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The African American Church House: A Phenomenological Inquiry of an Afrocentric Sacred Space

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Abstract: The institution of the black church in America is centered around two things: the people and their events. Very little scholarship has been documented about the physical buildings that became homes for the people and host to their events. These early church houses became the first evidence of a constructed material culture for formerly enslaved persons in America. The design and construction of black church houses provided enslaved as well as free persons of color the opportunity to physically create buildings that would become the center of African American life, beginning as early as the late 18th century and reaching to the present. Coupled with this exercise of the creation of architectural placemaking is the defining and application of the term "sacred space".

Keywords: black church; black space; Afrocentric sacred space; architectural history; African American history; hush harbor; praise house

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1. Introduction

A sacred space is a place created by a person (or people) who conducts an action important to him or her, practices a ritual, or simply makes a place where he or she can feel safe. To its user, this space is created, claimed, owned, and is made special compared to any other space or place. This space can be naturally created or physically constructed but will have substance and meaning for its users. The design and construction of early African American church houses, dating back to the late 18th century, represented sacred spaces for their users. These places became early examples of Afrocentric "black space", a concept that can carry varied meanings. It has often been described by some with the idea that you "know it when you're in it". Black space, though used in current discourse of social justice and the interpretive value of black bodies, is not a contemporary concept. This term can be used to describe the design and construction of these early religious buildings, providing a cultural but no less valued reference to describe the meaning and worth of these spaces to the people who created and occupied them. These early church houses are examples of two intersecting conditions: the study of architectural history and African American history, as well as a phenomenological example of the created religious space of these buildings and the lived practice of faith, resistance, and resilience that the parishioners experienced. The construction of these church houses provided African Americans with the ability to control and self-determine themselves, a quality not accessible to black people. In America, however, the exercise of this quality by African Americans came under threat. The most treasured thing these black church houses represented was a place to call home.

The central questions of this paper are the following: What are Afrocentric sacred space and its meaning, and does this space have placemaking and cultural value?

Afrocentric Sacred Space

"What is Afrocentric sacred space and what is its meaning?" The following is offered as a foundational structure to this question:

1. God is in our church houses as well. Black people have souls. It was believed by many during the Colonial and Antebellum period that African Americans did not have souls;

2. Our church houses are *our* communal homes. We created them, we constructed them, we supported them, and we own them;
3. African American cultural and spiritual lives found their roots originally in hush harbors, and later in our church houses. As the author Richard Wright exclaimed, "in our church houses, we can be ourselves.";
4. The Afrocentric duality of the natural and the communal must exist in our church houses now, and into the future. Light, water, and growing things are elements of West African religious culture, and to compromise the presence of any of these is to risk compromising the divine;
5. The architecture should reflect the best in the people, while the people should reflect the best in God.

As African Americans began to organize their own congregations, followed by the eventual design and construction of their own church buildings, a question can be asked: were African Americans creating an Afrocentric sacred space for themselves? Traditional African sacred space consisted of the understanding of the relationship between humankind and nature, natural places, and a cosmology that is human in its centrality.

The 1903 book "The Negro Church" by W.E.B. Dubois became the first academic account of the state of the black church at the turn of the 20th century. Documenting a historical account of African religious practices and the horrific influence the Middle Passage and the institution of slavery in the Americas had on these spiritual traditions, DuBois shifts his focus to the state of the newly formed institution of the black church in the United States. The book also documents the various black churches, on a state-by-state basis, and begins the dialogue of what the societal state of black America was, the problems black people faced, and the church's potential role in addressing these problems. DuBois' state-by-state methodology of ordering information in the book helps us to understand the breadth of black church founding and building expansion in the North and the South, as well as highlighting architectural examples of African American church construction, both urban and rural, as well as regional and vernacular influences on building form.

Regarding traditional West African practices, DuBois documented and concluded that African religion had a strong and influential origination in the cosmos, as well as in nature:

> The prominent characteristic of primitive Negro religion is Nature worship with the accompanying strong belief in sorcery. There is a theistic tendency: 'Almost all tribes believe in some supreme god without always worshiping him, generally a heaven and rain god; sometimes, as among the Cameroons and in Dahomey, a sun-god. But the most widely-spread worship among Negroes and Begroids, from west to northwest and south to Loango, is that of the moon, combined with a great veneration of the cow. The slave trade so mingled and demoralized the west coast of Africa for four hundred years that it is difficult today to find their definite remains of any great religious system. (DuBois [1903] 2011, p. 1)

From this, DuBois concludes that regardless of the culture of the people, there is the belief that a Supreme Being or God exists. Further, the influence of that god extends to the natural world around various African people.

Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, a professor of philosophy and religion at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, states the following in his book "*Afro-Caribbean Religions*" regarding the origins of some West African traditional religious practices:

> The traditional West African cosmos envisions a universe of interactions among many divinities, spirits, ancestors, humans, animals, and cosmic life, as well as evil forces, but everything is not divine. John Mbiti states that many ideas about God and the world evolved in African thought over millennia. They are expressed in sacred stories, legends, myths, proverbs, symbols, rituals, and saying of the sages. When these ideas converge, a picture emerges of a complex understanding of the cosmos. (Murrell 2010, p. 29)

This complex creation of the cosmos represents a variety of belief systems held by different people. The datum, however, of a universal structure beyond the reach of man is maintained. This universal structure becomes influential over the lives of those persons who created it.

The introduction of Christianity to Africans presented a contradiction to many West African religious traditions and practices, many of which were developed from a polytheistic perspective. Albert J. Raboteau, former professor of religion at Princeton, wrote about the transition of traditional African religions to an understanding of Christianity by enslaved people in his book "*Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South*". He states that "common to many African societies was a belief in a High God, or Supreme Creator of the world." This High God was somewhat detached from the actions of the world of man. The belief was that the High God was also separated from the lesser gods of the world, though "the lesser gods and ancestor-spirits were actively and constantly concerned with the daily life of the individual and the affairs of society as a whole" (Raboteau 2004, p. 8). It was common in the traditional religions of West Africa that the High God is the parent of the other and lesser gods, who are sometimes seen as mediators between man and God, while "the lesser divinities or secondary gods are numerous." Some people in West African cultures viewed the relationship between the High God, the lesser gods, and themselves in the context of "pantheons, or groups of gods, associated with natural forces and phenomena" (Raboteau 2004, p. 9). One example of a group of deities is the Orishas, who are African spirits commonly worshipped by the Yoruba people of West Africa. Christianity, however, presented a singular form of worship to Africans, with one supreme God and, as biblically described, the spiritual savior of humankind in Jesus Christ. The enslaved, especially those who were born in Africa and had direct memories and experiences of their former lives, found it most challenging and confusing to be forcibly detached from their traditional worship practices and forced to accepting a singular god with no cultural or spiritual connection.

Henry Mitchell, a professor of History and Black Church Studies, writes the following about the influence of religious beliefs on the necessity of surviving the institution of slavery:

> The most important African survivals of all may very well be in the belief systems, African traditional religious doctrines, as closely related to and merged with the orthodox Christian faith. At some points, the parallels are amazing, as with the omnipotence, justice, omniscience, and providence of God. None of these attributes of God had to be learned first in slavery. And all of these crossover African beliefs survived so amazingly well in America because they served so well to support African American psychic survival under oppression. (Mitchell 2004, p. 16)

Mitchell suggests that by the motivation of survival, Africans brought to America found ways to blend, or syncretize, their traditional religious beliefs with Christianity. This newly developed combined belief system was passed on from one generation to the next.

