

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: **34-36 E. Sharpnack Street**

Postal code: **19119**

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: **Grace Baptist Church of Germantown**

Current Name: **Sanctuary Church of God in Christ**

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: Religious

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): **1896 to 1968**

Date(s) of construction: **1898; 1914-15; 1919; 1922; and 1923**

Architects: **Unknown**

Builders: **T.P. Austin (1898); and Henry P. Schneider (1923)**

Original owners: **Grace Baptist Church of Germantown**

Significant person: **Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Sr.; Mary E. Henderson Wright; and Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, 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: **East Mt. Airy Neighbors**

Author: **Oscar Beisert, Architectural Historian**

Date: **11 September 2024**

Address: **1315 Walnut Street**
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

EMAIL: **KEEPER@KEEPINGPHILADELPHIA.ORG**

Nominator ☐ is ☒ is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: 12 September 2024

☒ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete

Date: 12 September 2024

Date of Notice Issuance: 12 September 2024

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: Sanctuary Church of God in Christ

Address: 34-36 E. Sharpnack Street

City: Philadelphia

State: PA

Postal Code: 19119

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: October 16, 2024

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: November 8, 2024 and May 9, 2025

Date of Final Action: ~~November 8, 2024~~ May 9, 2025

☒ Designated ☐ Rejected

12/7/18

NOMINATION
FOR THE
PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES



Figure 1. The former Grace Baptist Church, 34-36 E. Sharpnack Street, Primary (Northwest) and Side (Southwest) Elevations. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2023.

GRACE BAPTIST CHURCH
ERECTED BETWEEN CA. 1896 AND 1922-23

34-36 E. SHARPNACK STREET
MT. AIRY
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

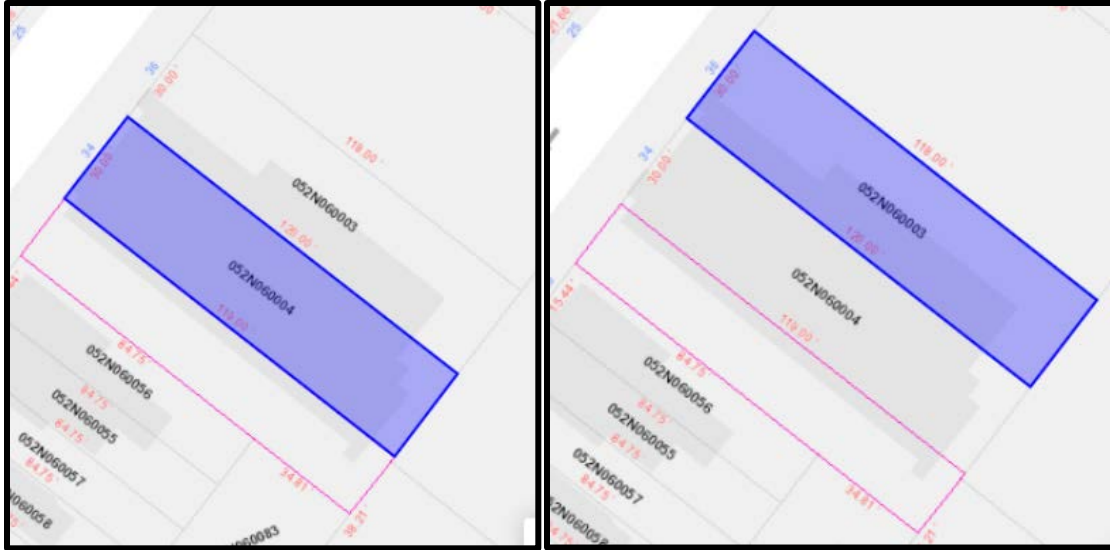


Figure 2. The boundary for the proposed designation is delineated in blue. Source: Atlas, City of Philadelphia.

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The boundary for the proposed designation is as follows:

34 E. Sharpnack Street

ALL THAT CERTAIN lot or piece of ground with the buildings and improvements thereon erected, SITUATE on the Southeasterly side of Sharpnack Street. BEGINNING at a stake set for a corner by the Northeasterly side of an alley Twenty feet in width being at the distance of Two hundred and Forty-two feet Northeastwardly from the Northeasterly side of Germantown Avenue. Thence extending along said side of said Sharpnack Street Northeastwardly Thirty feet and extending in length or depth of that width between parallel lines at right angles therewith Southeastwardly One hundred and Nineteen feet more or less.

36 E. Sharpnack Street

ALL THAT CERTAIN lot or piece of ground SITUATE on the Southeasterly side of Sharpnack Street at a distance of Thirty feet Northeastwardly from the Northeasterly side of Twenty-foot-wide alley, being about Two hundred and seventy-four feet, ten inches Northeastwardly from the Northeast side of Germantown Avenue. CONTAINING in front or breadth on said Sharpnack Street Thirty feet and extending of that width in length or depth southeastwardly between parallel lines at right angles to said Sharpnack Street One hundred and Twenty feet.



Figure 3. Grace Baptist Church, 34-36 E. Sharpnack Street, Primary (Northwest) Elevations. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2024.

6. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The former Grace Baptist Church is a house of worship that stands at 34-36 E. Sharpnack Street in the Mt. Airy neighborhood of Philadelphia. The site includes a four-part building, encompassing the main block at 34 E. Sharpnack; a rear component to the main block; a one-story annex at 36 E. Sharpnack Street; and a one-story addition at the rear of the one-story annex. To the southwest of the main block is a driveway that extends to the southeast from E. Sharpnack Street to the rear of the property. There is a small yard space to the northeast of the one-story annex at 36 E. Sharpnack Street.

Set back from E. Sharpnack Street in place of a yard, the main block is a one-story building of Wissahickon Schist construction, featuring a front-gable roof at 34 E. Sharpnack Street. The main block's primary (northwest) elevation is three bays in width, which is characterized by openings with Gothic arches delineated by Wissahickon schist voussoirs. The front façade features a central entrance with replacement double doors and a transom above. Replacement steps provide access to this doorway. Flanking the central opening, are single, like-size windows, featuring stained glass, which likely dates to the period of significance. The front gable features a plaque at the center that has been covered. The gable is delineated by a simple cornice. A cornerstone is located at the west corner of the primary (northwest) elevation, which reads as follows:

1915
Rev. P. H. Hughes
Pastor



Figure 4. Grace Baptist Church, 34-36 E. Sharpnack Street, Primary (Northwest) and Side (Southwest) Elevations. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2024.

