

Phyllis Wheatley Club and Home

5128 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago



Phyllis Wheatley Club and Home, 1896, Frederick B. Townsend, 5128 S. Michigan Avenue. © Serhii Chrucky

OVERVIEW

As Chicago works to become a more equitable place, it's important to recognize, honor, and elevate African American sites of significance like the Phyllis Wheatley Club and Home.

A stalwart and resolute group of Black women joined together in the early 1900s to create the Phyllis Wheatley Club which would provide a safe home and quality education to Black women and girls who either traveled to Chicago during the Great Migration or found themselves without stable housing. Recognizing the great risk that young women encountered when moving to an unfamiliar

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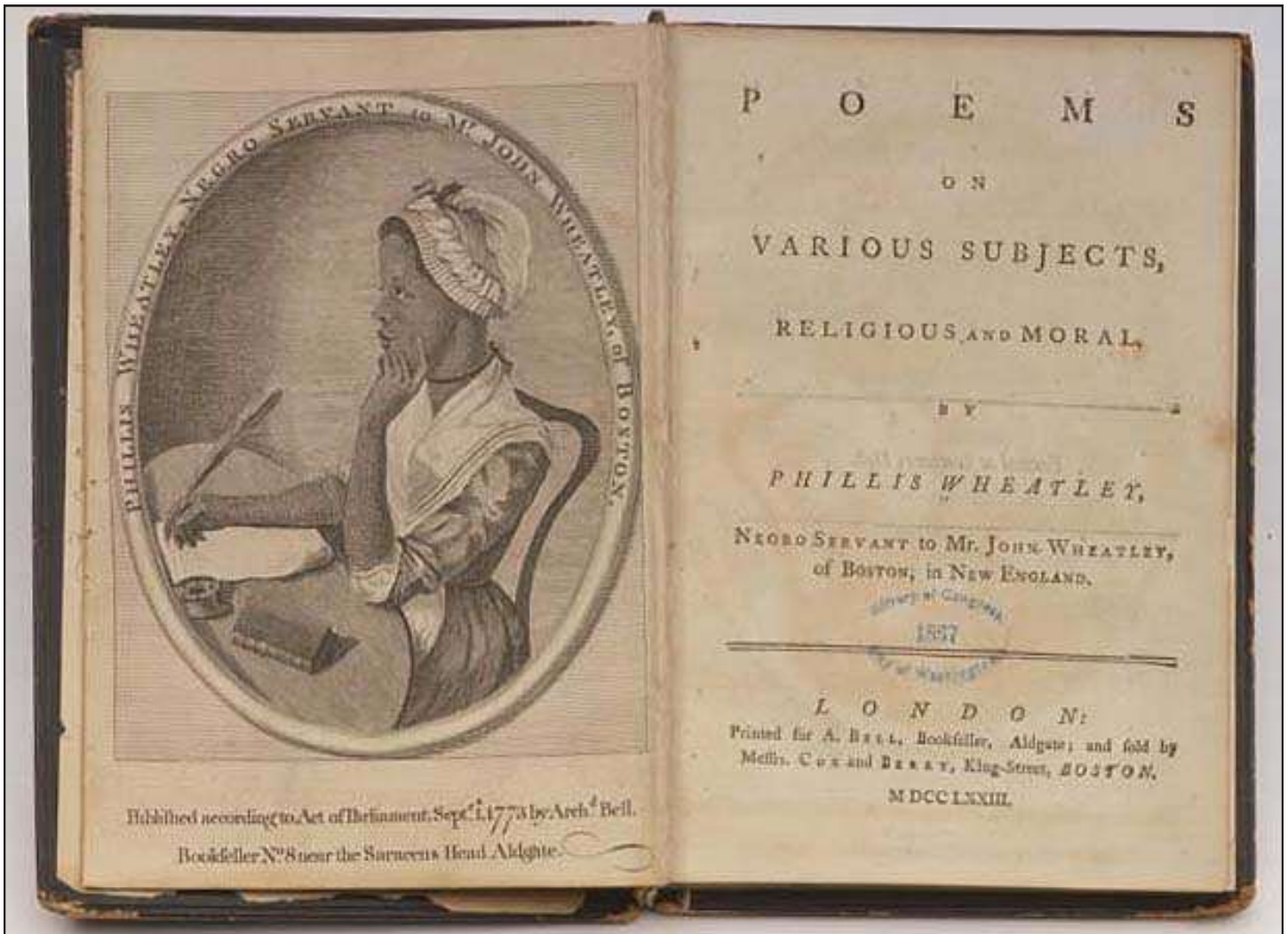
Address: **5128 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago**

