

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The history of the African-American community on the westside of Los Angeles (including Venice and Santa Monica) and the role of the African American in developing Venice is inextricably the history of the First Baptist Church of Venice.

As stated in the SurveyLA Citywide Historic Context Statement of African American History of Los Angeles, “Churches were crucial anchors of the African American community. They represented spaces of racial autonomy and freedom, where blacks came together by choice and strengthened ties of mutuality. They were sanctuaries of spiritual freedom, places where people could freely express themselves unfettered by the expectations or pressures of white society. For African Americans in Los Angeles, Doug Flamming writes, ‘Black Churches were their pride and joy, their haven in a racist America.’ They also represented springboards for community leadership, as well as centers of social life, business networks and civil rights activism. Churches, too, reflected the diversity of the African American community by class, background, and cultural proclivities. They played a vital role in allowing black congregants to express their individuality, while tying them to the broader community.”

The story of First Baptist Church in Venice tells the story of the African American community in Venice, a rare enclave of African Americans residing in a coastal town in California from the early 1900’s. First founded in Santa Monica in 1910, the early congregation soon purchased property at 5th Avenue and San Juan in Venice in 1911. This corresponded with the evolution of the Oakwood¹ section of Venice as an early and rare enclave of African American residents in a beach community in California and its relationship with Venice founder Abbot Kinney, who gained a reputation for hiring blacks to build his Venice canal system.

The history of Oakwood plays an important part of the social history of Venice and its character defining attributes of a diverse, social justice and creative enclave. Oakwood is the area bounded by Dewey Street to the northwest, Lincoln Boulevard to the northeast, California Avenue to the southeast, Electric Avenue to the southwest, and Hampton Drive to the west. It was the only area in Venice where African Americans were allowed to purchase property-- covenants were made illegal in 1948, but that did not deter realtors from refusing to sell to African Americans or dare to show them property out of the allowed boundaries.

That history of blacks owning homes started with Abbot Kinney’s employment of Arthur Reese, an African American who came to Venice from Louisiana in 1897, initially in his job as a railroad Pullman porter. Reese had an entrepreneurial spirit, initially opening up a shoe shine shop. He then started a janitorial service that became successful. He was asked to take over the janitorial department of the Kinney Company. Wanting to share the opportunities he found in Southern California, Reese recruited his cousins, the Tabor’s of Louisiana, to join his crew. They were pioneers of the Great Migration from the deep South, where rural poverty and a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan was driving families to find new lives and jobs in the booming industrial north, only 35 years after the end of slavery and the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

Employment to build the Venice Canal System drew blacks to Venice, California. Reese arrived in Venice from White Castle, LA in 1897 and is credited to being the first African American who

¹ The name “Oakwood” was given to the community in the early 90s as a means to distinguish the African American sector from Venice, in general.

lived and worked in Venice. By 1922, the entire Reese/Tabor clan had moved from Louisiana to Los Angeles. A short time after gaining employment in the janitorial department of the Kinney Company, Reese asked Kinney if he could decorate the building fronts of a special holiday affair that was to be held at the Dance Pavilion and the Auditorium. This launched his career as a decorator.

By 1918, Reese became the official town decorator for Venice. “He designed award-winning floats entered in the Mardi Gras Festival and the Tournament of Roses Parade” where he won 1st Prize. Due to Kinney’s failed business relationship his Venice vision did not manifest; however, Reese drawing from his Louisiana southern roots created extraordinary decorations and art forms, e.g. the paper mache bauble heads, and festive entertainment that became the Venice vibe that attracted visitors en masse from all over the world. His work allowed Kinney to capitalize on the entertainment appetite of the populace which resulted in the development of Kinney’s amusement park on the pier. In his obituary, Reese was described as “an accomplished decorator.” In reflection, he is more than an accomplished decorator. As an artist, his legacy is the talented and unique contributions he made to the entertainment industry of Venice in those early pioneering years that helped popularize Venice as the number one public visitor destination in California.

