

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: St. John Missionary Baptist Church

OWNER: St. John Missionary Baptist Church

APPLICANT: Brenda Columbus, Church Secretary

LOCATION: 2222 Gray Avenue

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: IV.a

HPO FILE NO: 09L214

DATE ACCEPTED: Feb-24-09

HAHC HEARING: Apr-23-09

PC HEARING: May 28-09

SITE INFORMATION

Lots 3, 4, and 5, Block 429, SSBB. The building on site is a three-story masonry church building with attached parsonage and offices.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

St. John Missionary Baptist Church was founded in Houston's Third Ward in 1899 by Rev. H. R. Johnson. Today with a congregation at 110 years old, St. John has a long history as an influential African-American institution in the community. Over the years, several different church buildings have been built to house the growing congregation. The current three-story brick Gothic Revival church building was constructed in 1946 under the leadership of Rev. N. C. Crain. Rev. Crain was pastor of St. John for over 40 years and left a lasting mark on the church. He was a notable preacher and traveled widely to lead revivals all over the country.

St John's 1946 church building was designed and built by James M. Thomas, a black contractor who specialized in building churches and became Houston's most active architect for African American congregations. Thomas began building churches in 1937, at a time when Houston had no black architects, and designed over 55 churches in his lifetime. He got his start as a designer while attending Prairie View College. In 1930, he began teaching mechanical drawing at Phillis Wheatley High School in Houston, where he taught for 42 years before retiring in 1972. Thomas died in 1994, leaving an important architectural legacy in the city.

Most of Thomas's churches share two prominent corner towers with pyramidal or hipped roofs and large gable roofs over the primary sanctuary. In many examples, wide steps lead up to an entrance above a raised first floor. Another notable and unusual feature of many Thomas designs is the use of glass block as a decorative feature, often used in place of brick between window openings. Thomas's design for St John incorporates many of the stylistic characteristics for which he is noted.

Today, Thomas's impressive brick church for St John Missionary Baptist Church remains a highly visible landmark in its location on Gray Avenue just off of I-45. St. John Missionary Baptist Church meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6 for Landmark designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

James M. Thomas

St John Missionary Baptist Church was designed and built in 1946 by James M. Thomas, a black contractor who specialized in building churches. Thomas started building churches in Houston in 1937, and became Houston's most active architect for African American congregations. Most of Thomas' churches share two prominent corner towers with pyramidal or hipped roofs and large gable roofs over the primary sanctuary. In many examples, wide steps lead up to double or multiple entry doors above a raised first floor. Another notable and unusual feature of many Thomas designs is the use of glass block as a decorative feature, often used in place of brick between window openings. Thomas designed over 55 churches in his lifetime.

Thomas was born in Pelham, Navarro County, Texas, and attended school in Navarro County. He later graduated from Prairie View College where he worked with the prominent African American architect, Louis E. Fry (later of Washington, DC), on several buildings on the Prairie View campus. In 1930, Thomas began teaching mechanical drawing at Phillis Wheatley High School in Houston, and in 1937, near the end of the Great Depression, he began working as a contractor building churches. He operated his own construction business and in many projects prepared a design and then supervised construction.

Through his lifetime, Thomas designed over 55 churches. The following churches are attributed to him:

- Damascus Baptist Church (1937, demolished);
- Rose of Sharon, 1106 Valentine Street (1945);
- Fourth Missionary Baptist Church, 2708 Webster Street (1945);
- St John Missionary Baptist Church, 2222 Gray Avenue (1946);
- Olivet Missionary Baptist Church, 3115 Lyons Avenue (1947, fire in 1983 and some alterations);
- Bethel Baptist Church, 801 Andrews (1950 addition, damaged by fire; COH Landmark);
- Concord Baptist Church, 7506 North Main (1951);
- Miles Chapel C.M.E., 4315 Lyons Avenue (1952);
- Greater Zion Baptist Church (3203 Trulley, 1955);
- Greens Chapel A.M.E. Church, 3318 Link Road (1961);
- Fifth Ward Baptist Church, 4300 Noble Street (date unknown, demolished);
- Church of the Living God (date unknown);
- Church of God, 2509 Burkett (date unknown);
- Mt Ararat Baptist, 5801 W Montgomery (date unknown);
- Greater Northside Antioch, 2500 Campbell (date unknown);

New Hope Missionary Baptist Church at 1221 Crockett may also be a Thomas design. Thomas said his largest project was for Greater Zion Baptist Church at 3203 Trulley in the Third Ward and his most unusual was Greater Northside Antioch at 2500 Campbell.

