

ADDRESS: 647-59 N 42ND ST

Name of Resource: Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church

Proposed Action: Designate

Property Owner: Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church

Nominator: University City Historical Society

Staff Contact: Heather Hendrickson, heather.hendrickson@phila.gov

OVERVIEW: This nomination proposes to designate the Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church building at 647-59 N. 42nd Street as historic and list it on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The nomination contends that the two-and-a-half story Gothic Revival church satisfies Criteria for Designation A, B, and J.

The nomination contends that Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church (MOTBC), built by the hands of its African American congregants in 1923, has significant character as part of the development of the African American community in West Philadelphia during the early twentieth century, fulfilling Criteria for Designation A and J. The nomination also argues that MOTBC satisfies Criterion for Designation B through its association with both civil rights activism and the Great Migration, which was characterized by the mass relocation of millions of migrants from the South to the North from 1910-1970. Rev. Marshall L. Shepard, famed civil rights activist and close colleague to Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., pastored MOTBC from 1926 until his death in 1967.

Only the church building is included in this nomination. The surrounding parking lots and senior housing complex are excluded from the proposed boundary.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: The staff recommends that the nomination demonstrates that the church building at 647-59 N. 42nd Street satisfies Criteria for Designation A, B, and J, and should be designated as historic and listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, with an amended period of significance to end in 1967 with the passing of Rev. Marshall L. Shepard.



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 (CD, EMAIL, FLASH DRIVE)
ELECTRONIC FILES MUST BE WORD OR WORD COMPATIBLE

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

Street address: 647-59 N 42ND ST

Postal code: 19104

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church

Current/Common Name: Mount Olivet Tabernacle 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: Baptist Church

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Please attach a narrative description and site/plot plan of the resource's boundaries.

6. DESCRIPTION

Please attach a narrative description and photographs of the resource's physical appearance, site, setting, and surroundings.

7. SIGNIFICANCE

Please attach a narrative Statement of Significance citing the Criteria for Designation the resource satisfies.

Period of Significance (from year to year): from 1923 to present

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: built 1923

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: _____

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: _____

Original owner: _____

Other significant persons: Rev. Marshall L. Shepard, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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

Organization University City Historical Society Date July 2022

Name with Title Ms. Corey Loftus Email info@uchs.net

Street Address 1332 Lombard St, Apt 1B Telephone (267) 584-6544

City, State, and Postal Code Philadelphia, PA 19147

Nominator is is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: July 18, 2022

Correct-Complete Incorrect-Incomplete Date: September 28, 2022

Date of Notice Issuance: October 27, 2022

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: MOUNT OLIVET TABERNACLE BAPTIST CHURCH

Address: 647-59 N 42nd St

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19104

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: _____

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: _____

Date of Final Action: _____

Designated Rejected

5. Boundary Description

This nomination proposes to designate Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church located at 647 N. 42nd Street, Philadelphia. The building is situated in a larger parcel, with parking lots to the north, east, and south. Only the church building is included in this nomination. The parking lots are excluded from the proposed boundary for designation. The proposed designation also excludes the Marshall L. Shepard Village, a low rise community of 161-Unit low-cost housing complex for senior citizens that borders the church on the north, east, and south sides. This property is considered separate from the church property proposed in this nomination.



Figure 1. Parcel boundary of Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church at 647 N. 42nd Street, Philadelphia, outlined in red.

The boundary of the church building begins at the southwest corner of N 42nd Street, extends approximately 93 feet north along N. 42nd Street, and approximately 117 feet along parallel lines to the rear of the church building. The proposed boundary includes the footprint of the church as shown below in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Proposed designation boundary of church building. Base map source: CityAtlas.

6. Description

Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church (MOTBC) is located at the intersection of N. 42nd and Wallace Streets in West Philadelphia. The building was constructed by the hands of its devoted congregants in 1923. There was no architect. According to church records, there were no blueprints either.¹ All construction took place under the supervision of a contractor who was also one of the Deacons at the time, Deacon Robert Pratt.² That congregants took such a primary role in the erection of the building illustrates the strength of community and the great degree of effort dedicated to the development of MOTBC.

¹ *Mount Olivet Baptist Tabernacle Church Yearbook (75th Anniversary)*, 1977, 7.

² Construction of MOTBC was not without a few hiccups. A church annual recorded that during the construction of the roof, the structural supports gave out and it collapsed. Several were injured and one person was recorded to have died due to the incident.



Figure 3. Mount Olivet Tabernacle Church, n.d. Facing southeast. Source: Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

The grand church building is two-and-a-half stories tall and turns a one-bay-deep, granite-clad westwork to the street. Although the Gothic Revival façade is essentially symmetrical, it terminates in a crenelated tower to the south and a pyramidal-roofed tower to the north, creating a moderately picturesque effect. The side walls consist of stuccoed brick and extend an additional seven bays on the lot. The easternmost bay is blind while the others feature ample stained-glass windows in the Perpendicular Gothic style. Please see further architectural descriptions organized by elevation below.

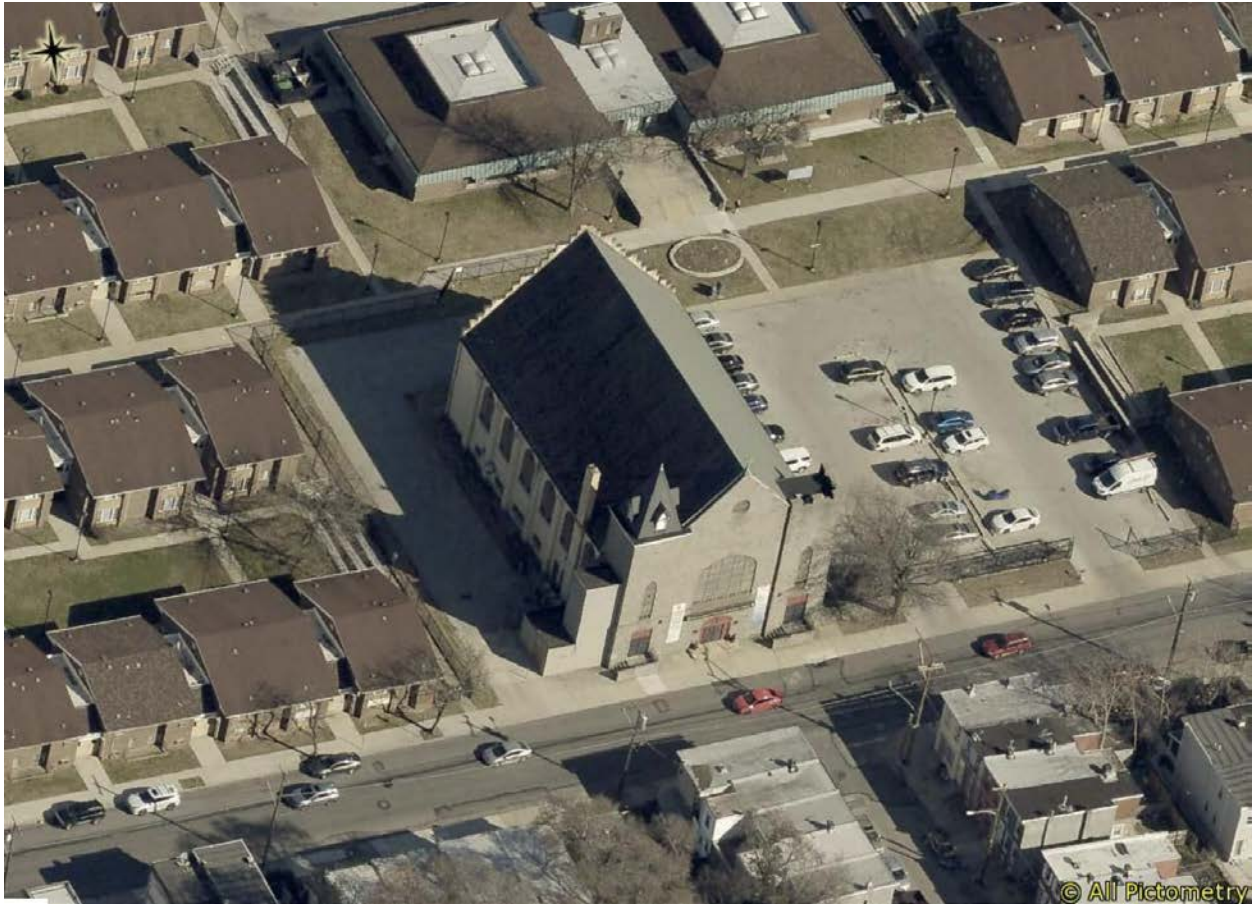


Figure 4. Aerial view looking east, Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church. Source: Pictometry 2022.

Though the church suffered a fire that originated in the heater of the baptismal font in 1994, the original structural integrity of the building has been maintained.³ The church and its construction at the hands of participating volunteers represents a specific moment in United States history when the urban northeast saw a rise in Baptist church construction as millions of African Americans moved north and west to escape racial violence and the Jim Crow south during the Great Migration (1910-1940). This history is described further in relation to MOTBC in the statement of significance section of this nomination.

MOTBC bought a plot of land for their new church in 1914 once they had secured enough funding. The site previously served as a streetcar barn and an oil station for the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company (which was previously called the Philadelphia

³ Mount Olivet Tabernacle Church v. Edwin L. Wiegand Division 781 A.2d 1263 (Pa. Super. Ct. 2001).

Traction Company).⁴ The 1895 and 1910 G.W. Bromley Maps show the site labeled “Phila. Transit Co.” and “P.R.T. Co.” respectively.

