

Landmarks Preservation Commission
July 13, 1993; Designation List 252
LP-1851

ABYSSINIAN BAPTIST CHURCH and COMMUNITY HOUSE

Church, 136-142 West 138th Street (Odell M. Clark Place); Community House, 132-134 West 138th Street (Odell M. Clark Place); Manhattan.
Built 1922-23; architects, Charles W. Bolton & Son.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 2006, Lot 52.

On July 15, 1991, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Abyssinian Baptist Church and Community House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 18). At the request of a representative of the church the hearing was continued to Oct. 29, 1991 (Item No. 3). The hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Eight speakers at the first hearing were in favor of the designation of this and the other items on the calendar at the hearing but urged the Commission to continue its work in Harlem. Numerous letters have been received expressing the same sentiments. At the second hearing, a representative of the church indicated support for the designation, but encouraged the Commission to recognize the church's ongoing mission and changing needs. Three additional speakers at the second hearing testified in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The Abyssinian Baptist Church, built in 1922-23, is the home of one of New York City's oldest church organizations and the second oldest within the family of African-American churches in Manhattan. Organized in 1808 by a small group of black worshippers who withdrew from the predominantly white First Baptist Church on Gold Street, the Abyssinian Baptist Church was incorporated in the following year, adopting the ancient name for Ethiopia. The northward movement of the Abyssinian congregation, which occupied several successive locations from its first home in a wooden church on Worth Street to its imposing stone edifice in Harlem, followed the residential patterns of New York's black population. Under the leadership of the Reverend William Spellman during the second half of the nineteenth century, the church grew rapidly into one of the wealthiest of the "African" congregations. In the twentieth century, the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Sr.'s "social gospel," blending social activism with spiritual leadership, set the tone for Abyssinian's ongoing mission to serve its community. Commissioned during Powell's tenure, the striking church building and the adjoining community house were the work of Charles W. Bolton & Son, a productive Philadelphia firm which specialized in churches. The neo-Gothic design of the church reflects the tradition of Protestant church architecture of the 1920s. Powell's son and successor, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. -- who served eleven terms as a U.S. Congressman -- put Abyssinian at the forefront of the national crusade for social reform and civil rights. During his pastorate, the church membership grew to over 10,000, placing it among the largest Protestant churches in the world. Today, the church leadership under the Reverend Calvin Butts continues its commitment to religious and social service and economic development in Harlem.

The History of Harlem, 1658-1920s¹

Harlem, originally called Nieuw Haarlem, takes its name from the Dutch city of Haarlem. The first permanent non-native settlement in Manhattan's northern region, the village was established in 1658 by Gov. Peter Stuyvesant about ten miles north of New Amsterdam along the "Harlem Road" (Boston Post Road), a Lenape Indian trail widened by the enslaved black workers of the Dutch West India Company. Following the English takeover in 1664, the Harlem village ranked with New York (formerly New Amsterdam) as the second largest European immigrant community on Manhattan Island. From the colonial period through the nineteenth century the distance from lower Manhattan to Harlem -- a three- to four-hour journey by horse-drawn carriage -- shaped the region's development and prosperity as a farming community of large estates, owned by some of New York's early wealthy families and labored upon by the city's black population.

Harlem suffered economic decline in the 1830s when many of the great farms failed and estates were sold at public auction. The area attracted those who sought cheap property and housing, including speculators and many poor immigrants who made homes in scattered shantytowns. The New York & Harlem Railroad was completed in 1837, but service was poor and unreliable.² Residential development in Harlem proceeded at a slow pace.

As the population of New York increased after the Civil War, development spread more rapidly. By 1881 three lines of the elevated railroad along Second, Third and Eighth Avenues, opened new neighborhoods. In 1885, the introduction of electric cable car service on Amsterdam Avenue and along 125th Street made Harlem even more accessible. The Harlem Opera House was inaugurated in 1889 and new buildings were constructed, lining the newly paved avenues and streets. Elegant homes, such as the King Model Houses built in 1891 along 138th and 139th Streets (later known as Striver's Row, located in the St. Nicholas Historic District), helped establish Harlem as a fashionable community.

The character of Harlem again changed dramatically during the early years of the twentieth century. A proposed subway route to Harlem in the late 1890s ignited a new round of real estate speculation, leading to highly inflated market values. Many new residential buildings were constructed; however, excessive vacancies forced a collapse in the Harlem real estate market prior to the completion of the subway. Taking advantage of the deflated real estate market was Philip Payton, a black realtor who founded the Afro-American Realty Company in 1904. Promoting easy access to Harlem via the new West Side subway (I.R.T.) to 145th Street, Payton negotiated leases on white-owned properties and rented them to blacks. Despite the fact that they were charged higher rents than were whites, New York's black middle class -- long denied access to "better" neighborhoods -- seized the opportunity for decent new comfortable housing and moved uptown. In 1906, the demolition of homes in the Tenderloin District, a predominantly black neighborhood near 34th Street, for the construction of Pennsylvania Station uprooted hundreds of families, sending them north to Harlem where good housing was plentiful and affordable. Soon black immigrants from the Caribbean and the American South joined the migration to Harlem. By 1914, most of the major black churches which were once located in lower Manhattan and midtown had moved northward along with their congregations. By 1925, New York City's black population was over 250,000 and most lived in Harlem.