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James Thomas commented in a 1980 *Houston Chronicle* article: “Back then there were no black architects in Houston. Colored people didn’t think plans were needed to build a church. They wouldn’t give a nickel or a dime for a plan.” So Thomas devised his own plans. Beginning with Damascus Baptist Church on Center Street, Thomas said he designed churches to “look like churches. You look at the last four or five churches I’ve done, and you’ll see what the next five will look like. The style stays essentially the same.”

Thomas developed an interest in church construction from attending his childhood Methodist church in Irene, Texas, that his grandfather, Jake Thomas, helped build. James Thomas taught mechanical drawing at Phyllis Wheatley High School for 42 years before retiring in 1972. He died in 1994, leaving an important architectural legacy in the city.

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 Hillard Rueben (H. R.) Johnson met with Reverend Gilbert Green, then pastor of the Little Zion Missionary Baptist Church on Velasco Street, to make plans for a new church. Also in attendance were James Bullock and wife Terry Bullock, Henry Stockin, Nettie Johnson, Francis Ford and her daughter, Amanda Foster, Phoebe Perkins, Eliza Bozeman and family, Tom Willis, Sister Evan, Callie Elcober, 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.

Reverend H. R. Johnson remained pastor only a short while before being called to Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Second Ward on Canal Street. St. John Baptist then called Reverend J. B. Bolden as its pastor. Two years passed, and Rev. Bolden, together with the small membership, bought a lot on 2200 Broadway Street, now known as Bastrop Street, the second lot from the corner between Hadley and Webster Avenues, and a small frame building was erected. As fate would have it, a storm came and demolished the first building. Throughout the difficulties, the congregation remained steadfast. Negotiations were made to purchase land and construct a church in the 2100 block of Bastrop Street at Gray Avenue. Until the new sanctuary was completed, a tent was erected in the middle of the block for conducting worship services, and the Rev. H. R. Johnson returned from Rockdale, Texas, to serve as minister.

The church experienced rapid growth while housed in the tent and during its early years in the new sanctuary. 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. H. R. 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

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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 at North MacGregor Way and Ennis Street. On May 15, 1915, Rev. H. R. Johnson and Rev. Williams baptized more than a hundred candidates in Brays Bayou. Upon completion on the new white framed, stained glass window sanctuary with its front entrance on Bastrop Street, there was a baptismal pool 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.

From the period of 1901 to 1915, Reverend H. R. Johnson resumed his work in preaching and organizing St. John Missionary Baptist Church. 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. Several annual church activities were planned. The church picnic was held each year in Dickerson, Texas. An Easter exercise was held each year, and a Christmas tree was presented annually with gifts, fruits, and toys that were given to the children. December 31 was known as Watch Meeting Night; the fifth Sunday was General Mission Day; Prayer meeting was held Tuesday night; and choir practice was every Friday night.

There were Sunday school, eleven o'clock worship services, and an evening service. In addition, there were other services, such as BYPU, Star Light Band, scheduled church meetings to keep the congregation informed of church affairs, revivals, and church rallies. For shepherding the flock, the minister received approximately eighty dollars per month.

In 1915, because of various misunderstandings and in spite of the efforts of the Moderator of Lincoln District Association, Rev. H. M. Williams, to settle the difference, the church decided to split. Seven hundred members followed Rev. H. R. Johnson to McGowan and Dowling Street, next to the corner in a small building owned by the East Trinity Methodist Church. Because the building, which faced McGowen Avenue, was too small to house the congregation, the members immediately started to raise money to purchase property on Dowling Street for their new church. Today, there are two St. John Baptist churches, one on Dowling Street and the other on Gray Street.

In 1915, Rev. W. M. Johnson was called from Louisiana as the third minister of St. John Missionary Baptist Church. He was familiar with religious as well as the financial needs of the church and worked diligently to reduce the debt of the church. At the time, St. John had become an important local church. Its seating capacity was practically 1000, and standing room was often at a premium. The church was noted for its attitude toward both civic and benevolent movements in the city and state. The personnel of the congregation was particularly unique in that its membership was representative of practically every vocation from housekeeper to lawyer, and members worshiped side by side without friction.