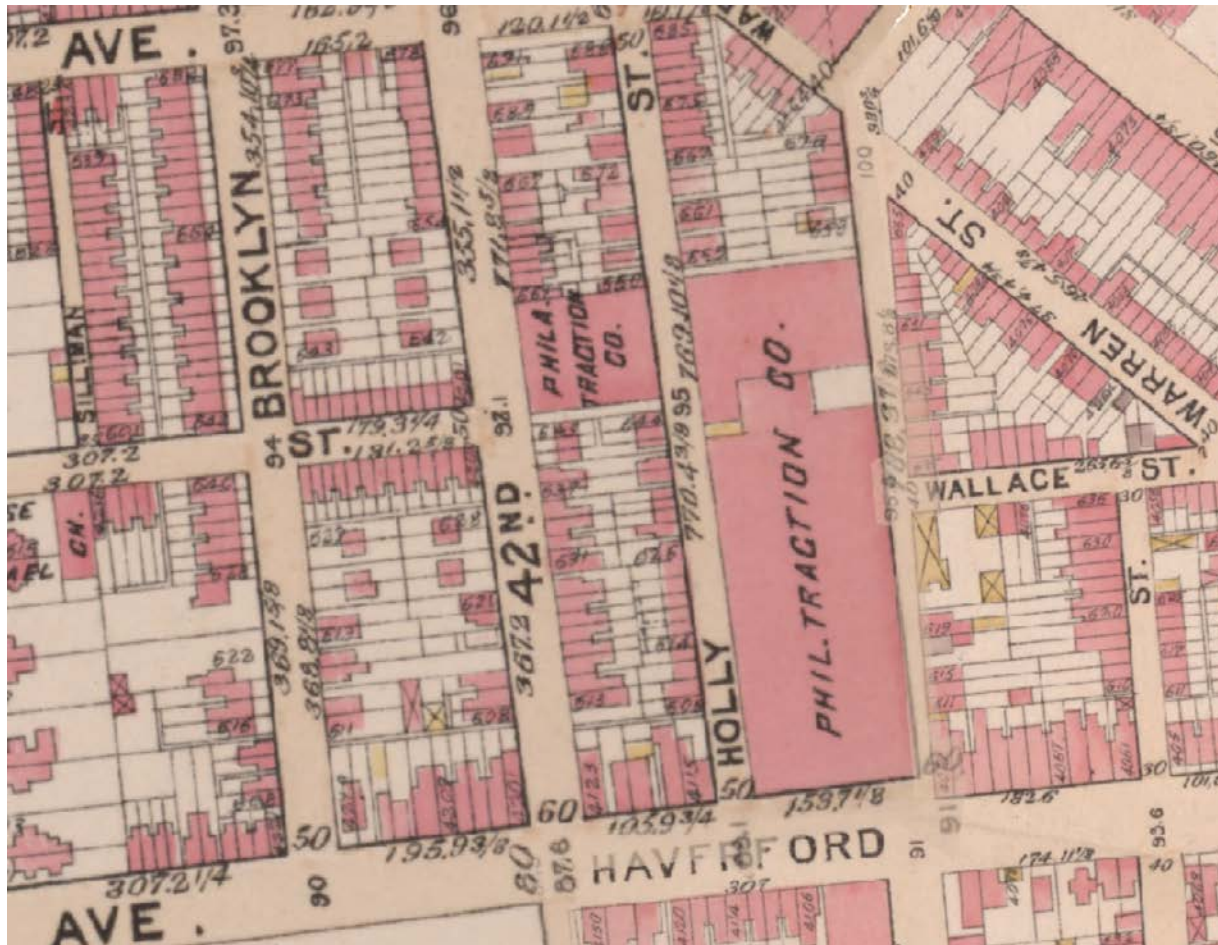


Figure 5. 1895 G.W. Bromley Map showing Philadelphia Traction Company site at the current location of Mount Olivet Tabernacle Church. Source: PhilaGeoHistory Maps Viewer.

⁴ *Mount Olivet Baptist Tabernacle Church Yearbook (75th Anniversary)*, 1977, 6. It is unclear if the congregation or church leadership had any significant prior relationships with the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company, but this history merits further research. The Philadelphia Transit Company was notoriously discriminatory towards its employees and restricted African American workers to menial labor before a major strike and its aftermath in 1944, <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/philadelphia-transit-workers-strike-against-negro-workers-1944>.

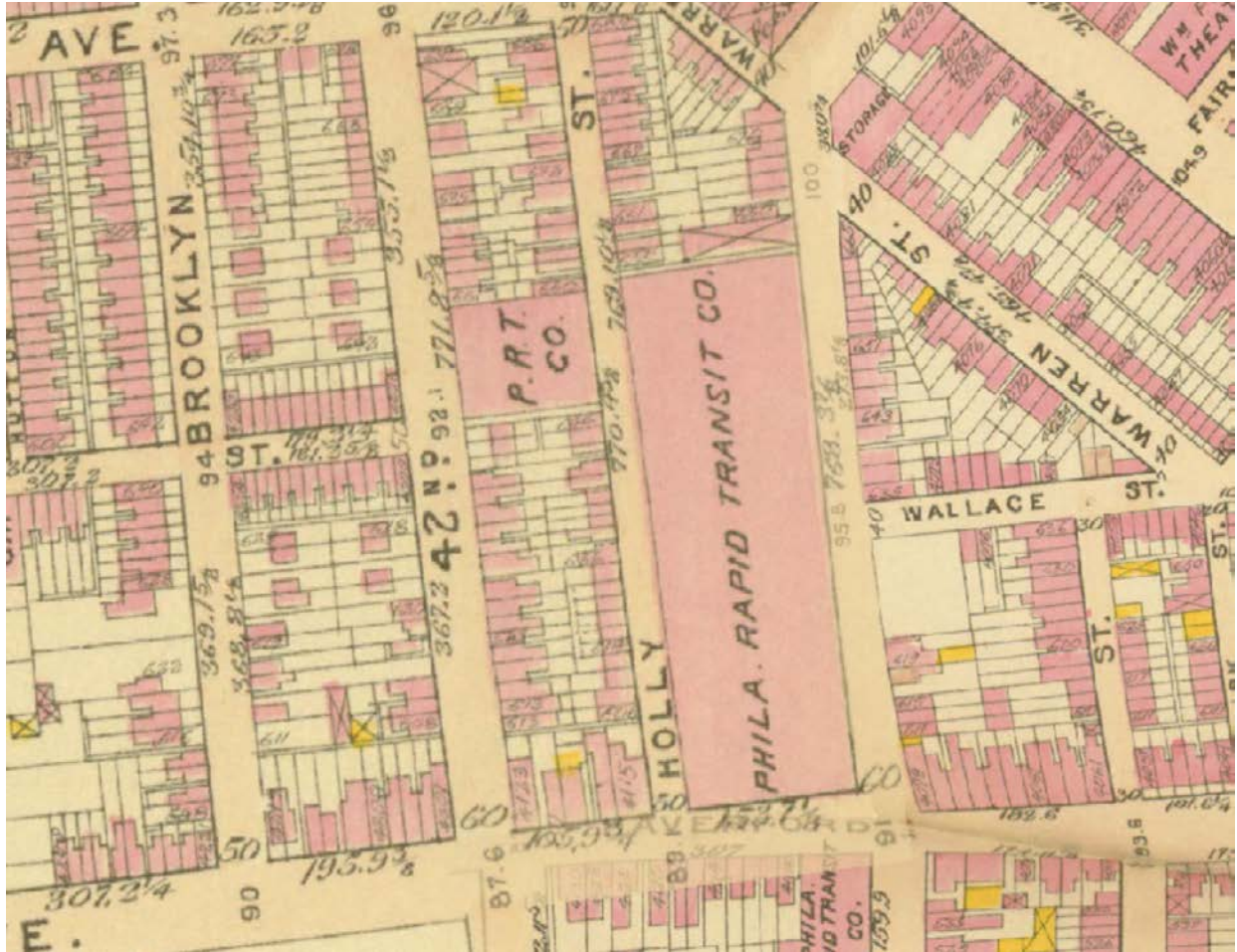


Figure 6. 1910 G.W. Bromley Map showing Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company site at the current location of Mount Olivet Tabernacle Church. Source: PhilaGeoHistory Maps Viewer.

Alterations to the Building's Exterior

Exterior alterations have been relatively minor. The least sympathetic are a concrete-block elevator tower at the northwest corner and staircases to secondary entrances on the façade. Toward the rear of the building, traces of now-filled door and window openings appear in the stucco. The use of asphalt shingle on the main roof and north tower is unobtrusive. Aside from these changes, the church retains a high level of integrity.

Interior details

The interior of the church features dazzling stained glass windows depicting the lives of Christ and various saints. These windows illuminate the main sanctuary and are the building's most striking feature. (Now covered with protective plexiglass, they are best

seen from within.) While conventionally medievalizing in design and replete with chivalric and Biblical motifs, they commemorate leading figures in the congregation's history and in some cases tend toward realism. Also intriguing are windows donated by various subgroups within the congregation – ushers, Bible class members, extended families – that reveal the social networks on which this African-American congregation relied for the raising of funds.



Figure 7. Mount Olivet Senior Choir in Procession, stained glass in the background. Circa late 1950's or 1960's HSP Mount Olivet Photograph Collection. Source: Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Descriptions by Elevation

West Elevation (Primary facade)



Figure 8. West Elevation N. 42nd Street, Primary facade. Source: Corey Loftus, July 2022.

The primary facade and main entrance features two towers at either end of different designs: one to the left with a pyramidal roof and dormer window, the other to the right with crenelation at the top of the tower. Otherwise the facade is generally symmetrical and the style borrows from Gothic Revival.

Starting from the base and moving upwards, the central door is elevated and approached by two cement stairs off of the sidewalk level. Doors to the right and left are slightly more elevated with individual staircases approached from sidewalk level. All door jambs are wooden and painted red. The central portal itself features a pair of paneled doors and a carved-wood tympanum with angels flanking a crucifix and the motto: "Where Neighborhood Becomes The Brotherhood". Below the carved text is a

black cross flanked by two angels. A black and white sign above the entrance door says, "Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church." A limestone datestone at the building's northwest corner commemorates the congregation's founding (1901) and commencement of the church's construction (1923).

The stained glass windows are located on the second story, a level above the doors on the facade. The largest window above the central door is a broad arched window. To its right and left lancet windows are centered above the side doors. As noted previously, the windows are currently covered with plexiglass for protective reasons, but a historical photograph shows what they looked like from the exterior before the coverings were installed (Figure 3).

North Elevation



Figure 9. Source: Photo taken by Corey Loftus, July 2022.

The north elevation is sided by a driveway that circles around the perimeter of the church with some parking options. Exterior walls and stucco and the roof is sloped. The dominant feature on this side of the building is the row of six large arched stained glass windows on the second story. They are currently covered in plexiglass like the stained glass on the west facade and are best viewed from within the sanctuary. An additional six windows on the bottom story let in light to the basement level. There are simple buttressing elements between the windows and a chimney extends up the side of the building, shielded from view by the left tower when looking at the tower from the front. The concrete block addition on this side of the building is and elevator tower.

