

**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: 2435 N. College Avenue

Postal code: 19121

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: Dixie Hummingbird Headquarters

Current/Common Name: _____

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: Residence

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 1951 to 1984

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: 1879

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: unknown

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: unknown

Original owner: John Joseph and Elizabeth P. File

Other significant persons: James B. Davis

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 Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia Date 11/29/2023

Name with Title Laurie Wexler, consultant Email advocacy@preservationalliance.com

Street Address 1608 Walnut Street, Suite 1702 Telephone 215-546-1146

City, State, and Postal Code Philadelphia, PA 19103

Nominator is is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: 12/6/2023

Correct-Complete Incorrect-Incomplete Date: 12/12/2023

Date of Notice Issuance: 12/15/2023

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: Demetrius A McCain

Address: 2435 N College Ave

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19121

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: 1/17/2024

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: 2/9/2024

Date of Final Action: 2/9/2024

Designated Rejected

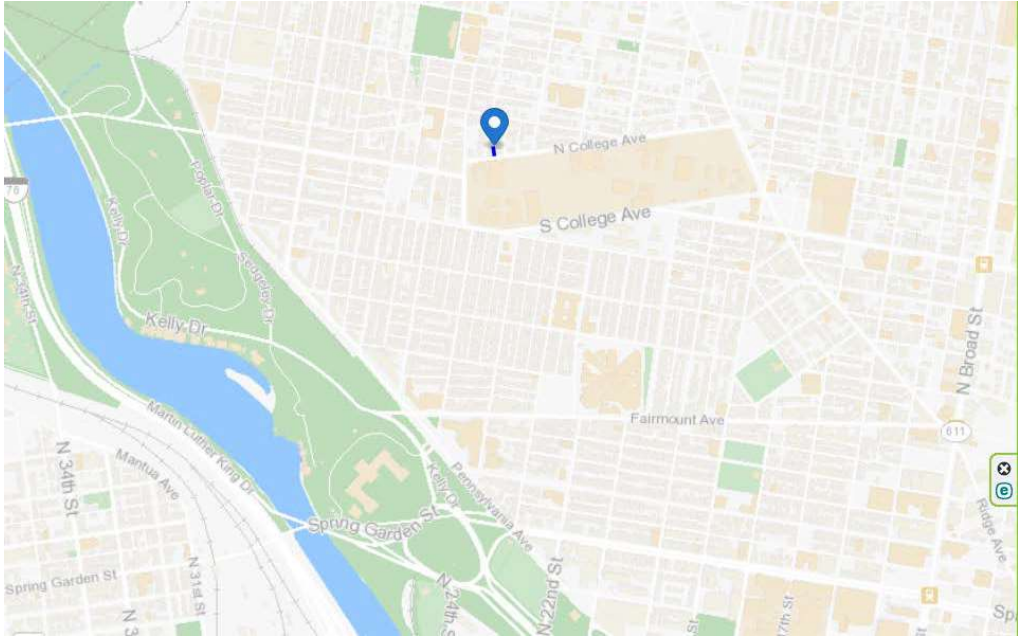


Figure 2. The location of 2435 N. College Avenue in the City of Philadelphia. Source: Atlas.

