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CITYSPACE

What's Historic?



It's What's Inside That Counts: Marian Anderson was a famous concert artist whose career also reflected the struggle for civil rights. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Often, it is the event within, not the building itself.

by John Andrew Gallery

In April, the Philadelphia Historical Commission added two buildings to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. While each one is important in itself, each also represents a larger issue of importance to historic preservation in Philadelphia. The first is Marian Anderson's house, which provides the basis for this column; the second is Guild House at Seventh and Spring Garden streets, which provides the basis for next week.

Marian Anderson's house is a two-story, brick rowhouse on a small street in South Philadelphia. Anderson maintained her residence in the house from 1924 to 1990. It was built in the 1870s and retains its Italianate cornice, typical of the period, and a few other original details. But from an architectural perspective it is quite ordinary. And that is one of the reasons why its designation as historic is significant.

Many people think that historic preservation is about preserving architecturally distinguished buildings. While this is the consequence of most preservation activity, it's really not the primary motivation. The primary motivation is preserving the history of people and events that shaped the past and, in so doing, so have influenced the present as well. Sometimes the connection of places to events and to people is so clear that it's easy to decide "what's historic." Independence Hall, for example, would be worth preserving for the events that took place there even if the building itself were ugly and undistinguished. This is also apparent in the designation of Anderson's house; it is historically significant not for its architecture, but for its connection to a person and events important in the history of Philadelphia. Anderson is an important part of our history not simply because she was an internationally famous concert artist, but because the course of her career also reflected the struggle for civil rights for African-Americans.

There is a second reason why the designation of Anderson's house is significant. If the underlying basis of preservation is history, then it must be the history of everyone who has lived in Philadelphia. Most of what we have preserved is representative of the dominant society, the society of white Americans. One of our responsibilities as preservationists is to take a broader view of history, one that encompasses the contributions of Philadelphia's multicultural heritage. A notable part of that is the role of African-Americans in Philadelphia.

In examining the history of African-American contributions to Philadelphia from a historic preservation point of view, buildings that African-Americans have created themselves are of particular importance. Foremost among these are black churches. Philadelphia has been a center of black religious activity for more than 200 years. The history of the African-American church is our history, reflecting both the historic growth of the city and critical aspects of its social and political history.

Philadelphia's first black churches emerged in the late 18th century as products of the frustration and hypocrisy of racism that black congregants experienced from predominantly white congregations. Architecturally, these first churches -- Mother Bethel, founded by Richard Allen in 1794; St. Thomas Episcopal, founded by Absalom Jones in 1794; and Zoar Methodist Episcopal, founded by 1796 -- looked almost identical to St. George's Methodist, the white church from which they arose. When each of these congregations built a new church between 1880 and 1890, after growing into large and prosperous religious institutions, they hired prominent white architects and chose building designs identical to those of white congregations of the time because they saw their role as creating opportunities for their congregants to have the same religious experiences they were denied in white churches.

Initially, the churches were not centers of social protest. However, the rapid black migration from the South from 1890 to 1910 led these churches to adopt a new role as social organizer and crucibles of protest for the black community, a role that expanded even further in the 20th century.



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rch also reflects the historic growth of the city. In 1813, all six black churches that existed by 1857. But by 1892, there were 28 churches, and areas of West and North Philadelphia, particularly along Ridge Avenue, a 3, the churches had followed the growing black population of the city to hia. One of the outstanding buildings of this period is Tindley Temple

United Methodist Church on South Broad Street. Occupying most of a full city block and with an enormous sanctuary, Tindley Temple stands today as a monument of African-American achievement in the first half of the 20th century.

From their humble beginnings as havens of refuge to their growth into pillars of strength and centers of community organization, Philadelphia's African-American churches, like Marian Anderson's house, remind us of the important contributions of African-Americans to Philadelphia's history, which we as a community have a responsibility to recognize and preserve.

John Andrew Gallery is executive director of the Preservation Alliance. This article draws on a research paper on historic African-American churches prepared for the Alliance by Matthew S. Hopper.



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