

METROPOLITAN BAPTIST CHURCH, (formerly the New York Presbyterian Church), 151 West 128th Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1884-85 and 1889-90; architects John R. Thomas and Richard R. Davis.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1913, Lot 1.

On May 13, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Metropolitan Baptist Church (formerly the New York Presbyterian Church), (Item no. 6). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Letters have been received in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

History and Development

Designed in two sections by different architects, the Metropolitan Baptist Church (originally the New York Presbyterian Church) is a fine example of the many new churches built in Harlem during the late 19th century at a time when the local church represented wealth and stability to the community. The building is distinguished by a somewhat unusual blend of the Gothic and Romanesque Revival styles, both favored in part for their imposing character, and reflects the importance of its original congregation. The earlier section of rough-faced limestone church, fronting on West 128th Street, was planned by John Rochester Thomas in 1884. It housed a small lecture room/chapel and was erected with the intention of adding a principal auditorium structure at a later date. The addition, comprising the Seventh Avenue facade and the northern section of the church, was completed in 1890 and designed by Richard R. Davis. Davis' extension, with its dominating gable and towers, complemented the Thomas design incorporating many details from the earlier structure.

Although the immediate neighborhood was not fully developed when the building was commissioned by the New York Presbyterian Church, greater Harlem was blossoming as New York's most fashionable suburb. Harlem derived its name from the village of Nieuw Harlem established in the region by Peter Stuyvesant in 1658, and embraced the area of Manhattan above Morningside Heights between the Hudson and Harlem Rivers. The region remained rural until the turn of the century. Country estates in the western half of the district took advantage of magnificent views from Harlem Heights, while the eastern section, between present-day 110th and 125th Streets, was cultivated as farmlands. It was not until the 1830s, when the New York & Harlem Railroad ran trains to 129th Street, that Harlem's potential as a residential suburb was recognized.

The transformation from rural village to fashionable upper- and upper-middle-class neighborhood, however, did not occur until after the 1870s. Harlem suffered a decline in the 1830s when its lush farmlands were depleted, and many great estates were sold at public auction during this period. The striking vistas and beautiful unspoiled country nevertheless attracted fashionable downtowners on picnics and day trips, particularly after the 1860s. In the 1870s the rapid growth of New York City began to notably affect the status of nearby Harlem. The area was annexed to the City in 1873, and from 1878 - 1881, three lines of the elevated railroad were extended as far north as 129th Street, precipitating the development of new residential neighborhoods.

The building boom lasted until 1905. Exclusive homes, such as Strivers Row in the St. Nicholas Historic District on 138th and 139th Streets, designed in part by Stanford White in 1891, were erected for affluent, established New Yorkers, people of wealth and taste, as Harlem came to epitomize the ultimate in fashion and elegance. An 1893 article in the Harlem Monthly Magazine foresaw correctly that "It is evident to the most superficial observer that the centre of fashion, wealth, culture, and intelligence, must, in the near future, be found in the ancient and honorable village of Harlem.." By 1900 luxurious apartment houses lined Lenox Avenue in the 130's and 140's blocks and Seventh Avenue, then one of the finest residential streets in New York. Harlem also boasted elegant rows of brownstones, the fashionable Polo Grounds, and the distinguished Harlem Opera House, which opened on West 125th Street in 1889.

As exclusive neighborhoods shifted northward, most churches were compelled to follow their congregations to Harlem. Many expensive and imposing church edifices were erected for prestigious congregations whose membership often numbered in the thousands.

When the leaders of the New York Presbyterian Church purchased the corner lots on Seventh Avenue and 128th Street in 1884 they were criticized for planning such a costly project, but the church had anticipated the growth of the immediate neighborhood and the healthy expansion of membership. At the time, the New York Presbyterian Church was well established in the city. The roots of the Presbyterian faith, which is based on a modified form of Calvinism and a specific ecclesiastical hierarchy, date to 1754 when the Associate Presbytery was formed by members of the religious secession in Scotland. In 1782, the Associate Reformed Church was formed when the Associate Presbytery joined with the Reformed Church of America. Three churches of this order were established in New York, but left a dissatisfied remnant group when they united as one in 1822. The small Scotch-Irish remnant, led by a representative of the Associate Reformed Synod, was established as the Associate Reformed Church of the City of New York in 1831, accepted into the New York Presbytery in 1867, and subsequently renamed the New York Presbyterian Church.