The American Civil War began in April 1861. By this time, the majority of enslaved persons were American-born. The traditional challenges of "cultural and linguistic barriers which had impeded the evangelization of earlier generations of African-born slaves were generally no longer a problem" (Raboteau 2004, p. 212). The conversion to Christianity of African-born slaves became a consistent problem, mainly because they did not know enough of the English language to understand Christianity. The enslaved Africans who were born in America were able to understand the language and the customs of whites, which made them more ideal candidates for conversion. Motivated by survival, the enslaved exercised acts of defiance directed at the preaching of white southern ministers. While trying to restrain the cruelty of the masters, white ministers were attempting to make the enslaved submissive. Dr. Noel Leo Erskine, a professor of Theology and Ethics at the Candler School of Theology at Emory, wrote the book *"Plantation Church: How African American Religion Was Born in Caribbean Slavery"*, which states that "many blacks testified

that the white ministers, dedicated to preserving slavery, tried to promote good behavior, contentment, industry, and humility in the quarters and to discourage stealing, lying, and rebelliousness" (Erskine 2014, p. 115). This point touches on the contradiction for African Americans presented through the Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening. These revivals swept through both the North and the South periodically from the 1740s through the 1780s. In his article "I Saw the Book Talk: Slave Readings of the First Great Awakening", author Frank Lambert stated that the Great Awakening "was as much a movement of the printed as the spoken word" (Lambert 1992, p. 186). George Whitefield, a leading revivalist, sought to "proclaim the message of the new birth to African-Americans, declaring its necessity for all persons, regardless of race. Slaveholders responded with hostility, opposing revivalist efforts to teach blacks to read and become lay exhorters, fearing that they would sow seeds of discords among slaves" (Lambert 1992, p. 188). The ecclesiastical argument of whether enslaved persons had souls to save, and greater still, the potential danger to slaveowners of exposing their slaves to Christian teachings of spiritual equality among all men and women, would become a threat to slavery's institution, and fuel uprisings. As a result, slaveholders began to encourage their slaves to become Christians, but only under the absolute control of their masters. It was feared, however, that Christianity among slaves could mean that slavery would be challenged on the basis of its contradiction of Christian values.

The conversion exercise, as mentioned earlier, was a challenge to revivalists' attempts at the Christian conversion of the enslaved. Raboteau comments on this, stating that the "conversion experience instead of the process of religious instruction made Christianity more accessible to illiterate slaves and slaveholders alike" (Raboteau 2004, p. 132). Revivalists like Whitefield, unwilling to challenge the institution of slavery itself, did not trust slaves and clearly attempted to guide their interpretation of the new birth, emphasizing especially the biblical injunction for servants to obey their masters. In other words, conversion affected only the slave's spiritual bondage, not his or her physical condition, while calling on slaves to give up any thought of seeking freedom from their masters (Lambert 1992, p. 189). Nonetheless, the effort to continue the conversion experience moved forward. Raboteau further examines the attempt to increase the number of conversions, as stated in the following:

> The increase in conversions of Negroes under the impact of revivalism was due to several factors. The evangelical religion spread by the revivalists initiated a religious renaissance in the South as a somnolent religious consciousness was awakened by revivalist preachers. The revival itself became a means of church extension for Presbyterians and, particularly, for Methodist and Baptists. The mobility of the Methodist circuit rider and the local autonomy of the Baptist preacher were suited to the needs and conditions of the rural South. In the heat of religious fervor, planters became less indifferent about their own religious involvement and, potentially, about that of their slaves. (Raboteau 2004, p. 132)

The enslaved developed their own understanding of Christianity, which drastically differed from the slaveowners' and their chosen preachers'. Erskine states the following:

> While white ministers emphasized memorization of the Lord's prayer, the Ten Commandments, and various passages that highlighted obedience and submissiveness, for enslaved persons their love for church and religious services had to do with their love for singing, dancing, praying, and possession of the spirit, and later on when they had their own church, they included preaching and drumming. There were different agendas and quite often there was a misunderstanding on the part of white preachers. (Erskine 2014, p. 117)

The enslaved community had an extensive religious life of its own, hidden from the eyes of slaveowners and white preachers. The enslaved devised several techniques to avoid the detection of their meetings, and celebratory religious practices, which included meeting in secluded places such as woods, gullies, ravines, and thickets, aptly called "hush or brush

harbors" (Raboteau 2004, p. 215). Author Alonzo Johnson, assistant professor of religious studies at the University of South Carolina, and a theologian, cites the relevance of the hush harbor:

> The function and structure of the pray's house spirit—if not its actual historical emergence—can best be understood in light of the development of two distinct traditions within the African American South, namely 'brush arbors' and the plantation missions. It was in the context of their brush arbor meetings on plantations that slaves first began to forge from the crucible of their African experience and the terrors of their inservitude a vision of Christianity that would be distinctively their own. (Johnson and Jersild 2014, p. 10)

The developing American Negro religious traditions and practices, which would be referred to as an "invisible institution", because it existed in the very presence of whites, added to the inevitable separation by the Negro from Anglo religious traditions and practices. As a result, enslaved people began to desire a physical place of their own to worship. The separation from Anglo influence also required a complete break from what was, in many Antebellum communities, and as enshrined in Southern traditions as well as law, the need to control the Christian narrative and its interpretation for the enslaved. The only path open for Negroes in their pursuit to freely worship was to contribute to the effort to obtain freedom, with the shadow of the Civil War looming over America.

As early as the late 18th century, African Americans began creating their own congregations, which would lead to the construction of church houses, to establish a break in black parishioners attending white churches. DuBois documented the eventual separation from white churches by Negroes. The following were offered by DuBois as reasons for the founding of Negro congregations and the construction of Negro church houses:

The result of a special missionary effort on the part of whites;

They (the Negro churches) were brought about by direct discrimination against the blacks made by the whites during divine worship.

> They were the natural sequence, when, on account of increase in members, it became necessary for congregations to divide, whereupon blacks were evolved as distinct churches but still under the oversight if not the exclusive control of whites. (DuBois [1903] 2011, p. 41)

With the existence of the "invisible institution", the founding of black congregations and denominations was happening simultaneously, both in the North and the South. Control of the church was at stake in this effort, with many Negro men, both literate and illiterate, finding the opportunity to at least convert and minister to the Negro population. The broader goal was the right to self-determine in the manner of the creation of a form of worship service developed and controlled by and for Negroes. Raboteau notes that "little Negro congregations, under the leadership of Negro preachers, sprang up wherever they were tolerated. Often, they were suppressed, more often they were privately encouraged. Not infrequently they met in secret."

Natural sacred spaces in African society included forests, rivers, and mountains, as expressions of a true connection with nature. Fortune Sibanda, an associate professor of Religious Studies in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Great Zimbabwe University, states the following:

> Sacred groves are places that encompass large mountain ranges, forest, and mountain forests. One informative definition says that 'sacred groves are areas of vegetation preserved through local taboos and sanctions that express ecological and spiritual values. In terms of function, sacred groves act as sacrosanct areas, which are at the same time temples, places for spiritual retreat and meditation, wildlife sanctuaries, and places where medicinal plants can grow in safety. This shows the social and spiritual significance of sacred groves. (Sibanda 2019, pp. 187–88)

Defining sacred space in nature must contain the human experience. The recounting of the African experience and eventually the African American experience is critical in understanding how an Afrocentric worldview founded in nature can substantiate the legitimacy of a spiritual Afrocentric experience. Sibanda continues:

> . . . a grassroots approach was pivotal in the (my) study. It enabled tapping voices of the indigenes as custodians of the sacred groves. Leavitt regards the grassroots 'as those living at the base,' at times representing the marginalized rural, or urban, communities. Colonialism and missionary Christianity have contributed to the vilification and demonization of African culture and beliefs regarding forest and mountains. The merit of the grassroots approach to this study is that, as a 'bottom-up' research technique and process, it captures the 'ground-level' views of (the) Nadu (people) indigenes. This in turn validates the community as a knowledge and research resource, familiar with the subject. Thus, they are 'agents for their own knowledge, not objects to be examined, prodded, or studied.' This allows for a greater appreciation of the ecological activities of the Ndau. (Sibanda 2019, pp. 187–88)

Architecturally, the making of a sacred space is fundamentally captured by the following:

> Sacred space is a space that is transparent to transcendence, and everything within such a space furnishes a base for meditation. When you enter through the door, everything within that space symbolic, the whole world is mythologized. To live in a sacred space is to live in a symbolic environment where spiritual life is possible, where everything around you speaks of the exaltation of the spirit. This is a place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be. This is the place of creative incubation. At first you might find that nothing happens there. But if you have a sacred place and use it, something eventually will happen. Your sacred space is where you find yourself again and again. (Campbell 1994, p. 145)