The side (southwest) elevation extends along the alley and is a one-story wall of Wissahickon Schist. This elevation features eight window openings that are defined by Gothic arches. The employment of Wissahickon Schist voussoirs continues in this elevation to form the arched openings. The cornice also extends along this elevation. The rear component of the main block is part of the above description; however, it has a slightly lower roofline, which begins after the sixth opening along the side (southwest) elevation. Three vents are located along each side of the front gable roof.



Figure 5. The cornerstone of Grace Baptist Church, 34-36 E. Sharpnack Street, Primary (Northwest) Elevation. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2024.



Figure 6. The One-Story Wing of Grace Baptist Church, 34-36 E. Sharpnack Street. Source: Oscar Beisert, 2024.

Elevated from the street within a small yard and a retaining wall of Wissahickon Schist, the one-story annex at 36 E. Sharpnack Street appears to be of masonry construction finished in stucco. The foundation of the building is comprised of pointed Wissahickon Schist. Steps lead from the street through the yard near the center of the property at 36 E. Sharpnack Street. The primary (northwest) elevation is two bays wide, featuring a door and a window. A short flight of concrete steps provides access to the front door. A simple cornice extends along the primary (northwest) elevation. The building is served by a flat roof. Two windows are within the side (northeast) elevation of the one-story annex. A one-story masonry addition extends from the rear of the annex, featuring a pedestrian door within its primary (northwest) elevation. This building too features a flat roof.



Figure 7. Top: Looking south at the subject property, showing both the primary (northwest) and the side (southwest) elevations. Source: Pictometry, Atlas, City of Philadelphia. Figure 8. Bottom: Looking east at the subject property, showing the side (southwest) elevation. Source: Pictometry, Atlas, City of Philadelphia.

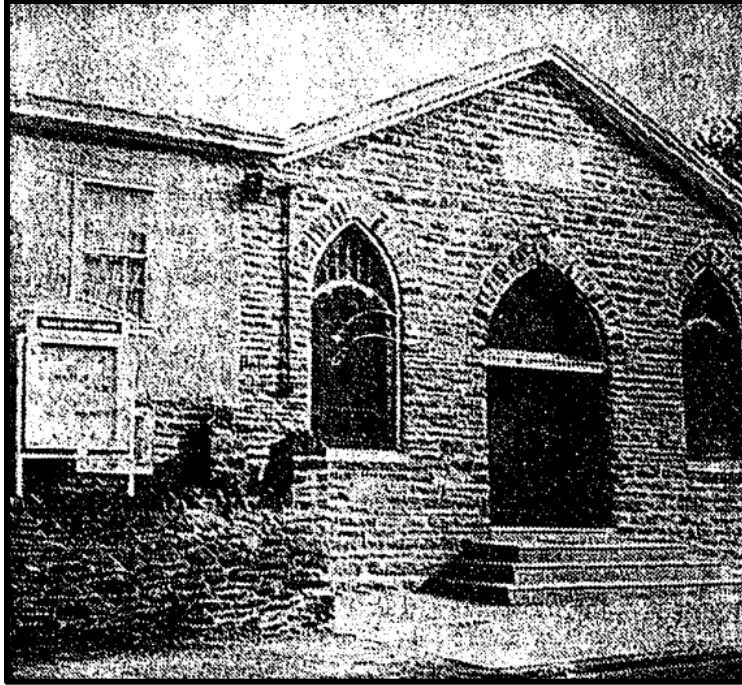


Figure 9. Grace Baptist Church in 1951. Source: *Philadelphia Tribune*, 11 September 1951, 9.

7. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Grace Baptist Church at 34-36 E. Sharpnack Street in the Mt. Airy neighborhood of Philadelphia is a significant historic resource that merits designation by the Philadelphia Historical Commission and inclusion on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The building satisfies the following Criteria for Designation 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 a person significant in the past; and*
- j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social, and historical heritage of the community.*

The period of significance for the subject property dates to the time of the congregation's initial occupation in 1896 until they moved to a new facility in 1968.

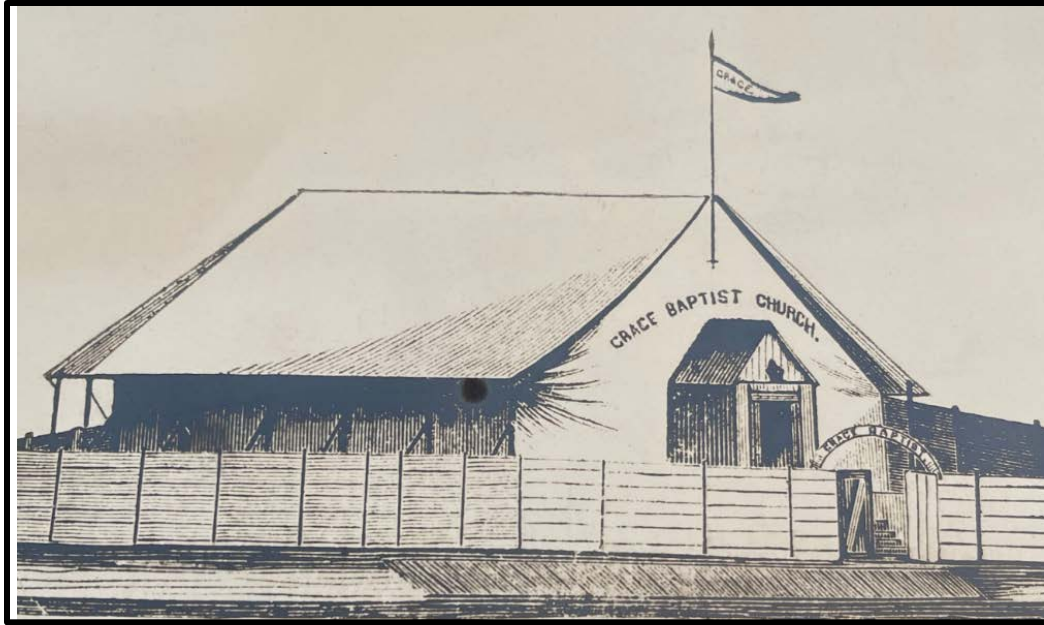


Figure 10. A drawing of the tent that Grace Baptist originally occupied on the subject property, as imagined by Pat Henning. Source: Gift of Pat Henning to the Germantown Historical Society in May 1986.