After occupying several downtown locations the church decided to establish a permanent headquarters in Harlem and commissioned John Rochester Thomas (1848-1901) to design the new building. Born and trained in Rochester, New York, Thomas was reputed to have designed more public

and semi-public buildings than any other architect in the country. Among his works were the Eighth Regiment Armory, the Seventy-first Regiment Armory, the Squadron A Armory, a designated New York City Landmark, an extension to the old New York Stock Exchange, buildings for the New York State Reformatory at Elmira, the New Jersey State Reformatory at Rahway, and the Eastern New York Reformatory. Among the educational institutions from which he received commissions were the University of Rochester, Rochester Theological Seminary, Cornell University, and the University of Virginia. Thomas designed more than 150 churches, one of which was the Second Reformed Church at Lenox Avenue and 123rd Street, now the Ephesus Seventh Day Adventist Church in the Mount Morris Park Historic District. Thomas is perhaps best known, however, for his 1889 design of the Hall of Records or Surrogates Court, a designated New York City Landmark. Richard R. Davis, who designed the auditorium addition, was a Harlem architect who maintained an office, 247 West 125th Street. He was responsible for many fine apartments and row houses in the area.

The cornerstone of the Thomas-designed church building was laid in October 18, 1884, and the first service held in September, 1885. The north side of the church was finished with a temporary frame bay in anticipation of the future addition. Ground was broken for the main auditorium structure on Thanksgiving Day, 1889. Davis' addition completed the church, incorporating the original design of both the exterior and interior. The new, wide, fan-shaped auditorium, which opened in October 1890, was partitioned from the original lecture room. When necessary, the two rooms were opened up as one during large Sunday services.

While the reason for the two-part construction was probably financial, it remains unclear why Thomas did not complete the project he had commenced six years earlier. Davis, in fact, appears to have plagiarized his composition for the Seventh Avenue addition from the western section of the nearby Reformed Low Dutch Church of Harlem on Lenox Avenue and West 123rd Street, designed by Thomas in 1885. The similarity is too close to be coincidental. Evidently quite proud of the completed New York Presbyterian Church, Davis claimed the entire design as his own in an 1893 business advertisement.

Only a few years after the New York Presbyterian Church was completed the character of Harlem began to undergo yet another transformation. Proposed subway routes to West Harlem sparked a wave of real estate speculation that continued until the bottom fell out of the market in 1904-1905. In 1904, a black businessman named Philip Payton founded the Afro-American Realty Company, which, during its short life, played a major role in the development of Harlem as a black community. In the aftermath of the real estate collapse, which produced a surplus of housing, Payton acquired five-year leases on white-owned properties and rented them at higher rates to black families. Blacks who could afford high rents had begun moving to Harlem at the turn of the century. A dramatic increase in Harlem's black population came, however, as hundreds of black families were uprooted when their homes in the Tenderloin area near 34th Street were destroyed during the 1906-1910 construction of Pennsylvania Station. For the first time good housing in large quantities was available to

New York's blacks. People talked of "moving up to Harlem". Just as Harlem had been an exclusive white community, it became an exclusive black community, with more than 50,000 blacks living there by 1914.

After the 1908 collapse of the Afro-American Realty Company, local churches played the most influential roles in the development of black Harlem. Traditionally, the church was the most stable institution in the black community. Church wealth and influence expanded concurrently with the growth of Harlem's black population and membership enjoyed a healthy increase as churches began to purchase property and move to Harlem. During the early 20th century many white denominations sold their church buildings to black congregations as "on to Harlem" movements brought black churches to the area. Selling their downtown properties at high rates, the black churches often invested their profits in local Harlem real estate. By the 1920s almost every well-established black church had relocated uptown. Many had congregations so large that it was necessary to hold several services on a single Sunday.

Unlike the established black churches that moved to Harlem from downtown locations, the Metropolitan Baptist Church was a new congregation. Organized as the Mercy Street Baptist Church by seven blacks in 1912, the congregation merged with the Zion Baptist Church and worshipped in the basement of a house at 45-47 West 134th Street, paying \$1.00 per year in rent. When the Reverend W.W. Brown arrived from Pittsburgh to lead the church in 1914, membership numbered 380. The congregation grew rapidly under Brown's direction and services were moved to the Public Casino. In 1916, the Metropolitan Baptist Church purchased three lots on West 138th Street between Lenox Avenue and constructed a temporary building that seated 1,500 persons. After this proved inadequate, the Church purchased the New York Presbyterian Building on West 128th Street in 1918 at a cost of \$85,000. In 1929 the Church acquired the three adjoining row houses on West 128th Street with the intention of erecting a youth center. These were later torn down but the center was never built.