Meanwhile, Irving Tabor, Reese’s cousin, became Kinney’s chauffeur and trusted friend. The bungalow court at 605-607 Westminster Ave., a cultural monument of the City of Los Angeles, is a mark in that history. City records indicate that prior to 1916, the property was owned by Kinney, but that Irvin Tabor bought it in that year and began to develop it with Kinney’s help. Eventually, it would become eight structures on two lots and serve as a compound for this early African American family of Venice.

When Kinney died, he arranged that when his wife died, their house would go to Irvin Tabor. Because of the backlash resulting from the Tabors moving into the “white section” of Venice, Tabor eventually had the house moved to 1310 Sixth Avenue in Oakwood, where he lived until his death in January, 1987. The house currently sits as a City Cultural Monument.

Reese built his home at 541 E. Santa Clara Ave. in Oakwood. Irvin Tabor and Reese were held in high esteem in their community and became leaders of the historically African-American Oakwood neighborhood. Their esteemed reputations, although earned through their own works is not surprising considering Arthur Reese was the son of Rev. Arthur L. Reese, Sr. who was a prominent Baptist clergyman in the south and an activist in causes for advancing social justice. Reese, Sr. was, according to his obituary, the president of the 20th Century Educational and Industrial Congress of Louisiana “and a man who has always been identified with every uplift movement for the colored people of the south.” The cliché that the apple does not fall far from the tree is certainly applicable in reference to these two cousins whose hard work followed in the tradition of Reese, Sr.

The history of Oakwood is one of property ownership, community building, of strong familial ties, of the entrepreneurial spirit of early Los Angeles, and of the emerging African-American presence despite restrictive covenants and societal exclusion. In 1910 home ownership among blacks in Los Angeles reached over 36%, the highest in the nation. The Reese and Tabor family enclaves built community ties. Reese was a mason in high standing, was the first African American to serve on the election board of the City of Venice, was elected a member of the Republican County Central Committee of the 61st Assembly District, and was a member of the

Chamber of Commerce. In an article that appeared in the Venice Vanguard Newspaper in March 27, 1920, it was reported, "Never in the history of Venice, we believe, has there been a colored man appointed on the elections board. We are proud of our town to know that its people are broad-minded and high minded enough to recognize worth and character, and quality, instead of inequality. Mr. Arthur Reese has been in Venice for a number of years, a man of family, property owner, and is a highly respected citizen. The sooner we recognize the principles and capabilities of a man, regardless of creed or color, prejudice will be overcome."

Reese was a founding member of First Baptist Church and was baptized there in 1911. In 1927 he was head of the building committee and he donated the property at 688 Westminster to the Church. It was second place of worship but the first Church they actually built. It was one of the first two churches in Oakwood formed to serve the African-American community.

That church was designed by Paul R. Williams who was born February 18, 1894 in Los Angeles, CA and died January 23, 1980.

"One of the most important Los Angeles architects, Paul R. Williams' prolific career extended from the 1920s to the 1970s. His vast body of built work stretches across the world from Paris and Colombia to Washington, D.C., New York, and Memphis. However, the Los Angeles area was his personal and professional focus. Overcoming incredible prejudice in an all-white field, Williams became the first African American admitted to the A.I.A and designed over 3,000 projects, including the Jetsons-like theme building at Los Angeles International Airport, Saks Fifth Avenue and W. & J. Sloane's department stores in Beverly Hills, the famous Beverly Hills and Ambassador hotels, and renowned celebrity haunts, such as Chasen's and Perino's restaurants." (Paul R. Williams, Architect, A Legacy of Style, Hudson, Karen E, 1993)

Reese was Secretary of the Church in 1912 and his notes reflect the baptism of Reese and Tabor relatives at the Church in the early years. In 1911, the Church hosted the Western Baptist Association for a convention at the Church. This caused the Church to become "a nucleus for the Negro Baptist of Southern California."

Churches were often the spiritual, social, and cultural center of the black community. They also represented centers of social life, business networks, and civil rights activism and played host to speeches and lectures by renowned intellectuals. First Baptist was no exception. Adam Clayton Powell Sr., the pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church of Harlem, New York, appeared as a participant at a church fundraising event. Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem was the largest Protestant congregation in the country in the early 1900's, with 10,000 members, and Powell, Sr. was a founder of the National Urban League and active in the NAACP.