CRITERION J

Grace Baptist Church at 34-36 E. Sharpnack Street represents a period of history in Mt. Airy and Germantown, when E. Sharpnack Street was a center of the African American community, specifically between 1896 and 1968. Grace Baptist Church has been associated with E. Sharpnack Street since June 1896; at which time the congregation was officially formed by “a council of the Baptist Churches of the Twenty-Second ward.”¹ It is unclear when exactly the property was purchased by the congregation prior 1914, but it may have been owned by straw purchasers or congregation members. The congregation officially purchased the subject property at 34 E. Sharpnack Street in 1914.² Built in phases between 1896 and 1922-23, the subject building served the congregation until 1968, when a larger, modern church building was completed at 25 W. Johnson Street.³ During their time in the subject building, Grace Baptist Church ministered to the African Baptists of Mt. Airy and Germantown, while serving the larger Black community. This was a period when the African Baptist church was a cultural and social center of the Black community. As time went on, Grace Baptist Church grew from a small congregation to become an important, influential leader of the Mt. Airy and Germantown communities, satisfying Criterion J.

While Grace Baptist Church's early history is largely undocumented, tradition has it that the congregation's origins can be traced to ca.1888, when a modest group of African Baptists were worshipping “in a room on the Keyser Estate” at Germantown. After a time, the nascent congregation outgrew these quarters and purportedly rented a community space in Vernon Hall. This led to the formation of the “Grace Mission,” which would ultimately become “Grace African

¹ *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 20 June 1896, 2.

² Deed: William H. Lewis to Alexander Campbell, Harry Spencer, and John H. Lee, Trustees of Grace Baptist Church of Germantown, 17 April 1914, Philadelphia Deed Book E.L.T., No. 365, 196. Source: City Archives of Philadelphia (CAP).

³ 1915 Cornerstone of the Subject Building; and *Grace Baptist Church of Germantown 1892-1992*. (Philadelphia: Grace Baptist Church, 1992).

Baptist Church” and, eventually, “Grace Baptist Church of Germantown.”⁴ The first pastor appears to have been Rev. T. P. Wilson, who served from 1892 to 1894. Following Rev. Wilson, Rev. John A. Read/Reed served the congregation from 1894 to 1902.⁵ During this time, the congregation appears to have worshiped in “Rausenberger’s Hall,” also known as the “Bee Hive Market” at the corner of Germantown Avenue and W. Johnson Street. By June 1896, “a council of the Baptist Churches of the Twenty-second ward” unanimously voted to “officially declare” Grace Baptist Church a formal “religious body.” It was about this time that the officers of the church secured a site on E. Sharpnack Street, where a building would be “remodeled and adapted for church purposes.”⁶ Local lore tells us that the congregation first worshiped in a tent (Figure 10). On August 16, 1898, a permit was filed for the construction of a 15’ by 28’ stone addition that was to be completed by T. P. Austin, contractor (Figure 11).⁷ Between 1902 and 1904, Rev. Wingfield led the congregation, followed by L. D. Robinson from 1904 to 1910. During Rev. Robinson’s tenure, there were purportedly 150 members. Departments of the congregation included a Sunday School; a B. Y. P. U.; a Ladies’ Auxiliary, a Missionary Society, and a Choir. Officers of the church included L. D. Robinson, Benjamin Hockem, F. Coleman, Mrs. Good, Mrs. Jacob Wall, Professor Taylor, and Robert Moore.⁸

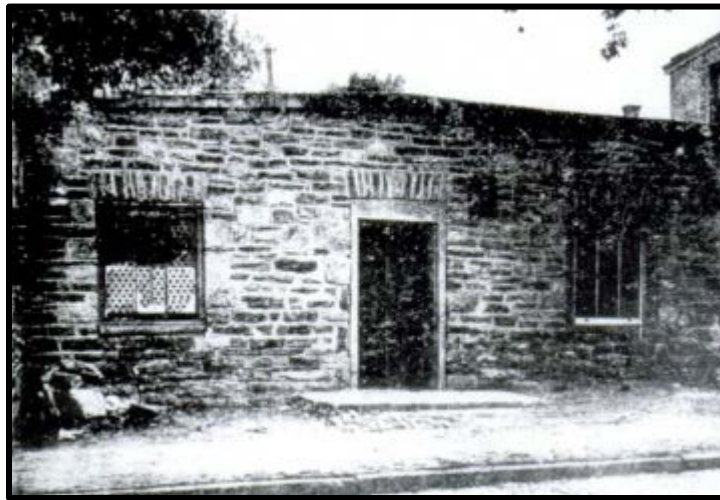


Figure 11. An early component of the subject building at 34 E. Sharpnack Street. Source: Germantown Historical Society.

In January 1910, the subject property was owned by Samuel Lee, one of the Trustees of Grace Baptist Church, at which time it was slated for Sheriff’s Sale.⁹ However, the congregation was able to raise some capital to save their investment. That same year, there was another leadership change with the appointment of Rev. R. L. Lewis, who served until 1912. The congregation

⁴ This information was taken from the website of Grace Baptist Church of Germantown on 28 August 2024. The website purports that the congregation’s second place of worship was in Vernon Hall at Germantown Avenue and Price Street; however, Vernon Hall was located at Germantown Avenue and W. Cheltenham Avenue. The congregation may have worshiped at Vernon Hall or at Parker Hall at the corner of Germantown Avenue and E. Price Street.

⁵ “Swore He Owned Church,” *The Philadelphia Times*, 13 June 1902, 5.