East Elevation



Figure 10. Source: Photo taken by Corey Loftus, July 2022.

The east elevation of the building is not visible from the street. It has a stucco exterior that is entirely flat except for five buttressing elements and a step gabled roof. There are

a total of eight windows: four on the first story, and four on the second as well. Two sets of back doors are located on the left and right side.

South Elevation



Figure 11. Source: Photo taken by Corey Loftus, January 2022.

Similar to the north elevation, the south side features a row of six arched stained glass windows on the second story and six rectangular windows on the story below. The exterior siding is stucco and the roof is sloped. There are no visible buttressing elements on this side of the building.

7. Significance

Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church (MOTBC), located at 647 N. 42nd Street, constitutes a significant resource that merits historical designation by the Philadelphia Historical Commission on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The church satisfies Criteria for Designation A, B, and J as enumerated in Section 14-1004 of the Philadelphia Code:

(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;

(B) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation;

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

Summary of Significance and Introduction

Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church (MOTBC) constitutes a crucially important historical resource to Philadelphia and the Nation. This nomination argues that MOTBC represents a significant value to the development of the African American community in West Philadelphia during the early twentieth century (**Criteria A & J**). This significance coincides with the Great Migration, a historical event of importance to the City and Nation characterized by the mass relocation of millions of migrants from the South to the North from 1910-1970 (**Criterion B**). Lastly, the church's heritage is evident in its association with the lives of persons significant in the past, including the famed leader and influential Civil Rights activist, Reverend Marshall L. Shepard, Sr. (**Criterion A**). Shepard was the pastor of MOTBC from 1926 until his death in 1967. His friend and fellow minister of the Christian faith, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described Shepard as "one of the greatest leaders of our nation" who had successfully "carved for himself an

imperishable niche in the annals of our history.”⁵ The details and explanation of the historical significance of MOTBC according to the criteria listed above are enumerated in the following statement. Also included in this nomination is a discussion of the notable tradition of music and the arts at MOTBC and the grand Moller Pipe organ that has been a main fixture of the church’s interior since it was installed in 1927.

History and Development of MOTBC

The early origins of MOTBC can be traced back to 1901, when a handful of members from Mt. Carmel Baptist Church decided to find a church of their own.⁶ Nine individuals attended the first church service in September of that year at 670 Holly Street, the house of Deacon James Brown (Figure 12). Their founding pastor, Reverend Napper Hester decided they would name their new church the Sharon Baptist Church (Figure 13).

⁵ Telegram from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to Mrs. Marshall Shepherd, Sr., Rev. Marshall Shepherd, Jr., and Rev. Samuel Shepard 1967 February 24. 1.1.0.42420, Morehouse College Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection: and Samuel Shepard: Subseries 1.1:Correspondence: General S-Z, 0000-0000-0000-0131d. Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlantic University Center, Inc. http://findingaids.auctr.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/172219.

⁶ Mt. Carmel Baptist Church was previously called Haddington Baptist Church. According to the history of Monumental Church (established 1826) as published on their website, Mt. Carmel Baptist Church is a descendant of their congregation, which was started in 1882 by a few members who broke off from Monumental. See more online: <https://www.thembc.org/history>. This history connects Mount Olivet with one of the oldest Baptist churches in the city of Philadelphia and illustrates the network formed between congregations since the early 19th century.



(Left) Figure 12. The house of Deacon James Brown at 670 Holly Street. Source: *Mount Olivet Baptist Tabernacle Church*, 1977 Page 5.

(Right) Figure 13. Reverend Napper Hester. Photograph of an oil painting. Source: Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

By 1903, the small but growing congregation had raised enough money to purchase their first property for worship, located at 507 N. 41st Street. Sharon Baptist Church remained in this location until 1912, when they merged with a neighboring church on 37th and Powelton and officially changed their name to Mount Olivet Baptist Church.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the congregation was busy laying a foundation for the social network and ministerial organization of the church. Women were active participants in these plans and organizations. The successful organizing efforts of the church community attracted new members who could join committees and benefit from the various services provided by the church. A Sunday school was offered and the choir performed weekly. In fact, education was an important aspect of the church since its beginning in 1901. As soon as the congregation formed, they manifested a Sunday school that followed Sunday morning services and was directed by Rev. Hester. By the 1970s, the Sunday school at MOTBC had enrolled more than 430 pupils, with separate divisions for children, youth, and adult study. MOTBC has also always been supportive of its members pursuing degrees in higher education, financially or otherwise. In all aspects of the church functioning and since its very beginnings, it was clear that MOTBC was set up to help its congregation and neighbors thrive in all areas of life including their personal and family lives, careers, educational endeavors, social activism, and artistic pursuits.

The congregation bought the land for Mt. Olivet's current home, located at 42nd and Wallace Streets in 1914. The location was only a few blocks away from Deacon Brown's home, where they first met. Groundbreaking followed in 1923. Rev. Morton Winson, pastor of Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Germantown, officiated the ceremony. By 1924, the congregation had moved into the basement. Originally, the site of MOTBC was an oil station and streetcar barn. Evidence from the 1910 Philadelphia Atlas G.W. Bromley Map shows the location occupied by "P.R.T. Co." or Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company— the predecessor to the current Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA) (Figures 5 and 6). It is unclear if there was any crossover between P.R.T. employees and MOTBC membership at the time of this purchase. P.R.T. was an early employer of black migrant labor at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁷

⁷ Perhaps if there ever was any documentation of an employer/employee relationship between P.R.T and the membership at Mount Olivet, it could have been lost in the fire in 1994. The church currently has a very limited archive of historical materials besides a few annuals and newspaper clippings.

The building was built by the hands of its congregants under the supervision of Rev. Hester and Deacon Robert Pratt, who served as superintendent of construction. According to church records, there were no blueprints. However, the church follows a simple plan with the elevated main sanctuary built on top of a basement level. Construction was not without its problems. After the first attempt to erect a roof, the structure collapsed and injured a few members. Church records note one death from the accident.⁸



Figure 14. Detail, west facade, Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church. Photo: Corey Loftus, July 2022.

The church's founding pastor, Reverend N. H. Hester died in 1925, soon after Easter service that year. His name is carved in stone in memory on the building exterior on the left of the central facade (Figure 14). The church searched for a Pastor for over a year

⁸ *Mount Olivet Baptist Tabernacle Church*, 1977.

before Rev. Shepard was installed. At that time, Shepard was in New York, serving as assistant to Rev. Adam Clayton Powell at Abyssinian Baptist Church.

Rev. Shepard was installed as MOTBC's new pastor in 1926. Like many members of the church, Shepard moved to the Northeast from the south during the Great Migration. He made his home in Philadelphia where he made a successful and ambitious career in both the church and in politics (see full biography below). During the twentieth century, MOTBC flourished. Members enjoyed a strong arts program, social calendar, and a myriad of internal ministries and organizations to get involved. MOTBC has a special legacy of social and political activism and community outreach further elaborated in the sections below. Its history constitutes an indispensable resource to the development of West Philadelphia that speaks directly to the broader development of the nation and its African American populations in the urban north. Thus, the history of MOTBC throughout national historical events like the Great Migration, the Great Depression, the Civil Rights Movement, and the continued struggle for racial justice into the twenty-first century, encompasses the history of the rise and role of churches in African American communities that developed in the urban north in the early twentieth century. MOTBC is a place of worship, activism, ministry, art and social activity, making the church what artist Jacob Lawrence called "the center of life" for migrants seeking new lives in the north.

As a religious institution, Mount Olivet's community involvement has always delivered above and beyond to provide senior living, employee training, and scholarships for higher education, making it a crucial example of what African American churches were and could be for their communities throughout the expanse of the twentieth century and amid the struggle for civil rights. MOTBC's institutional legacy deserves recognition for its participation in a wider network of organizations that together served and constituted the African American population in West Philadelphia.

The Great Migration and Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church

The largest wave of black migration to come to Philadelphia occurred from 1910 to 1970. Known as the Great Migration, the period is characterized by the exodus of millions of African Americans from the south to the north. An estimated six million people made the trek north and west, attracted by the promise of jobs during the World Wars and housing opportunities. Figure 15 illustrates the dominant routes of migration. Cities like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia became destinations for ex-slaves and their descendants looking for new lives outside the clutches of the Jim Crow South. Though segregation was still a reality in the north and the influx of black migrants impacted the formation of predominantly black neighborhoods. The economic and social opportunities of black migrants were shaped and profoundly limited by segregation at metropolitan level still felt in the twenty-first century.

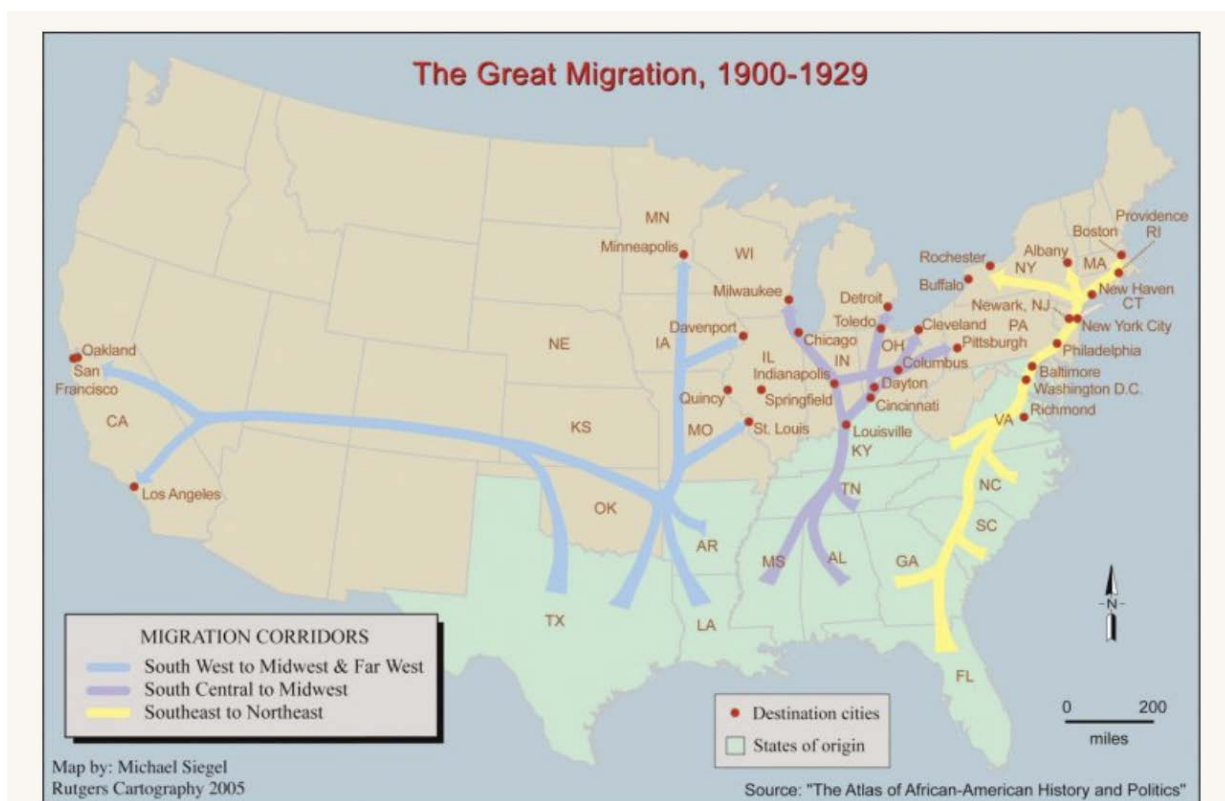


Figure 15. Siegel, Michael, "The Great Migration, 1900-1929," Digital Public Library of America, <http://dp.la/item/be891ab498f510adcf69a5a125f2a711>.