Architect: **Frederick B. Townsend**

Date: **1896**

Style: **Chicago Greystone**

Neighborhood: **Bronzeville**



Engraving of Phillis Wheatley Frontispiece by Scipio Moorhead as it appears in "Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral" written by Phillis Wheatley in 1773 Image Courtesy: Imagination Gallery B. American Treasures of the Library of Congress. Rare Book & Special Collections Division

city, the founders of the Phyllis Wheatley Club created a haven to support the development and protection of the young women in their care.

The third location of the Phyllis Wheatley Home operated from 5128 S. Michigan Avenue. At its peak, it could house over 22 women and girls. It functioned as the Phyllis Wheatley Home for approximately 50 years and has been in private ownership since the 1970s. In recent years, the 125-year-old home has suffered from deferred maintenance and significant water infiltration. Demolition court hearings are scheduled in 2021 to address code violations. An immediate plan to stabilize and restore the home is essential to avoid a possible demolition order.

The need is urgent to find a preservation solution to save this building which is a testament to the strength of Black women and their meaningful role in addressing societal needs in Chicago in the late 19th and 20th century. We at Preservation Chicago continue to uncover additional stories of the extraordinary women of the Phyllis Wheatley Club and their work to improve the lives of African American women, girls, and the community at large.

HISTORY

Phillis Wheatley was a poet who lived from approximately 1753 to 1784 and became the first English-speaking person of African descent and first U.S. enslaved person to publish a book of poetry. She was also among the first women authors to be published in America.

Wheatley was kidnapped from West Africa, transported by slave ship to Boston, Massachusetts and sold into slavery in 1761. John and Susanna Wheatley, who purchased the young girl, named her after the slave ship she arrived in—The Phillis.



ELIZABETH LINDSAY DAVIS
Founder of Phyllis Wheatley Home.

A LITTLE ACORN

Like the little acorn that evolves into the splendor of a stalwart oak tree, so the idea of Phyllis Wheatley Home has grown. No one can deny that the program of the Negro in Chicago is inseparable with this institution. Its importance is not measured by its size but its work. Hundreds of young women of the country have been nurtured and encouraged to go on by this center. Hundreds have enjoyed excellent home surroundings, among ambitious girls who came often from rural areas yearning to achieve. The inspiration from the founder, Mrs. Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, a character who will ever remain in Chicago's hall of fame as a woman of vision, courage, and power to do.

Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, Founder of Phyllis Wheatley Home, Phyllis Wheatley Home Christmas Annual, 1929. Courtesy: Chicago History Museum 38JD.P4Z



The Chicago branch of the Phyllis Wheatley Club in 1907. Image Credit: "Lifting As They Climb" by Elizabeth Lindsay Davis

Per written accounts, the Wheatley family was progressive for their time, allowing Wheatley to receive an "unprecedented education" for an enslaved person and learning to read both Greek and Latin.

While enslaved, she traveled to England, meeting with royalty and dignitaries. She had professional acquaintances with George Washington, John Paul Jones, Benjamin Franklin, and John Hancock. After her emancipation in 1773, she lived the remainder of her years as a free woman, later marrying John Peters, a free Black man. Her remarkable accomplishments are surprisingly well-documented, but it's heartbreaking to imagine what additional works have been lost since she died at the young age of 31. A second manuscript of her poetry was lost after her death in 1784.