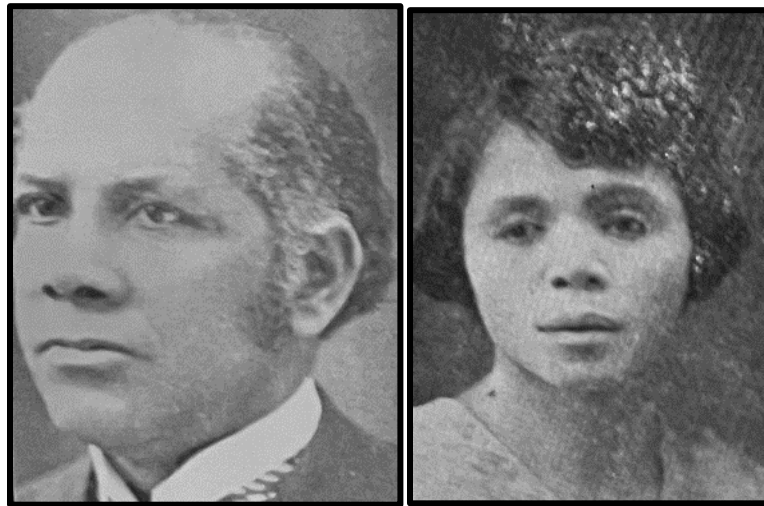
⁶ *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 20 June 1896, 2.

⁷ *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 16 August 1898, 10.

⁸ *The Philadelphia Colored Directory: A Handbook of the Religious, Social, Political, Professional, Business and Other Activities of the Negroes of Philadelphia*. (Philadelphia Colored Directory Company, 1907)

⁹ *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 17 January 1910, 11.

received a great gift in 1912 with the appointment of Rev. Dr. Patrick Henry Hughes (1871-1939/Rev. Dr. Hughes), who would serve in that role until 1938. His wife, Mamie “Mary” Lennox Hughes (1881-1959/Figure 13) would also be an important member of the congregation. No doubt under Rev. Dr. Hughes’ leadership, the Trustees of Grace Baptist petitioned Judge Ralston to authorize a mortgage of \$2,500 for the erection of a new house of worship.¹⁰ This comports with the 1915 cornerstone located within the primary (northwest) elevation of the subject building. By 1919, the building required improvements, including an addition, which was achieved through fundraising.¹¹



Figures 12. and 13. Rev. Patrick H. Hughes and Mrs. Mamie “Mary” Hughes. Source: *Grace Baptist Church of Germantown, 1892-1992*. (Philadelphia: Grace Baptist Church, 1992).

On March 18, 1920, James H. Harrison purchased 36 E. Sharpnack Street, the immediately adjacent parcel, for one dollar from James T. Jackson, which was a transaction no doubt related to Grace Baptist Church.¹² The congregation became subject to an indenture for the property at 36 E. Sharpnack Street on June 21, 1920, from John M. and Ida V. Lee for one dollar, at which time a frame dwelling was situated on the property.¹³ In 1922, Rev. Dr. Hughes commissioned a large, one-story addition (50’ by 95’).¹⁴ The aforementioned mortgage was paid off by September 8, 1923, when John H. and Ida V. Lee deeded the property to Grace Baptist Church.¹⁵ In 1923, the congregation commissioned another one-story stone addition (29’ by 33-1/2’). The project was undertaken by Henry P. Schneider, contractor, who completed the work and provided a mortgage for the congregation of \$17,000.¹⁶

¹⁰ “Church Mortgage Authorized,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 7 November 1915, 12.

¹¹ *Grace Baptist Church of Germantown, 1892-1992*. (Philadelphia: Grace Baptist Church, 1992).

¹² Deed: James T. Jackson to James H. Harrison, 18 March 1920, Philadelphia Deed Book J.M.H., No.769, p. 536. Source: CAP.

¹³ Deed: John M. Lee, et. al. to Grace Baptist Church, Inc., 21 June 1920, Philadelphia Deed Book J.M.H., No. 926, p. 208. Source: CAP.

¹⁴ *The American Contractor*, 25 March 1922, 57.; and

¹⁵ Deed: John M. Lee, et. al. to Grace Baptist Church, Inc., 8 September 1923, Philadelphia Deed Book J.M.H., No. 1731, p. 10. Source: CAP.

¹⁶ *Grace Baptist Church of Germantown, 1892-1992*. (Philadelphia: Grace Baptist Church, 1992).; and *Philadelphia Real Estate Record & Builder’s Guide*, 10 October 1923, 651.

Before the construction of the new structure, Grace Baptist Church of Germantown was granted its official Charter of Incorporation by the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. There were seven trustees listed on the charter: John H. Lee, 66 E. Sharpnack Street; James Johnson, 11 E. Sharpnack Street; Alonza Jennings, 64 E. Sharpnack Street; Austin Harrison, 1802 Van Pelt Street; Felix E. Posey, 62 E. Sharpnack Street; Zeb Johnson, 260 E. Johnson Street; and Alexander Harris, 6822 Musgrave Street.¹⁷ In March 1934, the congregation celebrated Rev. Dr. Hughes' fifty years of service as a pastor.

In 1938, the congregation called Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Sr. to serve as their interim pastor. On May 1, 1939, he was officially installed as pastor. He would greatly expand the congregation and enlarge its capacities. The congregation would continue to worship in the subject building until 1968.

The Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. described his father's church as follows:

[Grace Baptist Church was]“...a small church, it was not a mega church. Maybe we had 200, 250 members, and church was all day, Sunday school at 9:30, 11 o'clock worship service, 3 o'clock afternoon service, 5 o'clock BYPU, 6:30-7 o'clock evening. You could not take off your shirt and tie on a Sunday, cause that's of the devil.”¹⁸

During Rev. Dr. Wright Sr.'s tenure, the membership increased from around 100 in 1938 to 360 by 1951. In September of that year, Grace Baptist Church was featured in the *Philadelphia Tribune* with a photograph of both Rev. Dr. and Dr. Wright, as well as the subject building. The church edifice was described as follows in the caption:

The building of Grace Baptist Church in Germantown, which is steadily rising as one of the community's chief assets.¹⁹

The *Philadelphia Tribune* spoke to Rev. Dr. Wright, Sr.'s success in growing the congregation's membership numbers exponentially. In addition to membership, he championed “paying off the mortgage, the renovation of the church annex, the redecoration of the church, the installation of a concrete floor, and the installation of an oil burner.” In the early fifties, the congregation had the following organizations: the Missionary Society, the deacon's auxiliary, the gospel chorus, the PTA, the Sunday School, the emergency club, the courtesy club, the men's usher board, the ladies' auxiliary, the pulpit aid, the senior choir, the young people's choir, the trustee board, and the deacon board.²⁰ Many of these organizations worked to serve the larger community beyond the congregation, including Girl Scout Troop 937 and many community events.²¹

¹⁷ *Grace Baptist Church of Germantown, 1892-1992*. (Philadelphia: Grace Baptist Church, 1992).