A hush harbor, or brush arbor, was a place wherein the enslaved would gather in secret, under pain of death, to practice their own form of religious traditions. This space served as both a natural placemaking location in support of tradition West African spirit practice, and a re-interpretation of that cultural space in America, serving a similar purpose. These places were hidden, and typically were located in hollows, swamps, or thickets. These hidden places allowed the enslaved to simply be themselves, and to freely express their spirituality. These activities generally occurred in nature, as is consistent with many African religious practices physically centered in nature, as DuBois had researched and documented. A building was not needed, nor was it relevant to the religious practices in Africa or in the Antebellum South. Johnson continues by stating the importance of what the brush arbor spirit meant for the enslaved in the future:

> The spirituality what was forged in the brush arbors, coupled with the folk traditions that were forged in the religious meetings in the slave quarters, provided the impetus for the formation of the pray's house spirit and later the independent black churches in the South Carolina Lowcountry. (Johnson and Jersild 2014, p. 10)

The architectural definition of a sacred space in many African cultures was nature-centered, without the presence of a religious building. The Afrocentric sacred space is human and spiritual and must be connected to the natural and the cosmos, if only to see that which is not made by a human. The divine must be present in an architecturally created religious space, where the sun can reside and the trees, clouds, and the sky can be seen in wonder. The absence of divine creation in a human-created space can compromise the spiritual experience. The divine is in nature, where the traditional African religious experience exists. The simple design of early African American churches included windows, which allowed light to stream in, often with a window behind the choir stand, which in turn was behind the preacher, allowing the light to enter throughout the building, as well

as allowing the parishioner the chance to connect with the divine. Architectural church design today, it can be argued, has compromised the users' ability to see the divine in nature, because many contemporary buildings today do not incorporate windows for light and view within the worship space. The ability to connect with nature is traditional in many African societies and should be a design feature within our worship spaces today. A contemporary challenge in the African American community is the need to be reintroduced to an Afrocentric connection that is consistent with cultural spiritual worship, without the perception or belief that Christianity is compromised or questioned because of the introduction of elements from a traditional West African value system.

An early example of a constructed Afrocentric sacred space was the creation of the "praise house". A praise house, shown in Figure 1, was typically a wood-framed one-room building with one door. There was wooden bench seating against the walls, and at times in the middle of the space, with an accompanying podium located at the front of the room. Praise houses were first established on Saint Helena plantations in the Antebellum period, as the enslaved used small frame houses or other buildings as places to meet and worship, similar to meeting houses in northern Colonial America. These praise houses were generally located in the Lowcountry regions of South Carolina and Georgia. This region during the Antebellum period was occupied by coastal plantations and enslaved people with extraordinary ties to their West African traditions. These enslaved persons were known as the "Gullah Geechee". The Gullah Geechee today are descendants of Africans who were enslaved on the rice, indigo and sea island cotton plantations of the lower Atlantic coast. Many came from the rice-growing region of West Africa. The nature of their enslavement on isolated island and coastal plantations created a unique culture with deep African retentions that are clearly visible in the Gullah Geechee peoples' distinctive arts, crafts, foods, music, and language (The Gullah Geechee 2021).

Figure 1. Image of a Gullah praise house, Saint Helena Island, South Carolina 1995. Image from the National Humanities Center at http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org (accessed on 15 June 2018).

Freedmen built praise houses on or near their old plantations, in most instances calling their community by the name of the former plantation or plantation owner. The function of the buildings persisted after emancipation, and the basic architectural form has been retained (gullahcommunity.org 2018). The activities born in the praise house, as well as the praise house building itself, can be considered a precursor to the African American worship experience of today.

In his book *"Ain't Gonna Lay My 'Ligion Down: African American Religion in the South"*, Dr. Alonzo Johnson, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of South Carolina from 1991 to 2003, wrote about the "pray's house spirit" and its influence on the following traditions:

> The function and structure of the pray's house spirit-if not its actual historical emergence-can best be understood in light of the development of two distinct traditions within the African American South, namely 'brush arbors' and the plantation missions. It was in the context of their brush arbor meetings on plantations that slaves first began to forge from the crucible of their African experience and the terrors of their in servitude a vision of Christianity that would be distinctively their own. (Johnson and Jersild 2014, p. 10)

Johnson introduces the plantation missions, which were another influence upon the enslaved:

> Another major factor in the development of the pray's house tradition is the growth of the Plantation Mission System, the institutional embodiment of white evangelical efforts to introduce Christianity to southern slaves en masse. After the 1820s, on the heels of the (Denmark) Vesey and Turner insurrections, there was a concerted effort on the part of white denominations to take the Gospel to the plantations, where the slaves were. Many plantation owners and southern church leaders began to see Christianization as the only means of 'civilizing' and controlling their slaves. (Johnson and Jersild 2014, p. 10)

The conflict enslaved people experienced between the spirituality they created and developed in their brush arbors, and their efforts to resist the control of plantation owners and clergy to Christianize them, further encouraged the enslaved population to attempt to define for themselves how they would interpret Christianity in a manner that would honor African traditions, without yielding their culture to the will of the plantation owners. As the enslaved attempted to understand and determine which parts of the Gospel to syncretize with their culture, how far to emulate white church praise experiences became a matter for the enslaved to consider.

Protestant and Catholic faiths embrace the symbolism of the church building, using design and material applications such as cruciform building plans and stained glass windows to tell a biblical and ethnic story to a congregation. There are architectural differences in the designs of Protestant and Catholic churches. These differences have come to be expressed in the designs of early African American church houses, since the majority of African Americans were introduced to and accepted any one of the examples of Protestantism while creating new churches, such as the African Methodist Episcopal (AME), founded in 1787 (AME Website 2022), and the Christian (Colored) Methodist Episcopal (CME) founded in 1870 (CME Website 2022). Protestant church design, particularly the interiors, tended to be plain and devoid of ornament as compared to a Catholic sanctuary. Where there are varying degrees of aesthetic application, the design approach was inspired by the beginning of the Protestant Reformation and the outburst of iconoclasm, and the exercise of the removal of statues and images from churches. The reason for this iconoclasm was the belief that the promise of salvation through God's gracious forgiveness is most directly and clearly communicated through the scripture—preached, taught, studied, and memorized. Protestants, believing that Roman Catholics had largely wandered from the centrality of the Bible, removed what they saw as distracting and superstitious paintings, statues, and other images that had been substituted for God's word (Patheos.com 2021). This simple design approach would be reflected in many examples of early Protestant African American church house construction of the 19th century. The belief, however, that persons of color may need to emulate white denominations in order to integrate into American society became one reason why they may have believed it necessary to consider holding their spiritual services inside a building of their own, while continuing to develop their own unique worship experience.

As the early institution of the black church continued to develop, the importance of music within the Sunday worship experience became more prominent. In her article "Worship and Arts Sunday Cultural Resources", Tammy L. Kernodle, Professor of Musicology at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, writes about the importance of music and song to the

African American worship experience. She concludes that the religious roots of African American worship in song and dance can be found in the Old Testament (The African American Lectionary 2018). Exodus, in the 15th chapter, speaks of Moses and the children of Israel singing praises to God for deliverance from bondage in Egypt. The early form of the black sacred song was the Negro spiritual. The spiritual is a type of religious folksong that is most closely associated with the enslavement of African people in the American South (African American Spirituals 2018). Kernodle states the following:

> In the praise houses, brush harbors, and 'secret places' that framed the early worship services of African Americans, various song practices developed. Since most blacks could not read and in many instances, it was illegal for them to do so, these early practices relied heavily on call-and-response in order to sustain corporate worship, and the melodies and texts drew on every available source-hymns sung by white Protestants during the Second Great Awakening, spirituals that slaves crafted out of their understanding of the Bible and God, and African melodies that had been retained and passed down. Despite the diversity of structure and form that each of these song forms reflected, each articulated a theology of transcendence that governed the lives of these people. The black sacred song became central in the survival of black people through all of the social, economic, and political influences that framed black life through Emancipation, migration, and segregation. (The African American Lectionary 2018)