Phyllis Wheatley and her accomplishments have been memorialized often in the years since her death, demonstrated by the fact that many schools across America today bear her name. Surely one of her greatest posthumous namesakes, however, are the Phyllis Wheatley Homes.

Inspired by Wheatley's strength and talents, Phyllis Wheatley Clubs were formed in multiple cities throughout the United States. While the spelling of Wheatley's name is acknowledged as "Phillis," the clubs were formed under the spelling of "Phyllis". The club's focus was on improving the lives of young women through education, job training, sewing classes, and economics courses, or, as noted by the organization, "housing, health, vocational guidance, recreation and religious education".



Young Women Entering Former Wheatley House on 3256 S. Rhodes. Image Credit: The Story of the Illinois Federation of Colored Womens Clubs 1900-1922



Charlotte Pearson Weaver in a wedding picture from late 1920s. Photo Courtesy of Charlotte Pearson Weaver Family

The Chicago branch of the Phyllis Wheatley Club was formed in 1896 by a group of Black women led by Elizabeth Lindsay Davis. Davis leveraged her strong social networks for philanthropic efforts throughout the city and had the means to address impoverished living conditions for women and young girls, especially single women. During the Great Migration, over 500,000 Blacks headed north to Chicago to find greater opportunity and fill industrial jobs. As Davis wrote, “The burden of caring for this newly transplanted population was left entirely to the colored citizens of the city, who are, in the mass, already overburdened, hard-working people with little accumulated surplus among them.”

The Phyllis Wheatley Club was one of the oldest Black women’s clubs formed in Chicago and was part of a vast network of programs organized under the National Association of Colored Women’s (NACW) Clubs. Davis was the Illinois delegate to this national organization along with journalist and anti-lynching advocate Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Ms. Davis also authored a book, “The Story of the Illinois Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs covering 1900-1922.” The book outlines the various clubs throughout the state, and the women who helped found them.

The Phyllis Wheatley Home also sought to provide opportunities for Black women entering the newly professionalized field of social work. Many African American women graduates of the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy found positions as lead workers and residents at Black settlement houses. The Phyllis Wheatley Home hired Jennie Lawrence, a graduate of the program, to oversee its operations, and Lawrence introduced modern social work practices.

The first Phyllis Wheatley Home began operations as a settlement house in 1906. It included nine-rooms and was located at 3530 S. Forest Avenue, now known as Giles Avenue. Due to increased demand and organizational growth, Phyllis Wheatley Home moved to their second location at 3256 S. Rhodes Avenue in 1915. Then in January 1926, the Phyllis Wheatley Home moved to their third and largest building at 5128 S. Michigan Avenue. Unfortunately, the buildings that served as the first two Wheatley Homes have since been demolished.

Chicago 7: Phyllis Wheatley Club and Home

The 6,600 square foot home at 5128 S. Michigan Avenue was built in 1896 for William H. Ebbert and designed by architect Frederick B. Townsend. Townsend was a prominent Chicago architect who is also credited with designing the Five Houses on Avers Avenue Chicago Landmark District, 4808 S. Kimbark Avenue in the Kenwood Chicago Landmark District, the William C. Groetzinger House at 526 W. Deming in the Arlington-Deming Chicago Landmark District, Epworth United Methodist Church at 5253 N. Kenmore, and 16 W. Maple which was demolished in 2019, as all of which are noted in the Chicago Historic Resources Survey.