¹⁸ “An Evening with Rev. Jeremiah Wright,” Fresno State's Africana Studies Program and the 2015 Black Popular Culture Lecture Series and Online Research Archive, 2 March 2015. Source: [An Evening with Rev Jeremiah Wright - YouTube](#), Accessed on 5 September 2024.

¹⁹ *Philadelphia Tribune*, 11 September 1951, 9.

²⁰ *Philadelphia Tribune*, 11 September 1951, 9.

²¹ “Germantown Gems,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 18 December 1956, 4.



Figure 14. Top left: The subject building in the ca.1950-60s. Source: *Grace Baptist Church of Germantown, 1892-1992*. (Philadelphia: Grace Baptist Church, 1992). Figure 15. Top right: The wedding of Lilinau Valentine and Rudolph Goffney were wed at Grace Baptist Church in 1952. Source Lilinau V. Goffney. Bottom: The children of Grace Baptist Church in front of the subject building in the 1950s. Source: *Grace Baptist Church of Germantown, 1892-1992*. (Philadelphia: Grace Baptist Church, 1992).

Throughout the 1950s, Rev. Dr. Wright, Sr. prioritized the youth in the community as a major aspect of his ministry and social work, providing a overall sense hope to local African Americans. He said the following to the *Philadelphia Tribune* in February 1958:

There is ample opportunities for leaders, lay and churchman, to begin work now with the youths we have in Germantown, and make it a model of community racial relations for both the State and the Nation.”²²

By this time, the congregation had roughly 300 Sunday School members with more than 200 in attendance each week (Figure 16). They continued to work with scouts, among other organizations that served youth.

In the early 1960s, the congregation purchased a large lot at 25 W. Johnson Street (Figure 17). In the years afterward, there was endless fundraising to support the construction of a much larger,

²² Theodore W. Graham. “Grace Baptist Stresses Youths’ Role In Church,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 1 February 1958, 20.

modern church edifice on the W. Johnson Street property. The building was completed in 1968, after which time the subject property was sold.

The subject building represents a significant period of African American community history in Germantown and Mt. Airy, when Grace Baptist Church grew from a small congregation worshiping in a tent to a powerful force that had national, statewide, and local influence, satisfying Criterion J.



Figure 16. Top: Parishioners of Grace Baptist Church, the subject property, in the 1960s. Figure 17. Bottom: The site of the new Grace Baptist Church at 25 W. Johnson Street. Source: *Grace Baptist Church of Germantown, 1892-1992*. (Philadelphia: Grace Baptist Church, 1992).



Figure 18. Top left: Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Sr. in 1938 when he accepted his position as pastor of Grace Baptist Church. Source: *Philadelphia Tribune*, 14 April 1938, 22. Figure 19. Top middle: Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Sr. in 1958. Source: *Philadelphia Tribune*, 25 February 1958, 8. Figure 20. Top right: Jeremiah A. Wright, Sr. Source: *Grace Baptist Church of Germantown, 1892-1992*. (Philadelphia: Grace Baptist Church, 1992). Figure 21. Bottom: Deacon Marion Taylor, Trustee Austin Harrison, Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Sr., and Trustee Mary A. Wright. Source: *Grace Baptist Church of Germantown, 1892-1992*. (Philadelphia: Grace Baptist Church, 1992).

CRITERION A

Grace Baptist Church at 34-36 E. Sharpnack Street in Mt. Airy is associated with the life of Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Alvesta Wright, Sr. (1909-2001/Rev. Dr. Wright, Sr.), a significant Black pastor who greatly impacted the cultural, religious, and social life of the African American community, especially African Baptists, in the context of Mt. Airy and Germantown. The Rev. Dr. Wright, Sr. (Figures 18, 19, 20, and 21) led the congregation in the subject building from the time of his initial appointment in 1938 until the new W. Johnson Street building was completed for occupancy in 1968.

The Rev. Dr. Wright, Sr. was born on June 20, 1909, to James Allen Wright and Emma Carter, at which time the family owned and worked a tobacco farm in Caroline County, Virginia.²³ While he worked hard on the family's land, he found inspiration in "books and education," walking miles to and from the rural school every day.²⁴ Unlike most Black children of the era, Rev. Dr. Wright, Sr.

²³ 1910 U.S. Census. Source: Ancestry.com.

²⁴ Susan Williams Smith. *Book of Jeremiah: The Life and Ministry of Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2013).

also went to high school. Possibly inspired by his paternal grandfather, a preacher, Wright was drawn to the ministry. After graduating from high school, Wright matriculated at Virginia Union University in Richmond. Due to the cost of college, his university career was approximately seven years, as he would work one semester and take classes the next, eventually earning a Bachelor of Theology (BTh) and a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.). The Rev. Dr. Wright, Sr. immediately entered Seminary at Virginia Union, where he earned his Master of Divinity (MDiv).²⁵ During his time at school, he served as “assistant pastor of St. John Baptist Church, Caroline County, Va., and as pastor of Beulah Baptist Church, Spotsylvania.”²⁶ After graduation, Rev. Dr. Wright, Sr. was invited to serve as “Acting Pastor” for Grace Baptist Church in February 1938, learning about the role through an aunt in Philadelphia.²⁷ His candidacy for “Acting Pastor” was supported by Rev. Dr. Hughes, who was easing into retirement after serving the congregation since 1912. During this trial period, Rev. Dr. Wright, Sr. married Mary Elizabeth Henderson, a “girl from home,” on June 8, 1938, at Surry, Virginia.²⁸ On the recommendation of Rev. Dr. Hughes, the acting position was made permanent, which led to a formal installation on May 1, 1939, with Rev. Dr. Leonard Carr of the Vine Street Baptist Church delivering the sermon.