In many African cultures, music is central to the everyday lives and activities of people. Generally, at brush arbor meetings, participants would sing, chant, dance and sometimes enter ecstatic trances. As the Negro church continued to develop beyond slavery and toward the latter half of the 19th century, part of the worship service was created in the development of a church choir. Used as the instrument to ecstatically deliver the Negro spiritual, the body of singers created its rhythmic expression of music and movement, growing in relevance to the totality of the Negro worship experience. Kernodle continues with the following regarding the development of the Negro church choir:

> Although there were marked differences between black church practices in the South and the North, music constituted a larger portion of the worship experience in both locations. Many northern congregations began to advance the arranged spiritual, anthem, and the sacred works of European composer such as Bach and Handel during the late 19th century and early 20th centuries. The choir increasingly became the important conduit for worship as the 20th century progressed, and music ministries came to include multiple choirs performing varied repertoires. The gospel song, as defined first by the compositions of Charles Tindley, Lucie Campbell, and Thomas Dorsey, slowly became a popular song form in many black churches alongside long meter hymns, anthems, and congregational songs. (The African American Lectionary 2018)

Though African American worship experiences were generally more conservative in the North, and closer to the African roots in worship services in the South, the Negro spiritual quickly rose in application, becoming an outward example of African rhythmic culture and storytelling, until being fully integrated within the African American worship experience.

In his book "Ain't Gonna Lay My 'Ligion Down: African American Religion in the South", Jon Michael Spencer, a retired professor of history and theology of African American culture, writes about the connection to African rhythm as a cultural influence on the manner of spiritual expression:

> These drums, and all drums of lesser sacred status perform a requisite function in the music accompanying ritualistic dance, for with the articulations of these instruments' drummers seduce dancers into a state of ready fervor and mobilize the spirits into possessive action. The rhythm that does the seducing is characterizable as *African rhythm*, the singular noun intended to represent the common

> aspects of rhythm shared by most societies of continental Africa: first, its sacrality; and second, its multimetricity, cross-rhythms, asymmetrical patterning, and call and response, all articulated improvisatory and percussively, especially upon the drum, and customarily concretized in dance. (Spencer 1996, p. 39)

Spencer continues by specifically stating the cultural and religious importance of the drumbeat:

> But while the use of the drum was deferred in the diaspora, the drumbeats of Africa endured the slave factories and the middle passage and were sold along with the captive Africans on the auction blocks of the New World. Those drumbeats sat silently in many a gallery of white Protestant and Catholic churches until they could 'steal away' and release themselves without reproach in the physical concretizations of those who had carried the rhythm in the blood and bones and souls beneath their flesh. (Spencer 1996, p. 39)

With the survival of the drumbeat in the Americas, African American religious traditions began to develop, inspired by the cultural influence of percussion rhythm. One such religious tradition was the ring shout.

The ring shout, shown in Figure 2, rooted in ritual dances of West Africa and forged by the Atlantic slave trade, is believed to be the oldest surviving African American performance tradition of any kind. The ring shout was practiced on various plantations and celebrated in brush arbors, in many instances through the singing of spirituals, as well as within the walls of praise houses. Centered in the Gullah Geechee region of the coastal South, it differs from traditional black religious music in repertory, style, and execution. Despite its name, the ring shout entails little shouting. The word refers not to the singing but to the movement: small, deliberate steps in a counterclockwise ring. The word "shout" has been said to be a Gullah survival of the Afro-Arabic word "saut", the name of a ritual dance around the Kaaba, a sacred site in Mecca (Fox 2018). The circular steps for which shouting is known are by no means dancing. To avoid even the faint appearance of dance (considered sinful in some Christian traditions), shouters may neither cross their feet nor lift them high. The result is a low, measured step that is sometimes described as a shuffle, and this is shouting's visual hallmark. On the plantations of the Antebellum South, where it took on elements of Christianity, the ring shout flourished covertly for generations amongst the enslaved (Ring Shout, Fox 2018).

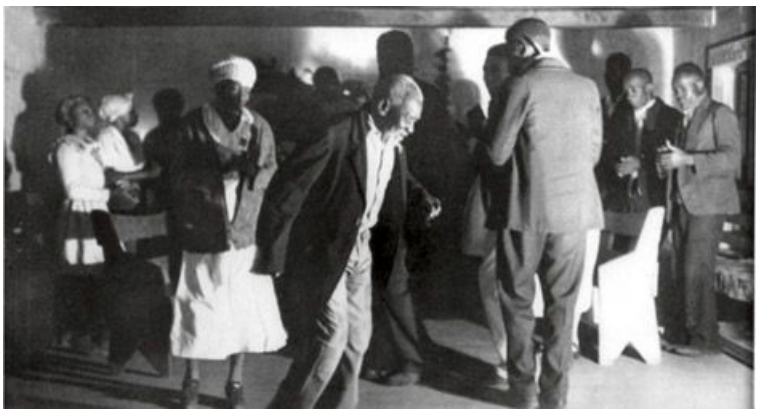

Figure 2. Ring Shout in Georgia, circa 1930. Image courtesy of Lorenzo Dow Turner Papers, Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution. From the following website: https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/anacostia-community-museum-attempts-record-breaking-ring-shout-34583242/ (accessed on 15 June 2018).

Music and movement developed into central forms of praise in the black church and continues to be expressed today. Contemporary church building design strongly reflects the need for an appropriate space for congregants and choirs to enthusiastically engage in

the experience of a worship service. Choir lofts today can become prominent architectural spaces, which can command lines of site and are typically located behind and above the pulpit. A traditional spatial design for a sanctuary is either linear or curvilinear, with the line of site covering the pastor, choir, and musicians.

The manner of praise and worship varies with the church. Some rural churches were more expressive and closer to their African roots, while some urban churches may have been more traditional in their services. The manner of praise was also influenced by the church a person would attend, with Protestantism generally being the primary religion practiced by enslaved and free persons. Catholicism, however, was present in the African American community, and there were efforts to evangelize enslaved persons to this religion. Afrocentric expression of singing, shouting, and spirit possession were more permitted, and became a more traditional part of Protestant religious services than what was allowed in a traditional Catholic mass.

In this architectural study of African American church houses, the primary focus of inquiry is on the building as an example of material culture, and not the religion. This approach allows us to study the history of the structure, its designer and builders, stylistic expressions of vernacular form, construction techniques, and its architectural value and meaning to the users who constructed it, as well as the community it serves. The religion practiced in the church house can certainly have an architectural influence on the design of the building, from the organization of spaces to the ability for storytelling through stained glass windows, providing an important inquiry into the history of the church and its parishioners. New Orleans traditionally has had a strong Catholic and Afrocentric presence. This presence takes the form of one of the most historic churches in the city, the Saint Augustine Catholic Church. Though this church supports the Catholic faith, its history and architecture are directly connected to African Americans living in the community surrounding this particular church, as well as the city.

Saint Augustine Catholic Church (SACC), shown in Figure 3, is located at 1210 Governor Nicholls Street in New Orleans, Louisiana. The current owner is SACC, with the support of the Archdiocese of New Orleans. The construction of the current building was completed in 1842. The site is composed of several buildings, which include the church, a school, and support facilities. The current use of the church building is for spiritual worship. SACC is considered the first Catholic church in New Orleans established and constructed for African Americans and people of color, both enslaved and free.

Figure 3. Saint Augustine Catholic Church, Treme Community, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2017. Image by the author. June 2017.