*Phyllis Wheatley Home Association Board of Directors, The Phyllis Wheatley Christmas Annual, 1929.
Courtesy: Chicago History Museum 38JD.P4Z*

Preservation Chicago has been able to connect with the family of a woman who once lived in the Phyllis Wheatley Home, and they were able to share details and stories of her experience as a resident. Charlotte Pearson Weaver lived in the Wheatley Home on Michigan Avenue in the 1920s, until she married her husband George Weaver in 1928. In the late 1960s, she returned to the Wheatley Home to serve as a house mother for three years. Charlotte was born in 1902 in Demopolis, Alabama, and as part of the Great Migration, moved to Chicago and to the Wheatley Home. Her daughter, Georgetta Cooper, recalls her mother's stories about the rules of the home. Male guests were only allowed "to call" on certain days and times and were only permitted to visits on the first floor of the home. The women's bedrooms were located on the second and third floors. The women who resided in the home had strict curfews with no smoking or drinking of alcohol allowed. The women had to arrive well-dressed for dinner, which was formal every day. Potential new residents were screened and interviewed by the Phyllis Wheatley Home's Board of Directors. According to Ms. Cooper, the women on the Board who oversaw operations of the Home were correct, "cultured" women, who were active in their churches and civic organizations.

The house rules had significantly loosened by the time Ms. Weaver returned to serve as a house mother in the late 1960s. Her granddaughters, Kathy Scott and Maria Scott, both recall visiting their grandmother at the Wheatley Home. They remembered all the wood finishes and paneling in the house, and they were especially fond of the old-time pop machine in the kitchen where they would buy 5-cent bottles of Mountain Dew and Orange Crush.

Other African-American Settlement Homes in Chicago:

- The Melissia Elam Home for Working Women and Girls, 4555 S. Champlain
- The Melissia Elam Home for Working Women and Girls, 4726 S. Martin Luther King Dr. (Chicago Landmark)
- The Frederick Douglass Center, 2032 S. Wabash Avenue
- The Fannie Emanuel Settlement House, 2732 Armour Avenue
- The Abraham Lincoln Center, 700 E. Oakwood Boulevard
- The Volunteer Workers Charity Club Home for Aged and Infirm Colored People, 610 W. Garfield Boulevard
- The Volunteer Workers Charity Club Home for Aged and Infirm Colored People, 4430 S. Vincennes Avenue



Cover of the Phyllis Wheatley Home Christmas Annual, 1929.
Courtesy: Chicago History Museum 38JD.P4Z



Phyllis Wheatley Home Association Brochure, November 30, 1927. Courtesy: Chicago History Museum 38JD.P4Z

Besides the Phyllis Wheatley Home, the Melissia Elam Home for Working Women and Girls at 4726 S. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive is the only other known surviving former Black settlement home for women in Chicago. It is also currently vacant and boarded-up similar to the Phyllis Wheatley Home. Dr. Margaret Burroughs and Loretta Peyton (Ms. Elam's niece) worked to save and restore this settlement home through a group they formed called the Friends of the Elam House Foundation. Their work included pursuing Chicago Landmark status to ensure the home could not be demolished. It was designated a Chicago Landmark on March 21, 1979. The Melissia Elam Home was impeccably restored, with the wood-paneled walls stripped of paint, hand-oiled, and revitalized. The third-floor ballroom was next on its restoration list. Tragically, a fire in 1992 destroyed much of the home's interior. It's currently owned by the Fitz Corporation, which acquired the building in 1997 through a tax sale.

The work of women's organizations and clubs, like the Phyllis Wheatley Home, supported and advanced women's lives was significant during this period. They served as job and leadership training centers and their advocacy for increasing and protecting women's rights, including suffrage, was critical at a time when those rights were nonexistent or emerging.

Preserving historic buildings like the Wheatley Home makes the stories of this work tangible and present in a way that books, websites, and other media do not. Saving the places in our city where such important work happened makes it possible for us to better understand the past and use it to continue the work today. The Phyllis Wheatley Home holds the memories of the countless Black women who left behind the Jim Crow South for a new life in Chicago.

