

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. **Place additional certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).**

1. Name of Property

historic name Ward Chapel AME Church
other names/site number _____
Name of Multiple Property Listing _____
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. Location

street & number 420 17th Street not for publication
city or town Cairo vicinity
state Illinois zip code _____
county _____

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,
I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.
In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance: ___ national ___ statewide ___ local
Applicable National Register Criteria: ___ A ___ B ___ C ___ D

Signature of certifying official/Title: Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer Date
Illinois Department of Natural Resources - SHPO

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official Date

Title State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:
___ entered in the National Register ___ determined eligible for the National Register
___ determined not eligible for the National Register ___ removed from the National Register
___ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

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5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply.)

Category of Property
(Check only **one** box.)

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	private
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - Local
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - State
<input type="checkbox"/>	public - Federal

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	building(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	district
<input type="checkbox"/>	site
<input type="checkbox"/>	structure
<input type="checkbox"/>	object

Contributing	Noncontributing	
0	0	buildings
0	0	site
0	0	structure
0	0	object
0	0	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

1

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)
Religion/Religious Facility

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)
Vacant/Not in use

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions.)
Late 19th and 20th Century Revivals

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions.)

foundation: Concrete

walls: Brick

roof: Asphalt

other

:

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Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity).

Summary Paragraph

Ward Chapel AME Church, commonly known as Ward Chapel, is located at 420 17th Street in Cairo, Alexander County, Illinois. Ward Chapel is located at the center of the block on 17th Street, between Washington Avenue/Ohio River Scenic Byway, and Dr. Martin Luther King Avenue. Ward Chapel was constructed in 1907, and rebuilt in 1918. Displaying modest Romanesque Revival ornamentation, the asymmetrical church building is a three-story rectangular masonry structure with a concrete foundation, a brick exterior, and a sloped shingled roof. A square bell tower is located at the southwest corner of the building. The churches' main entrance is set back behind three brick arches and accessed via a wide set of steps. A pediment of recessed courses of brick is located above the arches, with the same brick pattern repeated to the right, across the bell tower, and to the left. The building's secondary facades have rows of windows that repeat in a pattern across the first, second and third floors, with most window openings filled with original decorative art glass. A gabled shingle roof is hidden behind a parapet wall. The interior includes a pressed metal ceiling, decorative hanging light fixtures and a wraparound balcony. Ward Chapel is located within the geographical boundaries of the Cairo Historic District (NRIS# 79000815) added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1979, encompassing "most of the city between 33rd, Sycamore, Division, Park, Cedar and 4th Streets and the Ohio River."¹ Ward Chapel is contributing to the district but is not noted in the nomination by name or by address.

Narrative Description

Location and Setting

Ward Chapel is located on the north side of 17th Street within the southern section of the City of Cairo, Alexander County, Illinois. The property is located on lots 32, 33 and 34 of the 84th block of the First Addition to Cairo. The property is mid-block between Washington Avenue to the north, and Dr. Martin Luther King Avenue to the south. The property is located in a residential area of mid-20th century one and two story single family homes, interspersed by vacant sodded lots. To the north, along Washington Avenue, are a selection of municipal buildings, including the early 20th century Cairo Public Library, and the Cairo Fire Department and Police Department/Municipal Buildings, both housed in one-story mid-century buildings. The former Bennett Elementary School is located a block north, on 18th Street, and is in a midcentury modern style.

Cairo's architectural character is primarily expressed via extant buildings dating to the late 19th and early 20th century, with commercial buildings located primarily along Washington Avenue, and residential and religious buildings along secondary streets. In 1979, much of the area downtown was designated a National Register Historic District (Cairo Historic District, NRIS #79000815), an area bounded by Park Street, 33rd Street, Sycamore, 21st Street, Center Street, Cedar Street, Jefferson Street and 4th Street

¹Wagner, Robert, "Cairo Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1979, 3.

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and the Ohio River. At the time of listing, this district included 980 structures.² This district has experienced physical loss since the time of its original listing. Within the geographic boundaries of this district there are structures individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places, including the Old Custom House, located at 1400 Washington Avenue (NRIS#73000689), listed in 1973, and Magnolia Manor/Charles A. Gallagher House, located at 2700 Washington Avenue (NRIS#69000053) and listed in 1969.

Church Building

Exterior

Ward Chapel, located at 420 17th Street, is a three-story brick church building set on an exposed aggregate concrete foundation. The building is located on a sodded lot, with some mature trees towards the rear and left sides of the property. A sidewalk is located along the south side of the property, with a sodded parkway between the sidewalk and the street. To the left of the building is a sidewalk with a memorial and bench. The building is rectangular in plan and has a gable roof and displays modest Romanesque and Classical Revival elements throughout. The first floor/basement is located partially below ground. A single asymmetrical bell tower is located at the southern corner of the building. Across the primary and side elevations, the first floor of the building is an orange tinted common brick, laid in a common bond, while the second and third floors feature brick that is redder in tone. At the first floor, buttresses terminate with inset limestone across the primary and secondary facades.

The primary elevation is dominated by three arches that provide an inset for the primary entrance, accessed by a set of reinforced concrete steps. The concrete steps are flanked by four brick planters, two on each side, and have metal rails flanking the centermost steps. Between each of the brick arches is a concrete square. Above the arches is a vertical concrete section, with a frieze above. The frieze is inset with "A.M.E. Church." beside the frieze are two brackets, each with a bolt. Above the frieze is a pediment enclosed by recessed courses of brick laid in a decorative pattern. This course moves to the right across the primary facade, above the third floor, and to the left, around the belltower. The course continues underneath the gabled roof overhang, across the sides of the building. Underneath the pediment is a round section of limestone inset with "1918." An irregular parapet is located above the pediment, concealing the gabled roof behind it. The roof is clad in asphalt shingles over wood decking, with portions of the roof off of the left (north) elevation covered with a tarp. The bell tower rises above the third story, The belfry is open at the front, rear and side, with each opening separated by a fluted limestone column. The openings have limestone lintels. A multi-sided bell roof with a wide overhang tops the belfry. The belfry roof is clad in asphalt shingles. A finial completes the belfry roof.

Within the arched, three-story primary entranceway are three sets of reinforced concrete steps. The centermost steps lead up to the entrance to the sanctuary, while the lower steps, one to the left and one to the right, lead down to the first-floor/basement. The facade brick wraps around into the entranceway, with the remainder within reinforced concrete. To the left and right are sets of window openings, each with a pair of rectangular decorative art glass windows set within wood mullions. A second set of windows occur below the art glass windows. Window openings at the first-floor level are enclosed in paneled wood. The first-floor doors, one on each side and accessed via the lower left and right steps, are enclosed with plywood panels. A plinth flanks each side of the entranceway, and each plinth is enclosed by a metal rail. A further inset provides the sanctuary entrance, centered by two window openings. The sanctuary doorway and the window openings are enclosed outside with plywood, with wood doors and

²Wagner, Robert, "Cairo Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1979, 3.

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windows beneath. These doors and windows have decorative etched glass lights. Three window openings are located above the sanctuary entrance inset.

Decorative art glass windows overall feature white opalescent and colored glass, and are variations on Classical themes. Art glass windows within the bell tower and across the primary elevation and its corners feature a cross design with a circle.

Across each of the side elevations are three rows of windows, repeated bottom to top. These rows are separated by brick buttresses. The first floor on the left (south) side has three one over one windows in a row, as does the right (north) side. These window openings are glazed with clear glass. The second and third floor windows light the interior of the sanctuary within, which consists of the top two floors. Across the second floor, windows are a one over one style flanked with a rectangular side light, while the third story windows are arched, with three fixed panels. A decorative brick course dresses the top of the arched windows.

Art glass windows across the second floor feature a decorative swag pattern set within an ornamental colored glass frame. The arched windows above feature framed insets with a wreath pattern within. Within the colored glass wreaths are round painted sections depicting objects of an allegorical nature, such as bundles of wheat. A third-floor window opening off of the left (north) elevation, towards the center, is missing art glass, a second-floor window is also similarly missing art glass, while a window to the left is enclosed with a plywood panel.

The side elevations are symmetrical with the exception of a section towards the rear elevation. The brick exterior of this section has a slightly different tone than the first floor and second floor of the rest of the building. To the left (south), the first floor has one door at the far corner, with a window opening to the left that has been enclosed in plywood. To the right of this door is a window opening that has been bricked closed. Above the door is a one over one window with art glass on the second floor, while the third floor has a rectangular window with two glass panes. Across the right (north) elevation of this rear elevation section, there is a first-floor door with a door above and a door to the left, both of which provide access to the second floor. A one-story metal fire escape provides access to the interior. Above each second-floor door is a window opening on the third floor. The window opening to the left is enclosed with a plywood panel, while the opening to the right has a one over one plate glass window.

At the first floor of the rear elevation are three contemporary glass block windows located towards the right. Above, are two sets of contemporary one over one windows. A window at center has been enclosed with plywood. Above, just below the parapet, is a louvered vent opening. Steel angle braces are installed on the right side of the rear elevation.