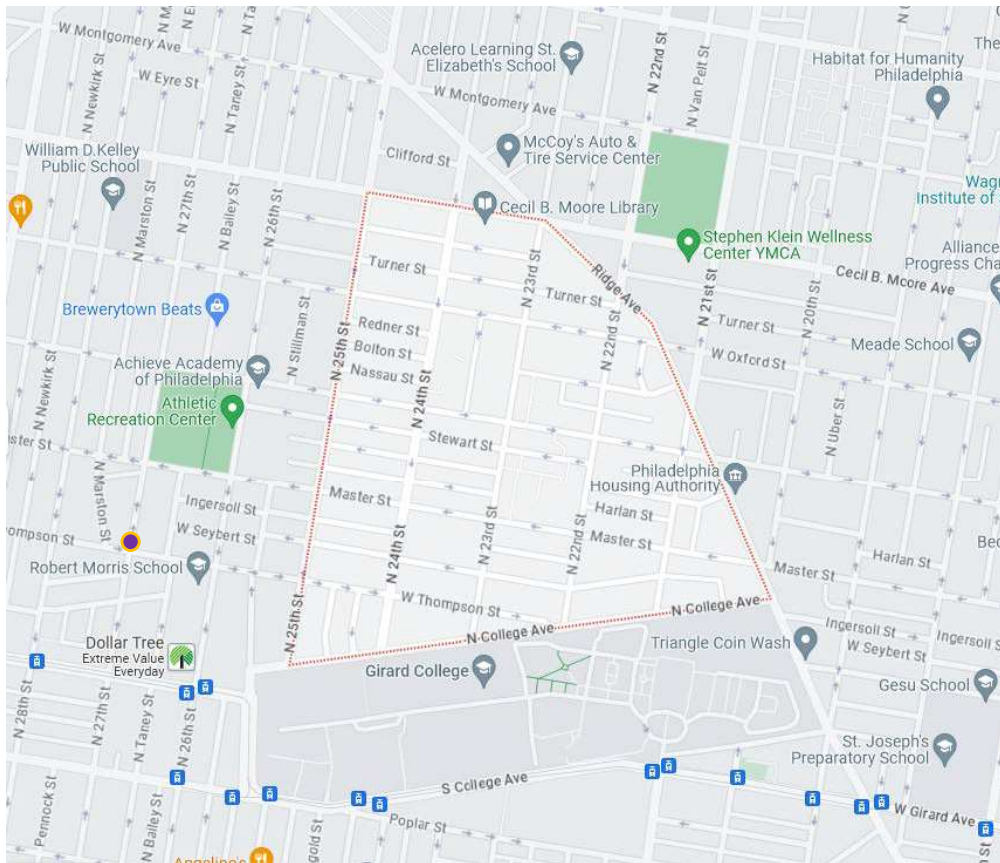


Figure 3. The location of 2435 N. College Avenue in the Sharswood neighborhood of North Philadelphia. Source: Google Maps.

6. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION



Figure 4. 2435 N. College Avenue situated in its rowhouse block. Source: Google Earth, June 6, 2022

The property at 2435 N. College Avenue is located in the 2400 block of N. College Avenue between Taylor and 25th Streets in the North Philadelphia West neighborhood of Sharswood near the border of Brewerytown, which begins at 25th Street. The blocks around the property include rowhouses with 2, 3, and 4 stories interspersed with a few empty lots. Located in the 29th Ward, the property is located 82' West of Taylor Street, runs 16' along North College Avenue, and has a depth of 75' northward toward Thompson Street. The lot is 1200 square feet, and the home is 2280 square feet. The integrity of the visible exterior is good, and the condition is listed as above average in property records.

The rowhouses on this block, including 2435, uniformly have three stories and two bays. The zero-lot-line home was built by 1879¹ and presents in the Workingman's Rowhouse style, later made famous by E. Allen Wilson, but is also regarded as a Federal or Georgian Town House.² The façade is constructed of Wissahickon schist in a random pattern.

The facade features white-painted, one-over-one sash windows on each of the three floors. They are topped with a rounded, arched lintel of schist with a center keystone and feature a masonry sill. The two windows on the first floor are narrower and longer than those on the second and third floors. The basement level also has two small windows with masonry lintels. The entryway has four stairs to the door with a railing on the left-hand side. The front door is a modern insert with a fanlight. It is topped with a modern, rectangular transom light. A simple siding cornice tops the façade.

¹ Sale from Grantor Thomas Meehan to Grantee Henry L. Fox, Deed Abstract (Lots 10, 29, 30,33, 34, 35) April 12, 1879, City of Philadelphia, PA, City of Philadelphia Department of Records, www.phila-records.com.

² Philadelphia Rowhouse Manual, Philadelphia, City of Philadelphia et al, 2008.



Figure 5. Façade. Credit: Laurie Wexler



Figure 6. Rear elevation. Credit: Laurie Wexler

The rear elevation presents with a cream-colored stucco. A white-painted door and window are on the first floor, a siding-clad cantilevered bay window is on the second floor, and a one-over-one sash window is centered above it on the third floor. Visible from the rear, the western side elevation is red brick. Barely visible are this elevation's one-over-one sash window placements. It appears there are two on the first floor, one on the second floor, and two on the third floor. The rear elevation affronts a narrow, inaccessible alley.