In 1927, the great W.E.B. DuBois spoke at a lecture to raise funds for the new church. The first page headline of the Santa Monica Evening Outlook, dated Wednesday, February 23, 1927 read, 'Dubois Addresses Large Assemblage'. Dubois spoke to an audience of 700 Bay District residents assembled at the Ocean Park Municipal Auditorium.² "DuBois was an American sociologist, historian, civil rights activists, author, writer and editor. He rose to national prominence as the leader of the Niagara Movement, a group of African-American activists who

² Santa Monica Evening Outlook newspaper, Wednesday, February 23, 1927, Vol. L11, No, 54

sought equal rights for blacks and opposed the policies of accommodation and conciliation promoted by some leaders such as Booker T. Washington. He was a graduate of Harvard University and internationally known for his work in advocating for social justice, education and equality for African Americans.

DuBois died August 27, 1963. He left a legacy of wisdom, hope and trailblazing doctrines of advocacy for justice for African Americans. His words in his arousing speech at the Municipal Auditorium on February 3, 1927 where he spoke in support of the First Baptist Church of Venice urged African Americans to actively engage in improving their lives through education and assimilation. “The races of the United States must either live together and assimilate -- or fight.” (The Santa Monica Evening Outlook, February 3, 1927, *Dubois Addresses Large Assemblage*)

The historical presence and the resounding words of Dr. W.E.B. DuBois in 1927 are a gift of historical significance to the Oakwood Community. He had many words of quotable wisdom and one quote that is fitting for the current efforts to maintain First Baptist Church as a place of worship.

It is the growing custom to narrow control, concentrate power, disregard and disenfranchise the public; and assuming that certain powers by divine right of money-raising or by sheer assumption, have the power to do as they think best without consulting the wisdom of mankind.

W. E. B. Du Bois

Arthur Reese was on the lecture committee of the church that invited W.E.B. Dubois and a host of other notable persons. Among those whose name also appears in the church records is Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, who was also a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League. Historical documents indicated that Powell, Sr. was a social justice activist who protested against racial discrimination of African Americans and liberally encouraged his congregants to engage in protests. His presence along with that of W.E.B. DuBois speaks loudly and clearly of the social activism, relevance and significant influence of First Baptist Church.

As a Trustee of the Board, Reese signed the application for the new building in 1927. His notes describe the new church as a community effort:

“Mrs. Abbott Kinney, wife of the founder of Venice, donated the lumber for framing, the Harvey Brothers donated the foundation materials, and rock and sand were hauled by the Tabor Brothers Trucking. On June 10, 1928 the new church was dedicated, with Rev. J.W. Jordan officiating.”

The First Baptist Church of Venice was a major centerpiece of cultural and social life for the Venice and Santa Monica communities and is a major cultural marker of African American history to this day. A California Eagle newspaper article in 1934 announced how the First Baptist Church put on “An Evening of Music” by the George Garner Negro Chorus for 4,000 people in Venice. The article described the event:

“All in it was a beautifully arranged performance: beautifully executed and beautifully received; reflecting great credit to Arthur L. Reese, general chairman of arrangements and to George Garner, conductor, for “An evening of Music’ which will not soon be forgotten.” (Overr, O.O., reporter, California Eagle, August 10, 1934)

This is one of many cultural and social highlights of the Church’s integral relationship and significance to the community. Obviously, thousands of people near and far were profoundly touched by the cultural, educational, social and spiritual guidance of the church.

According to Jataun Valentine, grandniece of Irvin Tabor, members of the Reese/Tabor clan who were Baptist generally attended First Baptist Church in Venice at one time or another and the relatives that were Catholic still attended many family and community activities at First Baptist, as it was an important center of the community, whether one was Baptist or not.