Interior

First Floor/Basement

The first floor/basement includes a large multipurpose room, accessed by one of two doors from the primary elevation, or one of two doors off of the rear of the right (south) or left (north) elevations. The basement has a floor of concrete, over which contemporary linoleum tiles have been laid, with the exception of a room towards the rear, where a wood floor is present. Two sets of angled wood stairs within this room provide access to the sanctuary above, one to the left, and one to the right, while rooms further into the basement provide space for storage, restrooms, and a service area. Cast iron posts with simple capitals provide structural support. The ceiling is a mid-20th century addition/alteration, with wood joists and rafters hidden above. Modern/mid 20th century HVAC system ductwork is present at the rear of the basement. At the front of the basement, under the belltower, is a concrete baptistry. The baptistry is

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dressed in wood. A small room located on the opposite side of the front section of the basement, within the corner, has a set of angled stairs leading up to the sanctuary. Hanging light fixtures are modern/mid 20th century, and include pendant lights, as well as fluorescent lights affixed to the drop ceiling.

Church Sanctuary

The two-story church sanctuary is accessed from the basement via one of two sets of stairs at the rear, as well as one set in the opposite corner of the basement. The sanctuary is accessed from the primary elevation via a set of fixed light french doors, at the center of the rear. At the rear of the sanctuary is a wood altar with a pipe organ manufactured by the Wicks Organ Company of Highland Illinois. A second hand organ was installed in the church in 1918, with a second instrument installed in 1926. The 1926 organ is symmetrical in design, with an oak console below gold finished bronze pipes. A screen lattice is located on either side of the pipes. The altar is circular in design and is finished with a low wood rail with barbell shaped cutouts. Within the altar is a row of pews towards the rear, with a carved altar table and two podiums towards the front. Above the altar are three metal pendant lights hanging from chains. These lights have ornamental white glass shades. To the left and the right of the altar are two murals depicting praying angels, located above symmetrical doorways. The murals of the angels are mirrored with the expectation of text. To the left, the mural reads "Holy, "Holy" Holy." To the right, the mural reads "Lord God Almighty." Both of these murals are signed "J. Clark 4/65" indicating that they were painted in April 1965.

Three rows of seven oak pews are separated by two isles across the main floor of the sanctuary, providing seating for 450 persons. The sanctuary has wood flooring throughout, with sections towards the altar covered with carpet. A U-shaped wood balcony wraps around the rear and sides of the sanctuary. The balcony has opera chairs, and seats 250. Metal posts support the balcony via the ceiling, from above. Access to the balcony is provided via one of four access points at each corner of the third-floor interior. The balcony has wood panels with intermittent posts. The ceiling is clad in a decorative metal pattern that repeats across the ceiling of the sanctuary in rectangular sections. Across the center of the sanctuary, the metal pendant lights continue towards the primary entrance, while glass dome lights flank the sides within the rectangular sections of metal ceiling. A modern/mid 20th century sprinkler system spans across the ceiling, while radiators are present at intermittent locations against the walls of the first floor. Walls are clad in plaster with brick underneath.

Integrity

From the building's exterior to interior, Ward Chapel retains a remarkable level of integrity, and retains sufficient integrity to retain its historic significance. Ward Chapel's essential features have changed little since 1918, and are limited to changes to window opening materials at the basement level, as well as interventions performed to secure and enclose the building after religious services were no longer performed after 2011, and the building ceased to be used on a regular basis for other activities. The exterior and interior layouts and room functions have remained unaltered.

The building retains its original form and roofline as well as general character defining and historical features and materials. At the building's exterior, these interventions include the enclosure of the front entrance with plywood from the outside, beyond which the original wood door with cut glass light remain. At the left (south) corner of the primary façade, window openings have been enclosed with wood paneling, while the window openings at the right (north) corner of the primary façade have been replaced with contemporary glass and wood paneling, respectively. Original doors at the rear of the left and right façade, one on the left and three on the right, have been replaced over time and are contemporary. A window opening at the rear of the left elevation has been bricked in. Window glass at the basement level across the left and right façades have been replaced yet retain their original one over one glass

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arrangement. At the buildings' rear elevation, three windows at the first floor/basement level have been enclosed with contemporary glass block. On the right façade, one original art glass window has been enclosed in plywood, while two other sections of art glass windows to the right are missing sections. These sections are enclosed by plastic tarp. All windows retain their original location, and no new openings have been added. Windows that have been replaced and or are missing were primarily utilitarian in nature and are peripheral to the art glass windows on the first and second floor. The art glass windows appear overall to feature their original sheet glass, comes, ties and frames.

Original features and materials are prevalent throughout the interior of Ward Chapel. These features are the strongest in the sanctuary, where the alter, pews, balcony, ornamental tin ceiling, art glass windows and light fixtures are all original to the building. Each of these decorative elements are mentioned in a description of the churches' interior published shortly after it opened in 1918.³ The first floor/basement retains its simple original features, such as the cast iron posts. The integrity of the interior is further authenticated by photos taken in 1970 of the basement and the church alter, at the later end of the period of significance⁴. The Wick Pipe Organ was installed in 1926. A mural dated "1965" by an unknown artist is still extant in the sanctuary.

Water infiltration through an opening in the roof has caused portions of the ceiling to collapse, and has damaged the interior of the church, including the balcony, floors and wall systems. While condition issues are pronounced, they do not affect the ability for the church to convey its significance or be easily recognized as the location where significant events occurred.

³"A.M.E. Church to be Used Sunday by Congregation," *Cairo Evening Citizen*, January 4, 1919.

⁴See Figures 9, 10 and 12.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Ethnic Heritage-Black

Social History

Civil Rights

Period of Significance

1918-1970

Significant Dates

1918, 1945, 1962, 1969-1970

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation (if applicable)

N/A

Architect/Builder

Undetermined

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations).

Ward Chapel AME Church, commonly known as Ward Chapel, is locally significant under National Register Criterion A for Ethnic Heritage, Civil Rights, and Social History as a property associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history. Ward Chapel has played a significant role in Black life and the pursuit of social justice for Black Cairoites for over a hundred years. Established in 1863, and located at the property at 420 17th Street since 1907, and rebuilt after a fire in 1918, Ward Chapel was the first Black church organized in Cairo, and is associated with significant events relating to the multi-decade, multi organizational effort to desegregate the city, and improve the social and economic circumstances of Black Cairoites that were harmed by systemic and structural racism. These events include strategization by Black Cairo School District Teachers and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for pay equality in 1945, Non-violent protest trainings and “sit-ins” of businesses and public facilities organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1962, the organization and deployment of a three-year economic boycott of white businesses in Cairo from 1969 to 1971, and the establishment of a medical clinic run by the “Flying Black Medics” in 1970, a group of doctors and nurses that flew from Chicago to provide medical services to Black Cairoites in the basement of Ward Chapel.

The period of significance for Ward Chapel is from 1918 to 1970, the year the current church was constructed (rebuilt after a fire), until 1970, when the church was transformed into a medical clinic for the “Flying Black Medics.” After 1970, the church continued to hold services, but events related to social justice and civil rights activities ceased to occur after the economic boycott ended in 1971. The church meets Criteria Consideration A, as a religious building that derives its primary significance from architecture.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Race Relations and Black Cairoites

Located at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, Cairo is the southernmost city in Illinois, and the seat of Alexander County. Set on a grid, the City of Cairo is shaped by each river, and bordered by Missouri and Kentucky. Founded in 1818 by eastern speculators and southern planters, Cairo’s first known permanent structures, a waterfront tavern and store, were built by enslaved people.⁵ Cairo’s strategic location, providing access to ports such as Louisville, Cincinnati, New Orleans, St. Louis and Memphis, made it ideal for river commerce. In 1855, the first train arrived from Chicago over the new Illinois Central Railroad. By the end of the 1850s, Cairo became southern Illinois’s largest city, with a population of nearly 2,000.⁶

Despite Illinois entering the Union as a Free State in 1818, conditions for Black Americans were decidedly inhospitable. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and the 1853 Black Law, banning free Black Americans from entering Illinois, stymied the growth of the Black population of Cairo until the 1870s.⁷ Exceptions were made during the Civil War for Black Americans migrating to the military Contraband Camp site, located in the delta at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Operating from 1861 to 1865, the Contraband Camp served as a military recruitment center for freedom seekers coming to Cairo via the Underground Railroad and

⁵Pimblott, Kerry. *Faith in Black Power: Religion, Race and Resistance in Cairo, Illinois*. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2017, 25.

⁶Ibid, 26.

⁷Illinois Black Law (1853) Office of the Illinois Secretary of State, Accessed March 10, 2024.