This tremendous migration dramatically changed the urban dynamic as populations rose and industry grew thanks to the influx in labor. However, African Americans were not free from discrimination in the north and the journey and adjustment was far from easy for families.

There was a myriad of causes that led to the Great Migration. The dominant motivations included a rise in recorded lynchings in the south, a few seasons of bad crops and lost jobs, and a demand for industrial labor in the north during the World Wars. During this time, churches were paramount institutions for the African American community, fulfilling a multi-dimensional role as a place of worship, community, social activity, and protection. They functioned as complex social, economic, and political organizations led by and for African Americans. Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church was no exception. It figures into this history, as an exemplar of the church and its role as a safe haven for migrants as they acclimated to life in Philadelphia.

A number of scholars such as Kenyatta R. Gilbert, Robert Gregg, James N. Gregory, and Matthew Countryman have emphasized the crucial role of African American churches in this period. Alongside community-focused organizations like the YMCA, Negro Migration Committee and the Armstrong Association, churches helped to ease the transition of migration. As Gregory describes it,

Whether leading from in front or leading from behind, the churches provided much of the impetus behind the distinctive community-building ideology of the period. They were a principal source of the atmosphere of welcome that greeted migrants, of the call to service that old settlers answered, and of the 'we are building the promised land' story that newspapers trumpeted. Not alone but in concert with newspapers, women's clubs, and some other community institutions, the leading churches promoted notions of civic responsibility that helped communities minimize the chaos of the first Great Migration and ease the transitions for both old and new residents. In the tightly squeezed, violence-surrounded, governmentally neglected, service-deprived, impoverished new ghettos of the North, these civic ideals counted for a lot. They were the difference between collective moralization and community pride. They were the source of

the claim that something wonderful was being constructed in those spaces, that Black Metropolises were emerging.⁹

Despite the undeniable challenges associated with the Great Migration, Gregory characterizes the multifaceted capacity of the church to address all aspects of community and civil life as a critical buffering force during this period. Historian Victoria Wolcott, who has also commented on the significance of churches like MOTBC, has also described that church as a space for women, who played crucial roles in the church organizations and networks that proved so essential to the local communities. Through the church, women became leaders of the community.

The Church as the Center of Life for Migrants

According to historian, Robert Gregg, “[c]hurches were the largest and most elaborate economic, social, and political institutions organized by African Americans, at least until the Second World War.”¹⁰ Gregg identifies “the crucial period in the development of the black community’s religious institution” as the period from 1890 to 1940. Mount Olivet falls directly into this period and its early history of development characterized by temporary locations, merging congregations and name changes speaks directly to formations that Gregg chronicles.

⁹ James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 216.

¹⁰ Robert Gregg, *Sparks From the Anvil of Oppression: Philadelphia’s African Methodists and Southern Migrants, 1890-1940*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 1.



Figures 16 and 17. Two panels from Jacob Lawrence's painting series, *The Great Migration: An American Story*, 1940-1. (Left) Panel 35, *They left the South in great numbers. They arrived in the North in great numbers*. 12 x 18 in. 1940-1. Collection of the Phillips Collection. (Right) Panel 54, *For migrants, the church was the center of life*. 18 x 12 in. 1940-1. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

One of the greatest lasting visual records of the Great Migration is found in a series of 60 tempera paintings by American artist and historian, Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000) titled *The Great Migration: An American Story*. Across all the brightly colored and carefully captioned panels, Lawrence chronicles the trials and tribulations of the migrants in their northern and westward journeys in his own expressive style. Lawrence depicts packed trains, hunger due to lack of food, northern industry, and urban housing. The impressive series captures a range of emotions from hope to desperation. Panel 54, in particular, speaks to the crucial role of churches in the migration. According to the caption— “for migrants, the church was the center of life.” In the foreground, black migrants sit in pews with their heads slightly bowed. Behind them, Christ walks in a landscape flanked by a cross and his mother Mary weeping. The mural forms a shallow alcove for the pews suggestive of the peace and solitude the church could provide its congregants, who are the clear focus of Lawrence's painting.

Of course, because the Great Migration is such a pivotal part of United States history, a number of other artists and writers documented the experiences of migrants in addition to Lawrence. Among them include Walter Ellison and his painting *Train Station* (1935), Langston Hughes's poem "One-Way Ticket." Hughes's poem expresses the desire to leave the south for anywhere else in search of safety and freedom:

I pick up my life
And take it with me
And I put it down in
Chicago, Detroit,
Buffalo, Scranton,
Any place that is North and East— And not Dixie.

I pick up my life
And take it on the train
To Los Angeles, Bakersfield,
Seattle, Oakland, Salt Lake,
Any place that is
North and West—
And not South.

I am fed up
With Jim Crow laws,
People who are cruel
And afraid,
Who lynch and run,
Who are scared of me
And me of them.

I pick up my life
And take it away
On a one-way ticket—
Gone up North,
Gone out West,
Gone!¹¹

Even contemporary artists have been inspired by the Great Migration and the transformation that resulted from it. A Fall 2022 traveling exhibition at the Mississippi Museum of Art explores the lasting legacy of the Great Migration. For this exhibition

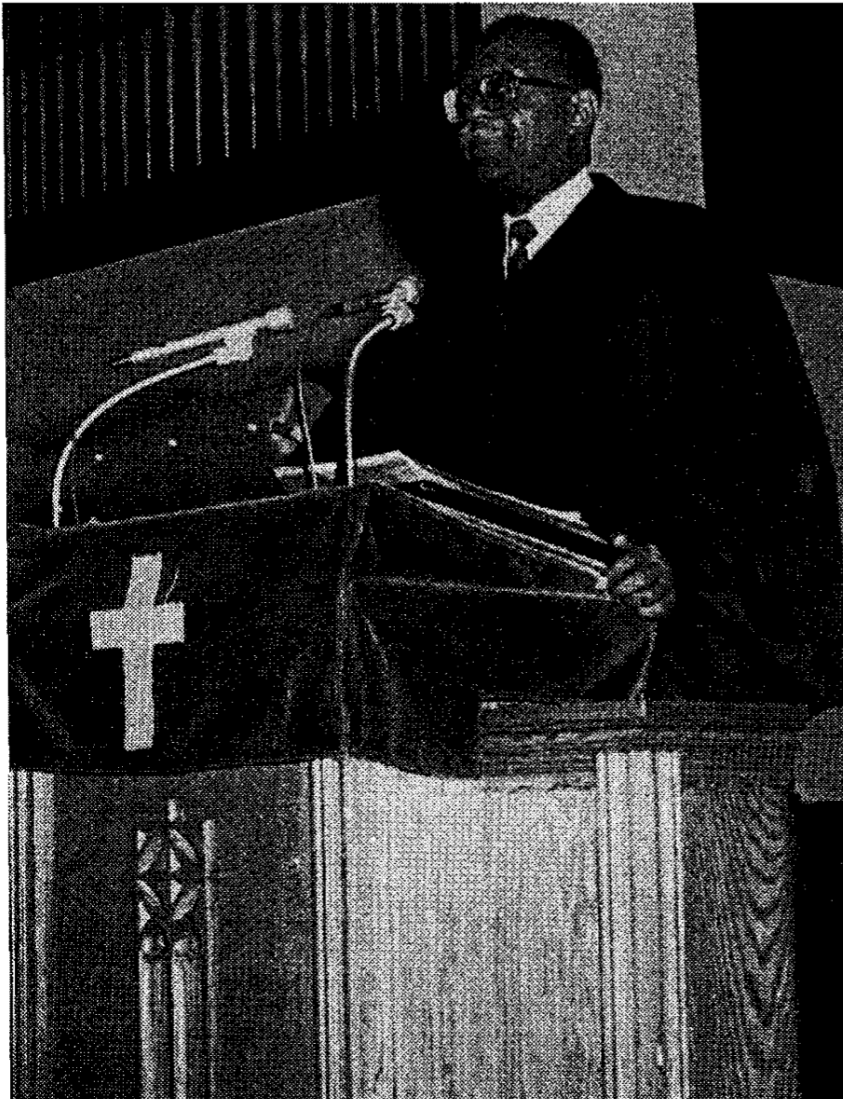
¹¹ Langston Hughes, "One-way Ticket"

entitled, *A Movement in Every Direction*, a selection of participating artists were asked to contribute artwork displaying their continued familial connections to the south.¹²

The interest in the Great Migration and the way it has shaped the nation was the topic of a five-series radio program hosted by WHY 91-FM in 1985 called “Goin’ North: Tales of the Great Migration.” Its primary aim was to collect personal stories about the mass movement that forever changed the nation for live broadcast. The program was narrated by none other than MOTBC’s own pastor, Rev. Marshall Lorenzo Shepard, Jr., pictured below.¹³ The Shephards migrated to the north from North Carolina and their influence at Mount Olivet was crucial to securing its prominence and reputation as a stronghold for the local community. That Shepard was selected to narrate this series speaks to his talent as a powerful preacher, but also importantly shows his personal history in connection to the Great Migration (See Figure 18).