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Dr. W. M. Johnson was an ex-president of the Mobile Baptist College and one of the foremost preachers of his age. He was regarded as a deep theologian, versatile writer, and brilliant orator. He had filled some of the most popular pulpits of the Baptist denomination, prominent among which were Mount Olive Baptist Church of Opelousas, Louisiana, and Franklin Street Baptist Church of Mobile, Alabama. He accepted the St. John pastorate, finding when he took charge a membership of 79, which he increased in four months to 450. He was one among that rapidly increasing number of pastors who believed in “at least owning a chicken coop on earth before expecting a mansion in heaven.” He owned taxable property in Louisiana, Texas, and Alabama. His tenure ended when members of the church became disenchanted that his wife was Methodist and held membership at Wesley Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1918, Rev. Johnson and his family moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Between 1918 and 1919, two ministers were appointed. Each served a relatively short period of time. Rev. William Clark from Orange, Texas, remained at the church for several months before moving to Dallas, Texas. Rev. E. W. Hawthorne became the fifth minister of St. John Missionary Baptist Church after Rev. Clark. Rev. Hawthorne was a highly educated individual whose preaching methods were thirty years ahead of the times. He allegedly attended Princeton University with former President Woodrow Wilson, although this can not be documented. According to past sources, Rev. Hawthorne had only one arm, which did not inhibit him from performing his duties. Seemingly, there was conflict among members of the congregation; and while they were involved in conflict, it is alleged that Rev. Hawthorne collected all moneys and left the city to return to the East Coast.

During this time period, there was some reorganization of officers in the church. Inez Stinson was the chorister; James Bullock was the Chairman of Deacons; O. B. Stenson and Roxie Clarkson worked cooperatively with the BYPU Department; Terrie Bullock was the treasurer; Hattie Shelton and Hattie Williams were with the Missionary Society; and Rev. A. Kemper was superintendent of Sunday school.

In 1920, Rev. William Wyatt was assigned the role of pastor. Between 1918 and 1920, a church parsonage was constructed on the north side of the church with its front entrance facing Gray Avenue. Rev. Wyatt and his family occupied the church parsonage, which provided them with availability to church members as well as members of the community.

In an attempt to improve the financial status of the church, the members under Rev. Wyatt were assessed church dues of fifty cents weekly and fifteen cents weekly for Sunday School. Upon establishing a roll call of members for their dues, it was revealed that the church had forty financial members. However, under the leadership of Rev. Wyatt, the congregation became so large that the church could not accommodate all worshippers during Sunday worship services. Rev. Wyatt died in 1924 while still serving as pastor of St. John Missionary Baptist Church. The parsonage was never occupied by another minister and was eventually demolished.

The general feeling among the congregation appeared to have been one of mutual respect and commitment towards Rev. Wyatt and his family. His family also worked cooperatively with church activities. He had two daughters. Ruby left Houston to reside in New York during World War II, and Thelma Wyatt Young remained at St. John until her health failed during the 1960s. She was the organist in the church for many years and the director of the famous male choir that had the distinction of being spiritual singers with outstanding harmony. When she became ill, Thelma Wyatt Young moved to New York to live with her sister, Ruby.

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Reverend N. C. Crain

During the search for the next assigned minister, various ministers conducted worship services. In June 1925, Rev. N. C. Crain, from Sweet Home Baptist Church in DeRidder, Louisiana, became the seventh pastor of St. John Missionary Baptist Church.

Nathaniel Carroll Crain was born in Madisonville, Louisiana, on March 12, 1886, to Ed and Mary Crain. He lived in a log cabin with dirt floors, no ceiling, no cooking stove, but a fireplace, homemade furniture, and a moss mattress. At the age of five, he attended a private school where he learned his alphabets, and at six years of age, he began attending a parish school. As a boy, he walked ten miles each day to a one-room school in a small church house that conducted school three months each year. He became a Christian in 1898 at the age of twelve, was ordained at fifteen years of age, and began his preaching career in 1903 at the age of seventeen. In addition, at thirteen years of age, he also became employed to help his father support the family and his sick mother. He studied at Ideal Bible College in Chicago, Illinois. Graduating with a Bachelor of Theology degree, he continued studies at Easonia Bible College, from which he received the Honorary Doctorate of Divinity Degree. He also studied at Hughes Business College and Friendship Bible College.