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provided an opportunity for formerly enslaved people to enlist with the U.S. Army, and for others to find jobs within the camp. Within two years, the camp would come to have housing, a hospital as well as a school.⁸ The passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments between 1865 and 1879 abolished slavery, ensured freed persons citizenship, and allowed Black men the right to vote, respectively. However, these amendments provided freedom on a strictly theoretical basis. Black Americans were regularly subject to racialized violence, and did not have access to the same employment, housing or educational resources as white Americans via de facto segregation, even in northern states and cities like Cairo.⁹

In May 1861, The United States Union Army founded Fort Defiance in Cairo, establishing the city as the base for army and naval operations on the western front.¹⁰ As enslaved Black Americans began fleeing the Southern states as the American Civil War raged, Cairo became an important stop on the Liberty Line of the Underground Railroad, with many Black Americans finding their way to the Contraband Camp. As the war concluded, Cairo became a stopover to other Northern cities, as well as a place where wage-work offered a slight degree of economic and social independence. Yet Black Cairoites were banned from using streetcars, hospitals, parks, and churches, and from patronizing white businesses.¹¹ In response, Black Cairoites established their own businesses, clubs, institutions, and houses of worship. During the decades where de facto or de jure segregation was the standard, these resources provided Black residents of Cairo with the ability to thrive against systems of exclusion, particularly as Black southerners moved north in search of better economic, social, and educational opportunities. By the late 1880s, Cairo's Black population was at 36%.¹² Cairo's population would peak in 1920 but would fall in the subsequent decades due to job losses, infrastructure projects that failed to serve the city center, and most notably and significantly, the economic and social effects of racial discrimination.

Racial tension in Cairo was maintained by local customs, racialized divisions of labor, and persisting segregation in the school systems, solidifying Cairo's reputation as a "southern town in a northern state."¹³ Movie theaters consigned Black patrons to the balcony, and swimming pools and parks designated separate areas for each race. Wages for Black workers were low, providing Black Cairoites with few opportunities to accumulate wealth, and forcing them to accept substandard housing. Segregation hardened through the development of wealthy white residential areas, leaving Black Cairoites with housing in vice districts or low lying, flood prone areas.¹⁴ When white systems of power perceived Black citizens as testing their positions as a lower class, those systems of power would resort to acts of intimidation and violence, including the lynching of Black citizens. The slow decline of Cairo's position as a center of the railroad economy beginning at the turn of the 20th century would also exacerbate racial tensions and cause many white Cairoites to incorrectly blame the downturn not on factors relating to economics, but by the environment of racial tension that Black Cairoites had created themselves.

Houses of worship were particularly critical as a place where Black Cairoites could gather away from racial tension and worship outside of white control. Unsurprisingly, Cairo's first Black Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal (AME) churches were established in the Contraband Camp alongside the camp's housing, school

⁸"Contraband Camp in Cairo, Illinois, The Network to Freedom Accepts New Listing" National Park Service, 2024.

⁹Champney, Brent M. S, "The Peculiar Climate of this Region," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Volume 10, 2014 146.

¹⁰Pimblott, 32.

¹¹McAdam, Doug. *Political Process and the development of a Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1999, 48.

¹²Pimblott, Kerry. *Faith in Black Power: Religion, Race and Resistance in Cairo, Illinois*. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2017.

¹³Pimblott, 51.

¹⁴Pimblott, 61.

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and hospital. These churches would grow to serve as the foundation for other community focused ventures, such as schools, political organizations, and benevolent groups.¹⁵

The African Methodist Episcopal Church

The African Methodist Episcopal Church, or AME Church, is an independent protestant denomination organized in the United States in 1794 by formerly enslaved Black Americans.¹⁶ The AME Church grew out of the Free African Society, which founders Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and others established in Philadelphia in 1787 after facing racial discrimination from mainline Methodism.¹⁷ The most substantial era of development occurred during and immediately after the Civil War and into Reconstruction, as formerly enslaved people looked to establish new social and religious communities.¹⁸ The Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church is the mother church of the AME denomination.¹⁹

The establishment of independent denominations by Black Americans in the context of a national environment of racism, segregation and discrimination allowed an opportunity for not only worship, but leadership, community building, self-expression and social action. While AME churches were created for religious purposes, they were often places where non-secular activities occurred, whether towards community building or liberation—in the spirit of the founding of the church due to the exclusionary nature of mainline methodism.

History of the Ward Chapel AME Congregation

Ward Chapel AME was formed in 1863 in the home of James and Mariah Renfrow (spelled alternatively as Renfro) on 15th Street between Walnut Street and Cedar. Ward Chapel originally had eight members.²⁰ Reverend George Jacob organized the group, which held meetings in member's homes. With the rise in migrants from the South, the congregation next moved into a house they converted into a worship space.²¹ According to oral tradition, Ward Chapel was a stop on the Underground Railroad Liberty Line in Illinois, assisting enslaved persons in escaping from bondage as they made their way to Chicago or other points north, with some remaining in Cairo. From the beginning of the founding of Ward Chapel, its members would be active in political and social matters. Member John Gladney served as Cairo's first Black elected police constable, and John J. Bird became Cairo's first Black police magistrate in 1873. In 1875, the church purchased the first pipe organ owned by a Black house of worship in Cairo.²²

The congregation would move from houses to its first purpose-built structure in 1878, which was destroyed by a storm that same year. In 1881, the rebuilt church would be destroyed again, this time by a tornado. In 1881, the membership built a structure at the present site, and it was renamed for Bishop Reverend Thomas Marcus Decatur Ward.²³ Frequent revivals around the turn of the 20th century built up Ward Chapel's membership, but

¹⁵Pimblott, Kerry Louise, "Soul Power: The Black Church and the Black Power Movement in Cairo, Illinois, 1969-74" PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 44.

¹⁶Mead, Frank S. and Samuel S. Hill. *Handbook of Denominations in the United States (11th Edition)*, Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2001, 211.

¹⁷Ibid, 211.

¹⁸"Our History" African Methodist Episcopal Church Website, Accessed March 10, 2024.

¹⁹Mead, Frank S. and Samuel S. Hill, 212.

²⁰Pimblott, 35.

²¹"Notes on Morning Star Free Will Baptist and Ward Chapel A.M.E. churches in Cairo, Illinois", *Illinois Writers Project*, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Chicago, Illinois.

²²Pimblott, 17.

²³"Notes on Morning Star Free Will Baptist and Ward Chapel A.M.E. churches in Cairo, Illinois", *Illinois Writers Project*, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Chicago, Illinois.

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another fire would almost completely destroy the church in 1904.²⁴ The congregation built its next structure in 1907, on the site of the current church with “modern stairways and halls.” On November 16th, 1914 the building burned in a fire, an event which was captured in a poem by a member of Ward Chapel:

Ode to the Burning of Ward Chapel AME by Miss Edmonia Watkins

We imagine we see you on 17th Street Stil,
We imagine we see Rev. Douglasses skill.
But when the truth dawns our eyes will fill
Ward Chapel lies in ashes and always will.
Our dear Ward Chapel on that favorite ground
The new remodeled building has burned to the ground

We loved her, we loved her now she is gone
To number with buildings in a different form
For in ashes and cinders a sight to alarm,
Dear Ward Chapel has fallen, but not from a storm
The dear Ward Chapel where much joy we found,
The remodeled building has burned to the ground.

When the members of Ward Chapel determined that it would cost \$25,000 in contractor fees to rebuild the church, they determined to do the work themselves.²⁵ Reverend Fredrick Douglas served as carpenter, while laypersons John Penick and Charles Bowlar did the concrete and brickwork, respectively.²⁶ The *Cairo Evening Citizen* reported that “the members helped in any way that they could, with the result that their \$25,000 church cost them \$13,500 and they have an indebtedness of only about \$6,000 upon it, as they began to use it.”²⁷

The rise of the AME faith in the United States coincided with an era in church design that embraced revival styles. The architecture of Ward Chapel displays Romanesque Revival attributes, and shares design similarities with both other AME churches and churches purpose-built for Black congregations during the early 20th century.

In 1900, the AME Church established the Church Extension Department. Dedicated to the acquisition of property and the design and construction of church buildings, the department produced manuals on the architecture of church buildings. In 1908, the AME Church appointed a supervising architect, John Anderson Lankford.²⁸

Completed/rebuilt in 1918, the present church was built on the site of its predecessor. It was a “very neat brick structure with a concrete basement, which besides housing the heating plant, will be used for the Sunday school,”²⁹ The *Cairo Evening Citizen* continued. Noting the art glass and other elements of the interior of the new church, the newspaper stated “the church has art glass windows which let in a flood of softened light by day and at night the indirect lighting system gives the same softened light. The fixtures are quite ornamental as are all of the appointments of the church. There is also a steel ceiling.” The congregation continued to grow, and by 1925 had multiple clubs, a school, choirs and auxiliaries. Secular activities and gatherings at the church provided an opportunity for Black Cairoites to discuss current events, politics, and also provide a safe space for

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵“A.M.E. Church to be Used Sunday by Congregation,” *Cairo Evening Citizen*, January 4, 1919.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Caldwell, Charlotte, “The Building Culture of the African Methodist Episcopal Church”, *SAH Archipedia*, accessed March 10, 2024.

²⁹Ibid.