Description

The exterior of the Metropolitan Baptist Church is little changed from its original appearance. The limestone structure shows a handsome blend of detail from the Gothic and Romanesque Revival styles which were the rule for ecclesiastical architecture of the period. Introduced in the 1840s, the Gothic Revival style never lost its popularity in church design throughout the remainder of the century, even after the Romanesque Revival style became fashionable in the 1880s. While the two styles were considered equally acceptable, elements from both were not commonly combined in one building design as they are in the Metropolitan Baptist Church. The low and heavy massing of the church, the rough-cut stone, the conical roof form, and the use of dwarf columns with foliate capitals are typically Romanesque, while the pointed arches, richly decorated fenestration, tracery, and flying buttress are characteristic of the Gothic Revival. Although planned separately, the designs of architects Thomas and Davis work

well as one, forming a unified whole with a variety of geometric volumes that intersect at different levels, and the principal facades gain a special character from a skilled combination of projecting and receding planes.

The Thomas-designed section on West 128th Street demonstrates the architect's skill in ecclesiastical design. Small in scale, the two and one-half story facade is dominated by a tremendous slate roof, shaped as a partial cone. A central peak-roofed gable end projects slightly from a bow-shaped wall that follows the curve of the roof, while a smaller peaked gable marks the southeast corner of the building. Located at the southwest corner, the principal entrance (originally designed to be crowned by a belltower) reveals a fine design. Engaged dwarf columns of polished granite mounted on limestone bases and crowned by foliate capitals flank heavy wooden doors finished with medieval hardware. A recessed Gothic-arched stained glass transom with decorative stone tracery appears above. The transom is framed by three stone moldings that spring from the capitals and an outer molding terminating in carved bosses. A similar door appears on the east end of the facade, adjacent to a three-sided angular bay. The entire facade is articulated by groups of stained glass, Gothic-arched lancet windows that appear at various levels. The principal gable is lit by a handsome stained-glass rose window with stone voussoirs and arched molding that appears over five lancet windows. Three small trefoil-arched lancets pierce the attic story. Decorative facade elements include terminal blocks with ornamental trefoils at the roofline, and slender engaged granite dwarf columns with foliate capitals that flank the rose window.

The west facade of the church, designed by Richard R. Davis, is dominated by a large-scale, steeply-pitched peaked roof gable end of rough cut stone traversed at intervals by plain bandcourses. The gable is flanked by engaged round towers pierced by a circle of trefoil-arched stained glass lancets crowned by layered conical roofs. A stained glass rose window is centered on the facade, set within a Gothic-arched enframingent that springs from pairs of engaged columns and pilasters. Five Gothic-arched lancets unified by a continuous molding pierce the wall at ground level. These are crowned by four circular plaques carved with trefoils. A bandcourse of the same motifs runs above, echoed by a similar bandcourse that marks the gable at attic level. A double lancet crowned by a Gothic-arched molding appears under the roof peak, which, like the towers, is crowned by a stone finial. A Gothic-arched entry flanked by engaged granite columns appears on either side of the gable end. Polished granite columns with foliate capitals flank the wooden doors, which are crowned by Gothic tracery, recalling the door compositions used by Thomas on the southern facade. A single flying buttress, another Gothic Revival element, marks the church's southwest corner at second story level.

The Metropolitan Baptist Church is remarkable for its fine stonework and stained glass, handsome composition, striking asymmetrical massing, and skilled combination of Gothic and Romanesque Revival forms. Positioned on a corner site, the church dominates the streetscape, while intersecting gables and a varied roof line give the building a special character. The original design is remarkably intact,

including a particularly fine cast-iron fence at street level. The building is an excellent example of Harlem's ecclesiastical architecture, and an important symbol of the wealth and prestige enjoyed by Harlem churches.

Report prepared by Rachel Carley
Research Department

This project was funded in part with the assistance of a preservation survey and planning grant authorized by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, administered by the U.S. Department of the Interior Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service; through the New York State Office of Parks and Recreation.