Figure 7. Aerial view of 2435 N. College Avenue and surrounding neighborhood looking north, Source: Google Earth, June 6, 2022.

7. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The property at 2435 N. College Avenue in Sharswood was the home of Dixie Hummingbirds founder James B. Davis and his family and served as the headquarters for the group. It is historically significant and should be listed individually on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The property satisfies Criteria for Designation A and J as delineated in Section 14-1004(1)(a) of the Philadelphia Code.

Under Criteria A, the property “is associated with the life of a person significant in the past,” as the home of a pre-eminent founder of an iconic and impactful American gospel music group.

Under Criteria J, the property “exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community” by demonstrating the centrality of gospel music and the Dixie Hummingbirds, specifically, to the music landscape of Philadelphia.

Period of Significance

The period of significance is from 1951, the year James B. Davis purchased 2435 N. College, to the year of his retirement in 1984.

Property History

By 1875, William Howell purchased a large parcel of land that bordered North College Avenue to the South, 25th Street to the North, Thompson Street to the North, and 24th Street to the East. The property lay at the perimeter of the northwest corner of Girard College. By 1877, the

property was subdivided into three portions, with 2435 N. College contained within the portion bordering 25th Street on the West, North College Avenue to the South, Thompson Street to the North, and Taylor Street to the East. By September 1877, this portion was further divided into 44 plots, with eight of the plots facing North College Avenue on the South side of the boundary. In May 1878, except for the two corner plots at the corners of N. College and Taylor and N. College and 25th Street, the other six plots sold together. An undated newspaper clipping attached to the Deed Abstract for April 12, 1879, indicates that the six dwellings were “3 story brick houses, with stone fronts”.³ An 1895 map confirms that, at the time, all the dwellings on North College Avenue facing Girard College from 24th to 25th Streets, including 2435, had stone facades.⁴

Subsequently, September 1920 was the first time the property was sold as an independent unit and sold thereafter, in 1924 and 1948.⁵ On October 15, 1951, James B. Davis and Hortense Davis purchased 2435 N. College.⁶ In 2011, the Estate of James Davis sold the property to 2435 N. College Ave LLC/Netter Holdings LLC. In 2021, the property was sold to Demetrius A. McCain.⁷



Figures 8 and 9. The area bordering North College Avenue to the South, 25th Street to the North, Thompson Street to the North, and 24th Street to the East was an empty lot at the time of sale to William Howell in 1875 and full of individual rowhouses by 1895. Source: 1875 Phila. Atlas, G.M. Hopkins, 1895 Phila. Atlas, G.W. Bromley.

³ Sale from Grantor Thomas Meehan to Grantee Henry L. Fox, Deed Abstract (Lots 10, 29, 30,33, 34, 35) April 12, 1879, City of Philadelphia Department of Records.

⁴ G.W. Bromley, 1895 Philadelphia Atlas, Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network.

⁵ Sale from Grantor John Joseph File and Elizabeth P. File to Grantee Sarah Lampert, Deed Abstract (Lot 34), September 13, 1920, City of Philadelphia, PA, Department of Records; Sale from Grantor Jacob Lambert and Sarah his wife to Grantee Frank Blum widower, Deed Abstract (Lot 34), June 28, 1924; Sale from Grantor Daisy Blum, etc. et al to Grantee Daisy Blum and Frank Blum, Deed Abstract (Lot 34), August 11, 1948,

⁶ Sale from Grantor Frank Blum to Grantee James B. Davis and Hortense, Deed Abstract (Lot 34), October 15, 1951

⁷ Sale from Grantor Netter Holdings LLC to Grantee Demetrius A. McCain, Office of Property Assessment.