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dialogue about the oppression and inequities that the Black community experienced in nearly every aspect of life. During the Great Depression, Ward Chapel moved from formal liturgies and classical recitals to embrace Gospel music and choirs, as well as ministerial and worship styles that spoke to a middle-class audience.³⁰

While the architect of Ward Chapel is not known, aspects of its design bear resemblance to the works of Wallace A. Rayfield, who taught at the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, a historically Black college in Macon County, Alabama. Rayfield is believed to be the second formally trained Black architect in the United States, and opened the first architectural practice in Alabama founded by a Black architect.³¹ Rayfield designed buildings for construction across nineteen states, including Illinois, and sold blueprints through mail order catalogs and books on church design, many of which were sold to AME churches, and evoked shared design attributes with Ward Chapel, including ornamentation, brickwork, and layout.³² A specialist in religious architecture, including Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama (NRIS # 800000696) Rayfield was the Superintending Architect for the Freedmen's Aid Society, which was supported by Black religious denominations across the northern states during Reconstruction.³³ Ward Chapel is not one of Rayfield's three hundred and fifty nine known structures, and while there is no direct evidence that links Ward Chapel to Rayfield or any other architect, the full scope of Rayfield's work is also unknown.

Social Action at Ward Chapel AME Church

While other Black churches in Cairo, including Baptist congregations, had sufficient physical space to host large worship and community gatherings, Ward Chapel set itself apart due the hierarchical structure of the greater AME church that oversaw it in providing an environment where social action could occur. While the denomination's insistence on itinerant ministry often meant that church leadership was rarely from the local community, the ministry attracted, retained and supported the education of its pastors. This promotion of an educated ministry attracted Black middle-class professionals that were educated themselves, including teachers, business owners, and skilled craftspeople. The worship style at Ward Chapel leaned towards the analytical and subdued, as opposed to the rapturous and lively, which further appealed to middle class Black Cairoites. A position within a higher social class allowed the members of Ward Chapel the time and resources to devote to social causes, and positioned Ward Chapel to grow to take the lead on social action during the modern Civil Rights movement in Cairo.

This ability to meet and discuss injustice without fear of intimidation from white segregationists or white citizens councils allowed Ward Chapel to grow into a position of political and cultural preeminence within the Black community while remaining a safe haven. While Ward Chapel was historically located in a Black section of Cairo, it was also close in proximity to the segregated Pyramid Courts public housing complex, which would also become a location where social action would develop from. The churches lay leaders and often the members of the congregation as a whole co-organized with other social justice groups, both local, regional, and national, who needed Ward Chapel to support their causes in numbers. Ward Chapel was a central location for continuous activity around social justice issues, and provided the political will and power to carry out actions that contributed to the role that Cairo would play during the Civil Rights era, a local echo of actions that would occur across the country in segregated cities and places.

Negro City Teachers Ass'n v. Schultz (1945)

³⁰Pimblott, 61.

³¹Dorough, Allan A. *The Architectural Legacy of Wallace A. Rayfield*, Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2010.

³²Ibid, 5.

³³Boone, Richard Gause. *The Freedmen's Aid Society: Education in the United States: Its History from the Earliest Settlements*. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971, 351.

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In January 1942, Black Cairoites gathered at Ward Chapel to hear a speech given by George Cross, a member of Graham Chapel AME in Mounds, Illinois, on the lynching of a Black man in Sikeston, Missouri. The packed crowd included Sumner High School teacher Hattie B. Kendrick, who was a member of Ward Chapel³⁴. Also attending that meeting were mechanic Henry Dyson and school teacher Omitress Sparks, who gathered signatures to secure a new local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Cairo.³⁵ In the late 1930s and 1940s, the NAACP was experiencing success suing local school districts for wage inequalities through the NAACP's Legal Defense and Education Fund, established in 1939, of which Lawyer Thurgood Marshall (1908-1993) was director-council.³⁶

In 1945, working with Democratic state legislator Corneal Davis, and organizing out of Ward Chapel, twenty-six Black school teachers, including Hattie Kendrick as a named plaintiff, filed a petition for injunction against the Cairo Board of Education, and the county and Superintendents of Schools.³⁷ The suit claimed that Black teachers in the district were not being paid as much as white teachers. Marshall successfully petitioned the court to release records exposing the city's discriminatory pay scale.³⁸ *Negro City Teachers Ass'n v. Schultz* was won by the plaintiffs, and a consent decree was imposed on the city of Cairo mandating equal pay for Black teachers.³⁹

School Desegregation

In the years after World War II, the Cairo chapter of the NAACP focused on school desegregation. Ward Chapel continued to serve as a place where organizational activities would occur, with both members and church leadership playing an active role in the struggle. Ward Chapel Reverend Arthur Jelks was Cairo NAACP branch president when the NAACP mounted a campaign to encourage Black parents to transfer their children to white schools in 1952.⁴⁰ Parents that participated were met with misinformation from school officials, while some were the subject of racial violence. At the urging of white business owners who were against desegregation, Cairo city police went to Ward Chapel and arrested Reverend Jelks as well as other church members, accusing them and the NAACP of "jeopardizing the safety of black students by forcing them to enroll in all white schools."⁴¹ A grand jury found no grounds for indictment. The desegregation effort proved successful; by March, 1953, twenty-one Black students had been integrated into Cairo's formerly white schools, a year before the U.S. Supreme Court would rule that segregation of public schools was unconstitutional via the unanimous ruling in the civil rights case *Brown v. Board of Education* on May 17, 1954.⁴² Activists from Ward Chapel were subject to repercussions for their participation and support of the desegregation campaign. The Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, of which Ward Chapel was a member, were denied parade and gathering permits from the city. Members of Ward Chapel were denied business licenses, and as one of the few Black school teachers to support the desegregation campaign, Hattie Kendrick was dismissed by the Cairo School Board, and would never teach in public schools again.⁴³

³⁴Public school teacher, civil rights activist, and longtime Ward Chapel lay leader Hattie B. Kendrick (1894-1989) provided audiotaped recordings of events associated with Ward Chapel starting in 1973 until her death. These recordings are housed at the Library of Congress.

³⁵Pimblott, 65.

³⁶Ibid, 65.

³⁷"Negro Teachers at Cairo Sue for Equal Pay," *The Belleville News-Democrat*, February 6, 1945.

³⁸"Equal Pay for Negro Teachers Asked in Suit," *Alton Evening Telegraph*, February 6, 1945.

³⁹Seng, Michael P. "The Cairo Experience: Civil Rights Litigation in a Racial Powder Keg", 61 Or. L. Rev. 285 (1982).

⁴⁰Pimblott, 72.

⁴¹Pimblott, 74.

⁴²"Brown v. Board of Education", *archives.gov*. Accessed March 20 2024.

⁴³Herda, Ann, "Black Women's Inspirational Leadership in the Civil Rights Movement: A Case Study," *Southern Illinois University*, Carbondale, 1994, 45.

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The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) comes to Cairo

Repercussions leveled against the participants in school desegregation efforts created disagreements within Ward Chapel's leadership and members regarding how to support social causes. This organizational turmoil caused Reverend Jelks to leave the congregation in 1953, which according to Kendrick, created a "time of problems and stagnation for the church."⁴⁴

In 1959, the Illinois AME conference appointed Reverend Blane Ramsey to Ward Chapel. The thirty-five-year-old Blane soon began to preach a social gospel that marshaled scripture to issue direct challenges to systems of racial discrimination and segregation. Ward Chapel established a new Social Action Commission, and Reverend Ramsey joined Hattie Kendrick on the Cairo NAACP executive board.⁴⁵ Reverend Ramsey's commitment to social action and inspired sermons would soon inspire a sixteen-year-old Charles Koen (1945-2018), a student at Sumner High School who lived in Cairo's segregated Pyramid Courts housing project, to see the injustices leveled on Black Cairoites through segregation and racism. Koen's great grandfather had helped build Ward Chapel, and his family maintained a contemporary connection with the church.⁴⁶ In 1960, Reverend Ramsey and Hattie Kendrick created the Ward Chapel Social Action Commission. This commission was intended to coordinate activities "in the areas of social, race and economic relations as well as community cooperation."⁴⁷ Meanwhile, Reverend Ramsey, inspired by other activist ministers from the south, began to put pressure on Cairo's religious and political leaders to address widespread practices of discrimination. In 1961, Ramsey petitioned Cairo's all-white city council to create an interracial council to address discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodation, and disrupted meetings of the all-white Cairo ministerial association, chastising them for their unchristian-like indifference to the plight of Black Cairoites. While these efforts by Reverend Ramsey were unsuccessful, Ramsey and other activists began to turn towards other tactics, and the groups that were deploying them successfully, including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

SNCC was a group of Black college students formed out of Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1960, emerging out of the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). SNCC believed in nonviolent social action as a way to achieve political and social goals. SNCC's founders included former SCLC director Ella Baker, activists Diane Nash, Bernard Lafayette, James Bevel, Marion Berry (who would go on to serve as Mayor of the District of Columbia), and future U.S. Representative John Lewis. While the group frequently strategized and coordinated with other groups like CORE and SCLC, as well as local activist groups where their activities took place, SNCC operated autonomously, and each decision that SNCC made was agreed upon by the members as a collective.⁴⁸

In May 1961, members of SNCC launched the Freedom Rides to challenge segregation on interstate buses and bus terminals, with the intention to ride from Washington D.C. to New Orleans.⁴⁹ The riders, twelve in all, encountered violence when they reached Rock Hill, South Carolina, where John Lewis and two other riders were beaten for entering the white waiting room. The Freedom Fighters declined to press charges, and the group continued South.⁵⁰ On May 14th, a violent mob of over a hundred people, including members of the Ku Klux Klan, met the group in Anniston, Alabama. One of the buses was firebombed, causing the ride to be terminated. The activists then flew to New Orleans.⁵¹

⁴⁴Kendrick-Brooks Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Pimblott, 82.