There were 63,700 blacks in Los Angeles in 1940. This number grew to 763,000 in 1970, as World War II defense production skyrocketed in Los Angeles. Meanwhile, the working-class communities of the Oakwood section of Venice continued to grow. The population of blacks in Oakwood tripled between 1940 and 1950. By the mid-20th century, a mix of neighborhood commercial establishments had emerged in the area, including a beauty salon, repair shops, secondhand thrift stores, a barbeque restaurant and other businesses to serve the residents of the modest dwellings of Oakwood. The area attracted a diversity of organizations and political activists including the Neighborhood Adult Participation Project (NAPP), Project Action, the One Stop EDD Service Center and others. Rev. Holmes allowed community activists to hold community organizing meetings in the church.

As the Oakwood community grew, so did the congregation of First Baptist Church. Soon it needed a bigger space. In 1966, plans were filed for a new home that was to be built at 685 Westminster, directly across the street from the building that was designed by Paul R. Williams. The new building was designed by George R. Williams in a mid-century style.

It was during this period of African-American residency in Oakwood that First Baptist Church built the church at 685 Westminster, where it currently sits, almost in original condition. Residents tell of their relatives who pledged their mortgages to help raise money for the new church. Oscar Rhone, a member of a 4th generation family of Venice, attests that his grandmother, Roberta Donaldson, was one of the individuals who supported the church in this way. After raising the \$250,000 required to build the church, it was dedicated on Sunday, March 30, 1968. Dr. C. H. Hampton, President of the Western Baptist State Convention of California and Vice President of the National Baptist Convention served as the guest preacher. Music was presented by the three choirs of the church. Its mid-century architectural style spoke of the modern, forward thinking of this congregation in Venice beach. It was reported by the Santa Monica Evening Outlook newspaper on March 30, 1968 that nearly 700 persons attended the ceremony. The photo that accompanied the Evening Outlook story captured the image of Bishop Holmes at the entrance of the doorway to the new church and behind him is the throng of parishioners following him as they transitioned from the old church which stood tall in the background -- a powerful and symbolic image. (See photo on page 14 of this document)

Bishop E. L. Holmes served as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Venice for forty-four years. He was a fixture in the Oakwood community. He built his home on Brooks Avenue in Oakwood so he could share the daily experiences of his parishioners first hand. He was a member of

various local community organizations including the Venice Rotary Club, the Venice Chamber of Commerce, the Boys and Girls Club of Venice, the Board of Judges for Venice High School and the Police Expo of Los Angeles. A center for African-American youth opened during the 1970s, serving teenagers in Oakwood many whom attended First Baptist Church. In the year 2000, City Council Member, Ruth Galanter, designated via Council resolution, 7th and Westminster as Bishop E.L. Holmes Square in recognition of his historical significance. The embossed plaque is a constant reminder of the special significance of the person, the place and the space, i.e. Bishop Holmes, the Church and the land. Bishop Holmes passed away in 1963 and memorial services were held for him in the Church.

Residents state that the church throughout its history was a haven for the black community. Music was an important element in the church services and ministry. For much of its history there were three choirs, including the Adult Choir, the Junior Choir and the Boys' Junior Choir. For many of the young men in the community, the choir was a haven. One participant, Rev. Dennis Moore, recalls that the Boys Choir was "a social and religious place where you could go and get help, have fun and not worry about negative forces on the outside." He has fond memories of the church, "I still remember Deacon McCleary and Deacon Fordham. They were both very helpful to me. I spent a lot of my growing up years at the church with my friends and older boys I looked up to.

Another congregant, David Johnson, a third generation resident of Venice, recalls that the Church was "the center of all our social lives.... It fostered our social relationships. It kept us positive. It gave us inspiration to overcome adversities. We could support each other. And it was kind of the jumping off point for all our other organizations."

Carol Ann Powell shared that her parents moved to Venice in about 1929. Her dad, Arthur Powell, passed away in July 2018 only a few days shy of his 102nd birthday and was an active member of First Baptist Church for many years until his illness kept him from attending service. Carol and her siblings attended church with her parents from the time she was 10 years old and continued throughout the years.