Saint Augustine Catholic Church is located in a historic district in New Orleans called Treme. The origins of the district can be traced to the earliest years of New Orleans, when a brickyard owned by the Company of the Indies was established outside of the city

near Bayou Road and today's Claiborne Avenue. This land became part of the plantation lands acquired by Claude Treme (Hawkins and Barrier 2018). Located on a portion of the Morand-Moreau plantation and sold by Treme in 1810 to the city of New Orleans, this area became the city's first subdivision, and is considered to be America's oldest existing African American neighborhood (Louisiana State Historical Marker 2018 for the Faubourg Treme Historic District). Treme began to subdivide his estate and sell off large tracts of land to free blacks and others on a first-come, first-serve basis. After selling thirty-five lots, Claude and Julie Treme left their plantation home for a more peaceful life. In 1834, Jeanne Marie Aliquot purchased the Tremes' former home and property from the city of New Orleans and brought in the United States' first Catholic elementary school for free girls of color and a few slaves. Jeanne Marie Aliquot became a major catalyst in the development of Saint Augustine Church (Saint Augustine Catholic Church Website 2016).

Under economic duress from her social ventures, Jeanne Marie sold the house to the Ursuline Sisters in 1836. They, in turn, sold the property to the Carmelites in 1840, who then took over the little school for colored girls and merged it with their school for white girls. The Carmelite Sisters used the Treme home for their motherhouse until 1926, when they moved out to Robert E. Lee Boulevard in the West End section of New Orleans (Saint Augustine Catholic Church Website 2016).

In the late 1830s, when free people of color got permission from Bishop Antoine Blanc to build a church, the Ursulines donated the corner property at Bayou Road (now Governor Nicholls Street) and Saint Claude, which they had bought for USD 10,000, on the condition that the church be named after their foundress, Saint Angel Merici (Saint Augustine Catholic Church Website 2016). In the midst of all these things, Henriette Delille, a free woman of color, and Juliette Gaudin, a Cuban, began aiding slaves, orphan girls, the uneducated, and the sick and elderly, among people of color, in 1823. Their particular concern for the education and care of black children aided greatly in the founding of the city's early private school for the colored. At the urging of Jeanne Marie Aliquot and the wise counseling of Pere Etienne Rousselin, the two women knelt in Saint Augustine Church on November 21, 1842, and pledged to live in the community and to work for orphan girls, the uneducated, the poor, the sick, and the elderly among the free people of color, thus founding the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family, the second oldest African American congregation of women (Saint Augustine Catholic Church Website 2016). The mission of the new church was therefore to provide a place for people of color to freely worship.

Church history documents the effort of parishioners to buy pews for seating in the church. The "War of the Pews", as the effort was historically called, began a few months before the dedication of Saint Augustine, scheduled for 9 October 1842. The pews are shown in Figure 4. The following is a description of the event:

> The people of color began to purchase pews for their families. Upon hearing of this, white people in the area started their campaign to buy pews. The free people of color bought three pews for every one purchased by the whites. In an unprecedented political and religious move, the colored members also bought the side aisle pews. They then gave those pews to the slaves as their exclusive place of worship. This mix of pews resulted in the most integrated congregation in the country: one large row of free people of color, one larger row of whites with a smattering of ethnic folk, and two outer aisles of slaves. (Saint Augustine Catholic Church Website 2016)

Figure 4. Pews reserved for the enslaved located in the nave of the Saint Augustine Catholic Church. Image by the author. June 2017.

Church members, however, would question the documentation of historical church events, specifically written by the Reverend Joseph Subileau, an early priest at the church in the late 1800s, because events, as presented by the archdiocese, would conflict with the congregants' knowledge and experience of similar events. For example, the congregants state that during the "War of the Pews", free people of color bought three pews for every one pew purchased by white parishioners. Official archdiocesan records show that the ratio of pews being purchased between the races was one to one. Further, Subileau concluded that "it is false to say that the colored people constructed Saint Augustine's church. When the collections were taken up, the colored people contributed just like the white people, according to their means. But the greater part of the money came from the collections made among the white people of the city" (The Advocate 2017). Congregants of color likely believed that their efforts in the establishment and growth of the church were diminished by documentation conducted by the local archdiocese.

Saint Augustine Catholic Church is located in the African American community known as Treme. The Treme community is composed of one- and two-story stick-framed residential buildings and was created initially as a neighborhood for free persons of color. The purchase of land tracts in the community, however, allowed both black and white persons, free and enslaved, rich and poor, to reside together in the area. Treme quickly developed into a multicultural neighborhood associated with the black Catholic community. The streets are narrow with parking for cars. There are no off-street garages at any of the residences, nor are there any carports; thus, there is no off-street parking for residences in the immediate area of the church. The only off-street parking available is at the church site. Most residences are set along the front property line, with no front yard or street plantings. The congregants, throughout the history of Saint Augustine, walked to the church for services. The urban neighborhood is densely designed to encourage pedestrian foot traffic, not only to attend church, but also to move about within the community. This type of pedestrian movement encouraged the development of a tightly knit community, wherein people knew one another. With the church as the anchor of the community, both physically and culturally, a relationship between the community and the church was established. This bond continues today, with the pride exampled by families who have been members of Saint Augustine for generations, even if the family no longer lives in Treme (Hunter 2018, pp. 104–6).

On the north side of the site, along Governor Nicholls Street, is a garden lot called the Tomb of the Unknown Slave, as shown in Figure 5. Dedicated on 30 October 2004, the

shrine "honors all slaves buried throughout the United States and those slaves in particular who lie beneath the ground of Treme in unmarked, unknown graves" (Plaque of the Tomb of the Unknown Slave 2017). The monument is made of forged metal links assembled as chain links and formed into the shape of a cross. There are shackles attached by smaller chains that also hang from the cross-shaped metal monument. The monument is anchored by two concrete bases, which are buried in the ground. A detailed image of the monument is shown in Figure 6.

Figure 5. Tomb of the Unknown Slave at north elevation of Saint Augustine Catholic Church. Image by the author. June 2017.

Figure 6. The Tomb of the Unknown Slave Monument makes a cross of steel links with shackles hanging from the cross. Image by the author. June 2017.

SACC was designed by French architect Jacques Nicolas Bussiere de Pouilly, the architect who designed the Saint Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square in New Orleans. The cathedral is considered his greatest work.

The local vernacular and style of the architecture in New Orleans are heavily influenced by the French Colonial tradition; however, there is a Spanish cultural presence that emerged first in the city, dating back to the mid-18th century when the French ceded to Spain the colony in the Treaty of Paris in 1763. New Orleans remained under Spanish

control until 1801, when it was ceded back to France. Napoleon sold the Louisiana Territory to the United States in 1803 (Jackson 2018). Saint Augustine's building design, specifically the tower design, may have less French influence and more Spanish, as shown in Figure 7. Saint Augustine's design suggests a hybrid application, which can be categorized as an interpretation of Spanish Romanesque. The hybrid model combines French and Spanish influences, both cultures having a strong historical presence in New Orleans. A pediment (historically used in Classical architecture—a triangular gable usually having a horizontal cornice with raked cornices on each side) is centered on the east façade. Spanish Romanesque architecture is highlighted by an off-center tower demarking an entrance, or the bell tower, which becomes the dominant element because of its verticality. Several church buildings in New Orleans have similar detailing in the design of their towers, upon buildings that are not Spanish Romanesque in fashion: Saint Vincent de Paul Catholic Church, shown in Figure 8, constructed in 1866, with its clock tower added to the building in 1924; Holy Trinity Catholic church, shown in Figure 9, constructed in June 1848; Saint Mark Methodist Church, dedicated in 1924, and shown in Figure 10. Saint Vincent served a French community, while Holy Trinity served a growing German community. Saint Mark served a Methodist denomination. With Saint Augustine serving a community of color, the datum between these four churches, with designs that show no regard for denomination or culture, appears to be the tripartite detailing of the towers (Hunter 2018, pp. 110–12).

Figure 7. Saint Augustine Catholic Church circa 1900s; image courtesy of the Historic New Orleans Collection.

Figure 8. Saint Vincent de Paul Catholic Church, New Orleans, Louisiana; image from the website http://old-new-orleans.com/NO_Three_Churches.html (accessed on 28 June 2018); photo credit to Three Historic Churches. June 2017.