The Early History of Abyssinian Baptist Church, 1808-1922

Abyssinian Baptist Church, now located at 132-142 West 138th Street, is among New York City's oldest church organizations and the second oldest within the family of African-American churches in Manhattan. In June, 1808, a small group of blacks withdrew from the predominantly white First Baptist Church on Gold Street.³ In the following year, the young congregation was assisted by a visiting minister, the Reverend Thomas Paul of the African Baptist Church in Boston,⁴ in purchasing an existing wooden church building on Worth Street (between Church Street and West Broadway). On Dec. 8, 1809, the congregation, known commonly in the nineteenth

century as the African Baptist Church, was incorporated and officially recorded, "by the name and style of the Abyssinian Baptist Church,"⁵ choosing the ancient name for Ethiopia.

During much of the early nineteenth century, the Abyssinian congregation struggled to survive, economically and socially. Competition for housing and jobs commonly gave way to racial confrontations between African-Americans and the growing European immigrant population. On July 10 and 11, 1834, the three "African" churches in the region south of Canal Street were attacked by anti-black demonstrators. Angry mobs stoned St. Philip's African Episcopal Church on Centre Street, the Mother Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church on Church Street, and Abyssinian. About the assaults, one city newspaper editorialized, "the cabin of the poor negro, and the temples dedicated to the service of the living God, are alike the objects of their blind fury."⁶

In addition, local segregationist laws which provided whites with more rights and opportunities than the black population often contributed to the economic success or failure of black enterprises. Financial instability in Abyssinian's early decades brought the church frequently before the city's foreclosure courts. The church's Board of Trustees, faced with the threat of foreclosure, advertised the Worth Street church property for sale. On April 26, 1854, the church "quite old and [in need of] considerable repairs"⁷ was sold for \$12,000. For the next ten years the congregation "wandered around in lower Manhattan, worshipping in houses and halls."⁸ During the Civil War, Abyssinian's migrating congregation held weekly meetings in the Thompson Street area, the region of the deadly July, 1863, "Draft Riots" in which hundreds of blacks and abolitionists were reportedly killed.

Church historians credit the leadership of the Reverend William Spellman (tenure 1856-1885)⁹ with Abyssinian's ability to survive the tumultuous mid-century era. On January 18, 1864, the church found a permanent home, purchasing for \$4,000 an existing church edifice "including gas fixtures, carpeting, chairs and furniture"¹⁰ at 164-166 Waverly Place (between Sixth Avenue and Christopher Street). From the poorest of the

"African" congregations, Abyssinian grew rapidly in the century's second half to become one of the city's wealthiest black churches, boasting over one thousand members. "No man ever pastored a church that left a greater impression of his own character than he [Spellman] left upon Abyssinian," wrote a later successor.¹¹

In 1903, Abyssinian moved from Waverly Place, purchasing a church building at 242 West 40th Street, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues.¹² Abyssinian's new location was in the Tenderloin District, described by W.E.B. DuBois as "New York's most dangerous slum."¹³ Leading the church in the early twentieth century was the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., an energetic minister who had attended Yale Divinity School and served for fifteen years as head of the Immanuel Baptist Church in New Haven, Conn. Shortly after his election in 1908 -- Abyssinian's 100th Anniversary Year -- Powell, Sr., the church's seventeenth pastor, mounted a neighborhood improvement campaign which was met with mixed results. "Under constant gospel bombardment, the neighborhood began to crack. Pimps, prostitutes, keepers of dives and gambling dens were drawn to the meetings, confessed conversion and were baptized," the pastor wrote. "But the majority went back to wallowing in the mire because they had no place else to go. The neighborhood was never quite the same and neither was the Abyssinian Church."¹⁴

In the next decade, the Reverend Powell, Sr.'s emerging "social gospel" began to take form, blending social activism with the church's spiritual leadership. He argued also for the relocation of Abyssinian to Harlem. While many black churches had already moved uptown, Abyssinian's members "now had a superstitious belief that the 40th Street property was a gold mine, and if they held it long enough it would yield them a million dollars." Angered in 1916 when the membership refused an offer of \$240,000 for the property, Powell, Sr., noted, "seven years later we were glad to accept one hundred and ninety thousand dollars." With the continuing population shift of the city's black community, he added, "it was apparent as early as 1911 that Harlem would be the final destination of the Abyssinian Church."¹⁵