Carol said in an interview August 10, 2018:

"For me and by brothers and sisters it was a happy place for us to go. We wanted to go to church even when it wasn't Sunday. It kept me and my friends out of trouble. My sister Gail said it taught her how to be a lady. The Church influenced so many, so many of us. It brings tears to my eyes to think about it not being there."

Alma Collins was born in Venice in 1950 in a house on Westminster down the street from the Church. The house is no longer there. She attended First Baptist with her mom and participated in holiday plays and activities planned for Easter, Christmas and other special occasions. In an interview on August 9, 2018 with Naomi Nightingale, PhD, Alma shared what the Church means to her:

"The Church is a cultural monument. It is the church I attended as a little girl. My mom, dad and grandmother attended that church. My father was a contractor and he built that church. The Church stands for our community. Our culture and history is being systematically erased from our community and that is so wrong."

Much of the “Venice of America” history is well known and documented. It came out of the singular vision of Abbot Kinney, whose dream of a cultural and entertainment center for Venice was enhanced by the talent and artistry of Arthur Reese. Unfortunately, much of the African American history of Venice is not well known or documented. The absence of documentation makes it easier to dismiss the relevance of the rich, distinctive cultural, social, history of African Americans; but, First Baptist Church of Venice and Bishop E. L. Holmes have history, known and documented. The relevance of the church, its history, the land, and the people -- ordinary and prominent - is imprinted with the spirit of their presence and that cannot be changed.

Venice is an artistic and cultural beacon for Los Angeles. In addition, Abbot Kinney’s extension of employment opportunities to Reese and Tabor resulted in the racial and cultural diversity that the Venice community is known for and enjoys today. Venice includes Oakwood, one of the first established intentional African-American communities in the city. Historically, it has been the most socially, racially, economically and culturally diverse coastal neighborhood in California.

Summary

So what is the significance of First Baptist Church? That question is synonymous with what is the significance of the African American people and their contributions to the Venice Community over the past 108 years? The answer is as profound as the question. It speaks to the collaborative blood, sweat, tears and hard earned funds of the people who pooled their monies to build the First Baptist Church. They, then, compounded the efforts, time and money to import Pastor and Mrs. Holmes to be the Minister and First Lady of the Church. It is the heart and soul of every individual that is infused in every brick, nail, plank and plaque it took to manifest this place of worship -- this House of God, First Baptist Church. It is the spiritual cornerstone and visual monument that kept a community grounded and protected in times of separatist, racist and discriminatory practices of housing, insurance redlining, employment, education, politics, and social justice. It is a significant historical site of a people and their daily lives no different than Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA, founded in 1886, or Phillips Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church in Santa Monica, CA founded in 1906 or Santa Monica African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church by the Sea, founded in 1906. All were founded by African Americans in their relegated communities on their relegated, bought or bestowed land. They are all churches built as Houses of Worship by African Americans seeking their own space where prayer, culture, beliefs, social justice, hope and religious freedom formed a collective faith of protection from societal ills. The same is true and thus is also a contributing factor to the historical significance of First Baptist Church.

In 1912 Venice, CA was an evolving community of African Americans who came to this small beach front place to work, live, raise their children and create a place representing their culture, traditions, religious freedom, recreation and social life. In this basically sand and swamp space where they were forced to live due to the redlining and discriminatory practices of the time, African Americans took the least of what was made available to them and made the most of it. They built or purchased homes, owned and operated grocery stores, worked hard for Abbot Kinney or other wealthy business persons or corporations. And, they built churches in which to nurture their religious beliefs, provide a refuge particularly when Ku Klux Klan threats reminded them they had not left the racism of the Jim Crow south in their native states of Arkansas, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Georgia or from whatever southern state they came, but that it was living behind its white hooded outfits just as real in Venice as it had been from where they came.