¹² See more information about the exhibition online: https://www.msmuseumart.org/exhibition/a-movement-in-every-direction-legacies-of-the-great-migration/?utm_source=art_news&utm_medium=speditorial&utm_campaign=MMA-2022-GME-VisitJackson-RA&utm_term=gme_visitjackson_artnews&utm_content=movement_every_direction_sponsored_content

¹³ “Goin’ North: Tales of the Great Migration” - Newspaper in Education Special Supplement. *Philadelphia Daily News*, E-1-E-20. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist_goinnorth/6



Special to the Daily News by Donnie Roberts

The Voice of 'Goin' North'

The Rev. Marshall Lorenzo Shephard Jr., pastor of the Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church in Philadelphia, will narrate the series "Goin' North: Tales of the Great Migration" on WHYY 91-FM.

Figure 18. Hardy, C. A. (1985). Goin' North: Tales of the Great Migration - Newspaper in Education Special Supplement. *Philadelphia Daily News*, E-1-E-20. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist_goinnorth/6

MOTBC provided, similar to Lawrence's caption and the ethos of Hughes's poem, a center of life for its congregation. Far more than a house of worship, the church was an animated host for a broad range of ministries, social and philanthropic clubs and organizations. And in addition to the physical space that churches provided, black

religious voices were also integral during the mass exodus. According to Gilbert, “the voices that called out from northern Black pulpits... played up the advantages of relocating, compelled mass migration and became crucial to successful transplanting.”¹⁴

Life in Philadelphia for Migrants

Life in Philadelphia was difficult and inhospitable to African American migrants even if the north provided some escape from Jim Crow laws. Sadie Tanner Mossell became the first black woman in America to earn a PhD in 1921. Her doctorate work consisted of a survey of 100 migrant families in Philadelphia and their standard of living.¹⁵ Of the 100 families Mossell surveyed, a vast majority were church members. She found eighty-three families reported that they made regular financial contributions to the church. Mossell noted that the church was also the center for social activity for these families.¹⁶ “Everybody went. You were the odd fellow if you stayed away. The church was the leader, therefore, of not only the spiritual but also the social life of the migrant.”¹⁷

MOTBC is central to the story of the Great Migration and settlement of Black southern migrants seeking work and new homes in the north during the greater part of the twentieth-century. Migrants arrived from southern states by crowded trains to cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York. Churches like MOTBC were instrumental institutions involved in the support and transition of rising populations of African Americans in the urban north. Not only was the church a place of worship, but also a center of social life that provided essential services pertaining to anything from health to educational support and skill training for the labor force. MOTBC was this facility for African Americans in West Philadelphia. Due the experienced direction and upstanding influence of visionary church leaders like the late Reverend Marshall L. Shepard (himself a migrant from Oxford, North Carolina), MOTBC rose to prominence as a

¹⁴ Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *A Pursued Justice: Black Preaching from the Great Migration to Civil Rights*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), 4.

¹⁵ “Newcomers,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, February 4, 1985, E-9.

¹⁶ Sadie Tanner Mossell, “The Standard of Living Among One Hundred Negro Migrant Families in Philadelphia,” PhD Thesis (The University of Pennsylvania, 1921), 31. Accessed online: <https://archive.org/details/standardofliving00moss/page/30/mode/2up>.

¹⁷ Mossell, 32.

leading religious institution at its height in the middle of the twentieth century. Its magnetism attracted and enjoyed impressive guests such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and J.A. Rogers.

Legacies of Redlining in Philadelphia

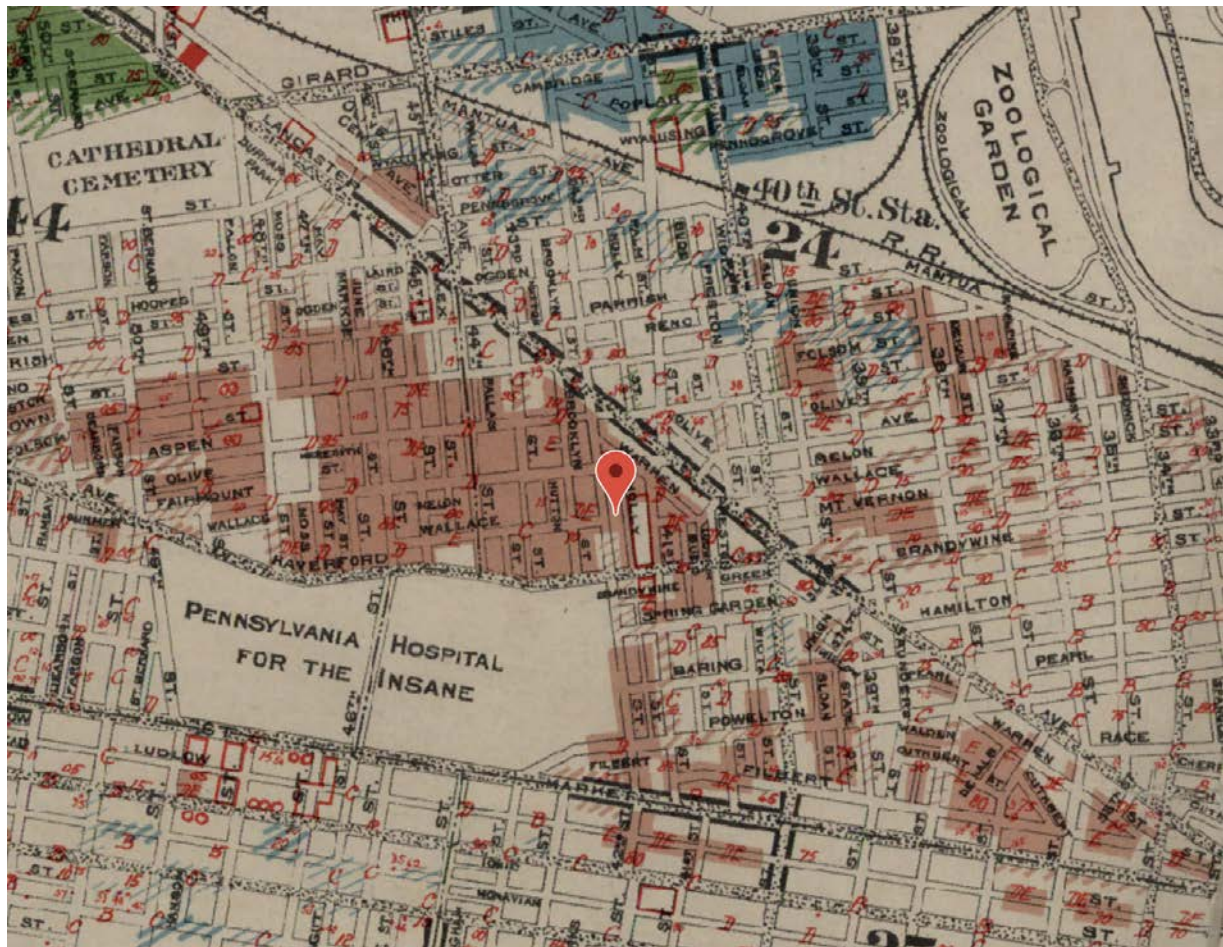


Figure 19. View of a Section of West Philadelphia from the 1934 J.M. Brewer Map. The red label marks the current location of Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church. The red shading designates what Brewer identified as a “Colored” section of the city. Source: PhilaGeoHistory Maps Viewer.

In addition to the general challenges associated with moving to a new place, African American Migrants were faced with discrimination upon their arrival in Philadelphia. The story of MOTBC is indicative of the history of redlining as this map shows. Migrants were denied job security, paid low wages, housing could be hard to come by and conditions bleak, and there were tensions between the local black populations and

newcomers.¹⁸ One of the lasting artifacts of discriminatory measures blacks faced is found in J.M. Brewer's profoundly racist real estate maps from 1934. Almost 90 years old at this point, Brewer's survey of Philadelphia neighborhoods continues to have a lasting impact on the city's demographic distributions today. As a consultant for the Home Owner's Loan Corporation, Brewer's objective was to chart the "residential security" of the city.¹⁹ In other words, Brewer racially codified the map to identify neighborhoods with colored, Jewish, and Italian residents, to indicate where loans and mortgages were considered a high risk. The 1934 map shows Mount Olivet on the edge of a red-shaded region of the map indicating the predominantly African American neighborhood. Amy Cohen has argued that the maps legacy has had lasting repercussions for historically black and white ethnic neighborhoods. In the face of such obstacles and despite financial difficulties during the Great Depression, MOTBC managed to successfully finance the building thanks to the generous donations of its many members. Some homeowners even mortgaged their homes in times of heightened financial stress to keep the church afloat. The longstanding dedication of MOTBC's membership and its fundraising efforts are a testament to the importance of MOTBC's standing as a community resource.

Significant Persons Associated with Mount Olivet

Rev. Marshall L. Shepard (1899-1967)

Reverend Marshall L. Shepard was a prominent Baptist preacher and a successful politician at the state and federal levels. Shepard was born in Oxford, North Carolina to parents who were both involved in Baptist ministerial work. His father was

¹⁸ Read more about the labor relations in: Leah Platt Boustan, *Competition in the Promised Land: Black Migrants in Northern Cities and Labor Markets*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

¹⁹ Amy Cohen, "Repercussions of Racist Maps Still Impact Neighborhoods Today," *Hidden City*, December 16, 2021. <https://hiddencityphila.org/2021/12/repercussions-of-racist-maps-still-impact-neighborhoods-today/>. Another mapping resource that is cited in Cohen's article is the University of Richmond's online interactive mapping archive, *Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America*, <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=13/39.966/-75.226&city=philadelphia-pa&area=D20&adview=full>.

superintendent of the Orphan Homes at Oxford, and his mother was president of the Woman's Baptist State Convention for 35 years.²⁰

Shepard was a smart child and successful in school. After high school, he received his doctor of divinity degree at the Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia and later studied at the Pendle Hill Quaker Graduate Center in Wallingford, Pennsylvania. In addition to his academic accolades, Shepard had worked as a pullman porter, steel worker, and a cook to fund his education. He made a desirable candidate to the search committee at MOTBC because of his skill in human relations, his gift of public speaking, and his commitment to the Christian faith.

