

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: St. John Missionary Baptist Church
OWNER: St. John Missionary Baptist Church
APPLICANT: Dr. Terrance D. Grant-Malone, Pastor
LOCATION: 2702 Dowling Street
30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: V
HPO FILE NO: 10PL088
DATE ACCEPTED: Mar-15-2010
HAHC HEARING: Apr-8-2010
PC HEARING: Apr-15-2010

SITE INFORMATION

Lots 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 through 16, Block A, Holman Outlot 15, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a three-story, brick and cast stone trimmed, church building, and a non-historic one-story, glass-walled pyramid roofed pavilion which is not included in the Protected Landmark designation.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

St. John Missionary Baptist Church was founded in Houston's Third Ward in 1899 by Rev. Hilliard Reuben Johnson. Today, with a congregation dating back 110 years, the church has a long history as an influential African-American institution in the community. Over the years, at least three different church buildings have been built to house the growing congregation. The current three-story brick neoclassical temple-type church building was constructed in 1950 under the leadership of Dr. Rev. S.A. Pleasants, Jr., who was the distinguished pastor of St. John for 27 years. The church made history by hosting the 85th National Baptist Convention of America in 1965 at the Houston Astrodome. This was the first religious event at the Astrodome hosted by a black congregation.

St. John Missionary Baptist Church's current church building was constructed in 1950 by African-American contractor and builder, W.C. White, from San Antonio. In the 1960s, White became the first black to serve on San Antonio's City Planning Board and Housing Authority.

The church's Ionic temple facade is considered the grandest of the Dowling Street churches. Its prominent architectural design of colossal concrete columns was symbolic of the church's spiritual strength in the community. Today, St. John Missionary Baptist Church remains a highly visible landmark in its location on Dowling near McGowen Street.

The St. John Missionary Baptist Church building meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8 for Protected Landmark designation.

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

Brief History of the Greater Third Ward

After the end of slavery in Texas on June 19, 1865, Houston experienced a heavy influx of formerly enslaved blacks moving into the city. The Fourth and Third Wards came to have the largest populace of blacks, who gradually began to purchase land to build their homes, businesses and churches. Because of Jim Crow laws mandating racial segregation in public places, the black church functioned as the backbone of the community and served as a venue for educational, social, and political activities.

In 1872, Rev. Jack Yates of Antioch Baptist Church and Rev. Elias Dibble of Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church spearheaded the purchase of land for the purpose of celebrating Juneteenth, marking the abolition of slavery in Texas. Known as Emancipation Park and located on Dowling Street, it is the first park established for blacks and until 1940, was the only public park in Houston open to blacks. It became a facility for social, political, recreational and educational purposes. Dowling Street, the main artery of the Third Ward community, later became the site of black residences, businesses, restaurants, offices, theaters and nightclubs. Riverside Hospital, Houston College for Negroes (now Texas Southern University), Jack Yates High School, the El Dorado Ballroom, Grand Court of Calanthe and several prominent historic churches were the most significant and influential institutions in the community. Historically, the greater Third Ward is considered one of Houston's residential, commercial, and cultural centers for its African-American population.

History of St. John Missionary Baptist Church

Throughout its existence, St. John Missionary Baptist Church has been an influential institution in Houston. The first social institutions fully controlled by African-Americans in the United States were the black churches, of which the Baptist denomination was the largest. The black church has been, and continues to be, a strong force in the life of the community.

On August 11, 1899, Reverend Gilbert Green, then pastor of the Little Zion Missionary Baptist Church on Velasco Street, met with Reverend H. R. (Hilliard Reuben) Johnson to assist him in organizing a new church. Also in attendance were James Bullock and wife Terry Bullock, Henry Stocklin, Nettie Johnson, Frances Ford and her daughter, Amanda Foster, Phoebe Perkins, Eliza Bozeman and family, Tom Willis, Sister Evan, Callie Elcober [sic] and Paul Taylor. James Bullock and Paul Taylor are credited with naming the new church St. John Missionary Baptist Church. The church had many struggles and grew slowly. The first meeting place was in a small building near the corner of Live Oak Street and Calhoun Avenue, facing Calhoun. (The Houston City Directory for that year lists the church at Live Oak Street and Pierce.)

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

Reverend H. R. Johnson remained pastor for a short while before being called to Mt. Zion Baptist Church on Canal Street in the Second Ward. Reverend James B. Bouldin [sic] was selected as St. John Baptist Church's next pastor. In November 1901, he solely purchased property in the 2100 block of Broadway Street (now known as Bastrop Street) between Gray Avenue and Webster Avenue. The congregation later erected a small frame building on this property.