Rev. Crain pastored several churches in Louisiana prior to moving to Houston - the Baptist Church of Ruseville, Mount Calver, Fulton, and the Evergreen Baptist Church in DeRidder. Under Rev. Crain's leadership, Sweet Home Baptist Church in DeRidder made great strides. The church was housed in a shed that was badly deteriorated. Parishioners used umbrellas in services during hot or rainy days. Rev. Crain was called as the minister one day and tore the shed down the next day, later building a completely new church.

Rev. N.C. Crain was a humble, sincere, dedicated preacher who promoted harmony and respect within his congregation. He had an intuitive ability to adapt the style of the old-fashioned black Baptist preacher as well as articulate the aspiration of the congregation. With a membership at St John of approximately fifty financial members and the debt from the small wooden frame building, Rev. Crain's immediate concern was to increase the membership and pay off lingering debts. Under his supervision and guidance, there was growth within the Sunday school and Baptist Training Union, increased development of the usher board and missionary societies, the creation of various singing and/or musical organizations, and the establishment of a kindergarten. Prospective deacons and deaconesses were taught and observed for two or more years to see if they qualified for the roles they were expected to fulfill. Anyone who could not fill a position as required was relieved of that position.

With the impact of World War II, many people moved to the city from rural areas. The congregation grew, and once again, there was need for a larger church building. Because of a shortage of essential materials as well as manpower, construction of the new sanctuary was delayed until 1945. Between 1945 and 1952, church membership increased to nearly five thousand, and approximately \$213,000 was spent on construction for the new sanctuary with its front entrance on Gray Avenue. The new construction included an education building, a nursery, a lounge area, an office space, Sunday school classrooms, a kitchen, and dining room facilities.

Along with the internal development of the church, Rev. Crain influenced active participation and representation in numerous official local, state, national, and international organizations. Rev. Crain also traveled widely to lead revivals all over the country. During his more than forty years as the pastor of St. John Missionary Baptist Church, he ordained many ministers and baptized over twelve thousand

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individuals. When his tenure ended in 1973, Rev. Crain had served longer than any other minister at St. John Missionary Baptist Church.

For six months in 1973, various ministers within the church as well as guest ministers conducted worship services until an official minister could be elected.

Starlight Band

The earliest documentation of the Starlight Band is October 23, 1925, with A. J. Bonner as matron; Odessa Taylor, president; and Maggie Neyland, secretary. Although minutes from only 1925 through May 7, 1929, are available, Starlight Band was perhaps organized even earlier than this. It was held at four o'clock each Tuesday. Mrs. Bonner would drive around to the homes of various members and pick up each child as well as return that child home when Starlight Band ended for the day. She started blowing her car horn one block from the home as notification of her arrival. As youth became older and no longer wanted to attend Starlight Band, parenting skills included gathering the children together from closets, under beds, and sending them to practice. Children from three or four years of age (pre-school) to pre-adolescence were included in the Starlight Band. Parents were supportive of Starlight Band, and there was an annual day each year for Starlight Band activities. If there was a child at St. John's church who did not attend Starlight Band while it existed, it was the exception. Children were taught to follow the organization of worship services by acting as president, teachers, secretary, and conducting prayer sessions. The matron assigned participants for these roles, and all children were included. On special events, Mrs. Bonner would conduct Starlight Band at her home.

In church, children did not sit in the pews; they sat up front in small red chairs and around the pulpit. On some occasions when a child became sleepy, he or she would lie down on the pulpit to go to sleep. Parents would get up to get the child at which time Rev. Crain would tell the parent, "Leave the child alone; he is not hurting a thing."

In 1925, Rev. N.C. Crain organized Usher Board No. 1. George James was designated president and Isaiah Williams, first vice president. George James served as president for forty years. Bernwick Williams served as second vice president after the death of Isaiah Williams and functioned as president during the illness of George James and Joshua Parks. Williams became president of Usher Board No. 1 after the demise of James. Members of Usher Board No. 1 were highly organized and very cooperative as a group. They respected leadership, faithfully working together.