When Rev. Dr. Wright, Sr. took charge, the congregation was composed of less than 100 souls. During his pastorate, the membership increased dramatically, as did the income of the congregation. This led to increased engagement in foreign missions, home missions, and education. Additionally, Rev. Dr. Wright, Sr. had a strong vision for a “community serving church.” In a discussion of the context of hypocrisy in the Black church, Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. characterized his father in the following manner:

My father was a Black preacher, but my father was “cut from the same cloth” as my maternal grandfather, my uncle John B. Henderson, and my mentor Samuel DeWitt Proctor. My father did not drink. My father did not smoke cigarettes. He did not chase women, and he was a seminary graduate.²⁹

The Great Migration of African Americans from the South to cities like Philadelphia also led to waves of new members in churches of many northern cities.³⁰ The Rev. Dr. Wright, Sr. harnessed these changes in a way that enlarged his ministry, the congregation, and its institutional capacity. In time, the congregation outgrew the subject building and, eventually, a modern church was constructed on W. Johnson Street. The Rev. Dr. also earned his Doctor of Divinity (D.Div.) from the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Mt. Airy. The Rev. Dr. Wright was a significant religious leader in the Germantown and Mt. Airy neighborhoods of Philadelphia, as well as a community leader, who developed one of the most important African Baptist congregations in Northwest Philadelphia, satisfying Criterion A.

²⁵ Susan Williams Smith. *Book of Jeremiah: The Life and Ministry of Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2013).

²⁶ *Philadelphia Tribune*, 14 April 1938, 22.

²⁷ *Grace Baptist Church of Germantown, 1892-1992*. (Philadelphia: Grace Baptist Church, 1992).

²⁸ *Virginia, Marriages, 1785-1940*. Salt Lake City, Utah: FamilySearch, 2013.

²⁹ Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. “Chapter 1. The Continuing Legacy of Samuel DeWitt Proctor,” *Blow the Trumpet in Zion!—Global Vision and Action for the 21st Century Black Church*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 4.

³⁰ Isabel Wilkerson. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration*. (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011).



Figure 22. Top left: Dr. Mary Elizabeth Henderson Wright. Source: *Grace Baptist Church of Germantown, 1892-1992*. (Philadelphia: Grace Baptist Church, 1992). Figure 23. Top right: Dr. Mary Elizabeth Henderson Wright. Source: Instagram. Figure 24. Bottom: Mary Elizabeth Henderson Wright and Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Sr. in 1951. Source: *Philadelphia Tribune*.

CRITERION A

Grace Baptist Church at 34-36 E. Sharpnack Street in Mt. Airy is associated with the life of Dr. Mary Elizabeth Henderson Wright (1916-2005/Dr. Wright), the longtime “First Lady” of the subject congregation, who greatly impacted the cultural, educational, religious, and social life of the African American community, especially African Baptists, in the context of Mt. Airy and Germantown. Professionally, she was a prominent educator, serving as the “First African American teacher...” at the Roosevelt Junior High School, the Germantown High School, and the Philadelphia High School for Girls.³¹ She also completed her Doctorate of Education (EdD) at the University of Pennsylvania at a time when few Black women were afforded the opportunity. These achievements occurred during her time associated with the subject property. Dr. Wright (Figures 22, 23, and 24) served the congregation in the subject building from the time of her husband’s investiture in 1939 until the new W. Johnson Street building was completed for occupancy in 1968.

³¹ “Germantown Teacher On U. of P. Faculty,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 12 September 1967, 16.

Dr. Wright was born Mary Elizabeth Henderson to Rev. Dr. Hamilton Martin Henderson (Rev. Dr. Henderson) and Mamie Hamlet Henderson. Education was always an integral value to the Henderson family. “Kept on the plantation” until the age of twenty, Rev. Dr. Henderson entered the world as a twenty-year-old who then started as an elementary school student, eventually completing his studies at Wayland Seminary. Mamie Hamlet Henderson was formally educated as well, she attended Hartshorn College. Wayland and Harshorn eventually merged to become part of Virginia Union University. Despite his late start, Rev. Dr. Henderson ultimately earned a BTh and a B.A. from Virginia Union. Dr. Wright too would earn her B.A. at Virginia Union, where she met Rev. Dr. Wright, Sr.³² She taught at schools in both Maryland and Virginia.³³ After graduating from Virginia Union in 1938, she married Rev. Dr. Wright, Sr., and moved to Philadelphia to become the “First Lady” of Grace Baptist Church. She would remain a resident of the Quaker City for the rest of her life.



Figure 25. Dr. Mary Henderson Wright, “outstanding educator of Philadelphia,” shaking hands with Rev. D.W. Hoggard, pastor of Mt. Carmel Baptist Church, on Women’s Day in March 1959. Source: “Women’s Day Speaker,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 21 March 1959, 20.

Dr. Wright spent much of her career as an educator for the Philadelphia School District, starting in 1944 at Sulzberger Junior High School. She was the “First African American teacher” at Roosevelt Junior High School, Germantown High School, and Philadelphia High School for Girls from 1961 to 1966. During the academic year of 1958-59, Dr. Wright was a National Science Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania. The University of Pennsylvania also awarded her a teaching fellowship for 1966-67. During the next academic year, Dr. Wright served as a “Master Teacher in Mathematics” at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education.³⁴ After twelve years of study and research, she earned her EdD in 1971. The *Philadelphia Tribune* reported on her doctoral dissertation:

Dr. Wright’s dissertation was a study of the articulation between the mathematics curriculum of the Philadelphia High School for Girls and the mathematics curricula of selected colleges which the girls of that high school attend.³⁵

³² Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. “Chapter 1. The Continuing Legacy of Samuel DeWitt Proctor,” *Blow the Trumpet in Zion!—Global Vision and Action for the 21st Century Black Church*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 4.

³³ “Germantown Teacher On U. of P. Faculty,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 12 September 1967, 16.

³⁴ “Germantown Teacher On U. of P. Faculty,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 12 September 1967, 16.

³⁵ “Article Corrected,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 8 August 1972.