Shepard moved from Harlem, New York, to Philadelphia in 1926 where he was installed as the new and celebrated pastor at MOTBC. Previously, Shepard was the assistant pastor at the Abyssinian Baptist Church of New York City, "which at that time was reported to be the largest Protestant congregation in the world."²¹

A number of clubs were established following the hire of Dr. Marshall Shepard as pastor and during his tenure. Among them were:

The Inspiration Chorus, 1927 (Mrs M.L. Shepard, pianist-director); Troopers and Trooperettes (later the Satellite Dramatic Club), 1930; the Sunshine Club, 1934, the Nurses' Unit, 1935; Young Adult Choir, 1938; Junior Missionaries, 1939; M.O.T.B.C. Basketball Team, 1939; Helping Hand Club, 1942; Selectee Liberty Mother's Club, 1942; Mount Olivet Braves, 1947; Men's Club, 1949; Ladies' Auxiliary to the Men's Club, 1952; Willing Workers 1952; Calendar Club, 1953; Hospitality Club, 1956; New Members League, 1957; Georgia Club, 1959; Virginia Club, 1959; Pulpit Aides, 1964 (later the Shepard Pulpit Aides); and the Deacon's Aides, 1963 (later the Deaconesses).²²

The variety of clubs illustrates the dynamic atmosphere that was characteristic of life at MOTBC and the creative energy of the congregation to form groups that served community interest and aided in church services. During the first phase of Rev.

²⁰ Floyd J. Calvin, "The Church Beckons the Young Man: Leadership in Large Centers is Praised," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 18, 1930, 11.

²¹ *Mount Olivet Baptist Tabernacle Church*, 1977, page 8.

²² *Ibid.*

Shepard's tenure at MOTBC in the late 1920's and through the Great Depression, the church and its members experienced some financial struggles. Yet under Shepard's leadership, they were able to stay afloat. In one of his initiatives, Shepard secured a partnership with the WPA, so that the basement of the church could be used to provide food and clothing to families. A total of 500 women were employed.²³

In his personal life, Shepard was a husband to Lucille Owen Shepard, and father to Marshall L. Shepard, Jr. and Samuel Augustus Shepard. Both sons followed in their father's footsteps and became ministers. Lucille was an active member at MOTBC and the community. When the family moved from Harlem to Philadelphia, she pursued her education at Temple University.

In addition to his ministry, Shepard is also remembered for his political career as a member of the Democratic Party. That he pursued a political career in the first place, speaks to the fact that religion and politics were connected pursuits for Shepard. For Shepard, his Baptist faith informed his political approach. He pushed to end discrimination against the black community and to provide equal opportunities for all. Despite what resistance and obstacles he would have faced as a black candidate running for office in the 1930s-50s, Shepard prevailed. He was voted to the Pennsylvania State Legislature in 1934, 1936, and again in 1940. Following suit, in 1936 he was the first African American to deliver the opening invocation at the National Democratic Presidential Convention in Philadelphia, though a representative from South Carolina walked out in protest as soon as he began his address. It was during this period that Rev. Shepard "was Chairman of the Foreign Mission Board, Board of Trustees of the International Japan Christian University, Delegate at the Baptist World Alliance which was held in Copenhagen, Denmark. "²⁴

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.



Figure 20. Black Democratic Party Leaders of Philadelphia, with former Governor George Earle. Standing: Samuel Holmes, J. Austin Norris, and Rev. Marshall Lorenzo Shepard. Sitting: Merce Lewis, Governor Earle, and Crystal Bird Fauset, March, 1940. Source: Charles Blockson Collection, Temple University Libraries



Figure 21. Photograph of Rev. Marshall Shepard being sworn in as DC Recorder of Deeds, October 1944 Harris & Ewing photo, Star Collection, DC Public Library; (c) The Washington Post. Source: Found online. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/131635569@N05/30762194842/in/photostream/>

Additionally, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Shepard to the position of Recorder of Deeds in Washington D.C. in September 1944. But Shepard soon returned back to his home in Philadelphia, first as a Commissioner of Deeds in Philadelphia, then as a City Councilman in 1951. He held this position on the City Council until his death. During these three decades, Shepard was sought after for public speaking engagements throughout the nation.²⁵ Being politically involved was an essential aspect of Shepard's commitment to defending freedom and democracy for black Americans. Many of his colleagues in the Church and across the nation took a similar political involvement alongside their religious careers. Among them included Bishop L.H. King,

²⁵ Ibid, 9.

Bishop R.C. Ransom, Bishop A. J. Carey, Dr. Sandy Rice, Dr. M.A. Talley, and Rev. Adam Clayton Powell. Shepard was particularly successful as an elected official, but he was also one of a number African American ministers who took politics seriously “not for the filthy lucre which the average politician expects but to do their part in helping the oppressed and especially to relieve the Negroes of the unjust burdens opposed upon them.”²⁶



Figure 22. Photograph of Marshall Shepard, Sr, Harry Truman, and J. Austin Norris, 1948. Visiting Philadelphia for the National Democratic Convention in 1948, President Harry S. Truman (1884-1972) shakes hands with Attorney J. Austin Norris (1893-1976), the first African American member of the Board of Revision of Taxes and leader of Philadelphia's 7th Ward. Standing next to President Truman on the left is Rev. Marshall L. Shepard, Sr. (1899-1967), Pastor of Mt. Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church and the first African American elected Councilman-at-Large in Philadelphia. Rev. Shepard also served as Recorder of Deeds in Philadelphia and Washington, DC. Source: Temple University Libraries: <https://digital.library.temple.edu/digital/collection/p15037coll17/id/897>

²⁶ Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, Inc., 1992) 298.

Scholars have suggested that the political involvement of black ministers in the twentieth century was important to the congregants of their churches as well.

In the same way that the biblical prophet's message revealed the divine plan in temporal space, a small cadre of Great Migration preachers felt similarly entrusted to act as God's instruments. Their rhetorical strategies broadcast an outlook of divine intentionality to numerous exigencies of the interwar period, and in poetic fashion preachers named their reality to transform it. To mediate change within their congregations and communities, these preachers took seriously the immediate sociohistorical situation of listeners in their theological reflections. Their critical awareness of the racial prejudice Absalom Jones and other Black Methodists experienced when barred from the first-floor benches they normally used in the worship service at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church differed only by time and space. And when looking forward, the prophetic preaching tradition that flowered within northern Black congregations during the Great Migration must be seen as the fount from which Boston University clerics Martin Luther King Jr. and Samuel Dewitt Proctor imbibed.²⁷

As Kenyatta Gilbert argues above, the cultural tradition of preaching in northern Black Congregations during the Great Migration was highly integrated during the period of the Great Migration. Preachers who carved such visible and influential careers as Rev. Marshall Shepard formed the basis of a legacy that continued to develop in the work and activism of black Christian such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) and Samuel Dewitt Proctor. Most notably, MLK was a friend of Shepard's and thus directly affected by his life and work. A photograph from the Temple University Archives shows MLK on a visit to MOTBC next to Rev. Shepard, Sr. and shaking hands with Rev. Shepard, Jr. to his left. Behind them, the original stained glass windows of the MOTBC main sanctuary are on full display.

²⁷ Gilbert, 5.

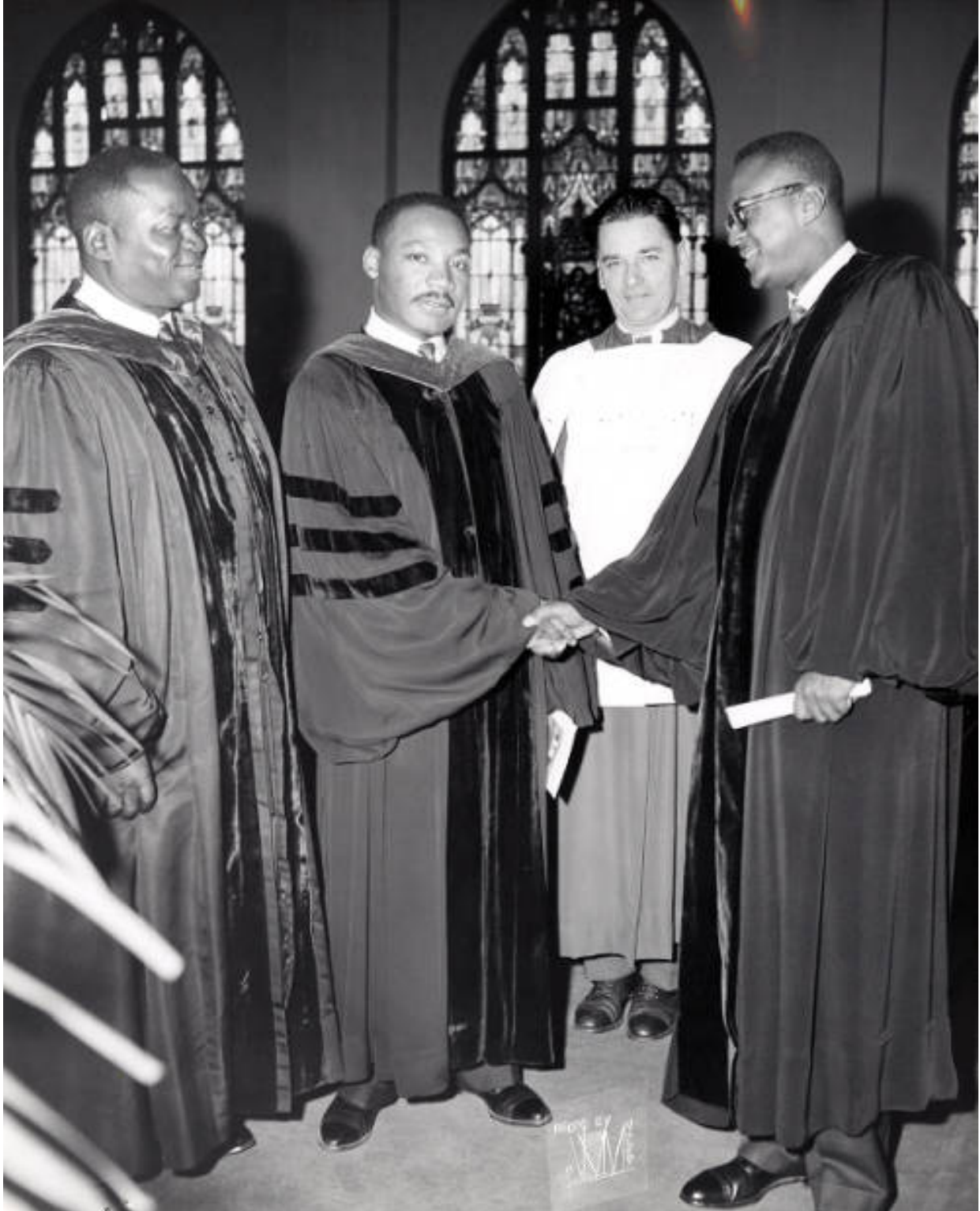


Figure 23. Source Temple University Libraries, the Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection. Source: For access to the original or a high resolution reproduction, and for permission to publish, please contact Temple University Libraries, the Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection (blockson@temple.edu; 215-204-6632).