In 1942, Rev. N. C. Crain organized the Junior Usher Board with Irene Whitfield and Nezzie Spriggs as matrons. In 1963, Rev. Crain had a vision to create Usher Board No. 2 with all new members. Again, he requested Nezzie Spriggs to serve as president. Many years ago through state association, the Usher Board supported Mary Allen College.

The Usher Board and Nurse Board were organized simultaneously with Ruby Powell as president of the Nurse Board and continued to serve until illness forced her to curtail physical activities. The Christian nurse came out from the early church, for it realized that a nurse assumes responsibility for creating a spiritual environment conducive to the recovery of the victim. Clothing attire for a church nurse was an all-white uniform and cap, and white shoes with a closed heel and toe.

Bible school was held at St. John each summer for two consecutive weeks following the close of the public school year. A large group of children and youth always participated, as did adults. Closing of Bible School was always an important event and as many as twenty children might be baptized.

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The congregation nurtured numerous musical organizations as well. The choir was a significant feature of church worship services from the time the church was founded in 1899. The WMA Singers were organized in May 1947 to convey the gospel. The group's first public appearance was in a revival at Providence Baptist Church. The WMA Singers had its first radio broadcast over K.A.T.L. St. John has one recording, "What Jesus is to Me" and a souvenir program dated Sunday June 13, 1948, for a performance of the WMA Singers at the City Auditorium. Other singing groups were the Aeolean Glee Club, organized in the 1940s; the Gospel Chorus, also organized in the 1940s; the St. John Choral Club during the 1940s and 50s; the Family Singing Group; the Revelation Choir in the late 50s and early 60s; and the Crainettes, organized in 1962 for female youth. In addition to the singing groups, many notable soloists sang at St. John Church over the years.

Other important church organizations and activities were a vibrant Sunday school for all ages, a Missionary Society, a Baptist Young People Union on Sunday evenings, and Children's "Rhythm Band" and the St. John Band, which traveled both in and out of the state for conventions, parades, and other special occasions.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND RESTORATION HISTORY

St. John Missionary Baptist Church at 2222 Gray Street is a three-story, masonry building designed in the Gothic Revival style by James M. Thomas. Gothic Revival first became popular in Europe and was inspired by medieval architecture such as castles and cathedrals. Identifying features of this style include pointed, arched windows; turrets and battlements; a steeply pitched roof; and often asymmetrical design.

St. John's nave, elevated above a raised basement, and its twin towers exemplify a church building type favored by local African-American congregations in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. Vertical strips of glass block are used here as architectural decoration. The building's designer, James M. Thomas, was a contractor who specialized in building churches for African-American congregations.

St. John Missionary Baptist Church features an asymmetrical, L-shape floor plan. It has a steeply pitched, parapet roof with a single cross gable and a centered gable over the main entrance, which is set behind two turrets and a covered entrance. The main elevation is five bays wide and includes a covered entryway. The main entrance has a symmetrical, double-entryway staircase that converges into a single staircase and leads parishioners through three, flattened Gothic arches to the front doors. The arches are adorned with polychrome patterns of contrasting brick. The staircases are flanked by symmetrical turrets which incorporate diaper-latticed lancet windows. Decorative polychrome patterns of glass block and contrasting stone insets run the vertical length of the turrets and provide a sense of great height. The turrets feature crenellation. The bell from the original church building on Bastrop Street was placed in the right tower when the current structure was built in 1946. The building also features lancet, tracery windows and rectangular, double hung windows. The windows are ornamented with polychrome patterns of contrasting brick.

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 and Diana DuCroz, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.

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Moore, Louis. "Thomas helps black churches put dreams into brick," Houston Chronicle, Saturday, November 15, 1960.

APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION

Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation of a Landmark.

(a) The HAHC and the commission, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the city council, in making a designation, shall consider one or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the type of designation:

S	NA	S - satisfies	D - does not satisfy	NA - not applicable
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STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to the Houston Planning Commission the Protected Landmark Designation of St. John Missionary Baptist Church as 2222 Gray Avenue.

EXHIBIT A
ST. JOHN MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH
2222 GRAY AVENUE



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EXHIBIT B
SITE LOCATION MAP
ST. JOHN MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH
2222 GRAY AVENUE
NOT TO SCALE