The African American pioneers of Venice, Arthur Reese and Irving Tabor, who worked for Abbot Kinney enhanced their lives and built housing for their families from the murky ground while helping Kinney build his dream world of canals, and piers and fantasy lands. The original African American settlers of Venice cultivated the 1.5 square mile of separate but unequal land that was a part of the then City of Venice, CA. In the area boundaries in which African Americans were allowed to live the First Baptist Church was built by the first black people to make Venice their home. It is significant to know that African Americans could not live anywhere else - under the threat of cross burnings by Ku Klux Klansmen - they were relegated to live in this 1.5 mile area. News articles of a 1922 Klan raid lists five men who were residents of Venice, CA and one man from Santa Monica, CA.

Brick by brick, pew by pew, stained glass by stained glass -- dedicated parishioners built it, funded it, owned it. When the membership grew too large to accommodate the Church they pooled their monies, time, talents and energy and erected their renewed First Baptist Church at the current site of the Church -- directly across the street on property owned by the Church. Pastor Holmes, of course, continued in his leadership position of the Church. It was a seamless transition; a celebration and testament for the "burning of the mortgage" signifying ownership of the property. This was the place that helped represent, unify and strengthen the community throughout the years. From the early 1900s when the first African Americans came to work in Venice and had to cling together, to barter their services, worship together and survive. With First Baptist Church as their rock, the African American people survived through the hardships and aftermath of wars, the great depression, and the daunting years of civil, economic and infrastructure neglect by the City of Los Angeles.

The Church had beautiful stained glass windows, a giant cross that reached towards the heavens accompanied by the scripted signage, "First Baptist Church" that lit up the night as a beacon for anyone who would come for the solace of worship, the comfort of communing and the spreading of the gospel that permeated the community. To have no regard for its history or for the people who are the fiber and fabric of the very foundation of the Church is reprehensible and blasphemous.

What is the significance? The people and the community, in general, would not have survived; would not have prospered to become homeowners, business owners, civil rights activists, community reformers and social leaders without the connectivity and the support of First Baptist Church, Pastor Holmes and its dedicated members. It is difficult to put to words the significance of something that is infused in the heart and soul of a people. The meaningfulness of sacrifices, the memories etched by generations of family members, the decades of attending services -- weddings, funeral services, concerts, christenings and other religious ceremonies -- that are infused within the walls and essence of this monumental historical edifice - all of these things and the people that represent the life and times of First Baptist Church are its greatest significance.

For all that it gave and has been to the people of Venice since its beginning, this Church and its land deserves to remain the spiritual legacy that it is. First Baptist Church tells the story of this special enclave of African American culture and life in this coastal city, the suburbanization of the residential development of Los Angeles, and the role of the African American church in the history of African Americans in Los Angeles. First Baptist was the spiritual, social and cultural center of the black community in Venice and is associated with individual leaders who contributed to the establishment of this unique community.

The story of the African-American community's role and the role of the church in creating and sustaining the special coastal community of Venice is one that starts in the late 1890s when blacks first moved to Venice. The story narrates the struggles and hardships suffered from discrimination, racism and segregation and of the successes of home ownership, entrepreneurship, and social celebrity experienced in spite of obstacles. Through the years the story speaks of progress born from the civil rights activism of the African-American community in Oakwood in the 1960's that produced community based programs, Head Start pre-school and 15 low-income apartment buildings. The story weaves through the 1980's and years beyond in this coastal town with First Baptist holding its space as a place of worship, refuge and tradition in the areas of ethnic heritage, religion and social history for its historical association with the African American community.

History is about the past. It is the stories that make meaning out of events and people and movements and the documentation of those things through print and through narrative. It is the ethnographical means of imprinting the past and the present for the benefit of the future. History cannot be eradicated because wealth privilege, bigotry, political bias, obfuscation or devaluing of people are promoted by self-serving power bases. Rather, stories are the voices of the past and the present and they keep alive the history that is important to one's cultural, social, and religious survival. This is indisputably true for First Baptist Church of Venice; there are 108 years of history within, around and throughout this place of worship.

Above all what must be recognized as the undeniable significance of the First Baptist Church of Venice and the rich cultural legacy of the early African American enclave of Venice is that our history matters.

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Written by Naomi Nightingale, PhD,
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First Baptist Church

Application for Historic-Cultural Monument

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