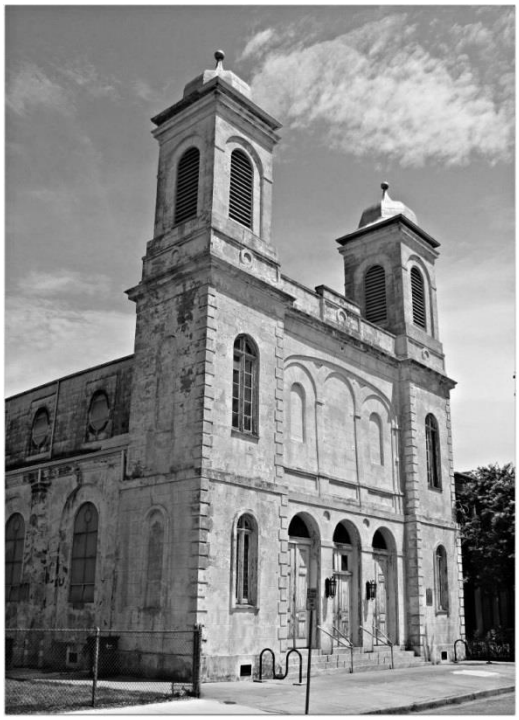

Figure 9. Holy Trinity Catholic Church, New Orleans, Louisiana; image from the website http://www.neworleanschurches.com/holytrinity/holytrin.htm (accessed on 28 June 2018); image credit John and Kathleen DeMajo. June 2017.

Figure 10. Saint Mark Methodist Church, New Orleans, Louisiana; image from the website http://www.neworleanschurches.com/stmarkfc/stmarkfc.htm (accessed on 28 June 2018); Image credit John and Kathleen DeMajo. June 2017.

Cultural expressions for African Americans in church building design came in the form of stained glass and paintings, specifically murals, and interestingly enough within the walls of many black Catholic churches. Vernon Dubard, a 7th Ward New Orleans artist, painted one of his most noteworthy works in the Our Lady Star of the Sea parish in New Orleans. Named "The Dance of Holy Innocence", the mural is located behind the altar of the parish, as shown in Figure 11.

Figure 11. Mural of "Dance of Holy Innocence", located in Our Lady of the Sea Parish, New Orleans, Louisiana; Image from the website http://www.neworleanschurches.com/StarofSea/star.htm (accessed on 29 November 2021); Image credit John and Kathleen DeMajo. November 2021.

In Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi, Armenian artist Auseklis Ozels, founder of the New Orleans Academy of Fine Arts, was commissioned to paint the mural "Christ in the Oaks",

envisioned to represent both the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, shown in Figure 12. According to the artist, "The figure of Christ hangs in the air, behind him a tree, the Cross, the symbol of the earth mightily grasping the ground. But Christ has broken free! The tree is behind him, yet it is his burden also."[16] Father Kenneth Hamilton, SVD, pastor of Saint Rosa de Lima, who directed a renovation of the church in the late 1980s and early 1990s, led the effort to bring the artist to the church to paint the mural. Father Hamilton drew inspiration from Pope John Paul II, who said that "Faith that does not become culture is not wholly embraced, fully thought, or faithfully lived" (Jacobs 2018).

Figure 12. Mural of "Christ In the Oaks", Saint Rose Catholic Church, Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi. Image by the author. August 2020.

The First African Baptist Church of Savannah, Georgia, installed stained glass images of the church's first seven pastors, three of which are shown in Figure 13. The windows have been in place within the walls of the building for over 130 years. These Afrocentric images reinforces the sense of culture within a sacred space, and culture as important, while conveying a sense of value in examples of painted imagery and expression in glass.

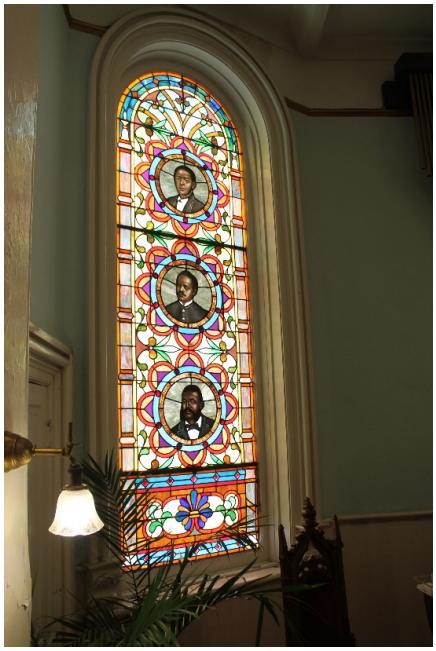

Figure 13. Stained glass imagery of former pastors of the First African Baptist Church, Savannah, Georgia. Image by the author. October 2014.

Another fine example of Afrocentric imagery designed in stained glass is the "Singing Windows" installed in the original chapel on the campus of Tuskegee Institute (known today as Tuskegee University).

The original campus chapel was built between 1896 and 1898 and was designed by African American architect Robert R. Taylor. The chapel was constructed almost entirely with student labor (Tuskegee University History 2022). The Singing Windows, installed as part of a renovation to the original chapel in 1932, were designed by J. and R. Lamb of New York. The windows were designed to portray eleven Negro spirituals, with African America illustrated via figures telling biblical stories through song. The original campus chapel fell to a fire in January 1957, and the current chapel was constructed between 1967 and 1969. The Singing Windows were reproduced and installed in the current chapel (Tuskegee University History 2022).

Nineteenth century African American churches were typically not afforded the opportunity for such an intersection of ecclesiastical and cultural expressions of architecture. These early church houses were constructed by people who built many structures, including churches, for their former slaveowners, and likely derived the form of their churches from the examples of church houses they had once built for white congregations.

To connect the sacred with the cultural begins to define the drive for resilience in wanting and needing the Afrocentric church building to survive. This connection of the sacred with the cultural to a space defined by four walls increases the value of the building. Charleston, South Carolina, presents an example of a religious context that is part of the culture of the city, with a plethora of church buildings framing its urban landscape.

Founded as an English proprietary colony in 1670, South Carolina has had a religious history dominated by Protestants (Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Lutherans) but marked by religious tolerance. Until the present century, leading churches have usually reflected a conservative theology, and supported the views and morals of "the establishment" and of society, rather than molding them or guiding them in new directions (Jones 1983). However, the growth of the presence of Africans in the colony from the late seventeenth century into the late eighteenth century continued as a result of the establishment of plantations, as well as Charleston becoming a major center for the domestic slave trade in America, resulting in the majority of persons living in the city being persons of color, either free or enslaved. As a result of this growth, South Carolina's slave code was the most draconian on the English mainland. City officials monitored every aspect and moment of the lives of blacks in their community, and white ministers played their part. Many owned enslaved domestics, and one assured his mixed-race congregation that the Bible pronounced it "contrary to God's will to run away or to harbor a runaway" (Egerton 2018). By the eighteenth century, Charleston had become the wealthiest city in all of the original Thirteen Colonies, with an economy based on the export of cash crops such as rice, indigo, and sea island cotton. However, by 1860, Charleston's free black population outnumbered the white population by more than three thousand, representing one-third of all free blacks in the state (Powers 2018). This growth of Africans brought with it a direct challenge to the city's perception of being a "Holy City", an unofficial title placed on the city as a result of the religious diversity now present.

Emanuel AME, or "Mother Emanuel" as it is sometimes referred to, was founded in 1816 and is considered the oldest African Methodist Episcopal church in the southern United States. This church, shown in Figure 14, also supports one of the oldest black congregations south of Baltimore, Maryland (The National Park Service 2018). Emanuel AME has had a history of resistance, from fighting against slavery through to the Civil Rights Movement. The church was founded by the Reverend Morris Brown, a free black man and prosperous shoemaker by trade, and Denmark Vesey, an enslaved man who purchased his freedom and thrived as a carpenter in Charleston, and these would both become voices of resistance. Violence against the congregants of Emanuel, as well as their church buildings, was the cost endured to secure not only religious freedom, but the achievement of justice and equality for the African American majority of Charleston.