In October 1906, Rev. Bouldin sold the church property back to St. John trustees. (Rev. H. R. Johnson, who had recently returned from Rockdale, Texas was listed in this transaction.) Pastor Bouldin resigned from St. John sometime around 1907 and assumed the helm of Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in the Fifth Ward. Pastor Johnson resumed the pastorate of St. John Baptist Church.

As fate would have it, a storm demolished the church building. Throughout the difficulties, the congregation remained steadfast. Until the new sanctuary was completed, a tent was erected in the middle of the block for conducting worship services. Reverend H. R. Johnson resumed his work in preaching and organizing St. John Missionary Baptist Church. The church experienced rapid growth while housed in the tent and during its early years in the new sanctuary. In the meantime negotiations were made to construct a new church for St. John's congregation.

Not only was there reorganization within the church, but also worshipers included large numbers of blacks as well as whites. St. John Missionary Baptist Church was the first Baptist church in Houston to have morning and eleven o'clock services. Rev. Johnson started this morning hour of worship among black churches in the city.

Since there were no available facilities for conducting baptismal services until the new sanctuary was completed, arrangements were made to use the pool of Brady Brick Yard by Buffalo Bayou in the Second Ward. Baptismal services were held on Sunday afternoon following eleven o'clock services. Rev. Johnson would order enough streetcars to take the congregation to Brady Brick Yard.

The congregation would walk one block north to Pierce Avenue to the streetcars. As many as one hundred people were baptized at one time. When the number grew so large that Brady Brick Yard could no longer accommodate the group, arrangements were then made to conduct baptismal services in Brays Bayou, at the present site of North MacGregor Way and Ennis Street. On May 15, 1915, Rev. Johnson and Rev. Williams baptized more than one hundred candidates in Brays Bayou. Upon completion on the new white framed, stained glass window sanctuary with its front entrance on Bastrop Street, a baptismal pool was located beneath the surface of the pulpit. When the baptismal pool was open for use, a reflection mirror permitted the congregation to observe the activities in the pool.

In addition to the baptismal pool in the new sanctuary, there was a main auditorium, partial balcony, elevated choir stand, room for pastor's study, and additional room for other official activities. In the left tower was a bell that continues to be used today. This original bell was moved to the right tower in 1946, when the current structure was built. Over the years, the bell has tolled to signal the start of Sunday school and church services, and when funeral processions depart the church.

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

The deacon board and other officers of the church were influential in the growth of the church and served in dual capacities. Some of the deacons and officers who can be credited with continuous efforts for maintaining the church were Hal Judkins, Paul Taylor, James Bullock, Austin Burney, Clem Bolden, John Bonner Sr., O. B. Stinson, Marion Stinson, Nat Black, Reverend Griffin, and George James.

The order of Sunday services in the past was quite similar to that of the present day. Annual church activities included the church picnic held in Dickinson, Texas, Easter exercises, and a Christmas tree presentation with gifts, fruits, and toys given to the children. December 31st was known as Watch Meeting Night and the fifth Sunday was 'General Mission Day.' Weekly activities included prayer meeting held on Tuesday nights; choir practice every Friday night; Sunday school; eleven o'clock worship services; and an evening service. In addition, there were other services, such as BYPU, Star Light Band and scheduled church meetings to keep the congregation informed of church affairs, revivals, and church rallies. The minister received approximately eighty dollars per month for "shepherding the flock."

Sometime between 1916 and 1917, the church decided to split, due to various misunderstandings. Despite the efforts of Rev. H. M. Williams, Moderator of the Lincoln District Association to settle the differences, several hundred members followed Rev. H. R. Johnson to a location on McGowen Avenue at Dowling Avenue to a small building owned by the Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church. Today, there are two St. John Baptist churches, one on Dowling Street and the other on Gray Street. St John Missionary Baptist Church at 2222 Gray was designated as a City of Houston landmark on September 2, 2009.

Rev. Johnson held worship services at the McGowen Avenue site for at while. Eventually the building became too small to house the congregation and members started to raise money to purchase property on Dowling Street for a new church building. In January 1920, St. John trustees purchased property in the 2600 block of Dowling Street between McGowen Avenue and Tuam Avenue, known as Lots 3 and 4 in Block A of Holman's Outlot #15. The church hired H. E. Curtley as architect and J. E. Nesby as contractor, to "build a church house in six months."