The Abyssinian Baptist Church and its Architect

On Sunday, June 17, 1923, a dedication service was held for the newly completed Abyssinian Baptist Church at 132 West 138th Street.¹⁶ Designed by Charles W. Bolton & Son, a noted Philadelphia architectural firm that specialized in church buildings, the 1,000-seat structure and adjoining community house together cost over \$300,000 -- a costly figure for the time, as some critics exclaimed. However, due to a massive fundraising campaign more than eighty percent of the mortgage had been paid by the dedication date.¹⁷

Abyssinian Baptist was the last of the historic black churches to move from the West Side to Harlem. In 1923, when church moved to West 138th Street between Lenox and Seventh avenues, Harlem's African-American community was centered on the streets of the West 130s between Fifth and Eighth avenues. The location was in the heart of the community, close to such other prominent black churches as St. Philip's Episcopal Church, which had moved to West 134th Street between Seventh and Eighth avenues in 1911, and Mother A.M.E. Zion Church, which had relocated to West 136th Street in 1914 and was to erect a new building on West 137th Street in 1923-25.

In addition to the established black churches that moved to Harlem, new congregations were founded in the community. Both the old and new congregations grew rapidly in Harlem and, as the number of congregants increased, larger sanctuaries were needed.¹⁸ Many of the congregations purchased the imposing church buildings that had been erected in the late nineteenth century by white congregations, but were being abandoned by those organizations as their members fled from Harlem. These buildings, dating from the first wave of development in the area, were generally located on prestigious corner sites. As few such sites remained available, Abyssinian Baptist, Mother Zion, and St. Philip's all erected their new homes on mid-block locations.

In April, 1920, Abyssinian Baptist purchased a 150-foot wide vacant plot of land on the south side of West 138th Street between Lenox and Seventh avenues and commissioned a design for a

new church complex from Charles W. Bolton & Son.¹⁹ Charles Weber Bolton (1855-1942)²⁰ was born in Zelienople, Pennsylvania, and studied at Lafayette College (he did not graduate). By 1881 he is known to have been working as an architect for the Southwestern Virginia Mining & Development Company and three years later he opened an office in Philadelphia where he continued to work until his death. His earliest known projects date from 1886. Bolton occasionally worked in partnership with other architects; in 1906 his son Charles L. Bolton became a partner and the firm's name was changed to Charles W. Bolton & Son. Charles Lewis Bolton (1884-1981) graduated from Lafayette College with a degree in civil engineering and then studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania (B.S., 1906) and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (1906-08).

Charles W. Bolton, working independently, and later as the senior partner of the firm of Charles W. Bolton & Son, designed a variety of buildings, but specialized in church design and was reportedly responsible for more than 500 churches across the country. Most of the church buildings were in the Philadelphia area and almost all were designed for Protestant congregations. The Bolton firm was especially active in the design of Presbyterian and Reformed churches, but was also responsible for a significant number of Baptist, Methodist, and Lutheran church buildings.

It has not been determined why Abyssinian Baptist hired a white architect from Philadelphia. The prolific Bolton firm must have been well known in local Protestant church circles, despite the fact that it had never designed a new building for a site in New York City.²¹ Prior to the Abyssinian commission, the firm had designed at least ten Baptist churches, all in or near Philadelphia. It is possible that members of Abyssinian Baptist were familiar with one or more of these buildings or with the firm's work in general.

For Abyssinian Baptist Church, Charles W. Bolton & Son designed an imposing neo-Gothic church building and adjoining community house. The choice of a Gothic-inspired design reflects the popularity of this mode for early twentieth-century churches in America. In the mid-nineteenth

century, many Protestant denominations in America had rejected the Gothic, and its associations with Roman Catholic and Episcopal doctrine, in favor of designs based on Romanesque precedents. However, by the turn of the century, the popularity of the Romanesque Revival style had waned and most Christian denominations returned to an exploration of the Gothic.²² Architects such as Ralph Adams Cram and Henry Vaughan promoted a return to the use of medieval design by all Christian denominations as the architectural means of reflecting a return to universal Christian values.

The new Gothic-inspired buildings, often referred to as neo-Gothic in style, adopted modern construction techniques, but incorporated traditional Gothic features modeled on forms found on twelfth- and thirteenth-century European churches and cathedrals. In New York City, extant examples of these neo-Gothic churches erected by Protestant denominations include the Washington Heights Baptist Church (now Convent Avenue Baptist Church, Lamb & Rich, 1897-99) on the corner of Convent Avenue and West 145th Street; Lenox Presbyterian Church (now St. James Presbyterian Church, Ludlow & Valentine, 1904) on the corner of St. Nicholas Avenue and West 141st Street; South Reformed Church (now Park Avenue Christian Church, Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson, 1911) on Park Avenue and East 85th Street; the Park Avenue Baptist Church (now Central Presbyterian Church, Henry C. Pelton and Allen & Collens, 1920-22); Mother A.M.E. Zion Church (George W. Foster, Jr., 1923-25); and Abyssinian Baptist.