⁴⁷"A Brief Historical Sketch of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1787-1963", Cairo Historical Preservation Project Collection.

⁴⁸Carson, Clayborne. *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995, 159.

⁴⁹Clayborne, 161.

⁵⁰Ibid, 163.

⁵¹Ibid, 164.

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The Cairo Nonviolent Freedom Committee (CNFC) and Cairo's "Sit-Ins" (1962)

In the spring of 1962, Reverend Ramsey reached out to SNCC organizers in Nashville, where the student movement was strongest, asking SNCC to participate in a campaign in Cairo against segregation. SNCC agreed, mounting the organization's first integration effort north of the Ohio River.⁵² SNCC organizers asked Ward Chapel lay leaders to mobilize local high school students in advance of their visit to participate in direct action campaigns. Charles Koen took this responsibility, forming the Cairo Nonviolent Freedom Committee (CNFC), headquartered at Ward Chapel. By the time SNCC fieldworkers John Lewis, Mary McCollum, James Peake, and Joy Reagon arrived from Nashville in June, Charles Koen had brought together over seventy Sumner high school students, and had marshaled support from a new SNCC chapter at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale.⁵³

Operating from the basement of Ward Chapel, SNCC activists trained the Cairo activists, most of whom were in their teens and early twenties, on the methods of nonviolent resistance. The group set their sights on a small number of white restaurants and hotels in Cairo, where they would enter the establishment, ask for service, and refuse to leave if service was denied. On June 17, 1962, activists from SNCC and the CNFC arrived at the Mark Twain Cafe and Cocktail Lounge at 68-915 Washington Street. In the book *The Cairo Story: And The Round-Up of Black Leadership* by Reverend Koen, Koen recalled walking past the whites-only Mark Twain Cafe on a hot summer night as a teenager, "Longing to go in...and enjoying what the whites were enjoying—all the fine food, fine music, with the comfort of air conditioning."⁵⁴ Arriving at the restaurant, Koen and the group sat down, and Koen ordered hamburgers. Receiving pushback from the waitress, Koen calmly repeated the group's order and asked the waitress if she was aware that they were entitled to service under the Illinois Public Accommodations Law. She threatened to call the police. Another group was denied service at the Cairo Hotel.⁵⁵ The owner of Mack's Barbecue turned a hose on activists, while SNCC field secretary Mary McCollum was stabbed in the thigh for leading an interracial group seeking service in the restaurant.⁵⁶

On June 28th, a spokesman for Illinois Governor Otto Kerner stated that the Human Relations Commission would investigate the incident.⁵⁷ As the media began to cover the sit-ins in the proceeding weeks, some business owners began to comply with the protesters' demands for service. Others relied on tactics such as overcharging Black patrons, rendering the food inedible, or locking the doors to establishments.⁵⁸

"There's no quitting...we are going to work until all of Cairo is integrated" said thirteen-year-old CNFC member William Hollis to a reporter visiting a CNFC meeting at Ward Chapel from the *Southern Illinoisian*. "I feel we should have the right to do these things. We should be able to go to all of these places and be served."⁵⁹ By July, seven of the demonstrators, including Charles Koen and John Lewis, were arrested. The NAACP offered financial support to the activists, all of which refused bail.⁶⁰ The arrests of the young activists sparked outrage amongst older Black Cairoites, causing the movement to gain support. Inspired by a similar action developed by SNCC in Nashville, CNFC launched "Operation Open City," a campaign that included an eleven-point plan seeking to overturn segregation in all aspects of civic life in Cairo, and other goals, including better

⁵²Pimblott, 84.

⁵³Ibid, 85.

⁵⁴Koen, Reverend Charles, *The Cairo Story: And The Round-Up of Black Leadership*, Cairo, Illinois: Koen Publishing, 1990, 44.

⁵⁵Koen, 45.

⁵⁶"Negroes Soaked in Cairo Sit-in," *Southern Illinoisian*, June 28, 1962.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹"Test in Cairo, 'No Quitting,' Negro Says," *Southern Illinoisian*, June 28th, 1962.

⁶⁰"Bias Complaints To Be Filed," *Southern Illinoisian*, June 29, 1962.

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employment opportunities, de facto integration of city schools, housing for all, fair treatment by the police, and a human relations council.⁶¹

By August 1962, SNCC and the CNFC had successfully integrated Cairo's restaurants, and began to look towards public accommodations. Cairo's only swimming pool, under the ownership of the Cairo Natatorium and Recreation Club, was built by the Rotary Club in the 1920s.⁶² The pool had been segregated since its construction, evoking its status as a private, members only club as a measure to keep Black swimmers out. According to oral tradition, Ward Chapel historically responded to this circumstance by allowing Black children to swim in the baptismal pool in the churches' basement. CNFC and SNCC activists organized a sit-in at the pool, which resulted in more arrests. In response the NAACP filed a lawsuit, which stated that the owners of the swimming pool had defied federal and state law. A similar lawsuit was filed against the Roller Bowl, Cairo's only roller skating rink, for denying Black patrons admission.⁶³ On August 17th, Charles Koen led a group of thirty-eight young people to test the ruling. The group was attacked by a violent mob, and fled to Ward Chapel for safety. These incidents caused Governor Otto Kerner to assign two special attorney generals to investigate unlawful segregation in Cairo. Angered by the state's actions, the local government created a parade ordinance that targeted public gatherings. Lawsuits and pressure from state officials caused the owners of the pool and roller rink to begin admitting Black patrons.

Reverend Ramsey's work to encourage support for integration from Cairo's religious communities and its clergy was boosted by "kneel-ins," a series of infiltrations at white houses of worship in the fall of 1962.⁶⁴ One of these kneel-ins was captured on film by photographer Danny Lyon, and utilized by SNCC to build membership. A new interracial ministerial association was formed, and worked toward urging the Cairo City Council to form a human relations commission. A commission was formed in 1963, just as Reverend Ramsey was reassigned to Bethel AME in Champaign, and Charles Koen left Cairo to begin his ministerial training. Koen would return to Cairo in 1966 and become pastor of Ward Chapel.

While conditions had improved, according to Hattie Kendrick, this ushered in a time in Ward Chapel and Cairo's history where local protests subsided. While this was occurring locally, the Civil Rights movement continued on a national scale. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prevented employment discrimination due to race, color, sex, religion or national origin. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 aimed to overcome legal barriers at the local and state levels that prevented Black Americans from exercising their right to vote as guaranteed under the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The Fair Housing Act of 1968, passed just days after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., prohibited discrimination concerning the sale, rental and financing of housing based on race, religion, national origin or sex.

While activists in Cairo had integrated restaurants and Illinois Governor Otto Kerner ordered the city to desegregate in accordance with state law, conditions for Black Cairoites overall had not significantly improved. The human relations commission and ministerial association became inactive. Meanwhile, many white Cairoites were showing an obstinate resistance to integration, demonstrating that they would rather see commercial establishments and civic resources, like the pool, close permanently over being forced to share them with Black patrons. As the summer recreation season opened, white members of the pool in Cairo stayed away, causing it to close early for the season. The next summer, the City of Cairo leased the pool from the recreation club, but continued opposition caused the city to close the pool early once again, just as the club had done. By 1968, the pool had been sold and filled with cement.⁶⁵

On July 17, 1967, protests were mounted at Pyramid Courts, a public housing development located a quarter mile from Ward Chapel, after the suspicious death of Private Robert L. Hunt, a Black soldier that had died in

⁶¹Pimblott, 88.

⁶²Pimblott, 90.

⁶³"Bias Complaints To Be Filed," *Southern Illinoisian*, June 29, 1962.

⁶⁴Pimblott, 92.

⁶⁵"Pool Filled with Cement, Blacks Knee-Deep in ANger." *Jet*, May 26, 1968.

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police custody. While authorities claimed Hunt's death a suicide, Black Cairoites believed he had been murdered.⁶⁶ These protests launched three days of rebellion that were agitated by Black Cairoites' lack of representation in political and economic institutions, treatment by police, lack of quality jobs, and the poor condition of Pyramid Courts. At the time of these protests, the rate of Black poverty in Cairo was twice the national average and ranked first of any city in Illinois.⁶⁷ Illinois State Governor Otto Kerner deployed the National Guard, and Cairo Police enforced a citywide curfew.⁶⁸ These protests were one of the many that occurred across the United States in the summer of 1967. That same month, the White Citizens Council, informally known as the "White Hats" for the helmets they wore, organized as a force of armed white Cairoites to defend families and property against Black rebellion.⁶⁹ Many of the members of the White Hats were local police and law enforcement officers, and the group was allowed to conduct paramilitary drills and arm themselves with weapons.