Neighborhood History

Sharswood began rapidly developing when the Ridge Avenue Passenger Railroad arrived in 1859.⁸ The city grid followed suit by the 1860s, and churches and housing filled the newly-platted landscape.⁹ An East-West transportation line was developed along Girard Avenue in 1894, and by 1895, most of the neighborhood was dense with rowhouse development, most of which housed working-class residents.¹⁰ This was when Philadelphia earned its nickname, “Workshop of the World,” and the neighborhood transitioned from the pastoral landscape of country villas to the urbanized landscape of dense rowhouse development.¹¹

During WWI, the population demographic shifted as African Americans migrated to Philadelphia for industrial jobs spurred by the war as part of the “Great Migration.”¹² The 1934 J.M. Brewer insurance map of Philadelphia shows the neighborhood as primarily African American.¹³ From the 1940s-70s, Sharswood established itself as a hub for Black culture, and, with the increasing Black population, struggles within the local and national civil rights story came to the fore. During this time, artists like Dox Thrash, who lived at 2340 Cecil B. Moore Avenue, and entertainers like Pearl Bailey, who lived at 1946 N 23rd Street, provided an outlet for people while disinvestment and prejudice swept the city.¹⁴ These injustices were later addressed by leaders like Leon Sullivan, Cecil B. Moore, Raymond Pace Alexander, and Martin Luther King.¹⁵ These same leaders led the fight, which resulted in the desegregation of Girard College in 1968.¹⁶

From the 1950s on, Sharswood became a pivotal neighborhood in the fight for civil rights.¹⁷ Racial tensions between the community and police culminated in 1964 when a confrontation between police officers and a woman set in motion three days of riots to which many attribute the downfall of the neighborhood as it resulted in 774 arrests, \$3 million in damages, and 339 injured.¹⁸ Many businesses along Columbia and Ridge Avenues, two commercial corridors, could not recover or decided not to for fear of further violence. Sources of employment for middle and working-class families began shuttering. While white middle-class families were able to flee to the suburbs because of “redlining” and other discriminatory practices, many African Americans were left behind.¹⁹ In the 1960s, Sharswood lost over twenty percent of its

⁸ Sharswood-Blumberg, A Preservation Approach to Revitalizing a Neighborhood, PennDesign Historic Preservation Studio, December 2015, Weitzman School of Design, University of Pennsylvania

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ J.M. Brewer Insurance Map, Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network.

¹⁴ Sharswood-Blumberg, A Preservation Approach to Revitalizing a Neighborhood, PennDesign Historic Preservation Studio, December 2015, Weitzman School of Design, University of Pennsylvania.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Andrea Haley, A Sharswood Story, Dox Thrash House, www.doxthrashhouse.wordpress.com.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

population.²⁰ Prior to this period, it was experiencing consistent growth, though the Philadelphia Planning Commission declared the area blighted in 1948.²¹

In Sharswood, a vibrant arts and jazz scene grew to rival that of Harlem, becoming Philadelphia's epicenter for African American arts, culture, and leadership.²² Civic organizations that supported the advancement of African Americans, such as the Pyramid Club at 1517 Girard Avenue, were established where artists including Dox Thrash, Duke Ellington, and Marian Anderson performed.²³ Ridge Avenue was a hub for jazz music and dance during the great African American migration north.²⁴ Bigotry in American society remained a formidable obstacle, but jazz music and the culture it produced offered all Americans an opportunity to interact.²⁵ White patrons routinely frequented Sharswood's jazz clubs to listen to African American performers who were often restricted from performing elsewhere.²⁶

Dixie Hummingbirds History

The Dixie Hummingbirds (Birds') was one of the longest-lasting and most influential groups in gospel music.²⁷ African American gospel music is a form of euphoric, rhythmic, spiritual music rooted in the solo and responsive church singing of the African American South. Its development coincided with -- and is germane to -- the development of rhythm and blues.²⁸ During the 1930s, gospel music emerged from the coalescing of three types of musical activity: a) the hymn style of Charles Albert Tindley (1851-1933) a Philadelphia minister who composed hymns based on Negro spirituals, adding instrumental accompaniments, improvisation and "bluesified" third and seventh intervals; b) the minimalist, solo-sung "rural Gospel" tunes that appeared as a counterpart to the rural blues; and c) the uninhibited, exuberant worship style of the Holiness-Pentecostal branch of the Christian church.²⁹

The Birds got their start when James B. Davis (born June 6, 1916, in Greenville, S.C.) formed the Junior Boys out of his junior choir in 1928.³⁰ The group's longevity to the present day has spanned nearly the entire history of the genre.³¹ In large part, it can be attributed to the uncompromisingly tight ship run by Davis, which demanded the unfailing integrity of the

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Sharswood-Blumberg, A Preservation Approach to Revitalizing a Neighborhood, PennDesign Historic Preservation Studio, December 2015, Weitzman School of Design, University of Pennsylvania.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ben Sisario, "Leader of Longtime Gospel Group Is Dead." The New York Times, April 28, 2007..