Although these neo-Gothic Protestant churches are designed with traditional architectural detail, they are not always laid out with a traditional cross plan with a nave intersected by transepts and a deep chancel. Many of these churches retain the auditorium plan that became popular for Protestant churches (other than Episcopalian) in the mid-nineteenth century.²³ In this type of plan, seats were arranged in arcs as in a theater; the focal point of the interior was the pulpit which was raised on a shallow platform. This seating arrangement permitted all members in the audience to see and hear the preacher, an indication of the central role played by the minister and the

importance of the sermon in the service. Abyssinian is one of many Protestant churches erected in the first decades of the twentieth century with a street elevation in the neo-Gothic style and an auditorium plan.²⁴ The high-style design of the church, with its impressive stonework and monumental Gothic arch, is a reflection of Abyssinian's prestige and importance.

The Abyssinian Baptist Church, 1923-1993

In the late 1920s, economic and social conditions changed for the worse in Harlem. Thousands of residents who had been attracted to Harlem to enjoy a better life were soon struggling in the Depression. Unemployment and poverty -- two issues which had confronted the Reverend Powell, Sr., in the Tenderloin District -- were, by the 1930s, far more pervasive in Harlem. Abyssinian developed a "People's Committee" to help members and non-members find employment. Under the direction of Powell's son, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., a graduate of Colgate University, the program claimed the procurement of 12,000 jobs in three years. As assistant pastor, Powell, Jr., organized Abyssinian's Employment Bureau, Free Food Kitchen, and Adult Education School which offered job training in civil service fields, office skills, home economics, sewing, and dressmaking. "The depression had lasted ten years and the people were hungry for physical bread more than for the bread of life," recalled Powell, Sr.²⁵ Throughout the decade, Abyssinian established its prominence as a leading religious and social institution. In 1937, Powell, Sr., retired with his son succeeding him as the leader of Abyssinian.

As a crusader for social reform, the younger Powell challenged businesses operating in Harlem to hire black workers. In 1938, he organized a demonstration of church and non-church members to persuade the officials of Harlem Hospital, a neighborhood facility, to integrate its medical and nursing staff. In the following year, Powell led a picket line demonstration in front of the Empire State Building where the executive offices of the New York World's Fair were located and succeeded in getting employment for hundreds of blacks at the fair. Several persons interviewed in 1992²⁶ recalled Powell's energetic presence. They remembered him, prior to his installation, as

a Sunday School teacher and organizer of the "Young Thinkers," a group which encouraged the expanding activity and involvement of members in community issues and in the civil rights movement. During his pastorate, Abyssinian grew to a membership of over 10,000, placing it among the largest Protestant churches in the world.²⁷

In 1941, Powell won a seat on the New York City Council and, in 1945, he was elected to the U.S. Congress for the district of Central Harlem, representing a community of 300,000 people -- eighty-nine percent of whom were black.²⁸ Beyond the environs of the Abyssinian Baptist Church and Harlem, the critical economic and social concerns of African-Americans heightened and millions followed the leadership of Congressman Powell in the nation's capital with great interest. In the 1950s and '60s, and as the chair of the House Committee on Education and Labor (1960-67), the eleven-term Congressman sponsored civil rights legislation and advocated federal aid for education, a minimum wage scale, and greater unemployment benefits. In 1969, two years after the U.S. House of Representatives had voted to exclude him from his seat in the 90th Congress for alleged misuse of public funds and controversial conduct, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Powell's appeal, ruling that the exclusion was unconstitutional.

Powell died on April 4, 1972, and was replaced at Abyssinian later that year by Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor. Under the leadership of Executive Minister Proctor and his Assistant Pastor, the Reverend Calvin Butts, Abyssinian further increased its programs for economic development and social activism. In 1987, the Abyssinian Development Corporation was organized for the purpose of improving social services and housing in Central Harlem. ADC has developed Abyssinian Towers at 50 West 131st Street (a 100-unit senior citizen housing complex opened in 1990), Abyssinian House at 139-143 West 138th Street (transitional housing for formerly homeless families opened in 1992), and West One Three Plaza at 51 West 131st Street (middle-income condominium apartments opened in July, 1993), and is a partner with the New York Landmarks Conservancy in the restoration of two

houses in Astor Row on West 130th Street (designated New York City Landmarks).

In 1989, the Reverend Butts succeeded Dr. Proctor as Executive Minister of Abyssinian. The church's importance to its membership and the surrounding community continues to move forward. Contemporary social programs provided by the church include AIDS Awareness, Alcoholics Anonymous, after-school activities,²⁹ daily programs for seniors, and annual financial support for Africare -- an international agency that provides medical and economic aid to many needy communities in Africa.

Community development and improvement extend also to Abyssinian's on-going "Billboard Campaign."³⁰ Actively led by the Reverend Butts, the campaign has characterized outdoor tobacco and liquor ads in urban communities as irresponsible marketing and has forced the offending companies to remove public advertisements from a area of several blocks in Central Harlem.