Economic Boycotts (1969-1971)

In 1969, Charles Koen, now *Reverend* Koen, established a new organization with Cairo NAACP chapter president Preston Ewing, and Hattie Kendrick. The Cairo United Front would continue the struggle against systemic racism, police brutality and white violence and segregation, but had a powerful new tool to deploy against the unjust treatment of Black Cairoites: economic boycotts.⁷⁰ On April 7th, 1969, a boycott of all the stores citywide that failed to hire Black workers, and treated Black patrons with contempt began with protesters marching through the streets of Cairo. Black Cairoites would no longer "provide money for the whites to buy bullets to shoot at them."⁷¹ Every Saturday for nearly three years, the Cairo United Front would picket through the streets of the city, facing harassment from white Cairoites. In the first year of the boycott, eleven businesses closed. Eventually a third of Cairo's businesses would close, never to be replaced. This boycott became one of the longest protests in American history.⁷²

The economic boycott was successful; white businesses that failed to treat Black customers equally dissolved, closed, and did not reopen after the boycott was lifted. Yet new businesses, amenities and public facilities — whether owned or operated by white or Black citizens or by the public agencies, did not open. This lack of amenities caused those that had the economic ability to move elsewhere to leave Cairo, and left the city without the financial or organizational resources to invest in public amenities, schools or housing, or to support the private sector. These factors contributed to the current density loss burdening the built environment, as well as the deteriorated and vacant condition of existing buildings.

Reverend Jesse Jackson speaks at Ward Chapel (1969)

On June 24th, 1969, Reverend Jesse Jackson, civil rights activist and politician, addressed seven hundred people from the Ward Chapel pulpit. Jackson was the head of the Chicago branch of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Operation Breadbasket, an organization founded in 1966 by the SCLC to organize boycotts and picket lines, but also to promote the employment of Black workers and the growth of Black businesses.⁷³ "There will be no peace here until power is redistributed" Jackson told the crowd. "For a solution in Cairo they must remove the rotten core. They must balance the military power. The government must move into Cairo with a food program and a medical aid program. It must be administered from the Black community

⁶⁶Hinton, Elizabeth. *America on Fire, The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion Since the 1960s*, New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Company, 2021, 48.

⁶⁷Hinton, 75.

⁶⁸"Guards Enforce Peace in Cairo," *Kingsport Times*, July 20, 1967.

⁶⁹Hinton, 73.

⁷⁰Ibid, 69.

⁷¹Ibid, 73.

⁷²Hinton, 69.

⁷³Ibid, 70.

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as well as the white community.⁷⁴ The day after the speech, Jackson led a rally of nearly three hundred from Ward Chapel through downtown Cairo, urging those that had chosen violence to restrain themselves. "Why should we burn down or tear up that which we will have half of soon?" he asked the crowd.⁷⁵ The economic boycott had done considerable economic damage to Cairo's white businesses. In an attempt to placate the Black community, white businesses agreed to hire a nominal number of Black workers, and the White Hats were disbanded. The Illinois Attorney General stepped in, asking for the boycott to be ended in "good faith."⁷⁶ The boycotters refused.

"The Flying Black Medics" Task Force Conference on Health (1970)

In the midst of the United Front's boycott of Cairo's businesses, Dr. Leonidas Harris Berry (1902-1995), Chairman of the AME Church's Health Commission, came to Cairo to speak on the "Present Day Health Problems of Black People in the U.S. "Poverty and poor health walk hand in hand," stated Berry during his lecture. Trained as a gastroenterologist, Dr. Berry worked at the Black owned and operated Provident Hospital in Chicago, was previously president of the National Medical Association, and clinical associate professor of medicine at the University of Illinois Medical School.⁷⁷ Dr. Berry was one of the first Black doctors admitted to the American Medical Association. In his speech, Dr. Berry conveyed that Black Cairoites were experiencing health disparities as well as economic, cultural and educational stresses.

While Cairo's St. Mary's Hospital was treating Black patients, it had a staff of only five doctors, taking care of the nearly twelve thousand citizens in Cairo, as well as patients in surrounding rural areas in Alexander and Pulaski Counties.⁷⁸ "There have been shootings and violent conflicts between the Black community, the local police, the state police, and a white vigilante group known as the 'White Hats.' The Blacks are carrying out an economic boycott now in its 15th month against white businesses in the town" Dr. Berry wrote.⁷⁹

In response, he organized a one-day medical clinic for the citizens of Cairo supported by members of the Black medical community in Chicago, in collaboration with AME Churches, and with Reverend Charles Koen, The United Front, and Ward Chapel's new pastor, Reverend M.T. Harrel. The group included thirty-two MD specialists, dentists, nurses, social workers and dietitians that would converge on Cairo to assist in remedying the lack of proper medical care.

On February 15, 1970, the "Flying Black Medics" boarded two sixteen-seat planes they had personally chartered at Chicago's Midway airport and headed to Cairo. Also on board was \$10,000 worth of laboratory equipment loaned from the Black-owned and-operated Williams Medical Clinic of Chicago. Ice on the runway at Cairo's airport forced the planes to land in Paducah, Kentucky. The group chartered a bus for the remaining twenty-five miles to Ward Chapel.

Ward Chapel was transformed into a medical clinic for "The Flying Black Medics" Task Force Conference on Health.⁸⁰ The vestibule of the church became a registration area, while the sanctuary became a waiting room where patients were entertained with health films as well as performances by the United Front Choir. Medical services were delivered downstairs. "The basement had been divided off with hanging sheets for examining

⁷⁴"Jackson addresses 700 in Cairo Tuesday night," *Daily Republican-Register*, June 25, 1969.

⁷⁵"Cairo Black Leaders Will Not End Store Boycott," *The Belleville News-Democrat*." June 26, 1969.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷"Ward Chapel Church Hears Medical Director", *The Cairo Evening Citizen*, December 15, 1969.

⁷⁸Dr. Leonidas Berry Papers," Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, Carter G. Woodson Regional Library, Chicago, Illinois.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

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rooms to serve the children, another for adult women, another for the adult men, and a central area for the laboratories and service desks for the social workers and dietitians. Giveaways included health literature, toothbrushes, medication and diapers, as well as door prizes for the over two hundred patients that were treated.⁸¹

The National Broadcasting Company flew their plane with television staff to Cairo to tape the proceedings at the clinic, which was broadcast the same day on The Today Show and the Huntley-Brinkley Report.⁸² This was a cooperative effort between Black professionals and Black churches in delivering an imaginative medical service to very poor and underserved people in the southern part of the state who were now caught up in racial conflict” wrote Hattie Kendrick of the Flying Black Medics.⁸³

Later History of Ward Chapel

The Civil Rights Movement began to wind down in Cairo and nationwide as landmark nationwide legislation continued to be passed, and as key activists were assassinated. The Civil Rights act of 1968 was passed the same year that Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered in Memphis. In Cairo, Ward Chapel continued to hold worship services and provide resources outside of the community, but the church no longer served as a place of organization around social justice causes. Membership at Ward Chapel continued to decline as members moved or passed away in the closing decades of the 20th century. Facing dwindling membership, Ward Chapel closed its doors in 2011. Since 2021, the Cairo Historical Preservation Project, along with third generation member and current Ward Chapel Pastor Ronnie Woods, has been working to preserve and repurpose the building.

Conclusion

Ward Chapel has played a significant role in Black life and the pursuit of social justice for Black Cairoites for over a hundred years. Ward Chapel played a significant role in the modern Civil Rights Movement as it developed locally in Cairo. Through the early 20th century, the church grew in political and social influence, cultivating an environment that had the power, resources, and long-term ability to both lead and support social actions against pay inequity, school segregation, and assist in organizing and carrying out sit-ins and economic boycotts. Later, acts of mutual aid that surpassed social and economic barriers to treat the medically underserved occurred at Ward Chapel. While these actions were ultimately a collaboration between the church and other organizations and movements, such as the NAACP, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Cairo United Front, Ward Chapel provided a physical location where social actions could be directed and organized from, and a community of members and lay leaders that provided leadership.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Kendrick-Brooks Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

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Ward Chapel AME Church
Name of Property

Alexander County, Illinois
County and State

"Negro Teachers at Cairo Sue for Equal Pay," *The Belleville News-Democrat*, February 6, 1945.

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Ward Chapel AME Church
Name of Property

Alexander County, Illinois
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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
 - Other State agency
 - Federal agency
 - Local government
 - University
 - Other
- Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):

Ward Chapel AME Church
Name of Property

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10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property Less than one

(Do not include previously listed resource acreage; enter "Less than one" if the acreage is .99 or less)

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

1	<u>37.002937</u>	<u>-89.174698</u>	3	_____	_____
	Latitude	Longitude		Latitude	Longitude
2	_____	_____	4	_____	_____
	Latitude	Longitude		Latitude	Longitude

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

Ward Chapel AME Church is located on lots 32, 33 and 34 of the 84th block of the First Addition to Cairo, in the City of Cairo, Alexander County, Illinois.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundaries selected represent the historic boundaries of Ward Chapel AME Church and the current parcel.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title	<u>Elizabeth Blasius, Jonathan Solomon</u>	date	<u>March 30, 2024</u>		
organization	<u>Preservation Futures</u>	telephone	<u>(773) 814-7845</u>		
street & number	<u>53 West Jackson, Suite 1637</u>	email	<u>elizabeth@preservationfutures.com</u>		
city or town	<u>Chicago</u>	state	<u>IL</u>	zip code	<u>60604</u>

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **GIS Location Map (Google Earth or BING)**
- **Local Location Map**
- **Site Plan**
- **Floor Plans (As Applicable)**
- **Photo Location Map** (Include for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map and insert immediately after the photo log and before the list of figures).