²⁸ African American Gospel, The Library of Congress Celebrates the Songs of America, Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/collections/

²⁹ Ibid; Jack McCarthy, The Rich History of Black Gospel in Philadelphia, Gospel Roots of Rock and Soul, February 26, 2019, WXPB-FM

³⁰ Marovich, Bob. Texas Gospel: Devil Can't Harm a Praying Man, Journal of Gospel Music, June 8, 2010, The Black Gospel Blog, 2023,

³¹ Ben Sisario, "Leader of Longtime Gospel Group Is Dead." The New York Times, April 28, 2007.

group's musicians at all times.³² As the founding member, James B. Davis was the acknowledged leader of the group until his retirement in 1984. The Birds began their career during the late '30s as a jubilee-styled act, joined in 1938 by Davis's close friend Barney Park, 13-year-old baritone phenom Ira Tucker, and bass singer extraordinaire Willie Bobo, a former member of the Heavenly Gospel Singers. They made their recorded debut a year later on the Decca label, where they issued several hit singles, including "Soon Will Be Done with the Troubles of This World," "Little Wooden Church," and "Joshua Journeyed to Jericho."³³

A pioneering force behind the evolution of the modern gospel quartet sound, the Birds were among the longest-lived and most successful groups of their era, renowned for their imaginative arrangements, progressive harmonies, and all-around versatility. They earned almost universal recognition as the greatest Southern quartet of their generation, and their influence spread not only over the world of spiritual music but also inspired diverse secular artists ranging from Jackie Wilson to Bobby "Blue" Bland to the Temptations.³⁴

Criterion J

The development of Black gospel music and the distinct musical styles it birthed was central to the Great Migration of Blacks to Philadelphia in the early 1900s. As the city and region's African American population grew and black churches flourished, Philadelphia served as the home base for many of the music's biggest stars who settled in the city during the mid-twentieth century "golden age" of gospel.³⁵ Within Philadelphia, gospel's foothold was in areas with significant African American populations, primarily North Philadelphia and also South and West Philadelphia. Beginning on the rural Southern church circuit, when the Birds arrived in Philadelphia in 1942, they cut their teeth primarily at churches and schools. At the same time, their harmonies continued to grow more sophisticated and their virtuosity did not go unnoticed by audiences, and throughout the mid-'40s — an acknowledged golden age of a cappella quartet singing — the group regularly played to packed houses throughout the south.³⁶

Indeed, the single most important factor that drew the Hummingbirds to Philadelphia was the promise of steady work.³⁷ In the city, North Philly was the most attractive neighborhood given its affordability, culture, and the intense focus and passion for Black gospel music brought from the south. Prior to purchasing 2435 N. College, James Davis lived next door at 2433 N. College.³⁸ He lived and worked on this small strip of N. College from prior to 1950 to his passing in 2007 at the age of 90. From 1951, 2435 N. College Avenue also served as the group's headquarters, where they practiced and conducted their business when not performing in person, on radio,

³² Jerry Zolten, *Great God A'Mighty*, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 41.

³³ Jay Warner and Jason Ankeny, *The Dixie Hummingbirds: 2000 Inductee*, The Vocal Group Hall of Fame, 2023.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Jack McCarthy, *The Rich History of Black Gospel in Philadelphia*, *Gospel Roots of Rock and Soul*, February 26, 2019, WXPB-FM.

³⁶ *Dixie Hummingbirds, Inducted 1988 Walk of Fame*, Philadelphia Music Alliance

³⁷ Jerry Zolten, *Great God A'Mighty*, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 87.