The physical beauty of Abyssinian's stone exterior and spacious interior³¹ is appealing to both members and non-members. Weekly, tourists from around the world travel to Harlem to visit the church and enjoy the world-famous Abyssinian Choir -- one of the city's chief attractions.

Description

Abyssinian Baptist Church is a symmetrically-planned building faced with rock-faced blocks of Manhattan schist laid in random ashlar and trimmed with white terra cotta. The church occupies approximately three-quarters of its 150-foot wide lot; the asymmetrical community house adjoins the main church building to the east. The church is massed with a central gabled section flanked by square towers; a somewhat lower tower marks the east end of the community house.

The focal point of the church facade is the central gabled section. The gabled facade has a high base that is pierced by three groups of three windows each, the openings separated by terra-cotta piers. The openings were apparently originally filled with leaded, diamond-paned windows. A terra-cotta beltcourse separates the base from the main section of the gable which is pierced by an enormous pointed-arched window

that fills most of the facade. The sides of the window are flanked by a keyed terra-cotta enframing, while the section from the springline to the peak of the arch is outlined by a projecting terra-cotta molding that continues, from the springline, across the church and community house facades. The large stained-glass window opening, with its terra-cotta tracery, is divided vertically into three sections by stepped, buttress-like piers composed of rock-faced stone (the step of each buttress has terra-cotta coping), and smooth terra cotta at the upper portions. Horizontally, the expanse of glass is broken by a band of square Gothic panels, each bearing a shield embellished with a Greek cross. The window is covered with protective sash at the exterior. Running across the gabled facade, above the window, is a terra-cotta beltcourse ornamented with terra-cotta bosses in the form of angels, saints, and symbols of the four evangelists. The crenelated roofline of the gable is outlined by a terra-cotta cap molding. At the peak of the gable is a terra-cotta niche crowned by a bouquet.

Each of the square end towers is divided from bottom to top into four sections (entrance, two window sections, and parapet); the upper two sections rise above the central gable, the community house, and the surrounding buildings. The beltcourses on the gable all continue onto the tower facades. Each tower has a central, pointed-arched entrance set within a rectangular terra-cotta enframing (several steps lead to the entrance in the east tower). Each pair of wooden doors is located below a pointed-arched wood transom divided into seven panels that were probably originally filled with leaded glass. The spandrels are ornamented with shields set within quatrefoils. Above the entrances, the second level of each tower is articulated by a pointed-arched opening with a terra-cotta keyed surround. Each of these openings is divided into two windows with terra-cotta tracery. The third section of each tower has similar windows cut into both the front and side elevations; each of these windows is capped by a drip lintel with trefoil spandrels. The beltcourse below these windows is ornamented with terra-cotta bosses in the form of angels and religious figures. Another beltcourse separates the windows of the third level from the crenelated parapet. Each tower is marked by projecting corner buttresses with small, steep gables outlined in terra

cotta at the level of the arch springline. Near the top of each buttress is a smaller pediment. Above are terra-cotta gargoyles in the form of angels (the gargoyle at the southwest corner of the east tower is damaged) and terra-cotta pinnacles (three pinnacles on each tower).

The four-story community house complements the church. It is faced with the same materials as the church and is anchored at the east by a low, tower-like entrance bay that echoes the taller towers of the church. The entrance bay has a pointed-arched entrance set above a low flight of stone steps. Above the original paired doors is a pointed-arched transom that originally contained diamond-paned windows. The entrance has a modest terra-cotta enframing. The second and third stories of the entrance tower are articulated by pairs of cusped windows with diamond-paned sash set in terra-cotta enframements with drip lintels. On the fourth story, two rectangular diamond-paned windows are separated by a terra-cotta niche which rests on a corbel in the form of an angel blowing a horn and is crowned by an ornate Gothic hood. A beltcourse ornamented by two foliate bosses separates the fourth story from the crenelated parapet.

The main mass of the community house is slightly recessed behind the entrance tower and the east tower of the church. The strong, horizontal massing features long bands of windows on the second through fourth stories. On the first story are three pairs of windows with keyed terra-cotta surrounds and terra-cotta piers. At the second and third stories are three pairs of diamond-paned cusped windows; the are pairs separated by terra-cotta panels topped by blind cusped arches. At each level, the window ensemble is set beneath a long drip lintel. The fourth story has three pairs of steel casement windows, each pair separated by a single casement (these casements do not appear to be original). A beltcourse, continuing from the church facade, runs above the fourth-story windows. The building is capped by a crenelated parapet. A tall iron fence (not original) runs in front of the entire church complex.