THREAT

Water infiltration and temperature fluctuations are always significant threats to historic buildings across Chicago. These same elements have harmed the Phyllis Wheatley Home. The roof is compromised and requires full replacement. The home's rear wall is deteriorated and requires stabilization, repair, and perhaps complete reconstruction. Water damage and other failures have impacted the Wheatley Home's interiors. However, the home's basement, foundation, and remaining elevations appear to be in stable condition. Despite many issues throughout the property, original wood cabinetry, decorative trim mouldings, doors, historic light fixtures, and the original wood staircases all remain.

The current homeowners, Dr. Ariajo "JoAnn" Cobb Tate and Martin Tate, are committed to restoring the property and its important history, although they are struggling to secure the resources needed for a complete restoration and renovation of the building.

Without an immediate, viable plan for restoration and funding, the home could potentially be ordered demolished during ongoing hearings before the City of Chicago's Buildings Division Court.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Phyllis Wheatley Home is one of few surviving testaments to the strength and ability of Black women who were committed to playing a meaningful role in helping to address inadequate housing and difficult living conditions for the Black residents of Chicago.

Chicago has an unfortunate record of demolishing settlement house buildings. All but two of thirteen buildings that comprised Jane Addams' Hull-House, one of the most well-known settlement houses in the city, was demolished in the 1960s to make way for the University of Illinois at Chicago campus. As so few sites of Black social settlement houses remain in Chicago or across the nation, preserving the Phyllis Wheatley Home is critical.

Preservation Chicago encourages the City of Chicago to prioritize elevating this history as we collectively strive to embrace diversity, equity and inclusion. It is imperative that the City of Chicago and especially the Department of Buildings and Department of Planning and Development) work with the current owner, the Alderwoman, Washington Park community, and preservationists to find a solution that will ensure its protection from demolition and a solid plan for its restoration and reuse.

The rehabilitation costs for the Phyllis Wheatley Home are estimated at \$700,000 for the exterior repairs and range



Phyllis Wheatley Home Association Brochure, c.1921. Courtesy: Chicago History Museum

from \$1 million to \$1.5 million for a complete restoration. Unless the house is sold to a private buyer, public subsidies or philanthropic contributions will be required to make these substantial repairs.

Preservation Chicago is committed to working with all stakeholders to achieve a preservation outcome of restoring a place that tells the important story of Black women's clubs, suffrage efforts, and settlement houses in Chicago. In a full circle moment of great synergy, a group of professional Black women has begun to organize to save the Wheatley Home. Preservation Chicago would be honored to support their work in every way we can.

We have been working with urgency to prevent emergency demolition and to generate stakeholder support and emergency funding to restore the building. Additionally, Preservation Chicago recommended the Phyllis Wheatley Home as a suggestion for Chicago Landmark Designation on January 26, 2021 at the Program Committee hearing of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks.



Phyllis Wheatley Home, Frederick B. Townsend, 5128 S. Michigan Avenue © Serhii Chrukky

African-American Women Leaders in the Social Club and Settlement House movement

- Ida B. Wells-Barnett was involved in the establishment and support of many African-American women's clubs and settlement houses.
- Dr. Fannie Emanuel, who graduated as a medical doctor from the Chicago College of Medicine in 1915, served as a Board member of the Phyllis Wheatley Club
- Louis Solomon Waller, one-time president of the Frederick Douglass Center.
- Sadie Pritchard Hart, who worked with the Phyllis Wheatley Home. She was also a prominent member of the Order of the Eastern Stars, the Freemasons division for women.
- Fannie Barrier Williams, who helped to secure recognition of the "American Negro" in the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, served on the Phyllis Wheatley Board of Directors.
- Fannie Mason was among the founders of the Home for Aged and Infirm Colored People in Chicago.
- Minnie A. Collins worked for decades with the Phyllis Wheatley Club, and was chairwoman of the Board of Managers of the Phyllis Wheatley Home.
- Ella Johnson served as the Phyllis Wheatley Club treasurer.
- Clara Johnson served as President of the Phyllis Wheatley Home.
- Mattie Johnson Young served on the Phyllis Wheatley Association Board of Directors.