Ward Chapel AME Church
Name of Property

Alexander County, Illinois
County and State

Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 3000x2000 pixels, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log	Ward Chapel AME Church		
Name of Property:	Ward Chapel AME Church		
City or Vicinity:	Cairo		
County:	Alexander	State:	Illinois
Photographer:	Elizabeth Blasius, Jonathan Solomon, Don Patton		
Date Photographed:	Various, 2022-2024		

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

- Photo 1 of 18: Primary elevation of church, looking north
- Photo 2 of 18: Primary elevation of church and side elevation, looking south
- Photo 3 of 18: Side elevation, looking north
- Photo 4 of 18: Side elevation, looking north
- Photo 5 of 18: Rear elevation, looking southeast
- Photo 6 of 18: Side elevation detail, looking southwest
- Photo 7 of 18: Primary elevation detail, looking north
- Photo 8 of 18: Basement, looking east
- Photo 9 of 18: Basement, looking southeast
- Photo 10 of 18: Basement, looking south
- Photo 11 of 18: Basement, looking north
- Photo 12 of 18: Sanctuary, looking northeast
- Photo 13 of 18: Sanctuary, looking southeast
- Photo 14 of 18: Sanctuary, looking southeast
- Photo 15 of 18: Altar and organ, looking north
- Photo 16 of 18: Sanctuary and balcony, looking east
- Photo 17 of 18: Mural detail, left side of altar, looking west
- Photo 18 of 18: Art Glass window detail, looking southwest

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

List of Figures

(Resize, compact, and paste images of maps and historic documents in this section. Place captions, with figure numbers above each image. Orient maps so that north is at the top of the page, all document should be inserted with the top toward the top of the page.

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- Figure 2 of 17: 1914 Sanborne Fire Insurance Map showing Ward Chapel AME (Chicago History Museum)
- Figure 3 of 17: Hattie Kendrick (center) with State Representative Corneal Davis (third from right) and members of the Cairo branch of the NAACP, circa 1940s (Library of Congress)
- Figure 4 of 17: A crowd gathers outside of Ward Chapel AME Church prior to a Cairo Nonviolent Freedom Committee (CNFC) rally, June 1962 (John P. Engel, Photographer, Stephen L. Staltson Photograph Collection, Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, UMass Amherst)
- Figure 5 of 17: A crowd marches in downtown Cairo during a CNFC/SNCC rally, June 1962 (John P. Engel, Photographer, Stephen L. Staltson Photograph Collection, Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, UMass Amherst)
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- Figure 7 of 17: "Come Let Us Build a New World Together," SNCC Poster featuring John Lewis (far left) and young CNFC activists, 1962 (Danny Lyon/Magnum Photos)
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- Figure 9 of 17: Dr Leonidas Berry speaks at Ward Chapel on December 15, 1969 (*Cairo Evening Citizen*)
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Figure 15 of 17: An elderly patient is seen by a doctor and nurse in the basement of Ward Chapel during the "Flying Black Medics" Task Force Conference on Health, February 15, 1970. (Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature)

Figure 16 of 17: Exterior Photo Key (Google Maps)

Figure 17 of 17: Interior Photo Key (Preservation Futures)

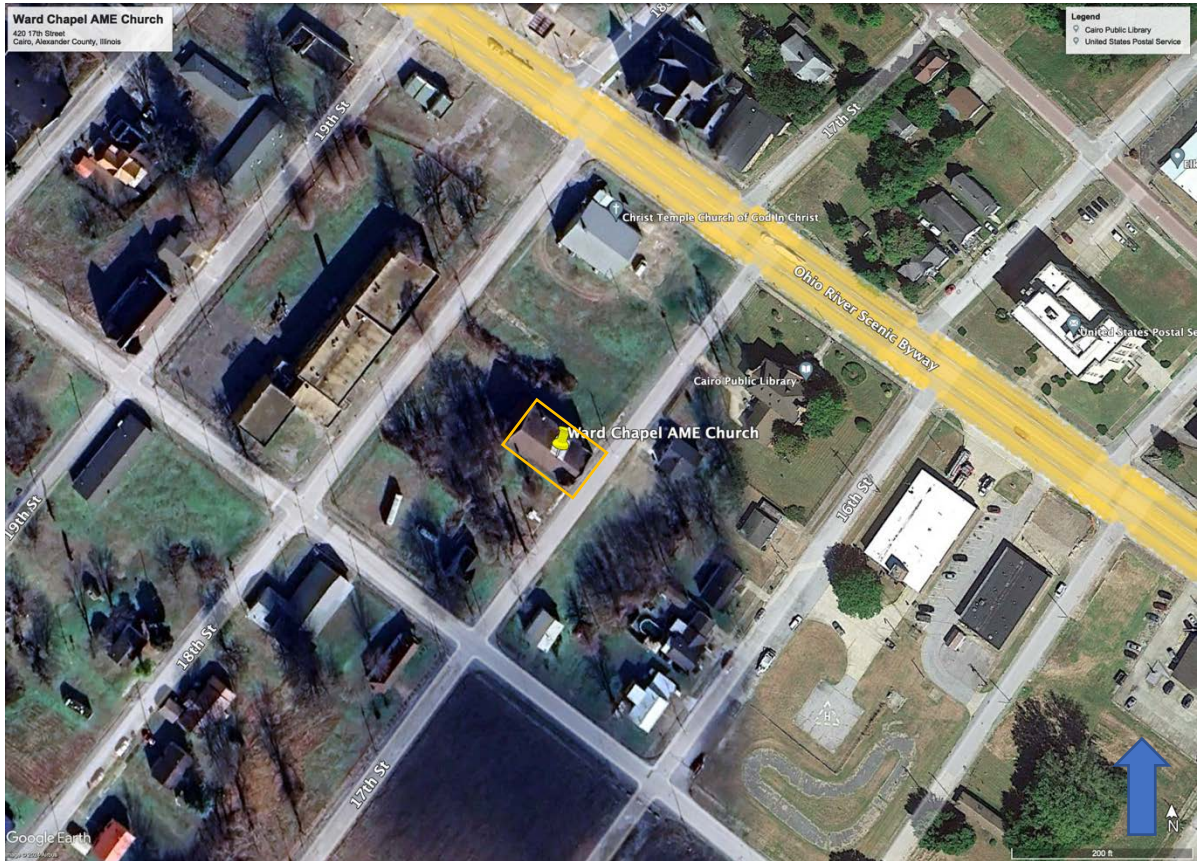


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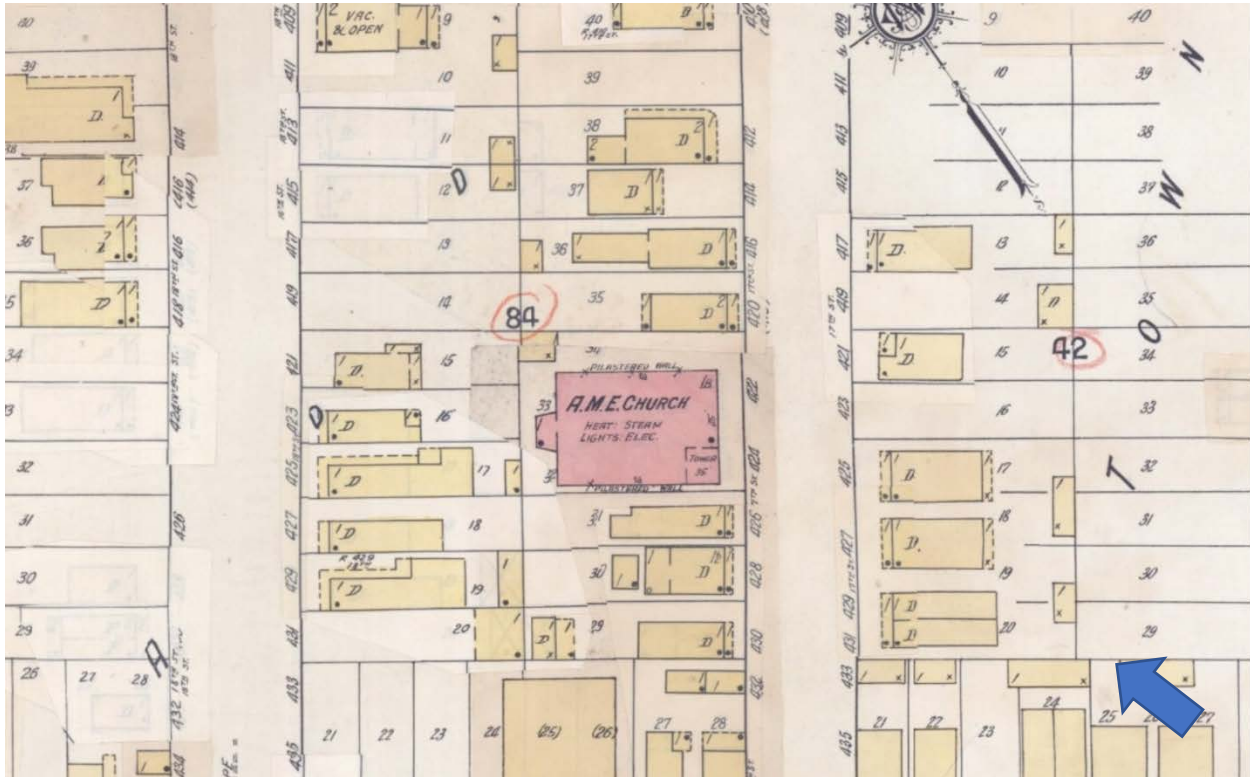


