flower Club; the Group F Club; the Home and Foreign Missionary Circle; the King's Daughters; the Ladies' Auxiliary to the Ushers Association; the Mayflower Club; the Mutual Aid Society; the Painting Club; the Present Choir; the Pro Re Nata Club; the Senior Baptist Young People's Union and Junior Baptist Young People's Union among others. The organizations listed here appear in Charles H. Brooks' *Official History of First African Baptist Church, Philadelphia*, which was first published in 1922 and was revised in 1977.<sup>47</sup> These clubs persisted into the 1980s. The organizational purposes ranged from ensuring that the church was dressed with flowers each Sunday to "fostering the superior class of athletics in the City of Philadelphia and an establishment of more Christ-like sprit in athletics."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, African American Churches of Philadelphia, 1787-1949.

<sup>45</sup> William T. Catto, *A Semi-Centenary Discourse Delivered in the First African Baptist Church, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: 1857), 105-111.

<sup>46</sup> "First African Baptist Church Tremendous Influence for Good," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 5 November 1957.

<sup>47</sup> Brooks, *Official History*, 77-92.

<sup>48</sup> Brooks, *Official History*, 107-136.



Board of Trustees, 1922. Courtesy the New York Public Library.

Most notably, First African Baptist Church established the Reliable Mutual Aid Society, an insurance company that would serve African Americans in Philadelphia. According to an article in the Philadelphia Tribune, the Mutual Aid Society “at one point boasted having 75% of Negro professionals among its active members.”<sup>49</sup> The church also incubated the Cherry Building and Loan Association, a mortgage lender that promoted homeownership by loaning to individuals and families who would have found it difficult, if not impossible, to secure a mortgage from a traditional lender. First African Baptist Church was the first church in Philadelphia to do this, initiating a trend among faith-based institutions in Philadelphia.<sup>50</sup> Seven other historically African American churches including Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas would follow suit.<sup>51</sup> Both the Mutual Aid Society and the Cherry Building and Loan Association were instituted under the leadership of Rev. William A. Creditt, the pastor who oversaw construction of the current building.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> “First African Baptist Church Observes 150th Anniversary,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 13 January 1959.

<sup>50</sup> “First African Baptist Church Observes 150th Anniversary,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 13 January 1959.; and Sherry Taylor, “Building Faith and Building Brethren: Community Development in Philadelphia: 1880–1915,” Independent Study for the University of Pennsylvania Department of City and Regional Planning, accessed June 26, 2015, <http://www.dubois-theaward.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Building-Faith-and-Building-Brethren.pdf>

<sup>51</sup> Taylor, “Building Faith”

<sup>52</sup> Brooks, *Official History*, 101.



The New Choir, 1922. Courtesy the New York Public Library.

As referenced above, the congregation did its share of church-planting. From it grew Tasker Street Missionary Baptist Church (1874), Shiloh Baptist Church (1927), Miller Memorial Baptist Church (1895), Mt. Zion Baptist Church of Germantown (1871), and Kaighn Avenue Baptist Church in Camden (1856). This fact was cited upon the congregation's 200th anniversary in 2009 in City of Philadelphia-issued Resolution No. 090491, which was about "Recognizing, Honoring, Celebrating, and Thanking the First African Baptist Church of Philadelphia for its invaluable contributions to the City of Philadelphia..."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> City Council, City of Philadelphia, Resolution 090491, "Recognizing, Honoring, Celebrating, and Thanking The First African Baptist Church of Philadelphia for its invaluable contributions to the City of Philadelphia on the occasion of its 200th Anniversary," 6 June 2009.



Philadelphians dressed for church stand on the stoop of their rowhouse. Circa 1920s. Courtesy the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

The resolution also credits the church for founding the Downingtown Industrial and Agricultural School, a nonprofit boarding school that provided vocational training to disadvantaged African American youths from 1905 until 1993.<sup>54</sup> Located in Chester

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<sup>54</sup> City of Philadelphia Resolution No. 090491.