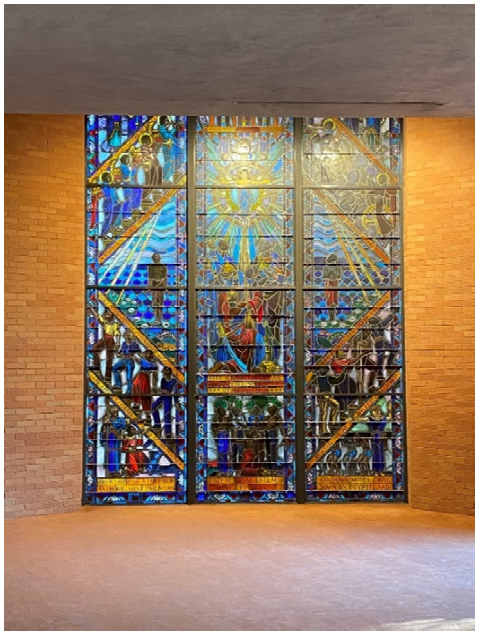

Figure 14. Singing Windows stained glass imagery in the campus chapel at Tuskegee University. Image by the author. January 2020.

The church was founded as the Hampstead Church in 1816 by African Americans who were former members of Charleston's three Methodist Episcopal churches. State law and city ordinance required lawful churches to be dominated by whites, though African Americans held separate services, usually in the basements. Hampstead Church was part of the "Bethel circuit" of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first independent black denomination in the United States, founded in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1816 by Richard Allen. They created an independent congregation because of a dispute over the use of the black burial ground. The white-dominated churches had increasingly discriminated against blacks in Charleston, culminating in Bethel Methodist's construction of a hearse house over its black burial ground. In 1818, church leader Morris Brown left a white Methodist church in protest, and more than four thousand black members of the city's three Methodist churches followed him to create this new church (Emanuel AME Church Website 2018). The first Emanuel AME Congregation church quickly became the focal point for the city's enslaved community, and, because of this, was routinely harassed by city officials. State and city ordinance allowed for black worship, but only between sunrise and sunset, and demanded that a majority of the congregants be white. The church's ministers allowed Vesey to teach reading and writing, which violated the state's ban on black literacy, leading Charleston authorities to repeatedly shut the church down. One Sunday in June 1818, whites swept into the church, arresting 140 "free Negroes and Slaves". Eight churchmen were fined and sentenced to receive ten lashes. Authorities invaded the church again in 1820, and in 1821 the city council warned Reverend Morris Brown that they would not tolerate a "school for slaves" (Egerton 2018).

In 1822, Denmark Vesey was implicated in a slave revolt plot. Vesey and five other organizers were executed on 2nd July after a secret trail. Additional trials took place over the following weeks, with more than thirty men executed and others deported from the state. The original church, a wood-frame building built between 1816 and 1818 (Allen 1983), was burned down by a crowd of angry whites. Reverend Brown was imprisoned for one month but was never convicted. Upon his release, he and several other prominent members fled to Philadelphia, while others managed to reconstitute the congregation in a few years. In reaction to Nat Turner's slave rebellion, in 1834, the white-run city of Charleston outlawed all-black churches. The AME congregation met in secret until after the Civil War in 1865 (Emanuel AME Church Website 2018).

After the War, the congregation rebuilt the church building between 1865 and 1872 on its present location, as a wooden structure, under the leadership of the architect Robert Vesey, the son of Denmark Vesey. In 1886, an earthquake demolished the church building. The current church, shown in Figures 15 and 16, was constructed on the same site as the previous wood building, and was completed in 1891.

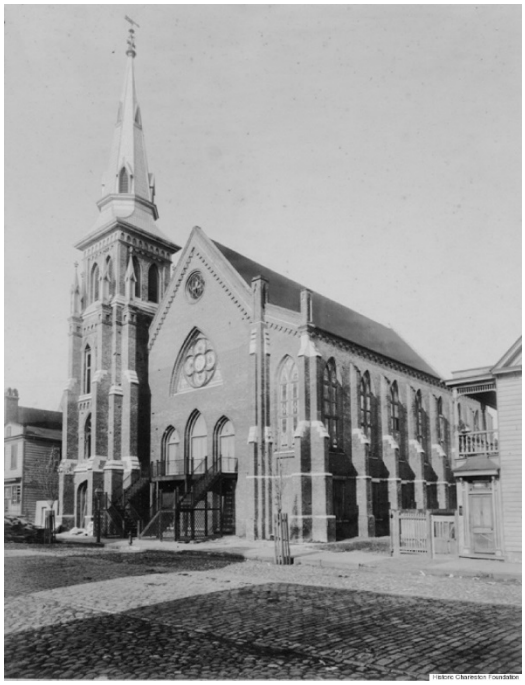

Figure 15. Emanuel AME Church circa 1910. Image courtesy of the Avery Research Center at the College of Charleston.

Figure 16. Emanuel AME Church, Charleston, South Carolina. Image by the author. June 2017.

Morris Brown and Denmark Vesey were determined to create and construct their safe spiritual place to worship and to simply be themselves. Laws, southern tradition, and acts of domestic terror were exercised against persons of color and their church buildings well into the height of the Civil Right era. This destruction continued most recently with the burning of three churches in Louisiana in late March and early April of 2019, hence the loss of Afrocentric sacred space. Monday Gell, a friend of Denmark Vesey, once stated, nearly two hundred years ago, "the African church is the people". The people designed,

constructed, and maintained the buildings of the early black church, defining for themselves a space for the spiritual, cultural and social creation of a safe place.

The cultural value of placemaking will

"Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening skies
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea"

The lyrics of *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, by James Weldon Johnson, are inspirational when considering the application of the word "*resilience*" to the existence of early African American church buildings. The African American church house is the first constructed example of material culture for African Americans. These early churches have been historically, and are currently, under threat from a number of forces; abandonment by their congregations, either by the passing of members, or congregants moving to newer facilities; the ravages of time, expressed by physical deterioration; domestic terror and destruction, dating back to the 18th century, either through prohibitive laws and southern tradition, or simply through forces such as fire and bombing. When discussed in the context of what an Afrocentric sacred space is, the cultural value of these spaces must be studied.

Resilience, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is "*an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change*". Resilience and resistance are counterweights when thinking of the historical path African Americans traveled from the 19th century to the mid-20th century, and to the height of the fight for full inclusion into the American fabric. From the wave of construction, which began in the latter part of the 19th century, African American church houses became second homes for many, with the physical building becoming the center of the African American community. The most treasured thing the church house represented, in the past as well as today, is a place for black people to call home.

After Reconstruction, most African Americans felt free and safe, to a certain extent, in establishing church congregations, with the construction of buildings soon to follow. The existence of many of these African American church houses, either in urban or particularly in rural settings, represented to many non-African Americans a resistance to Jim Crow and white supremacy. Black people viewed the ability to freely construct a place of worship as the ability to self-determine; an expression and representation of the concept of "black space".

David Thomson, a New York-based collaborative performer and creator in the fields of music, dance, theater, and performance, defines "black space" as follows:

> What is Black Space? It is a space created in opposition, in solidarity, as refuge, as think-tank, and ultimately as a source of power. It is a space to share and negotiate the codes, questions, and understandings of our identities within the larger culture, as well as a space of contradiction and limitation . . . . (Thomson 2021)

Over time, these black spaces became the focus of those who simply could not accept the idea of Afrocentric normalcy in America culture. Thomson's definition of "black space" continues:

> It's a term that was transformed by Black people during the 1960s into an idea that embraced the complex space of power, love, and identity. It signified the difference between being put in a room and creating a room of one's own. I believe the power to self-identify, in a time when we have developed a multitude of terms that describe our ways of being in this world, is itself the beginning of addressing the old, stagnant concepts of race. (Thomson 2021)

This definition is consistent with Wright's interpretation from the 1940s, given in his explanation of the meaning and value of the simple architectural spaces created by

simple church buildings. As the right to self-determine was being exercised by black people living in post-Reconstruction America, the meaning and value of space definition became more important and meaningful. It spoke to a desired way of living that these newly freed people wanted, a point documented in the book "*The Souls of Black Folks*", written in 1903 by W.E.B. DuBois. DuBois wrote about the challenges of the Negro citizen living in America at the turn of the 20th century as an example of "twoness"; the existence of duality that African Americans live within. This "double consciousness" is linked to the intersectionality between an understanding of *resistance* (as an African American person) and *resilience* (as a person), giving a human quality to these church houses.