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Figure 3: Hattie Kendrick (center) with State Representative Corneal Davis (third from right) and members of the Cairo branch of the NAACP, circa 1942 (Library of Congress)



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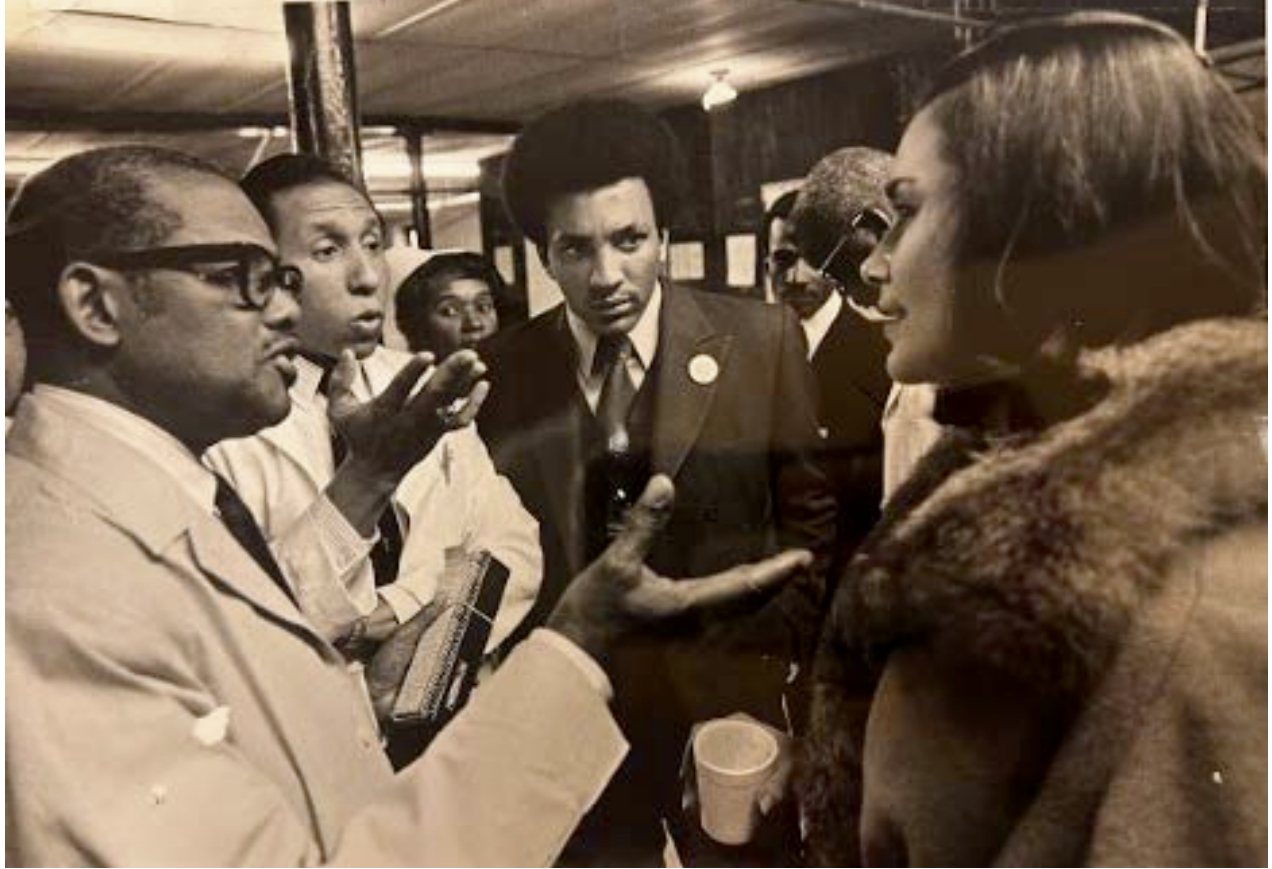


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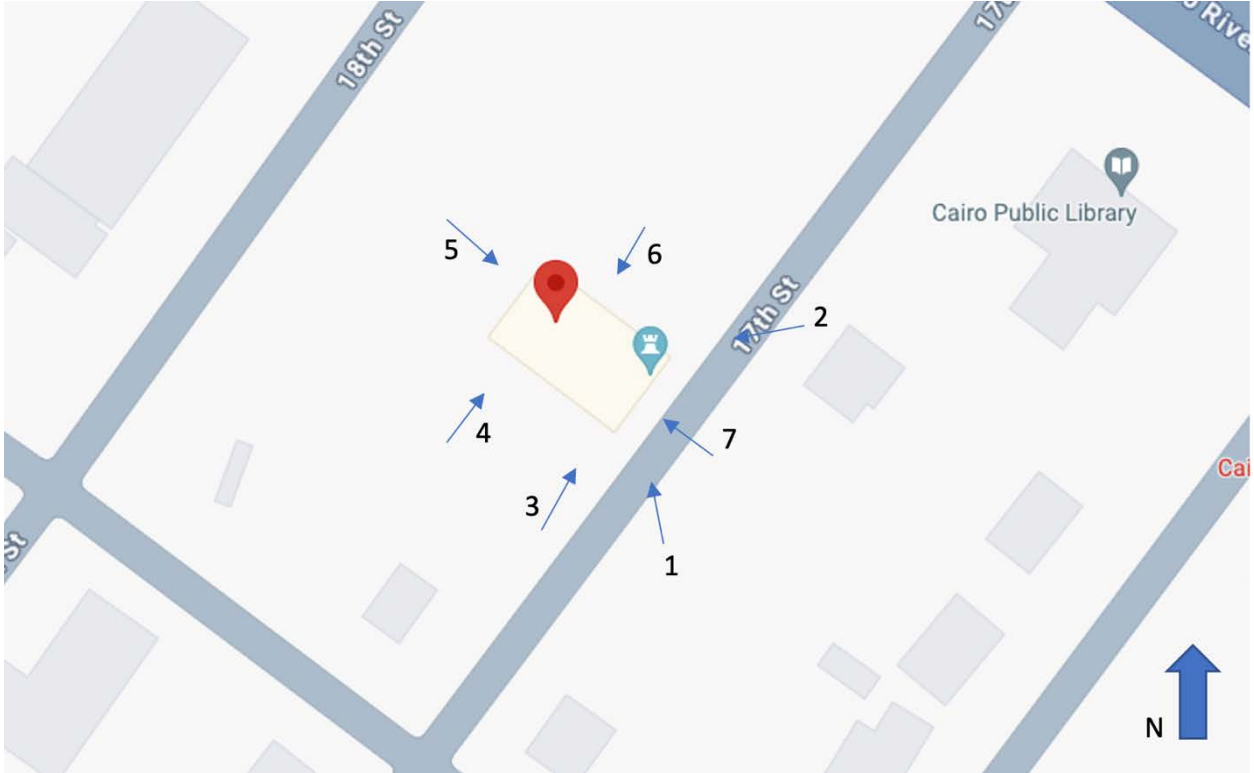
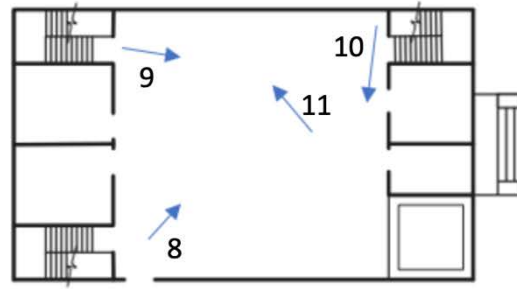
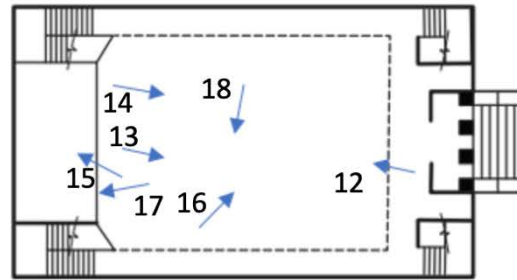


Figure 16: Exterior Photo Key (Google Maps)



Lower Level



Upper Level



Figure 17: Interior Photo Key (Preservation Futures)



Photo 1:



Photo 2:



Photo 3:



Photo 4:



Photo 5:



Photo 6:



Photo 7:



Photo 8:



Photo 9:



Photo 10:



Photo 11:



Photo 12:



Photo 13:



Photo 14:



Photo 15:



Photo 16:



Photo 17:



Photo 18:

