

Olivet Baptist Church

3101 S. King Drive, Chicago



Olivet Baptist Church / First Baptist Church of Chicago, 1876, Wilcox and Miller, 3101 S. King Drive. Photo credit: Serhii Chucky / Esto

OVERVIEW

Olivet Baptist Church is the oldest African American Baptist church structure, and the second oldest African American congregation in the city of Chicago. In 1918, Olivet Baptist Church purchased the Gothic Revival church building at 3101 S. King Drive, which was originally constructed for First Baptist Church of Chicago in 1875, by the early Chicago architecture firm Wilcox and Miller.

Located in the historic Douglas-Bronzeville and Lake Meadows Community, Olivet has a long history of influential Black leadership stretching back to the 19th century. Many of the

Olivet Baptist Church / First Baptist Church of Chicago

Address: **3101 S. King Drive / 405 E. 31st Street**

Architect: **Wilcox and Miller**

Date: **1876**

Style: **Gothic Revival**

Neighborhood: **Douglas-Bronzeville-Lake Meadows Community**



Detail of King Drive upper façade, Olivet Baptist Church / First Baptist Church of Chicago, 1876, Wilcox and Miller, 3101 S. King Drive.

Photo credit: Debbie Mercer

congregation's pastors have been leading figures at various political levels, including during the National Baptist Convention and the 20th century Civil Rights Movement. During the Chicago Race Riots of 1919, the church fought to maintain peace under the leadership of Pastor Lacey Kirk Williams (1871-1940), who also served on a 12-person commission investigating the riots. In the 1920s, as the Great Migration brought an influx of African Americans from the South to the urban North, the church became a community center for the growing population with the promise of jobs and housing. However, following the death in 1990 of Joseph H. Jackson (1900-1990) who served as pastor for nearly fifty years, the church struggled to maintain its former stature in Chicago's African American community. In recent decades, the number of parishioners has declined significantly, and portions of the church are effectively sealed off due to deferred maintenance.

Despite its storied history and architectural pedigree, the property is not formally recognized as a historic landmark by either the City of Chicago or National Park Service. A sensitive yet pragmatic rehabilitation would bring the church back to its full operation and allow this Chicago institution to remain standing well into the decades to come.

Chicago 7: Olivet Baptist Church



31st Street and King Drive elevations, Olivet Baptist Church / First Baptist Church of Chicago, 1876, Wilcox and Miller, 3101 S. King Drive.

Photo credit: Serhii Chucky / Esto

HISTORY

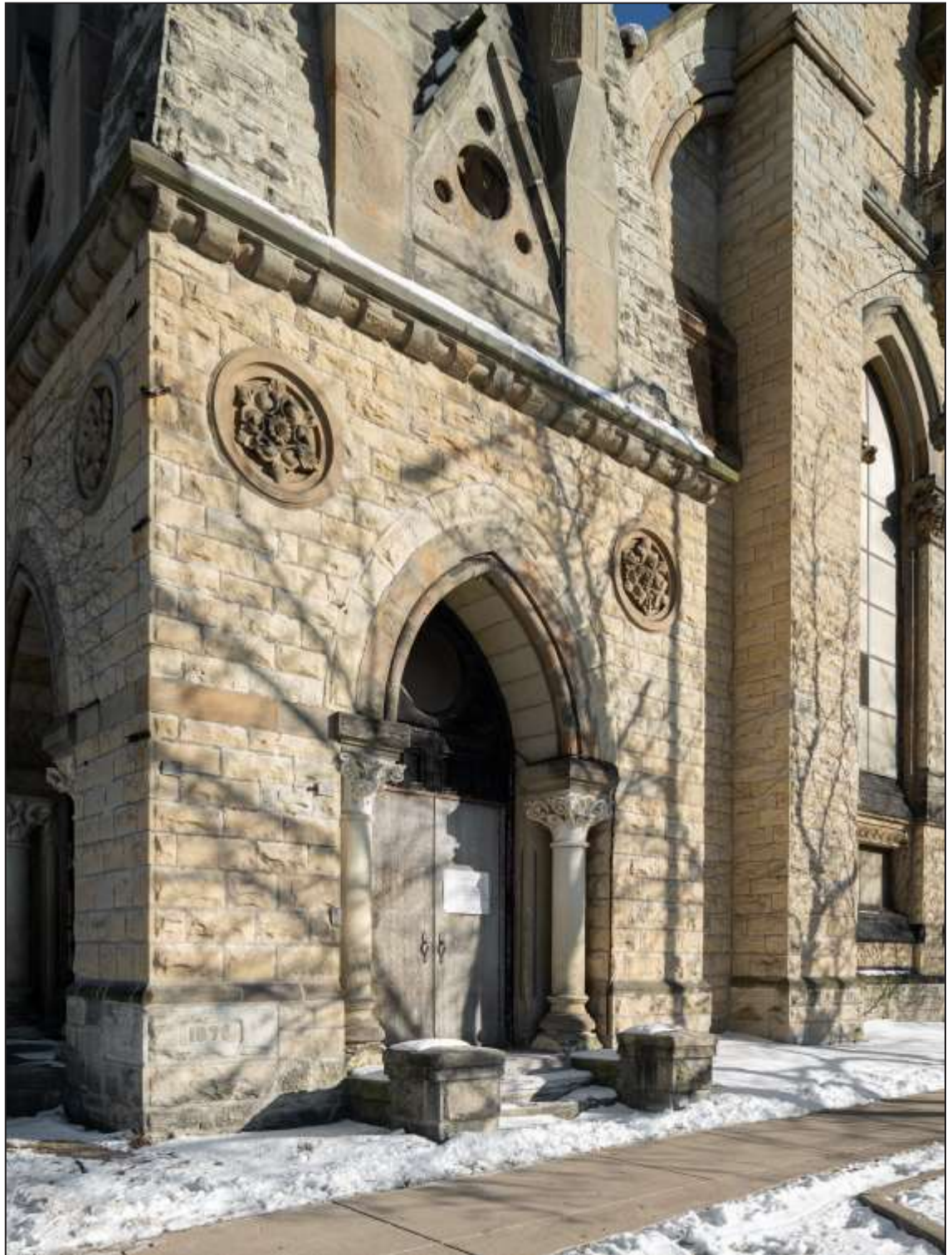
Black churches began to emerge in Chicago in the late 1840s. Quinn Chapel was the first, organized in 1847 on Wells Street, followed by Olivet Baptist Church, which traces its origins to 1850, when it was first organized as Xenia Baptist Church by John Larmon and Samuel McCoy in the heart of Chicago. Following incorporation in 1853, the Xenia Baptist Church became known as Zoar Baptist Church (Xenia was a variant of the word Zoar), and called its first minister, the Rev. H. H. Hawkins of Chatham, Canada to lead its flock of 56 members. In 1857, Zoar erected a church on the corner of Harrison and Griswold Streets (demolished), today the location of the LaSalle Street “L” station. In the years before the turn of the 20th century, growing numbers of Black migrants from the South joined the congregation. Managing what had once been a modest congregation, but now was rapidly expanding, became increasingly difficult. In 1858, roughly sixty members seceded from Zoar Church and formed the Mount Zion Church in a wood-frame storefront on Clark Street in today’s Loop. The two congregations later reunited in 1862 under the name Olivet Baptist Church, with a total of 132 members. John Jones (1816-

1879), one of Olivet's founders, operated a safe house in his home that became a key point on the Underground Railroad. John and Mary Jones home site is a Chicago Landmark located near the southwest corner of W. 9th Street and S. Plymouth Court. The church served as a station helping enslaved people, also referred to as "Freedom Seekers," in their escape from the South. The reunited congregation continued to worship at the Zoar Church building until 1865.

As Olivet saw its congregation increase, following an early wave of northward African American migration after Emancipation and the Civil War, the church relied on the city's other Black congregations for aid in finding a new building. The congregation met at a temporary location until 1868, when a bigger church was completed in the South Loop under Reverend Richard De Baptiste (1831-1901), a famous figure in the National Baptist community.

After this first building was destroyed, either in the Chicago Fire of 1871, or an ensuing 1874 fire, the congregation rebuilt the church at a different downtown location on Fourth Street (renamed Madison Street), between Polk and Taylor Streets. The new structure, designed by architect Benjamin J. Bartlett (1834-18--), followed a novel model that combined a commercial business block with the church facilities.

By 1903, 600 people were listed as members of Olivet Baptist Church. While African Americans comprised just two



Detail of corner entry on King Drive, Olivet Baptist Church / First Baptist Church of Chicago, 1876, Wilcox and Miller, 3101 S. King Drive.. Photo credit: Serhii Chucky / Esto

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percent of Chicago's population by 1910, there were nearly two dozen African American Churches in the city. Many of these Baptist churches serving the African American community established during this period were offshoots of Olivet, the city's oldest, and at the time, largest African American Baptist church.