Footnotes

¹As quoted in Gilbert Osofsky, Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p.71.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

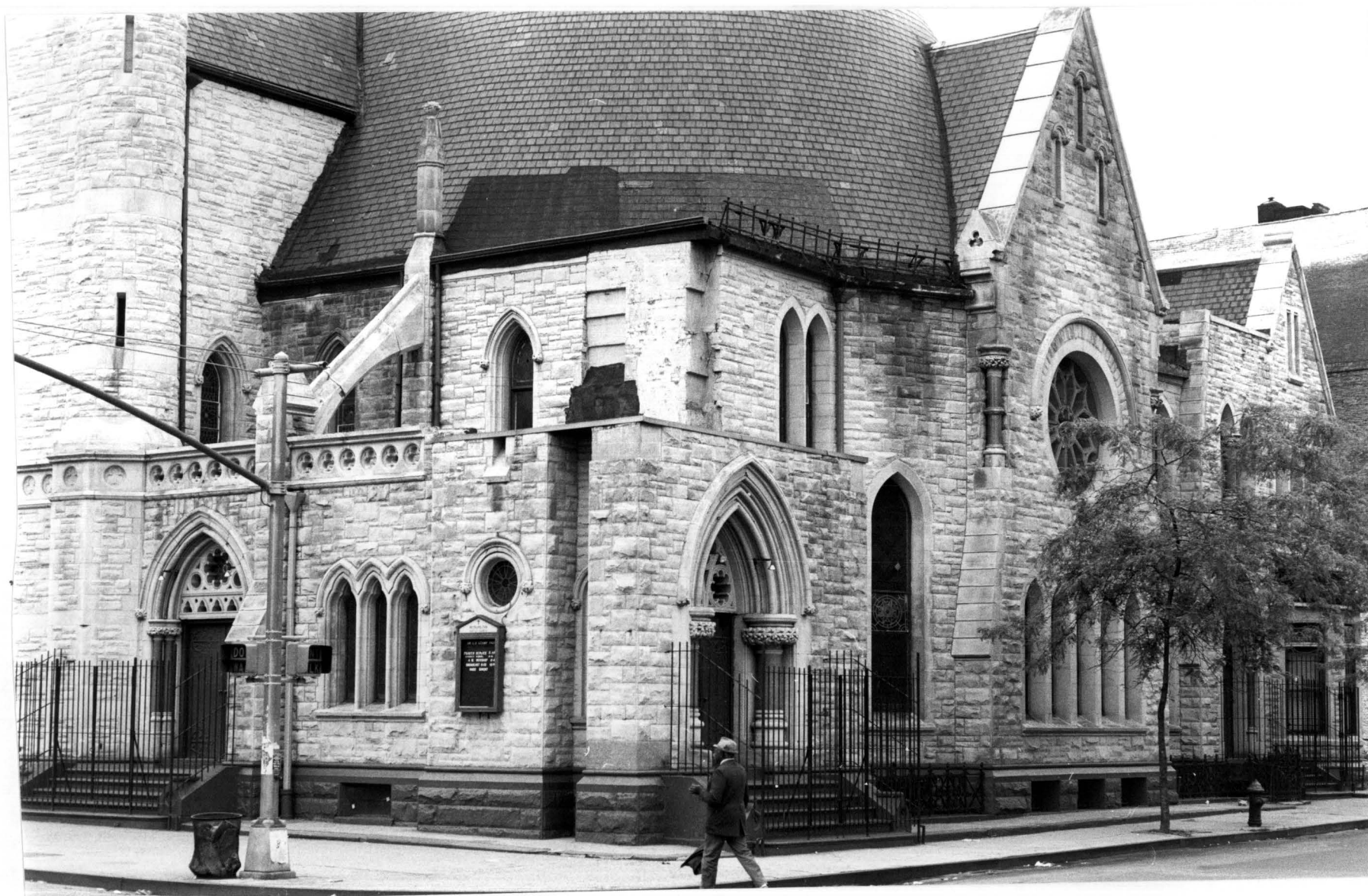
On the basis of careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Metropolitan Baptist Church (originally the New York Presbyterian Church) has a special character, special historic and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Metropolitan Baptist Church is a fine example of the many churches built in Harlem during the late 19th century; that it was constructed in two separate but remarkably compatible stages by the architects John R. Thomas and Richard R. Davis; that it is distinguished by a skilled combination of Gothic and Romanesque Revival forms as well as fine stonework and stained glass; and that it is an important symbol of the wealth and prestige enjoyed by Harlem churches well into the 20th century.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Administrative Code of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Metropolitan Baptist Church, 151 West 128th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1913, Lot 1 as its Landmark Site.