Following the news of Rev. Shepard's death, MLK sent the following telegram to Mrs. Marshall Shepard, Sr. and her two sons, Rev. Marshall Shepard, Jr., and Rev. Samuel Shepard on February 24, 1967.

I am deeply saddened to learn of the death of my dear friend and your distinguished husband and father. His passing comes as a great loss to Philadelphia, the church community and the nation. By all standards of measurement he was one of the greatest leaders of our nation and he carved for himself an imperishable niche in the annals of our history. His life as a minister of the gospel and public servant is one of the glowing epics of our time. The greatest tribute that we, our friends, and you, his family can pay to Marshall Shepherd is to continue the work and the commitment that he so nobly initiated. I know these are difficult moments for you, but I am sure that you can gain consolation from the fact that the life of your husband and father was lived with such creative purpose and fulfillment. I know that in this moment of shattering disappointment you will also gain consolation from your Christian faith which affirms that death is not a period which ends this great sentence [sic.] of life but a comma which punctuates is to more loftier significance. Please know that you have my deepest sympathy and my most fervent prayers. The most profound regret that I have at this time is that a long standing speaking commitment here in Los Angeles, Cal. tomorrow afternoon makes it impossible for me to attend the funeral.

MLK Jr²⁸

It would be impossible to justly summarize the vast success and ambition of Rev. Marshall Shepard in his career as a minister and politician. Following the death of Rev. Hester, MOTBC's founding pastor, Rev. Shepard secured MOTBC's future as a great beacon of faith, hope, and community in West Philadelphia. His leadership supported the black community with the resources for job training, employment, and education.²⁹ Furthermore, Shepard's religious beliefs and respect for human beings inspired him to take political action as an elected official with a reputation against all forms of

²⁸ Telegram from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to Mrs. Marshall Shepherd, Sr., Rev. Marshall Shepherd, Jr., and Rev. Samuel Shepherd 1967 February 24. 1.1.0.42420, Morehouse College Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection: and Samuel Shepard: Subseries 1.1:Correspondence: General S-Z, 0000-0000-0000-0131d. Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlantic University Center, Inc. http://findingaids.auctr.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/172219.

²⁹ Floyd J. Calvin, "The Church Beckons the Young Man: Leadership in Large Centers is Praised," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 18, 1930, 11.

discrimination. MOTBC is crucial to the life and legacy of Rev. Marshall L. Shepard, because this is the church that Shepard spent his entire career as a head pastor.

Rev. Marshall Shepard's son, Rev. Shepard, Jr. became head pastor of MOTBC after his father's death. Rev. Shepard Jr. honored the spirit of his father's leadership as president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC). Social justice and transformation were the central goals of the convention. Shepherd's involvement indicates the legacy of activism at MOTBC and the church's commitment to political initiatives in the name of civil rights.³⁰ However, the social engagement prominent at MOTBC fell into decline during the 1980s at the same time the congregation saw a decrease in membership. Despite the decline, the strong legacy of social engagement at MOTBC also illustrates the capacity for religious organizations to advocate for political issues and encourage activism among congregants.

Though he wasn't directly politically involved as a secular elected official like his father, Rev. Shepard Jr. still demonstrated his commitment to the security of civil rights and equality. For instance, in 1971, he opened a 'Green for Mayor' Headquarters and served as president of the Green For Mayor Committee in support of Congressman William J. Green.³¹ Additionally, in 1989, MOTBC was actively involved in protesting the wage disparity present at Fast Food restaurants in West Philadelphia. Article in the *Philadelphia Tribune* shows a photo of Rev. Shepard Jr. holding a sign at the demonstration to boycott the two fast food restaurants.³² Shepard was outspoken about the University of Pennsylvania's historically glaring neglect for the surrounding community and the effects of campus expansion. He urged the university to partner with its neighbors and support the local economy and infrastructure in a substantial way.³³

³⁰ Tiffany Sherrell Murphy, "Establishing Foundations for Social Engagement: moving from Conservation to Awareness at Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church," Ph.D. Dissertation/Ministry Project, (Palmer Theological Seminary, 2016), 66.

³¹ "Green for Mayor Headquarters Opened by Group Headed by Mt. Olivet Pastor," *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 12, 1971, 3.

³² Kendall Wilson, "Clergy continues assaults on eateries: Wage disparity at issue," *Philadelphia Tribune*, December 8, 1989, 1A.

³³ "Local Minister says Penn Disregards its Community"

https://www.thedp.com/article/1996/11/local_minister_says_penn_disregards_its_community

Notable Guests and Speakers

One of the many ways MOTBC was able to respond to the membership's commitment to social justice was by inviting prominent speakers and activists to speak to the congregation. The following lists acknowledges some of the notable people who have spoken at MOTBC.³⁴ Though this is by no means a comprehensive list, it illustrates the reputation and attraction of MOTBC to leaders and activists who visited from all over the country. Not all the dates are known, so the list loosely follows chronological order.

J.A. Rogers (1880-1996): famed Jamaican- American author and historian, J.A. Rogers (1880-1966) addressed the congregation in 1931. Roger is known for titles such as *From Superman to Man* (1917) and *100 Amazing Facts about the Negro* (1934). He dedicated his life to exposing racism in historical writing and through his own writing, produced anti-racist accounts of history.

Hon. Oscar DePriest (1871-1951): Congressman from Illinois and first African American man to be elected to Congress in the 20th century.

Dr. Mordecai W. Johnson (1890-1976), president of Howard University.

³⁴ One sermon that was left out of this list was the 1926 Annual Sermon to the R.C.O. (Robert Curtis Ogden Association) is held at Mount Olivet. The event featured chorus and orchestral performances from the R.C.O. This event is historically significant because it represents the complicated and patronizing relationship between Wanamaker's Department Store and its African American employee base. R.C.O. formed as a group within Wanamaker's, under the leadership of Philadelphian Robert C. Ogden (who oversaw advertising and marketing for Wannamaker's). R.O.C. was in theory conceived "to celebrate the achievements of the store's black employees; for example, the association awarded annual prizes for achievement in musical composition and performance."

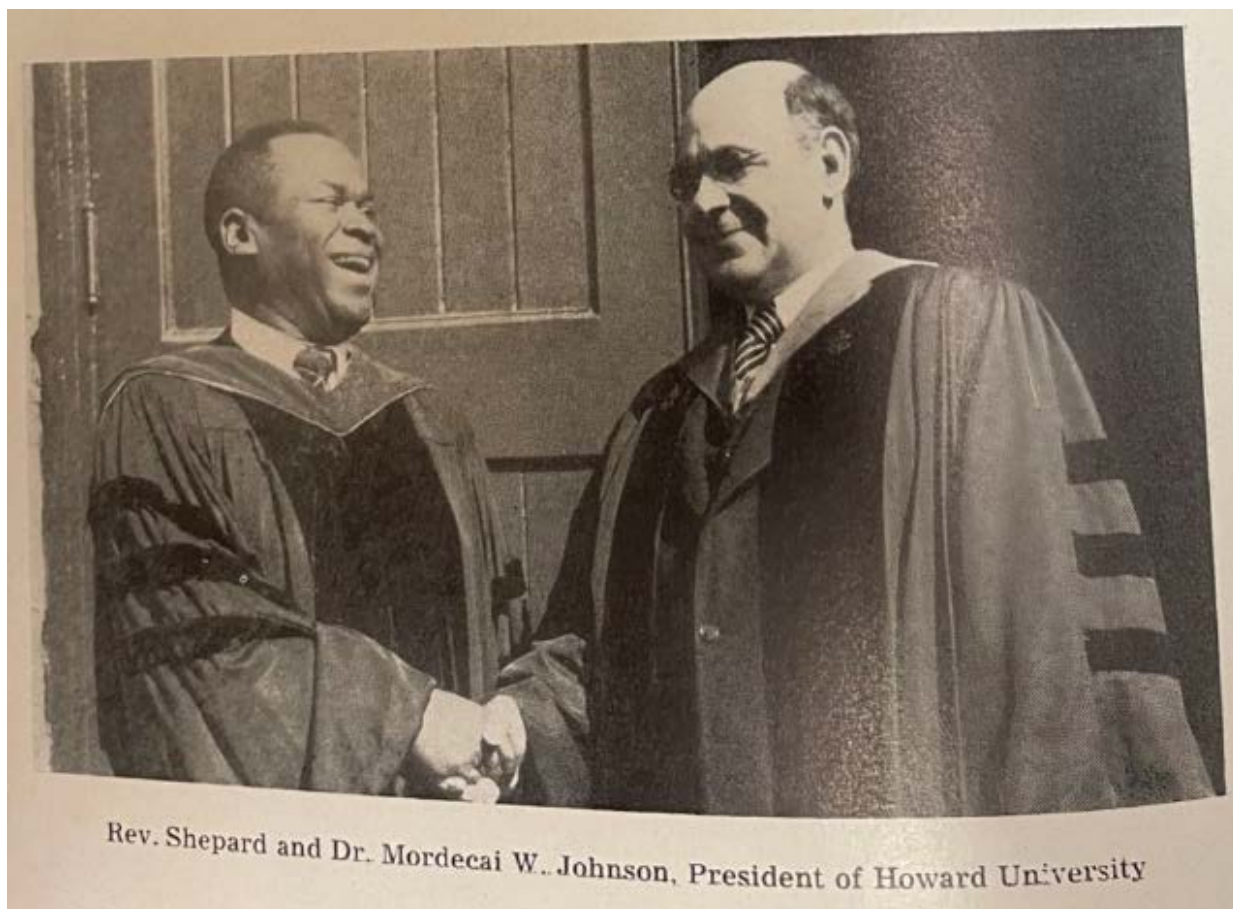


Figure 24. Rev. Shepard and Dr. Mordecai W. Johnson. Date Unknown. Source: *Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church*, 1977 page 56.