Rev. H. R. Johnson left St. John and organized Progressive New Hope Baptist Church, also located in the greater Third Ward. On August 3, 1926, Rev. S.A. Pleasants, Jr. began his 27-year tenure as pastor of St. John Missionary Baptist Church on Dowling Street. At that time, the membership rolls listed 280 congregants, the church was in debt for \$21,115.62, and the building had structural problems. Under Pleasants' leadership, the church significantly increased its membership, gained financial empowerment, and implemented many organizations, systematic order and religious doctrines that set the standard for churches in the city, state and across the country. St. John Missionary Baptist Church practiced an accountability system called "Divisions." This system divided church members into small structured groups allowing the pastor to keep abreast with the needs of the congregation (prayer needs, financial concerns, death notification, etc.). The church established a home mission department which ministered to members who were sick in the hospital or confined to their home. A prison ministry was involved in ministering to members and individuals from the community who were incarcerated. Implemented in the late 1930s-early 40s, the church established a silent department deaf ministry to accommodate hearing-impaired members during worship service. The National Brotherhood Union, an auxiliary of the National

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

Baptist Convention of America, Inc., was organized in 1941 by Ira L. Clark, a member of St. John Missionary Baptist Church. He was the first president of this organization and structured its doctrine which trained men to be spiritual leaders.

During the 1940s, St. John Missionary Baptist Church financially supported foreign missionary outreach programs in Africa. The church financed the education of three African women, which enabled them to go to school in their homeland. By 1941, St. John Missionary Baptist Church on Dowling boasted the largest African-American congregation in the city of Houston. With the church's growing membership and financial increase, Rev. S.A. Pleasants, Jr. purchased several lots in close proximity to the church. In 1950, W.C. White, a pioneer African-American builder of this era from San Antonio, was hired to build an edifice to accommodate St. John Missionary Baptist Church's recorded membership of over five thousand. A new sanctuary located at 2702 Dowling Street was built at a cost of approximately one-half million dollars. Its prominent architectural design of colossal concrete columns was symbolic of the church's spiritual strength in the community.

Rev. S. A. Pleasants, Jr., made great strides in increasing the membership of the church, and creating a financial empowerment which served the needs of the congregation and the Third Ward community. Rev. S. A. Pleasants, Jr., passed away in April 1953. Thousands gathered at the church and lined the streets to pay last respects to this great spiritual leader.

In 1953, Rev. M.M. Malone was elected to succeed the late Rev. S.A. Pleasants, Jr. During the days of segregation and the struggle of the Civil Rights Movement, St. John Missionary Baptist Church was a spiritual force in the turbulent, political and social climate of that era. At this time, the church was known as being one of the largest black churches in the country. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., once made an appearance at the church. In the early 1960's, St. John Missionary Baptist Church's early morning Sunday school broadcast was aired on KYOK, the local African-American radio station. The late Deacon F.D. Dinkins served as teacher and the late Rev. James Gentry, Jr. was the announcer. Throughout its history, St. John's has had an array of choirs and orchestras that offered renditions of religious music to enhance the spirit of the worship service. A church band was formed in the 1930s under the direction of D. C. Chapman. The D. C. Chapman Band was one of the first bands to become a constant musical element in African-American churches.

St. John Missionary Baptist Church had an official communication newspaper called "The Register." This publication began in 1960 and chronicled important church events of the greater Third Ward community and also advertised community outreach programs offered by the church. The church made history by hosting the 85th National Baptist Convention of America in 1965 at the Houston Astrodome. This was the first religious event at the Astrodome hosted by a black congregation. Another accomplishment achieved under the leadership of Rev. M. M. Malone was the construction of the educational building which is identified today as the Malone Chapel. This building was designed by prominent Houston African-American architect, John S. Chase A.I.A. Chase was the first African American licensed to practice architecture in the state of Texas and later was the first African American admitted to the Texas Society of Architects and the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA).

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

Rev. M. M. Malone served as pastor of St. John Missionary Baptist Church from 1953-1983. He was known for being a gentle, God-fearing minister who demonstrated a steadfast love for the church, and left a legacy of being a faithful servant unto God. He passed away July 24, 1983. A scholarship named in his honor is given yearly to deserving high school graduates in pursuit of a higher education.

Continuing to serve the needs of its congregation, the following men served as an interim minister of St. John Missionary Baptist Church: the late Rev. Jess E. Baker, the late Dr. Lewis R. Morris, Rev. T.C. Collins, Rev. Vernus Swisher, Rev. Gerry L. Baldwin, and Rev. Richard Chambers. On May 15, 2005, Dr. Terrance D. Grant-Malone was called to pastor St. John Missionary Baptist Church.

Reverend S.A. Pleasants, Jr.

Reverend Sanderson Alexander Pleasants was born in Cuero, Dewitt County, Texas, on December 4, 1879 to Joseph and Virginia Pleasants. Rev. Pleasants attended public school in Cuero and at an early age accepted the Baptist faith while a member of Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Cuero under Rev. M. Harrison's administration. He was called to preach at an early age and was ordained in 1904. He received his college training at Guadalupe College in Seguin, Texas, earning a Doctor of Divinity degree and later enrolled in responding colleges. He served as moderator of the Mt. Zion Association for several years and during his administration the organization gained financial and spiritual prosperity. He also served as pastor of Sweet Home Baptist Church in Seguin, and Mt. Zion Baptist Church and Macedonia Baptist Church in Cuero.