By 1917, there were over 2,600 people in attendance at Olivet's Sunday services with hundreds still being turned away, many of whom were recent migrants from the South. To accommodate its increasing membership, Olivet purchased its church building from the First Baptist Church of Chicago in 1918, which had a 3,000-person capacity. The official turnover between the congregations was celebrated on the second Sunday in September, 1918, marked by a parade from the old building to the new, with attendees singing "Onward, Christian Soldiers." In addition to a dramatic increase in capacity, the new building also signaled a shift away from the increasingly commercial downtown and toward the less dense neighborhoods to the south.

The building at 3101 S. King Drive, which still houses Olivet Baptist Church today, was originally constructed in 1875 for the First Baptist Church of Chicago, which had been organized by Rev. Allen B. Freeman at Wacker Drive, then South Water Street, and Franklin Street on October 19, 1833, by some of the earliest settlers of the city, when Chicago was little more than a cluster of blockhouses. Over the following four decades, the congregation moved several times as the city grew. Their first major church building, located on Wabash Avenue, was a grand structure valued at \$200,000. However, this building was destroyed during Chicago's second great fire on July 14, 1874. After the fire, the congregation temporarily met at Wabash Avenue Methodist Church. By November 1874, they had begun construction of a new



Partial view of 31st Street elevation with new replacement steeple, Olivet Baptist Church / First Baptist Church of Chicago, 1876, Wilcox and Miller, 3101 S. King Drive. Photo credit: Eric Allix Rogers



Detail of First Baptist name carved in stone, Olivet Baptist Church / First Baptist Church of Chicago, 1876, Wilcox and Miller, 3101 S. King Drive. Photo credit: Serhii Chucky / Esto

church at the corner of 31st Street and King Drive (then South Park Way), completing it in 1875.

Willcox and Miller's plan was selected from among nine submissions, making them the architects of the new church building. Although their partnership lasted only from 1874 to 1877, the Willcox and Miller ranked among the busiest architectural firms of the period, taking on numerous commissions both within the city and beyond, and the new First Baptist Church is one of their surviving works.

William H. Willcox (1832-1929), an English-born architect and surveyor who practiced in several U.S. cities, including New York, Chicago, Nebraska, Minneapolis-Saint Paul and Seattle. He served as a topographical engineer during the Civil War and later partnered with Charles C. Miller in Chicago. Willcox also designed public buildings, including the Nebraska State Capitol (1879-1882, now demolished), and published a book on church design in 1884, *Hints to Those Who Propose to Build; also a Description of Improved Plan and Construction of Churches*. He died in Yountville, California, in 1929 at the age of 96.

Willcox's partner, Charles Crosby Miller (1831-1902), was also an architect active in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, primarily in Ohio and Illinois. He was born in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1831, and moved to Norwalk, Ohio, in 1838. Miller learned the basics of architecture from his father, a carpenter by trade. In the early 1850s, he served as a draftsman in the Cleveland office of architect John J. Husband (1820-1895). Miller later went to work as an architect in Toledo and Chicago and was the co-author of an architectural pattern book titled *Architecture Designs of Street Fronts, Suburban Houses and Cottages*, regarded by architects and is still frequently used as a reference. One of his best known works is the Stick Style William Cunningham Gray House (1883) in Oak Park, later transformed by Frank Lloyd Wright into the Prairie School masterpiece known as the Edward R. Hills House or the Hills-DeCaro House. Miller died in Winnetka, Illinois in 1902, after a long and productive career.

Olivet's massive stone church building measures 110 feet wide and 165 feet deep. A beautiful sanctuary occupies most of the western half of the complex, while an adjoining Sunday school building, also constructed in 1876, is



Historic photograph of the church with its original steeple. Olivet Baptist Church / First Baptist Church of Chicago, 1876, Wilcox and Miller, 3101 S. King Drive, circa 1913. Photo credit: The Newberry Library - Modern Manuscripts and Archives, Percy H. Sloan photographs, Buildings, Chicago: Churches, Baptist, File — Box: 1, Folder: 12