Dr. James E. Shepard (1875-1947), pharmacist and founder president of the North Carolina College for Negroes (now called North Carolina Central University).

Dr. Benjamin Browley (1882-1939), author and educator at Shaw University, Raleigh, North Carolina³⁵

Adam Clayton Powell, pastor at Abyssinian Baptist Church of New York hosted the rededication of the main auditorium in 1949³⁶

Mayor Joseph S. Clark (1901-1990), 90th Mayor of Philadelphia and a reformist policymaker. In 1954, Clark addressed an audience of more than 1,200 people at MOTBC³⁷

³⁵ Floyd J. Calvin, "The Church Beckons the Young Man: Leadership in Large Centers is Praised," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 18, 1930, 11.

³⁶ The record of the rededication does not clarify if it was Powell Sr. or Jr. who conducted the rededication, as both were affiliated with the Abyssinian Baptist Church of New York.

³⁷ "Mt. Olivet Jammed to Hear Mayor," *Philadelphia Tribune*, February 9, 1954, 2.

Mrs. Sarah Patton Boyle (1906-1994), social activist and relative of General George S. Patton. In 1958 she spoke to a packed church on Women's Day services about "her impressions of the current racial strife in the south."³⁸ She formerly served as the president of the Council of Social Action.

Music and the Arts at Mount Olivet

Rev. Napper Hester, the church's founding pastor, dreamed of attaining a beautiful pipe organ for the sanctuary since the congregation formed. Music and the arts have always been central to religious and social life at Mount Olivet Tabernacle Church. The most important figure in the history of MOTBC's music program is the musician, choral director, and educator Samuel R. Cosby, Jr. (1917-2015). Cosby was an internationally acclaimed and accomplished musician and teacher. He began playing the organ at MOTBC when he was 16 and became the church's official organist when he graduated high school while he studied for his B.S. in Public School Teaching at the State Teacher's College. Later he went on to study music at West Chester University and Julliard, where he earned degrees in both music education and voice. When he returned to Philadelphia he taught music in the Philadelphia Public School System. His talents in music and education led him to travel the world on various exchange programs and sabbaticals. Known as a demanding though kind teacher, Cosby promoted musical excellence and was much loved by the musical community in Philadelphia.

³⁸ "Relative Of Gen. Patton Speaker At Mt. Olivet," *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 25, 1958, 3.



Figure 25. Photograph of Samuel R. Cosby Jr. published in his obituary, Ayana Jones, "Samuel R. Cosby Jr., 97, Retired Music Teacher," *The Philadelphia Tribune*, May 12, 2015. https://www.phillytrib.com/obituaries/samuel-r-cosby-jr-97-retired-music-teacher/article_793d4179-303f-5b69-9738-141f44b9b293.html



Figure 26. Photograph of the Junior Choir. Source: Scanned from *Mount Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church*, 1977, page 29.

MOTBC and the history of its Möller Pipe Organ

In 1927, the MOTBC congregation purchased a brand-new organ from the M.P. Möller Organ Company. It had always been the dream of the church's founding pastor, Rev. Napper H. Hester (1859-1925), to install a grand pipe organ in the main sanctuary of the church. Though he didn't live to see the pipe organ in person, the congregation chose the highest quality organ on the market. The same organ remains in the sanctuary today, one of MOTBC's prized possessions and a significant historical link to the musical tradition at the church and the values of MOTBC's original congregation.

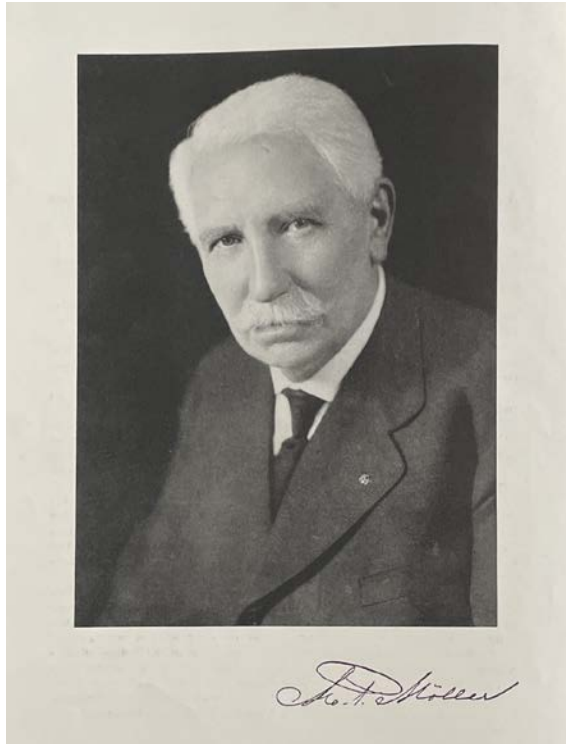


Figure 27. Mathias Peter Möller, founder and president of M.P. Möller Pipe Organ Co. Source: M.P. Möller Pipe Organs Brochure (1933), page 4. Accessed online: <https://pipeorgandatabase.org/builder/3914> .

Mathias Peter Möller (1854-1937) established his company, M.P. Möller Organ Co., in Hagerstown, Maryland in 1880. An immigrant from Denmark, Möller worked briefly in furniture design when he first arrived in the United States in 1872 before transitioning into an impressive apprenticeship at the then-largest pipe organ company in the United States, Derrick-Felgemaker Company. Before opening M.P. Möller Organ Co., Möller famously assembled an organ for the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia that garnered high praise.³⁹ When he eventually ventured to start a business of his own, Möller made a successful career for himself. His pipe organ company quickly gained its remarkable reputation for exceptional craftsmanship and unmatched quality. Möller organs are characterized by simplicity in design, mechanical perfection, and Möller's improved wind chest. Due to his musical ingenuity in craft and design, Susquehanna University conferred an honorary Doctorate of Music degree upon Möller in 1925.⁴⁰

³⁹ "M.P. Möller 1854-1937," *M.P. Möller Pipe Organs* (Brochure), 3. Accessed online <https://pipeorgandatabase.org/builder/3914>.

⁴⁰ "M.P. Möller 1854-1937," *M.P. Möller Pipe Organs*, 3.

Soon after in 1928, Christian X, King of Denmark, recognized Möller's achievements as well, conferring upon him knightship as "Knight or Ridder of the Ancient Order of Dannebrog."⁴¹

In addition to MOTBC's specialized organ, Möller assembled pipe organs for notable churches and institutions across the country. Some of the company's most high profile commissions included the organ at the Cadet Chapel, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, NY; First Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois; Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church, Tampa, Florida; Calvary Baptist Church, Washington, D.C.; and Second Presbyterian Church in Newark, New Jersey.

The specialized Möller organ was a significant and celebrated purchase for MOTBC. It cost the congregation a grand sum of \$10,000 and the introduction of the pipe in the main auditorium completely changed the tone of Sunday worship.⁴² The organ purchase spoke to the continued development of a rich musical tradition at MOTBC. In 1927, MOTBC was still a young church, at least in its architectural presence at 647 N. 42nd Street. They had just welcomed a new pastor and were adjusting to their new building. The installation of such an impressive organ served both to legitimize the music program at MOTBC and to signal that MOTBC had moved in, with a bright future ahead. What started out as a small dream of a few willing congregants in 1901, had finally become a magnificent completed church with a majestic new pipe organ to match. The church membership was growing as migrants continued to move from southern states looking for work and new lives in the north. Mount Olivet opened its doors, proud of the building they called home.

Over the years, MOTBC has continued to carefully maintain its Möller organ. The pipe organ was cleaned and modified in 1968, costing a total of \$45,000. Modifications included a new three-manual console, a 16 trumpet, a three-rank mixture, and a

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² In 2022, the pipe organ would have cost approximately \$157,515.25. Calculated with an online inflation calculator at <https://www.saving.org/inflation/inflation.php?amount=10,000&year=1927>.

principal chorus.⁴³ The restoration in 1988 was even more involved. MOTBC sent the organ to the Moller Company in Hagerstown for “complete rebuilding and restoration” which took over a year and included the replacement of the four-manual console.⁴⁴ The restoration was quite an upgrade and enlargement of the original 1927 organ. A summary of the organ structure and sound was described in *The Philadelphia Tribune* in 1989,

The present organ boasts of 1,439 wood and metal speaking pipes ranging in size from one inch by one-quarter to 16 feet by 12 inches. In addition the organ includes a 20-note chime division and a 48-note acoustic harp. There are 3.2 miles of wire connecting the console with the two organ chambers, housing, and pipes. The organ is played from a console consisting of 61 key manuals, on 32-key pedal clavier, 12 general combination pistons, 30 manual combination pistons, 12 toe studs, three expression pedals, 41 drawknobs, and 30 cauplers.⁴⁵

In the same article, the organ is referred to as the “Cosby pipe organ,” as MOTBC named it after their accomplished music director and organist, Samuel Cosby:

The Cosby pipe organ includes string sounds (soft), flue sounds (quiet), diapason sounds (loud), and reed sounds (very loud). All of the foregoing are legitimate pipe organ sounds intended for worship service. The Cosby is not a “one-man-orchestra band” or imitative instrument. All of its sounds are created by pipes or by natural means. There are no electronic creations, or stereo loudspeakers. The pipes sound as a result of pressurized air supplied by a motor located on the basement level. The new four-manual console provides for 15 additional ranks, which the congregation hopes will be added in the near future.⁴⁶

⁴³ “Mount Olivet Tabernacle dedicates recently restored Moller pipe organ,” *The Philadelphia Tribune*, May 12, 1989, 2-C.

⁴⁴ “Mount Olivet Tabernacle dedicates recently restored Moller pipe organ,” *The Philadelphia Tribune*, May 12, 1989, 2-C.

⁴⁵ “Mount Olivet Tabernacle dedicates recently restored Moller pipe organ,” *The Philadelphia Tribune*, May 12, 1989, 2-C.

⁴⁶ “Mount Olivet Tabernacle dedicates recently restored Moller pipe organ,” *The Philadelphia Tribune*, May 12, 1989, 2-C.



Figure 28. MOTBC Main Auditorium facing northeast with Stained glass and organ. Signs on pews show social distancing measures taken by the MOTBC congregation during the pandemic. Photo taken January 2022. Source: Corey Loftus.

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