County, the state-funded school was intended as a northern counterpart to the Tuskegee Institute. The founders of the school, First African Presbyterian Church pastor Rev. William A. Creditt and trustee John S. Trower, remained invested in the school until their deaths in 1911 and 1921 respectively, both serving as principals.<sup>55</sup> Trower, a Northampton County, Virginia born business leader, was a wealthy restaurateur and caterer. He catered for the William Cramp & Sons Shipbuilding Company, one the world's most prolific shipbuilders, and occasionally for John Wanamaker. While servicing contracts for Cramp and Wanamaker, Trower's business was headquartered in Germantown, in the retrofitted Germantown Savings Fund Society building. In addition to cofounding the Downingtown Industrial and Agricultural School, Trower was instrumental in securing the site at 16<sup>th</sup> and Christian Streets.<sup>56</sup>

Upon the church's 150th anniversary in 1959, the *Philadelphia Tribune* said, "The church's history defines a culture and combined wealth not equal to any other church of color in America."<sup>57</sup> Indeed, First African Baptist Church, a relatively uncommon example of a building built by a long established African American congregation, exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of both Philadelphia's African American community and the Baptist Church.

## **Conclusion**

This nomination illustrates the historic significance of the First African Baptist Church at 1600–06 Christian Street under Criteria for Designation A and J as related to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. Constructed in 1906 as a purpose-built, architect-designed house of worship for the First African Baptist Church's congregation, the building at 1600-06 Christian Street is the last extant resource that represents the historic significance of this important African American congregation. The building served the congregation for over 100 years, making it its longest home. Its architectural style, materials, and the fact that it was designed by the important architectural firm Watson & Huckel only further supports its historical significance under Criteria A and J. Lastly, since 1906, the First African Baptist Church has stood as a major community center in the neighborhood, which was for decades home to a large African American population.

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<sup>55</sup> Sarah Borden and others, Finding Aid for the Downingtown Industrial and Agricultural School Collection, 1907–1985, Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection, Temple University, accessed 26 June 2015, <https://library.temple.edu/scrc/downingtown-industrial-and>

<sup>56</sup> Sarah Borden and others, Finding Aid; "John S. Trower Best Known and Probably Wealthiest Negro in the Country," *Washington Bee*, 29 April 1911.

<sup>57</sup> "First African Baptist Church Observes 150th Anniversary," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 13 January 1959.

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### Contributors.

Upon hearing about plans that may include the demolition of this locally unprotected historic property against the authority of the covenant held by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, this nomination was assembled by the following contributors:

Oscar Beisert, Architectural Historian and Historic Preservationist  
J.M. Duffin, Archivist and Historian

The information provided to Oscar Beisert, Architectural Historian and Historic Preservationist, by Emily T. Cooperman, Ph.D., as well as the Multiple Property Documentation Form commissioned by the Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia, has been invaluable in the completion of this nomination in a timely manner. Additional contextual information and support was provided by anonymous congregants of the First African Baptist Church and various members of the Philadelphia's preservation community. Furthermore, we would like to recognize inspiration from Aaron Wunch, Ph.D. and W. Wilson Goode, Sr., D.Min. While this nomination could be greatly enlarged to include additional information, we feel that it is complete and correct in its assertions and its historical research sufficient to allow for immediate protection of the endangered building by the Philadelphia Historical Commission.

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Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Library Company of Philadelphia

New York Public Library

### **Unprotected and Threatened African American Historic Resources**

Three National Register of Historic Places-listed resources in the vicinity of the church serve as reminders that southwest Center City was once home to a vibrant African American community that shaped the City of Philadelphia. They are the Marian Anderson House, the Royal Theater, and Tindley Temple United Methodist Church.<sup>58</sup> These sites, as well as many others that are not listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places or the National Register of Historic Places, foster sense of identity and continuity among those African American residents who remain. In just ten years, between 2000 and 2010, the area's African American population decreased dramatically while its white population increased almost proportionally. In 2000 the area was 72% African American, but by 2010 the area was 55% white. This shift meant that 4,000 African American residents were replaced by close to the same number of white residents while the area also saw an increase in Latino and Asian residents.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>“National Register Information System.” National Register of Historic Places. National Park Service, accessed June 23, 2015, [http://nrhp.focus.nps.gov/natreg/docs/All\\_Data.html](http://nrhp.focus.nps.gov/natreg/docs/All_Data.html).

<sup>59</sup> “In G-Ho, the pendulum swings again,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 14 June 2011.