³⁸ National Archives at Washington, DC; Washington, D.C.; Seventeenth Census of the United States, 1950; Year: 1950; Census Place: Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Roll: 2505; Page: 11; Enumeration District: 51-1286

or, later, on television. They quickly capitalized on the advent of radio as the preeminent medium through which Americans enjoyed music and entertainment. And “[i]n the mid-1940s, Hummingbirds singer Ira Tucker (1925-2008) was the first black person to stage events as well as gospel music at the Metropolitan Opera House (Met) at Broad and Poplar Streets in North Philadelphia.³⁹ Featuring the Birds and other local and national gospel acts, these successful shows made “The Met” an important gospel venue.

“Mindful of the growing population of African Americans newly arrived from the South, WCAU (the ratings leader in Philadelphia in 1942) and others aired Black gospel music on Sunday mornings that harkened back to Southern church roots.”⁴⁰ Within one month of arriving in Philly, the Birds had a regular schedule on WCAU, and within a little more than one year, they catapulted to national recognition on the radio.⁴¹ On WCAU, the Birds performed as the Jericho Boys and the Swanee Quintet and performed in packed stadiums without the benefit of a hit record.⁴² In 1945, the group recorded for Apollo and then Gotham.⁴³

5. The Dixie Hummingbirds over WCAU. Photograph from the Philadelphia Afro-American, October 10, 1942. Wilson Baker in front; from left, Ira Tucker, James Davis, Barney Parks, William Henry.



Figure 10. Source: Great God A’Mighty, Oxford University Press, photo 6. <https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780190071493/photograph/6-10/>

³⁹ Jerry Zolten, Great God A’Mighty, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 134.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 87.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 90.

⁴² Jay Warner and Jason Ankeny, The Dixie Hummingbirds: 2000 Inductee, The Vocal Group Hall of Fame, 2023,

⁴³ Ibid.

The Birds' music and the group's members themselves were an integral part of church services where they would participate and, thus, became a fixture of the culture of Black churches in North Philadelphia and throughout Philadelphia and the region. During a performance, they would go into the congregation or audience to include attendees in their music. Loyal audiences would also regularly listen to local gospel radio stations and attend concerts at major venues such as the Robin Hood Dell and Temple University's Liacouras Center.⁴⁴

Thus, the Dixie Hummingbirds' unique sound was essential to the burgeoning musical infrastructure of North Philadelphia's Black community and, more widely, for spiritual, emotional, and communal sustenance. This point underscores the importance of the Birds' gospel music for Blacks who experienced the Great Migration and their descendants. The Birds and other gospel groups enabled Blacks from the South to set down new roots while bringing their identities, culture, and best memories of the past with them through their music. Moreover, the tenacity, stability, and talent of the Birds, no doubt, provided notable examples for young and old in the Sharswood and North Philly communities to which they were so dedicated. Davis' insistence on respectable behavior, no alcohol, no drugs, immaculate dress, punctuality, and reliability was widely known. This expectation is also part of their legacy.

Criteria A

Radio was the linchpin for the Birds' success. Before arriving in Philadelphia and spending months on the road, they also utilized radio performances throughout the southeast and up to Boston to gain a following and increase networking in the music world.⁴⁵ In addition to live performances, radio remained key to establishing and expanding a fanbase of Black and White listeners. Advantageous to the Birds was that the radio removed the focus on skin color.⁴⁶ Moreover, station owners cared only that listeners stayed tuned, heard the advertisements, and bought the products.⁴⁷

Soon after, the Birds were introduced to John Hammond, producer of 1930s concerts at Carnegie Hall in New York City focusing on African American performance style "From Spirituals to Swing."⁴⁸ The Carnegie concerts incentivized the establishment of New York City's first integrated club, Café Society, where the Birds began to perform regularly. Club manager Barney Josephson sought to showcase Black talent in the style of European cabarets as well as defy the pretensions of the rich while treating Black and White customers equally. Depending on Hammond as his "unofficial musical director," Josephson helped launch careers of now-legendary African Americans as well as popularize gospel groups such as the Dixie Hummingbirds among White audiences.⁴⁹ Within the next few years, however, the group