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*Olivet Baptist Church / First Baptist Church of Chicago, 1876, Wilcox and Miller, 3101 S. King Drive. Photo credit:
Children boarding bus in front of Olivet Baptist Church, circa 1920, Chicago History Museum, ICHi-037978*

seamlessly attached to the eastern portion of the main historic structure. The eastern half contains a fellowship hall on the first floor and the Sunday school and church offices on the second floor. Olivet Baptist Church was said to be the largest in the United States at the time of completion, seating about 1,500 people. Like many nineteenth-century religious buildings, the Olivet Baptist Church building reflects the Gothic Revival tradition. Its exterior is clad in rusticated Joliet limestone from quarries southwest of Chicago, giving the facade a rustic, textured appearance. The tall pointed Gothic arches, rondells, sills, trim and many details of the facades are highlighted in smooth sandstone, differentiating various features and components of the church. The church's most striking feature is its highly articulated square corner tower. At one time, the tower was crowned by a prominent faceted steeple (later demolished) that rose approximately 160 feet above the street, almost doubling the height of the corner tower structure. A smaller tower at the southwest angle finishes in a wedge-shaped roof, with a window and chimney fronting south. The carved limestone capstones along S. King Drive are very bold and finely cut, contributing to the building's picturesque composition. The church's large arched windows, situated between foliated capitals inspired by the French Gothic style, contain simple trefoil tracery. The church features strong massing and prominent square engaged columns, marking the end of its large nave beneath a gabled roof. Throughout all its primary facades, the church exhibits a high degree of integrity of design, fine articulation of all components and materials on its elevations, and stands prominently on 31st and King Drive.

This building became the center of the First Baptist congregation's religious and social life for more than four decades. The church provided worship services, community gatherings, and educational programs, serving a predominantly white congregation at the time. It was a period with both growth and change. Around 1918, the Douglas neighborhood, what is now known as the Bronzeville area of Chicago's South Side, was undergoing rapid demographic changes. White residents were moving out while Black residents were moving in. Church leaders