Reverend Pleasants moved to Houston around 1926 and succeeded Rev. H. R. Johnson as minister of St. John Missionary Baptist Church on Dowling Street. He rebuilt the church he found in disarray, significantly increasing its membership and financial stature. He also implemented many organizations, systematic order and religious doctrines that set the standard for churches in city, state and around the country. According to the church's history, under Dr. Pleasants' administration the St. John congregation donated more money for education to foreign missions than any other black Baptist church in America. Before his death in 1953, he taught at Conroe College for several years. In 1967, Pleasants Elementary School (Houston Independent School District) at 1305 Benson Street was named in his honor. It closed as of June 1991.

W. (Wright) C. (Cuney) White

St. John Missionary Baptist Church on Dowling Street was built in 1950 by W.C. White, a black contractor who specialized in building churches. A native of Gonzales, Texas, he was born November 1, 1892, to Mr. and Mrs. P.S. White. The family moved to San Antonio, Texas in the early 1920s and White attended the local schools there. He was born into a family of builders. His grandfather was a shipbuilder; his father was a mechanic, and his stepfather taught him carpentry skills.

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

By 1917, White was working as an apprentice for the J. T. Walton Realty and Construction Company. He moved up the ranks as foreman, general superintendant and eventually as part owner of the company after five years. He later formed his own company, W.C. White, Inc., employing an average of 30 employees. Many G.I. veterans became skilled craftsmen under his tutelage.

In the 1960s, White became the first black to serve on the City Planning Board and the Housing Authority in San Antonio. He was a Mason, board member of the Ella Austin Children's Home, Alamo City Chamber of Commerce, N.A.A.C.P., Y. M.C.A., treasurer of the Colored Laborers and other community organizations. For many years White was considered one of the country's outstanding black builders and developers. He died October 15, 1976.

White began building residential structures and churches in the San Antonio area in the 1940s. At the time of his retirement, he had built over 50 churches. The following churches are attributed to him and are all located in San Antonio:

- Bethel AME (1942)
- Church of God in Christ (1943)
- Corinth Baptist Church (1948)
- East End Church of God in Christ (1951)
- Friendship Baptist Church (1952)
- Greater Mt. Olive Baptist Church (1953)
- New Light Baptist Church (1954)
- Antioch Baptist Church (1956)
- Mt. Siniah Baptist Church (1956)
- New Hope Baptist Church (1957)
- Zion Star Baptist Church (1957)
- Union Baptist Church (1958)
- Mt. Zion Baptist Church (1960)
- St. James AME Church (1961)
- Coliseum Park Baptist Church (1961)
- Mt. Calvary Baptist Church (1962)

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

St. John Missionary Baptist Church is the most monumental church building in Houston's Third Ward. The current church building was designed by San Antonio architects Beckmann, Williams and Williams and constructed by African-American contractor W.C. White, also from San Antonio. The architecture is a neoclassical temple-type church faced with a hex style [six-columned] Ionic portico elevated a full story above sidewalk level. The portico is approached by a monumental flight of stairs, and capped with a pediment superimposed on the building's blind attic level.

Three symmetrically organized portals, framed with Ionic architraves, give access from the portico into the church's narthex. Symmetrical wings containing three stories of community, classroom, and office spaces project from the long north and south side elevations of the church. The church is

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

faced with light-colored buff brick and cast stone trim. To the north of the church is a separate, one-story, glass-walled pyramid roofed pavilion which, in its lightness and transparency, contrasts with the solidity and opacity of the church. The pavilion is linked to the ground floor of the church by a canopy-covered sidewalk. A palm tree planted in front of the pavilion is a distinctive landscape element.

The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by Courtney Spillane, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.

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Interest of Houston's Colored Population. Houston, Tex.: Sotex Pub., [1915].

San Antonio Register Newspaper, October 26, 1976.

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CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

OR

The property is listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places or designated as a “contributing structure” in an historic district listed in the National Register of Historic Places (Sec. 33-229(a)(3));

OR

The property is recognized by the State of Texas as a Recorded State Historical Landmark (Sec. 33-229(a)(4)).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the Houston Planning Commission accept the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommend to City Council the Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation of the St. John Missionary Baptist Church Building at 2702 Dowling Street.

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

EXHIBIT A

St. John Missionary Baptist Church Building
2702 Dowling Street



CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

EXHIBIT B

SITE LOCATION MAP

St. John Missionary Baptist Church Building

2702 Dowling Street

NOT TO SCALE