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NOTES

1. For the overall history of Harlem: James Riker, *Revised History of Harlem: Its Origins and Early Annals* (New York: Harlem Publishing Co. 1904), 185-187; I.N. Phelps Stokes, *New York Past and Present 1524-1939* (New York: Plantin Press, 1940), 78-85; James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1930), 281-284; Berthold Fernow, ed., *The Records of New Amsterdam* (Baltimore: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1976), vol. 6, 296; John Romeyn Brodhead, ed., *History of the State of New York: 1609-1664* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1853), vol. 1, 641; and Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).
2. Richard Brooks, ed., *The Diary of Michael Floy, Jr. 1833-1837* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1941). Floy lived in the Bowery village (near 11th Street and Broadway) and traveled regularly to the family farm in Harlem, normally making the long trip by carriage. On July 22, 1836, he lamented his decision to return home by train, "the nine miles have not so much work in them as nine yards in some parts of the Harlem Railroad." On May 19, 1834, Floy wrote about a full day of "Spring planting" of potatoes, lima beans and scarlet runners.
3. Jonathan Greenleaf, *A History of the Churches of All Denominations in the City of New York* (New York: E. French, 1846), 240; Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., *Upon This Rock* (New York: Theo. Gaus & Sons, Inc., 1949), 1-3.
4. Church historians credit the Reverend Paul as the leader and organizer of the early institution. However, few materials among the church's extant records have survived regarding Paul's tenure or that of his early successors. There is substantial disagreement within church records and public documents regarding the pastor's name and identity. Some secondary church materials describe "Benjamin Paul," a white pastor, as the church founder. Greenleaf's *A History of the Churches...*, a well-regarded nineteenth-century guide to New York City churches, names "Benjamin" Paul without reference to race. Writing more than a century after the church began, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr.'s *Upon This Rock* recalls the founding pastor as "Thomas" Paul, a "white liberal" pastor from Boston. However, other non-Abyssinian sources, particularly Carol V.R. George, *Segregated Sabbaths* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1973), indicate Abyssinian's pastor was the Reverend Thomas Paul (1773-1831), an African-American clergyman from Boston. In July, 1806, Thomas Paul was ordained as pastor of the African Baptist Church in Boston; see William Cogswell, ed., *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (Boston: Samuel G. Drake, 1847), vol. 1, 241. An abolitionist leader, the Reverend Thomas Paul organized black churches throughout North America and the Caribbean. He actively supported the migration of North American blacks to Haiti; see Thomas Paul, *Correspondence Relative to the Emigration to Haiti of the Free People of Colour in the United States* (New York: printed by Mahron Day, 1824), New-York Historical Society, manuscript collection. A portrait of Paul, as reproduced in *The Negro Almanac* (New York: Bellweather Co., 1976), suggests that his identity could have been regarded with ambiguity. The loss of early church records leaves the matter intriguing, but ultimately inconclusive.
5. NYC Chancery Court, "Abyssinian Baptist Church, Document A-2," unpub. [NYC, Municipal Archives]. Testimony from church officers on July 13, 1833, provides the Dec. 8, 1809, "Abyssinian" incorporation date. By New York State law, passed in 1813, Abyssinian reincorporated under "An Act to Provide For The Incorporation of Religious Societies." Laws of the State of New York, 36th Session, April 5, 1813, Chapter 60, p. 212.
6. "The windows of the African [Abyssinian] Baptist Church...were broken to atoms." *New York Evening Post* ("Riots and Continued Disturbances of the Peace"), July 12, 1834, p. 1.
7. New York State Supreme Court, New York County Court Records, "Abyssinian Petition to Sell Real Estate," April 26, 1854 [NYC, Municipal Archives]. "It has been deemed most for the interest of the church that said property should be sold and the debts of the church paid off with the proceeds and that church should remove their place of meeting farther up town." The Worth Street church was sold for \$12,000; however, creditors owed a total of \$9,000 were present at the closing. Some church biographies list the sale price as \$3,000.
8. Powell, Sr., *Upon This Rock*, 3.
9. *Ibid.*, 4. Powell, Sr., writes "he [Spellman] introduced the custom of annual boat outings, and this became the outstanding social event in New York churches...they chartered one of the largest excursion boats on the Hudson River, and had to attach a barge in order to accommodate the thousands." An earlier Abyssinian preacher, the Reverend Sampson White, is also considered by Powell, Sr., as an exceptional

pastor during the church's first forty years. In 1847, White went to Brooklyn to organize the Concord Baptist Church.