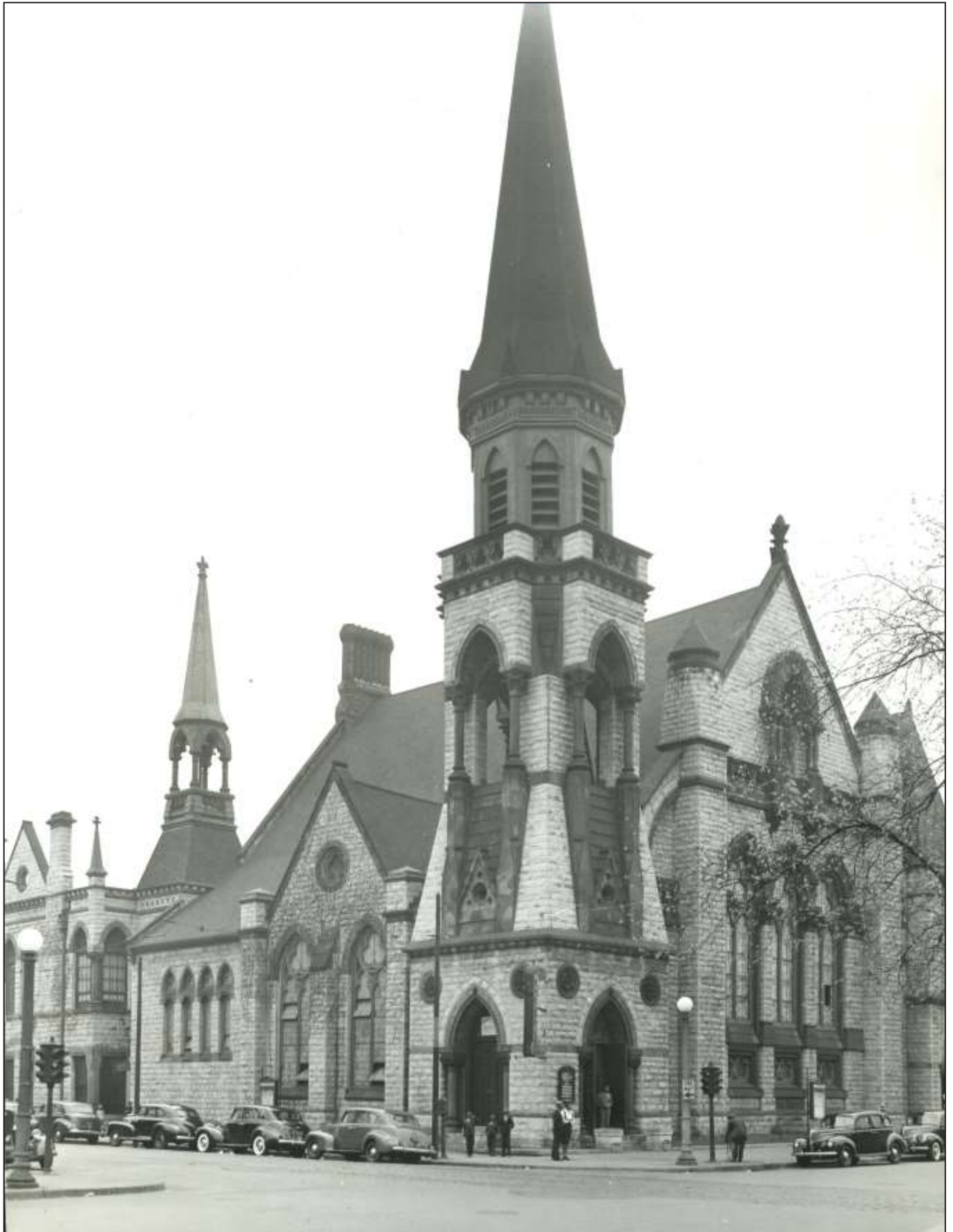


Olivet Baptist Church / First Baptist Church of Chicago, 1876, Wilcox and Miller, 3101 S. King Drive.

Photo credit: Members of Olivet Baptist Church; Chicago, Illinois; circa 1925, Woodards Studio, Chicago History Museum, ICHI-026767

realized that the congregation was changing in a community that had become almost entirely Black, and they decided to sell the building and relocate southward. They sold the property to Olivet Baptist Church for \$80,000. Olivet had outgrown its facilities due to the migration, and the transaction was described as one of the greatest examples of a “Baptist Missionary endeavor” in the city. Until the end of World War I, First Baptist held worship services at Memorial Christian Church, a Disciples of Christ congregation pastored by Herbert L. Willett (1864-1944). However, the church leadership remained concerned about the permanence of the neighborhood community and felt that they needed to move farther south. In 1919, they purchased a new building at 935 East 50th Street and Drexel Boulevard in the particularly affluent Kenwood neighborhood. This building, built in 1911 by Plymouth Congregational Society and said to be one of the finest examples of pure English Gothic architecture in the city, remains the home of First Baptist Church today.

Over the following decades, Olivet Baptist Church’s congregation continued to grow. By 1921, the church already had more than 10,000 members, and its membership rose to 20,000 members by 1941. As the membership continued to expand, Olivet acquired additional land east and north of its main building between 1957 and 1960 as part of the Land Clearance Commission’s Redevelopment Project No. 1. This land was intended for parking and educational facilities, and a portion of the parcel once contained a parsonage to house the pastor and their families. The current two-and-a-half story educational building or the annex, one of Dr. Joseph H. Jackson’s notable accomplishments during his tenure as pastor, was constructed in 1961 and completed in 1962. It was designed in a mid-century modern style by McKissack & McKissack, one of the nation’s oldest African American-owned architectural and contracting firms, established in 1905 in Nashville, Tennessee. The new school structure



Historic photo of church with its original steeple, Olivet Baptist Church / First Baptist Church of Chicago, 1876, Wilcox and Miller, 3101 S. King Drive. Photo credit: Landmark of Religious Progress in Chicago, Chicago Daily News, May 23, 1942 / Preservation Chicago Photo Collection

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Olivet Baptist Church in the news. Photo credit: Olivet Baptist Church, Landmark of Religious Progress in Chicago, Chicago Daily News, pg.2, May 23, 1942, Chicago History Museum, ICHi-183652

senior choir for 48 years. Kay was the father of community activist Hattie Kay Williams (1922-1990), who was known for her humanitarian and educational outreach efforts. She also worked with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on the Chicago Freedom Movement campaign.

Beyond its architectural merits, Olivet played a direct role in stimulating migration with the advertisement of opportunity, jobs and housing in Chicago, primarily through the influential Chicago Defender newspaper. During the Great Migration, from 1910 to 1970, millions of African Americans relocated from the rural South to industrial cities in the Northeast and Midwest. Within this period alone, 500,000 Black migrants arrived in Chicago. Olivet served as a community center for many new migrants, offering forty different social, cultural, and economic

cost \$500,000 and was one of the few religious buildings in the area erected without loans, relying primarily on gifts and sacrifices from Olivet members and their friends. The building was designed to expand community services, featuring 30 Sunday school classrooms and a recreation hall. Part of the space served as a day nursery for children, while another section was dedicated to senior citizens, offering programs such as industrial crafts. The youth of the community also had special quarters for socials, discussions, and study groups. In 1962, the building served as the Executive Headquarters for the Annual National Baptist Convention USA, hosting approximately 25,000 delegates from all 50 states, as well as representatives from the Bahamas and Jamaica, and missionaries from Liberia and Nigeria. Originally constructed as the J.H. Jackson Educational Building and dedicated in 1962, the building was rededicated in the 1970s in honor of Marion Kay (1896-1971). Kay was a prominent Chicago singer who toured the United States and Canada. He also served as Olivet Baptist Church's treasurer and sang in the