Professionally, she was a member of the Philadelphia Teacher's Association, the National Education Association, and the Association of Mathematics Teachers of Philadelphia and Vicinity. She eventually became the first African American vice principal of Girls High School of Philadelphia in 1968 and, later, Germantown High School.³⁶ She was a regular guest speaker at churches and schools, delivering on topics like "The Power of Black Women."³⁷



Figure 26. Left: Dr. Mary Henderson Wright is honored with a corsage at the Annual Women's Day program on Sunday, March 16, 1958. Source: *Philadelphia Tribune*, 29 March 1958, 7. Figure 27. Right: A feature photo of Dr. Mary Henderson Wright as a guest speaker in 1970. Source: *Philadelphia Tribune*.

Dr. Wright (Figures 25, 26, and 27) was greatly involved in the affairs of Grace Baptist Church, serving as a leader in her own right, while aiding her husband's longtime pastorate. By 1967, she was "engaged in many capacities of Christian Education and Kingdom Building." She was also very involved in local, state, national, and even international affairs of the African Baptist community.³⁸ By the time the congregation moved to W. Johnson Street, she was involved with the "Sunday School, Baptist Training Union, Missionary Circle, Scholarship Committee, the Board of Trustees, the Cathedral Choir, and the Gospel Choir."³⁹

Dr. Wright completed her EdD in ca.1971-72, after the congregation moved to W. Johnson Street, where she was honored by the congregation for her achievement.⁴⁰ The Wrights resided immediately adjacent to the new church in a two-and-one-half-story twin at 29 W. Johnson Street (Demolished).⁴¹

³⁶ "Mrs. Mary Wright Thankful Baptist Woman's Speaker," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 7 March 1970, 26.

³⁷ "Mrs. Wright To Lecture," *The Jersey Journal*, 24 April 1971.

³⁸ "Women's Observance Day," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 4 June 1968, 10.

³⁹ "Article Corrected," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 8 August 1972.

⁴⁰ Eustace Gay. "Grace Baptist of Germantown Honors 1st Lady," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 8 August 1972.

⁴¹ "Article Corrected," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 8 August 1972.

Dr. Mary Henderson Wright was a significant Black woman of the past in Philadelphia, and the subject building represents a major focal point of her life between 1938 and 1968, satisfying Criterion A.



Figure 28. Top left: The Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. in 1951, during which time growing up in Grace Baptist Church. Figure 29. Top middle: Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. in his teens, during which time he was growing up in Grace Baptist Church. Source: “An Evening with Rev. Jeremiah Wright,” Fresno State’s Africana Studies Program and the 2015 Black Popular Culture Lecture Series and Online Research Archive, 2 March 2015. Source: [An Evening with Rev Jeremiah Wright - YouTube](#), Accessed on 5 September 2024. Figure 30. Top right: The Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. in 1959. Source: Julia Jordan. “Germantown Gems: Pastor’s Son To Deliver “Trial Sermon Sunday,” Philadelphia Tribune, 2 March 1959, 20. Figure 31. Bottom: Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. greeting President Bill Clinton during a prayer breakfast at the White House in 1998. Source: Wikipedia.

CRITERION A

Grace Baptist Church at 34-36 E. Sharpnack Street is associated with the life of Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Alvesta Wright, Jr. (Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr.), the nationally-renowned Black pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois. Deviating from the African Baptist church, Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. grew a dwindling congregation of 87 in 1972 to over 8,000 parishioners, becoming one of the most influential pastors in Chicago. In 1985, Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. was conducting his important ministry on the South Side of Chicago, when he met future President Barack Obama, then a twenty-six-year-old community organizer, who was then a “religious skeptic” purportedly “moved to tears” by Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr.’s sermon.⁴² He soon left Chicago to attend Harvard University. Upon returning to Chicago, Obama joined Trinity United Church of Christ during the 1990s. It was here that he and future First Lady Michelle Robinson were married by Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. From that time forward the Obamas were members of Trinity until 2008. During this time, then-Senator Barack Obama was greatly influenced by Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. and his cautious, but inspiring

⁴² “Obama’s Ties To Church Examined,” *CBS News*, 20 March 2007.

message of hope, which would ultimately become a primary theme of President Barack Obama. Despite their eventual estrangement in the face of political pressure, Rev. Dr. Wright Jr.'s ministry and activism were hugely influential on President Barack Obama as an activist, a leader, and a politician. After thirty-six years of service, Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. retired from his job as pastor of Trinity, becoming pastor emeritus.

The Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. was born Jeremiah Alvesta Wright, Jr. to Rev. Dr. Wright, Sr. and Dr. Wright on September 22, 1941, in the racially mixed neighborhood of Germantown. His parents first lived in a two-story brick twin at 68 W. Duval Street;⁴³ however, they would later move to a two-and-one-half-story brick twin at 105 W. Sharpnack Street, where Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. and his sister Mary L. Wright were being raised by 1950.⁴⁴ He was born and reared in Grace Baptist Church, which occupied the subject building during the entirety of his youth and formative years. The Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. attended the prestigious Central High School in Philadelphia—then 90 percent white—graduating in 1959. In his high school yearbook, he was described as “Always ready with a kind word, Jerry is one of the most congenial members of the 211.”

The Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. preached one of his first sermons, a so-called “trial sermon,” at Grace Baptist Church, in the subject building, on a Sunday in May 1958 at 6:00PM.⁴⁵

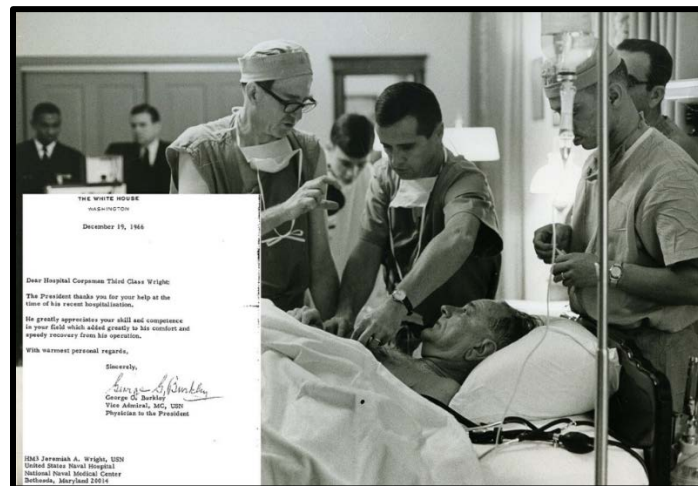


Figure 32. The Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. stands behind President Lyndon B. Johnson during a surgical procedure in 1966. Source: Wikipedia.