The cultural value of these early church houses was simple—the idea of ownership of four walls of our own making, with the freedom to express an African American spirit, culture, and agency inside the created space. As black communities were established in the latter part of the 19th century and into the first decades of the 20th century, the purpose of the church house began to expand. Beyond the primary function of serving as a house of worship, the building was used as a place for education, a communal place to gather, a place to develop businesses and collective economics, and to politically organize.

The height of this conflict, where resistance and resilience were undergoing their greatest expression, was the Civil Rights movement in the mid-20th century. It is at this point in American history that commitment faced confrontation, with the Old South and Jim Crow being faced with the winds of societal change for a more inclusive country. The church houses became the rallying place to plan, support, protect, and preach for a new "great awakening" in this country. In the midst of this oncoming change came an unfortunate but not surprising occurrence—the church houses became targets.

Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod,

Felt in the days when hope unborn had died.

Since 1822, attacks against African American churches in the United States have taken the form of arson, bombings, mass murders, hate crimes, and white supremacist-motivated domestic terrorism.

Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, was burned to the ground in 1822 in order to shut down the church, because the congregants violated the "black codes" of the city.

Mount Zion Baptist Church, opening and holding its first service on 4 April 1921, was burned to the ground on 1 June 1921, in the Tulsa Race massacre.

On 15 September 1963, the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, was bombed during a Sunday church service where twenty-two persons were injured, and four girls died.

On 30 June 1974, at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, Alberta Williams King, the mother of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., along with Edward Boykin, another congregant, were murdered in the church by Marcus Wayne Chenault, a black Hebrew Israelite.

From 1995 to 1996, 145 black churches were burned in a wave of arson attacks.

The Huffington Post published an article entitled "*There Have Been At Least 100 Attacks On Black Churches Since 1956*" on 21 October 2015. These various attacks took the form of bombings, arson, vandalism, and shootings.

On 2 April and 4 April 2019, Holden Matthews was charged with arson for the torching of the Greater Union Baptist Church and Mount Pleasant Baptist Church, both located in Opelousas, Louisiana. Both churches were burned to the ground. On 15 April 2019, eleven days after the burning of these small churches, the world was consumed with the burning of the Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, France, to which far more attention was given.

These attacks, and many more, were on "black space".

Yet with a steady beat

Have not our weary feet

Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?

The creation and ownership of a place is an exercise of power. The ownership of a building becomes power exercised by those who own it, and thus control the activities that occur within the spaces. Human presence, and the actions created by these people, transforms the space, defined architecturally by four walls, into a place, where those who own the space reside, and events take place. As a result of these actions, there develops an innate feeling of pride and protection for the use and defense of the place owned by those who at one time in their lives did not know the feeling of ownership. A church house that is valued will become resilient over time.

We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,

We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered . . .

When viewed through a contemporary lens, and as an aging structure, these church houses must continue to have a function in order to survive, especially in the face of the current societal rise of Afrocentric consciousness in America. The conceptual term of "black space" becomes more relevant to the newly constructed sacred structures of today, as they continue to engage in similar functions as their forerunners. It must be made clear, however, that "black space" should not be interpreted as a contemporary term. Its example existed in brush harbors, slave quarters and open fields on many plantations and in praise houses. This term is transcendental and must be intertwined with an understanding of resilience on the behalf of Africans in the diaspora and the construction of the physical material that reflects our culture. In its representation of spatial definition, the architecture of the African American church house can be compared to the human qualities of aspiration and security. In his book *"The Temple in the House: Finding the Sacred in Everyday Architecture"*, author and architect Anthony Lawlor, AIA, offers the following:

> Gate, path, and lotus seat reflect the pattern of desire, search, and fulfillment. A second pattern—reaching outward for a higher level of life coupled with the inspiration of turning inward for healing and renewal—is reflected in the steeple and sanctuary. The steeple calls the mind to grow in knowledge and experience. Simultaneously, we are drawn to the qualities of the sanctuary—shelter, nurturing, stability, and loving embrace. (Lawlor 1994, p. 51)

The steeple and the sanctuary embody a relationship wherein both parts together are necessary to holistically represent a complete person, or metaphorically speaking, the experiences of directing a prayer to the heavens to gain an understanding bigger than oneself, while feeling that the offering of such a prayer comes from within the safe and secure walls of the sanctuary. Where it can be argued that any church building that has a steeple and a sanctuary could provide such a representation, it was consistently stated in the days of enslavement that black people desired to reach for a better world to live in. Questions abounded as to why enslavement happened, with the enslaved being told their reward was not on earth but in heaven, if they would work hard and honor their earthly masters. A similar situation also pertained in the fight for equality, from the days of marching in the streets in the past to the days of marching in the streets in the present. There was always the rationale voiced to African Americans during the height of the American Civil Rights Movement that change was coming too fast; that a more incremental approach to societal change was best. Historically, equality became more pronounced within the sanctuary of a church, while looking upward like a steeple and faithfully believing that the walk of faith would not be a lonely one. The steps of Reedy Chapel in Galveston, Texas were the place where newly freed black people participated in the first Juneteenth celebrations after learning of their freedom on 19 June 1865. Brown Chapel in Selma, Alabama, became the crucible for the launch of the march from Selma to Montgomery one hundred years later in 1965, which led to the events of "Bloody Sunday". The famous "Albany Movement" was born in the Old Mount Zion Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia. This movement worked with and was supported by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

(SNCC). Congregants and community members led grassroots campaigns out of the church, with the goal of ending discrimination in public facilities and achieving voters' rights in southwest Georgia. These experiences of people of faith had cultural roots in hush harbors and slave quarters, which eventually found its expression and home in black church houses. Lawlor quotes Thomas Moore in stating that "*a tall steeple and a rose window are not designed to allow additional seating or better light for reading. They speak to the soul's need for beauty, for love of the building itself as well as its use, for a special opportunity for sacred* imagination" (Lawlor 1994, p. 51).

Resiliency exists in the human experience. African Americans have had to be resilient since setting foot in Hispaniola in 1502, when Juan de Cordoba sent black slaves from Spain to the West Indies (National Humanities Center 2021). Here, the central point is not one of resiliency or resistance, but one of value. The value of a people is exampled in material culture; whether this be architecture, art, music, writing, fashion, industry, science, intellectual discourse, etc., it must be found that the culture of a people carries value for that people. The 19th century German-born American anthropologist Franz Boas is well known for his theory of cultural relativism, which is the idea that a person's activities or beliefs should be understood in the terms and values of their own culture, not someone else's (Boasian Anthropology 2021). I can think of no better way to move forward in the chronicle of the African American story than to understand its influence on architecture's ability to represent the resilience and resistance of its people and their experiences.

Afrocentric sacred space can be considered a subset to the broader term of black space. The general definition of this term is simply, "*I know it when I am in it*". The point here is the notion that value does not have to be Eurocentric to be relevant. Further, there are general human experiences that are shared by all, regardless of culture, as the theorist Christopher Alexander writes so eloquently in his book *"The Timeless Way of Building"* via the phrase, "the quality without a name". This phrase makes reference to the creation of good building and good placemaking. If people of African descent are to exercise resilience and resistance to the continued negative external influences of the world, which continue to challenge our right to self-determination, what and how we do something, how we experience a quiet moment, our expressive worship with engaging choirs and animated pastors, and to create a safe place to reside, it must be done on terms that align with our culture and allow our agency to exist. The phenomenological structure of Africans' natural spiritual origins must be defined by the value of Africans living through the diaspora, with the understanding that good architectural placemaking is not assumed to be Eurocentric. Author and activist Richard Wright, writing in his 1941 book "12 million Black Voices", states the following:

> ...for it is only when we are within the walls of our churches that we are wholly ourselves, that we keep alive a sense of our personalities in relation to the total world in which we live, that we maintain a quiet and constant communion with all that is deepest in us . . . (Wright 1941, pp. 130–31)

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