10. NYC, Mortgages, Deeds and Conveyances [Block 592, Lot 50], Jan. 18, 1864. The Waverly Church was located opposite the Northern Dispensary, a medical clinic built in 1827 to serve the poor in the "outlying areas" of Manhattan. The dispensary still stands at the intersection of Christopher Street and Waverly Place.
11. Powell, Sr., *Upon This Rock*, 4.
12. NYC, Mortgages, Deeds and Conveyances [Block 789, Lots 62-65], Jan. 12, 1903. The lot, which included a church, measured seventy-five feet by ninety-nine feet and was purchased for \$65,000. Three weeks later, Abyssinian purchased an adjoining twenty-foot by ninety-nine-foot lot for \$15,000.
13. W.E. Burghardt DuBois, "The Black North - Second of a Series," *New York Times*, Nov. 24, 1901, p. 11.
14. Powell, Sr., *Upon This Rock*, 14.
15. *Ibid.*, 15.
16. *New York Times* ("Dedication"), June, 18, 1923, p. 30.
17. Powell, Sr., *Progress, The Law of Life: A Message by A. Clayton Powell Delivered in the Abyssinian Baptist Church, Sunday Morning, January 15th, 1928, Four Days After the Mortgage Burning Service*, published by Abyssinian Baptist Church [New York Public Library, Schomburg Collection]. The church and community center were constructed and furnished at a cost of \$334,000. A burning ceremony for the mortgage papers was conducted January 11, 1928.
18. Osofsky, 113.
19. NYC, Department of Buildings, Plans, Permits and Dockets [Block 2006, Lot 52]. The church, seventy-two feet wide by ninety-three feet deep, was constructed on what were originally Lots 55, 56, 57, and part of 54 [NB 170-1921]. The Community House, forty-feet wide and ninety-three feet deep, was constructed on Lots 52, 53, and part of 54 [NB 171-1921]. The entire property is now known as Lot 52. Begun in May and June of 1922, respectively, the buildings were completed in May of 1923.
20. The major source for information on the Boltons is Sandra L. Tatman and Roger W. Moss, *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects 1700-1930* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1985), 78-84; also see Charles W. Bolton, *Fifty Years of Church Building and a Study Concerning the Future* (Philadelphia, 1928). Two churches designed by Charles W. Bolton & Son were published in Ralph Adams Cram, *American Churches* (New York: The American Architect, 1915), vol. I, plates 143-145: the Emmanuel Presbyterian Church and Richardson Memorial Presbyterian Church, both in Philadelphia.
21. In 1920, a year before design began on Abyssinian Baptist, the firm designed alterations and additions to a Reformed church on Grove Street and Anderlock Avenue in Brooklyn; Tatman and Moss, 83.
22. Exceptions include denominations with their roots in colonial New England (such as Congregationalists and Unitarians) which built in the Colonial Revival as well as neo-Gothic styles, and newer denominations, such as the Church of Christ Science (Christian Scientists) and the Church of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), which sought a design aesthetic that would set them apart from older Christian groups.
23. Early examples of auditorium plan churches in New York City include Plymouth Congregational Church (now Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, Joseph C. Wells, 1849); the Hanson Place Baptist Church (now Hanson Place Seventh Day Adventist Church, George Penchard, 1857-60); and the Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church (Grimsteed & Morrill, 1861-62), all in Brooklyn.
24. Mother A.M.E. Zion Church and the Washington Heights Methodist Church also have auditorium plans.
25. Powell, Sr., *Upon This Rock*, 55.
26. In July, 1992, an oral history project was conducted by Martia Goodson for the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Ms. Goodson interviewed ten Abyssinians who have been members of the church since the early part of this century. During the 1930s, the church also supported a mission in Sierra Leone and constructed a hospital in the French Congo.

27. *The 38th Anniversary Souvenir Journal of the Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Memorial Auxiliary* (New York: Abyssinian Baptist Church, 1992).
28. [Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., obit.], *New York Times*, April 5, 1972, pp. 1, 7.
29. Youth recreational activities include basketball, football, and "Double Dutch" (jump roping).
30. News coverage of the Abyssinian Baptist Church "Billboard Campaign" was extensive; see *New York Times* ("Billboard Owners Switching, Not Fighting"), March 4, 1990, p. B4, and April 4, 1990. Abyssinian considers public tobacco and liquor advertisements to be detrimental, unhealthy and contrary to the church's effort to improve the overall community. Butts was profiled in: Joel Dreyfuss, "Harlem's Ardent Voice," *New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 20, 1991, sect. 6, pp. 10-23, 31, 39.
31. The interior of the church is not subject to this designation.

OTHER SOURCES CONSULTED

- Amsterdam News*. ("The Harlem Riot of 1935: Publication of the New York City Mayor's Commission Report.") April 1, 1935.
- Anderson, Jervis. *This Was Harlem*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981.
- Capeci, Dominic J. *The Harlem Riot of 1943*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977.
- Lockwood, Charles. *Manhattan Moves Uptown*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976.
- O'Dell, Carolyn, Research Director. *Harlem: Church and Community*. Vols. I and II. Compiled by the Protestant Council of the City of New York, 1962.
- 150th Anniversary Sesquicentennial Celebration Booklet, 1808-1958*. New York: Abyssinian Baptist Church, 1958.
- Stokes, I.N. Phelps. *Iconography of Manhattan Island* ("Topographical Map of Northern Manhattan and Harlem"). Vol. 3. New York: R.H. Dodd, 1919.