Olivet Baptist Church School, 1962, McKissack & McKissack, 3125 S. King Drive. Photo credit: Serhii Chrukky / Esto

organizations. By 1920, the Church had grown to approximately 10,000 congregants, making it the world's largest African American congregation as well as the world's largest Protestant church at the time. The Church touted a 2,500-seat auditorium and a lecture room on the first floor. On the second and third floors, a club and rooms for Sunday school and church offices located in the easternmost portion of the historic church complex and fronting 31st Street.

In addition to providing direct social services, the Church became increasingly involved in labor relations and city politics. The Church has only had four pastors since 1916: Lacey Kirk Williams (1871-1940), who served from 1916 to 1940; Joseph H. Jackson (1900-1990), from 1941 to 1990; Dr. Michael A. Noble, from 1992-2011; and the current pastor, Rev. John L. Smith, who has served the community at Olivet since 2012.

Lacey Kirk Williams was a Baptist minister who came to Chicago from Texas in 1916 to lead Olivet Baptist Church. After the 1919 Chicago race riot, Illinois Governor Frank Lowden (1861-1943) appointed him to the Chicago Inter-Racial Commission to study the city's race issues. As a nationally renowned Republican, Williams remained active in politics until his death in a 1940 plane crash while traveling to the G.O.P. convention. This was consistent with his lifelong commitment to Abraham Lincoln's emancipation platform and the Republican-led Reconstruction in the South. In 1941, Joseph H. Jackson took over as pastor of Olivet Baptist Church, a position he held for nearly fifty years until his death in 1990. Like his predecessor Williams, Jackson adhered to Booker T. Washington's (1856-1915) accommodationist approach to achieving civil rights, focusing on economic uplift rather than social and legal action. In 1953, he was elected president of the National Baptist Convention (NBC). During the 1960s, amid the height of the Civil Rights Movement, Jackson frequently clashed with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), criticizing his approach, while nonviolent, was overly confrontational.

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Interior sanctuary photos of Olivet Baptist Church, 1876, Wilcox and Miller, 3101 S. King Drive. Photo credit: Rolf Achilles

Because of his controversial remarks, King and other dissenting ministers broke away from the NBC to form the Progressive National Baptist Convention, USA. Jackson, however, held onto the presidency of the NBC until 1982, when he was succeeded by T. J. Jemison (1918-2013), one of the founding members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

THREAT

Since the 1990 death of pastor Joseph H. Jackson, leader of the church for almost fifty years, the congregation has significantly dwindled in numbers. As with countless churches across Chicago and the nation, an aging congregation, demographic shifts, and the considerable demands of maintaining a large, historic structure have all proved challenging. Since then, Olivet has struggled to recover its stature in Chicago's African American community. The Church retains ownership and continues to hold services in a smaller section of the historic structure, though the building itself shows signs of increasing deterioration. The church building's masonry is stained with organic material and the roof and many of the windows throughout appear in need of repairs. Additionally, earlier remedial work, such as the northwest church spire replacement, while undertaken with good intentions, does not align with the church's historic character.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Formally pursuing City of Chicago Landmark status is a natural first step for Olivet Baptist Church, and a path Preservation Chicago recently recommended at a public meeting of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks.



Interior sanctuary details and window photos, Olivet Baptist Church, 1876, Wilcox and Miller, 3101 S. King Drive. Photo credit: Rolf Achilles

Repairs and weatherproofing the exterior envelope of the church and addressing a series of open code violations likewise remain top priorities. With significant public subsidy and/or private assistance, the church would hopefully be positioned to fully reopen its grand sanctuary. City of Chicago Adopt-a-Landmark funding is unfortunately on pause at the time of this writing, but national programs such as the National Fund for Sacred Places and the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Preserving Black Churches are both excellent candidates for private support. Serious consideration should likewise be given to investment opportunities for both the adjacent, modernist school wing, which is currently vacant, and the large, underutilized surface parking lot. Whether via lease, partnership, or outright sale, monetization of both spaces could support larger rehabilitation efforts for the grand church structure.