⁴⁴ Jack McCarthy, *The Rich History of Black Gospel in Philadelphia*, Gospel Roots of Rock and Soul, February 26, 2019, WXPB-FM

⁴⁵ Jerry Zolten, *Great God A'Mighty*, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 37-38.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93; Jack McCarthy, *The Rich History of Black Gospel in Philadelphia*, Gospel Roots of Rock and Soul, February 26, 2019, WXPB-FM

⁴⁹ Café Society, October 8, 2022, Wikipedia.

returned to religious music and settled on a core of performers that consisted of Ira Tucker, Davis, William Bobo, Beachey Thompson, and James Walker, with Howard Carroll on electric guitar. The Birds chose to remain true to music that celebrated the Lord and promoted spiritual well-being.⁵⁰

The Dixie Hummingbirds are probably the best known of the African American gospel quartets, having performed for over 50 years throughout America and Europe.⁵¹ They hit their stride in 1952, recording gospel standards like “Jesus Walked the Water” and “I Just Can’t Help It” for Peacock.⁵² [Whereas], “Rhythm & blues” was “Billboard” magazine’s designation for the music of Black America in 1953, a niche market served by small independent labels cropping up across the nation, the top R&B hit of the year was Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton’s “Hound Dog” from Peacock Records, an independent started a few years earlier in Houston.⁵³ The record’s success opened the door to airplay for other artists on the label, including the Dixie Hummingbirds.⁵⁴ The Hummingbirds’ first two Peacock singles had been released a year prior with moderate success. In 1953, “Let’s Go Out to the Programs” sold over half a million copies, an exceptional tally in any genre then.⁵⁵ The song effectively launched the Dixie Hummingbirds into the upper echelons of gospel, a stature that the group enjoyed throughout their decades-long career.⁵⁶ In 1966, the Hummingbirds performed at the Apollo Theater and the Newport Folk Festival and were an instant sensation.⁵⁷

Seven years later, in 1973, they backed Paul Simon on his gospel-flavored composition “Loves Me Like a Rock.” The record sold a million copies and reached number two in the late summer. The group declined an offer to tour with Simon. “We knew that was instant money, instant money, big money,” Davis said on the 1998 “Nightline” segment. “But we were booked in five states. And as far as I was concerned, our word was our word.”⁵⁸ Soon after, the group recorded its own version, earning a Grammy award in 1974 for Best Soul Gospel Performance in “Loves Me Like a Rock.” In 1978, Ebony Magazine named them “The World’s Greatest Gospel Group.”⁵⁹

They inspired countless R&B and soul singers, from Jackie Wilson to James Brown, Clyde McPhatter to Bobby “Blue” Bland, Steve Wonder, Hank Ballard, Paul Simon, The Temptations, and Deniece Williams.⁶⁰ The Birds’ discography includes 25 albums, 56 singles and extended

⁵⁰ Jerry Zolten, *Great God A’Mighty*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

⁵¹ Jay Warner and Jason Ankeny, *The Dixie Hummingbirds: 2000 Inductee, The Vocal Group Hall of Fame*, 2023

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ 1953 recording of “Let’s Go Out to the Programs”, added to the 2011 National Registry on May 23, 2012, Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Jay Warner and Jason Ankeny, *The Dixie Hummingbirds: 2000 Inductee, The Vocal Group Hall of Fame*, 2023

⁵⁹ Jocelyn Stewart, James B. Davis, 90: founded Dixie Hummingbirds, April 29, 2007, *Los Angeles Times*

⁶⁰ Jay Warner and Jason Ankeny, *The Dixie Hummingbirds: 2000 Inductee, The Vocal Group Hall of Fame*, 2023

play soundtracks, 181 compilations, 183 appearances, and 100 releases.⁶¹ The Birds received Grammy nominations in 1994 and 2000 for Best Traditional Soul Gospel and, in 2007, Nominee for Best Traditional Gospel Album. In 1999, they received the Grammy Hall of Fame Award for *Amazing Grace/My Record Will Be There*. In 1988, they were selected to join the Philadelphia Hall of Fame. In 2000, the Dixie Hummingbirds were inducted into the Vocal Group Hall of Fame and awarded a National Heritage Fellowship by the National Endowment for the Arts.⁶² In 2003, an award-winning book was written about their 75-year career span, *Great God A'Mighty! The Dixie Hummingbirds: Celebrating the Rise of Soul Gospel Music*. And in February 2008, a feature-length documentary/concert film was released, *The Dixie Hummingbirds: Eighty Years Young*.⁶³