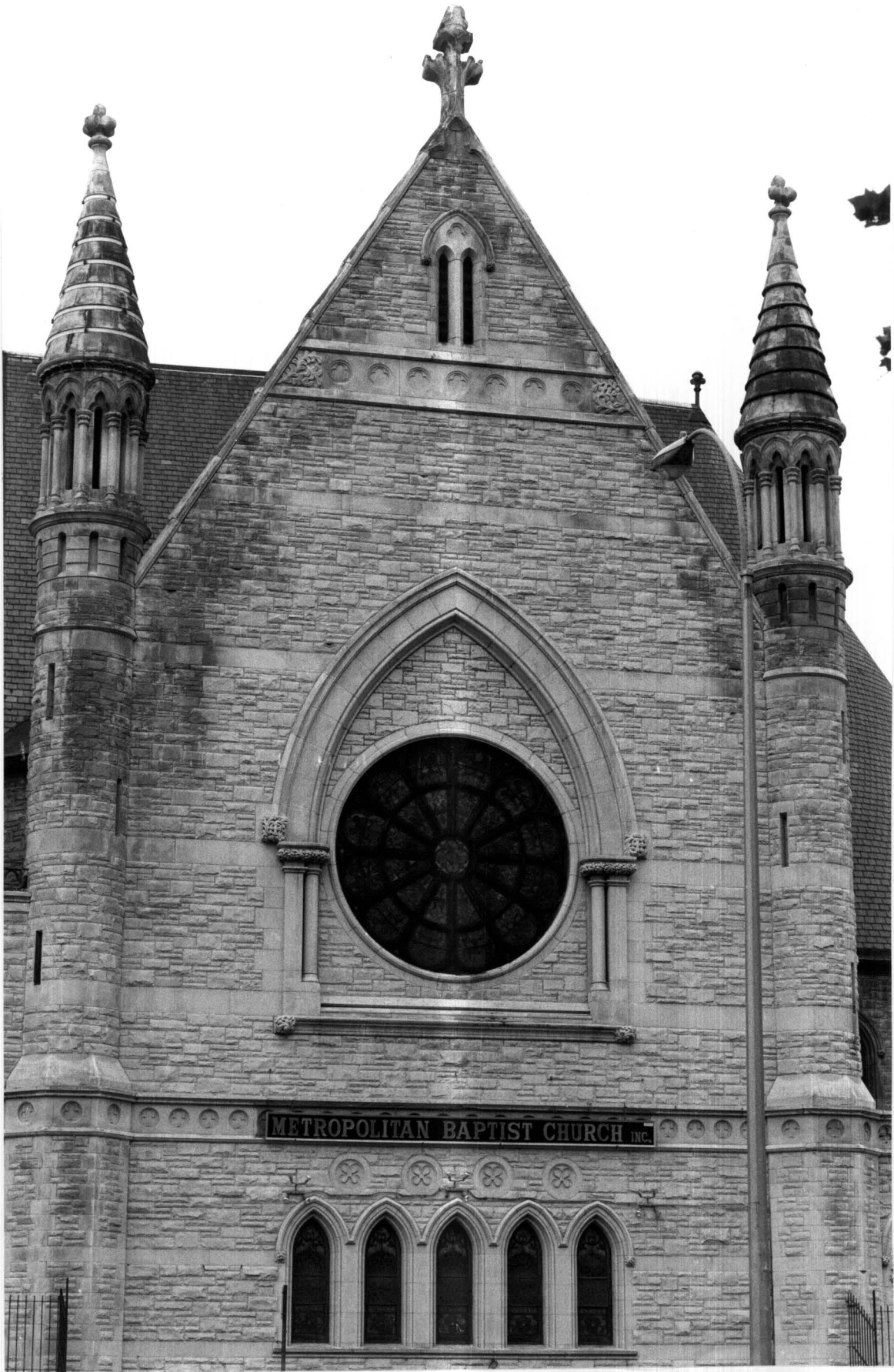
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