Between 1959 and 1961, Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. attended Virginia Union University, eventually leaving to enlist in the United States Marine Corps. as part of the 2nd Marine Division. In 1963, he joined the United States Navy, being trained as a cardiopulmonary technician at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. This included being part of the medical team charged with taking care of President Lyndon B. Johnson after his surgery in 1966 (Figure 32).

⁴³ United States of America, Bureau of the Census. *Sixteenth Census of the United States, 1940*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1940. T627, 4,643 rolls.

⁴⁴ Department of Commerce. Bureau of the Census. 1913-1/1/1972. *Population Schedules for the 1950 Census, 1950 - 1950*. Washington, DC: National Archives at Washington, DC.

⁴⁵ Julia Jordon. “Germantown Gems: Pastor’s Son To Deliver “Trial Sermon” Sunday, *Philadelphia Tribune*, 2 May 1958, 20.

As his parents were preparing to move to the W. Johnson Street site in 1967, Wright enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C., where he earned a B.A. in 1968 followed by a Master of Arts (M.A.) in English in 1969. He would go on to complete his MDiv from the University of Chicago Divinity School, as well as a doctoral (PhD) degree in 1990 from the United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio.

The Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. entered his pastorate at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois on March 1, 1971. When he took over, the congregation had 250 members on the books with roughly 87 attending regularly. By 2008, the congregation had become the largest in the “mostly white” United Church of Christ denomination.

The Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. was not only a great pastor who significantly enlarged his congregation, he was a community activist and leader, who employed his position of influence to improve the lives of Black people on the South Side of Chicago. It was his ideological zeal that built his 8,000-member congregation. It also attracted a young Barack Obama, then a twenty-six-year-old community organizer, to attend services at Trinity in 1985. President Obama was essentially a “religious skeptic,” who was greatly impacted by Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr.’s sermons and larger mission.⁴⁶ Obama eventually left Chicago to attend Harvard University. He would later return to Chicago, again becoming involved with Trinity and Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. During these years, he met the future First Lady Michelle Robinson. The two were eventually married by Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. The Obama daughters were baptized and brought up at Trinity.⁴⁷

The Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. continued to influence Obama even as he became a shrewd politician. It was the maverick pastor, himself, who coined the phrase: “The audacity of hope,” in one of his many powerful sermons. Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. often preached a message centered on hope, which no doubt satiated the thousands of congregants he served on the South Side of Chicago. In 2004, Senator Barack Obama made a name for himself with a keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention, in which hope was the central theme. In 2006, after years in the United States Senate, the future president wrote *The Audacity of Hope*, which tendered his “Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream.”⁴⁸ There is little question as to who influenced this important book. When Obama ran for President, “hope” would be the central theme of his campaign. The concept of hope proved to be incredibly infectious, aiding him in his bid to become the First African American President of the United States.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ “Obama’s Ties To Church Examined,” *CBS News*, 20 March 2007.

⁴⁷ Will Bunch. “A man of the cloth... and controversy,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 17 March 2008.

⁴⁸ Barack Obama. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. (Crown, 2006), 356.

⁴⁹ Will Bunch. “A man of the cloth... and controversy,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 17 March 2008.

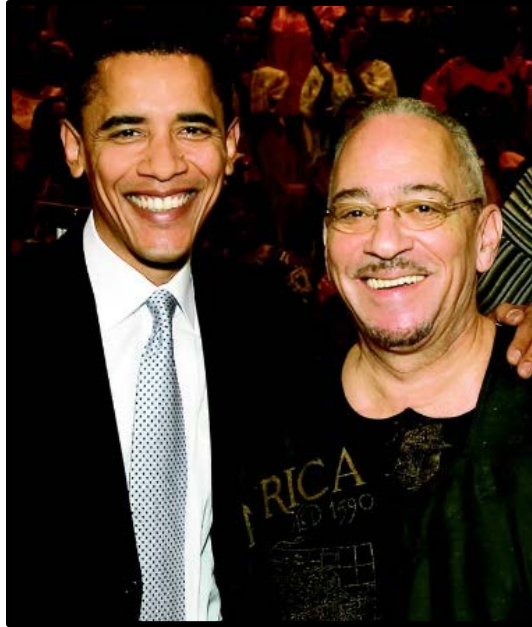


Figure 33. President Barack Obama and Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. Source: *Galesburg Register*.

Commenting on then-Senator Obama running for President of the United States, Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. said the following:

Picture some kid who lives in Hyde Park or over in Ida B. Wells Homes or Washington Gardens, who will see Barack and say, ‘My God. I can be one day be that.’ The amount of hope that it will give kids who society has written off just in terms of them changing their concept of what is possible is going to be immeasurable for generations to come.⁵⁰

While the relationship between President Obama and Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. was forever destroyed by the brutal politics of seeking high office, it is undeniable that “The audacity of hope” had a profound impact on the future president and his hugely popular campaign. Seeds of this powerful theme, an ingenious ideology arriving at just the right moment, were planted at Trinity by Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. The fact is that the roots of this inspiring ideology began for Rev. Dr. Wright, Jr. much earlier, in the church of his mother and father, in a quaint Wissahickon Schist chapel in E. Sharpnack Street, in the hopeful environs of the racially-mixed Germantown and Mt. Airy communities. The inspiration began, like so many things American, in Philadelphia.

The Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. is a significant Black religious and community leader who greatly influenced the course of American history, a life story that began in Grace Baptist Church, specifically in the subject building, satisfying Criterion A.

⁵⁰ Many Brachear. “Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.: Pastor inspires Obama’s ‘audacity’,” *Chicago Tribune*, 21 January 2007.



Figure 34. Grace Baptist Church at 25 W. Johnson Street. Source: Grace Baptist Church.

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This nomination was sponsored by the East Mt. Airy Neighbors (EMAN) under the leadership of Linda Bell, President, and Evonne Tisdale, an EMAN board member, who organized the effort. The nomination was completed by the Keeping Society of Philadelphia with Oscar Beisert, Architectural Historian and Historic Preservationist, as the primary author with assistance from J.M. Duffin, Archivist; and Nancy McBreen, Retired Teacher.

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