Figure 10. *The Legendary Dixie Hummingbirds*, 859 N 15th Street, Philadelphia, Credit: Laurie Wexler

As part of the Mural Arts Philadelphia Collection, a mural entitled *The Legendary Dixie Hummingbirds* was painted by artist Cliff Eubanks on the exterior wall at 859 N 15th Street in Philadelphia in 2005.⁶⁴ It is located in North Philadelphia along 15th Street by the famous Metropolitan Opera House (now the Met Philadelphia) where the Dixie Hummingbirds often performed. The mural description continues that “...[t]he Dixie Hummingbirds are among the most successful groups of their era; renowned for their imaginative arrangements, their progressive harmonies, and their all-around versatility. Over the years, they have earned the almost universal recognition as one of the greatest gospel groups ever.”⁶⁵

⁶¹ The Dixie Hummingbirds, Discogs.

⁶² Otis Alexander, Dixie Hummingbirds, www.blackpast.org, December 18, 2021

⁶³ The Dixie Hummingbirds: 80 Years Young, Jeff Scheftel, 2008, Oliver Entertainment.

⁶⁴ The Legendary Dixie Hummingbirds, Mural Arts Philadelphia, Cliff Eubanks, 2005, Public Art Archive, 2023

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

In 2018, the Dixie Hummingbirds celebrated their 90th anniversary and, at a press conference at the African American Museum in Philadelphia, announced a yearlong celebration of live concerts, a reissue of their 2011 album, *Gospel Praise Songs – Powered by Gospel*, a number of celebratory and tribute events, and a 2019 United States touring stage production, *From Streetlights to Spotlight*.⁶⁶ The year-long celebration began on August 29, 2018, when the Dixie Hummingbirds performed a live concert from World Cafe Live in Philadelphia as part of the Gospel Roots of Rock and Soul project.⁶⁷



Figure 11. Source: The Historical Marker Database, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 2017

The original Dixie Hummingbirds were together for 35 years. The first to leave the ensemble was group founder James Davis, who retired in 1984 after 56 years on the circuit. He was replaced by the Rev. Joseph Williams, who sang with them from 1983 to 1987. Williams, who had sung in a gospel group called the Sons of the Birds, graduated to the Dixie Hummingbirds at age 45. Willie Bobo died in 1976. Ira Tucker and James Walker were still featured as of the late 1980s. Ira Tucker passed away in 2008, the longest-living of the original group. The Birds continued to perform with the sons of the Birds' and other musicians. The ongoing pride and gratitude toward the Dixie Hummingbirds, especially in Philadelphia's Black community, remains heartfelt and palpable.

Conclusion

⁶⁶ Jack McCarthy, *The Rich History of Black Gospel in Philadelphia*, Gospel Roots of Rock and Soul, February 26, 2019, WXPB-FM / The Trustees of The University of Pennsylvania, 2018, www.xpngospelroots.org, (accessed October 8, 2023).Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

In summary, the property at 2435 N. College Avenue, known as the Dixie Hummingbirds Headquarters, is historically significant and should be listed individually on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The property satisfies Criterion for Designation A as delineated in Section 14- 1004(1)(a) of the Philadelphia Code; the property "... has significant interest or value as part of the development of heritage and cultural characteristics of the City of Philadelphia and the Nation...[and] is associated with the life of a person significant in the past. James B. Davis and the Dixie Hummingbirds are hailed, respectively, as the greatest manager and "the world's greatest gospel group."⁶⁸ Likewise, the property satisfies Criterion for Designation J as it "[e]xemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community." The Birds were not only an immense pride of Sharswood, North Philadelphia, and the larger City, but they were steadfast in their commitment and passion for carrying and communicating their unique Black Gospel music northward with and for those who experienced the Great Migration and their next generations.

8. Major Sources Cited

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