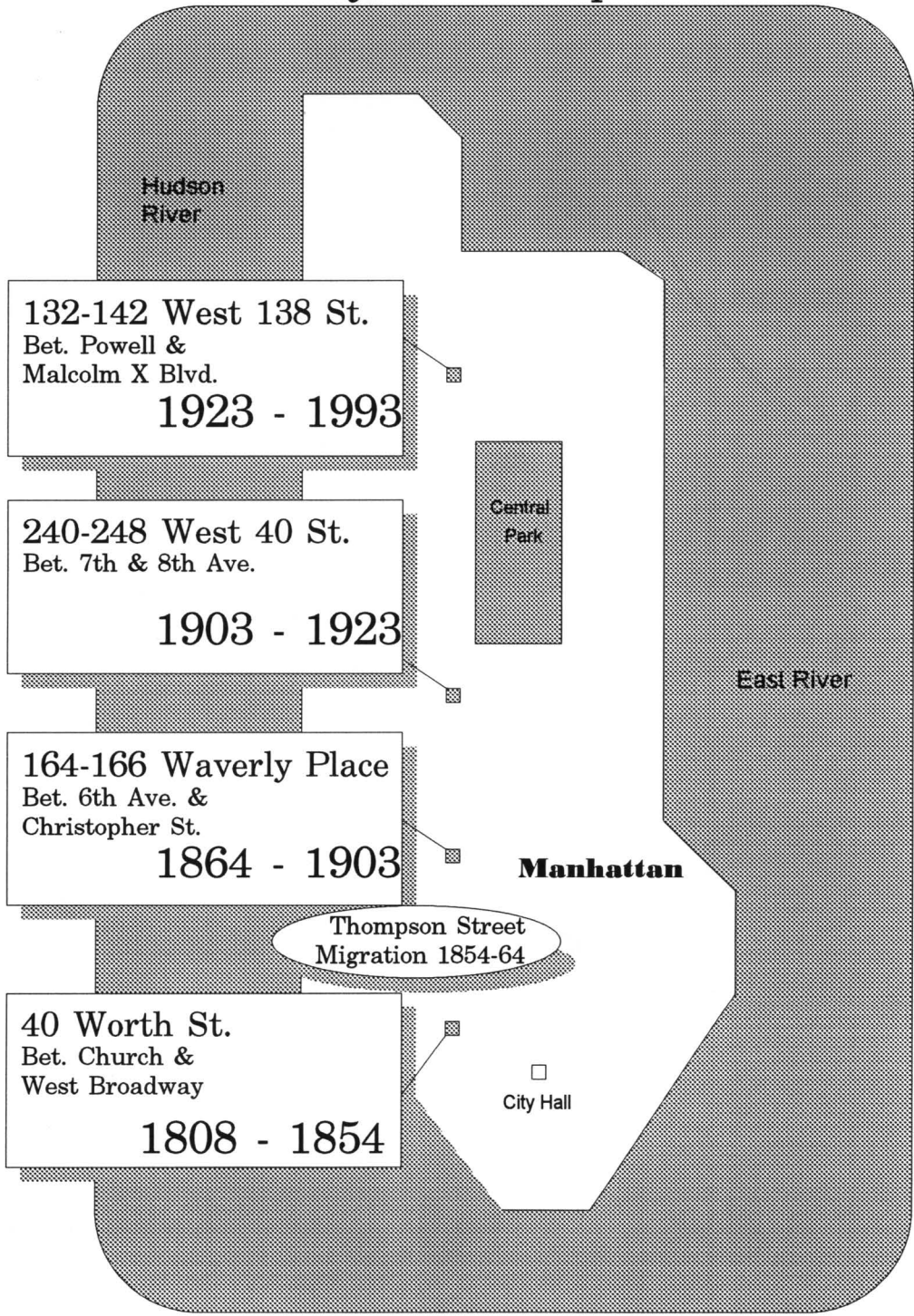
FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and the other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Abyssinian Baptist Church and Community House have a special character, special historic and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Abyssinian Baptist Church and Community House, built in 1922-23, is the home of one of New York City's oldest church organizations and the second oldest within the family of African-American churches in Manhattan; that the Abyssinian Baptist Church was organized in 1808 by a small group of black worshippers and was incorporated in the following year, adopting the ancient name for Ethiopia; that the congregation's northward migration, culminating in the construction of this imposing stone edifice in Harlem, followed the residential patterns of New York's black population; that under the leadership of the Reverend William Spellman in the second half of the nineteenth century, the church grew rapidly into one of the wealthiest of the "African" congregations; that the striking church building and the adjoining community house were the work of Charles W. Bolton & Son, a productive Philadelphia firm which specialized in churches; that the neo-Gothic design of the church reflects the tradition of Protestant church architecture of the 1920s; that under the leadership of Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the church rose to the forefront of the struggle for social reform and civil rights, firmly establishing Abyssinian's ongoing mission to serve its community; that during the pastorate of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., the church membership grew to over 10,000, placing it among the largest Protestant churches in the world; and that the current church leadership continues its commitment to religious and social service and economic development in Harlem.

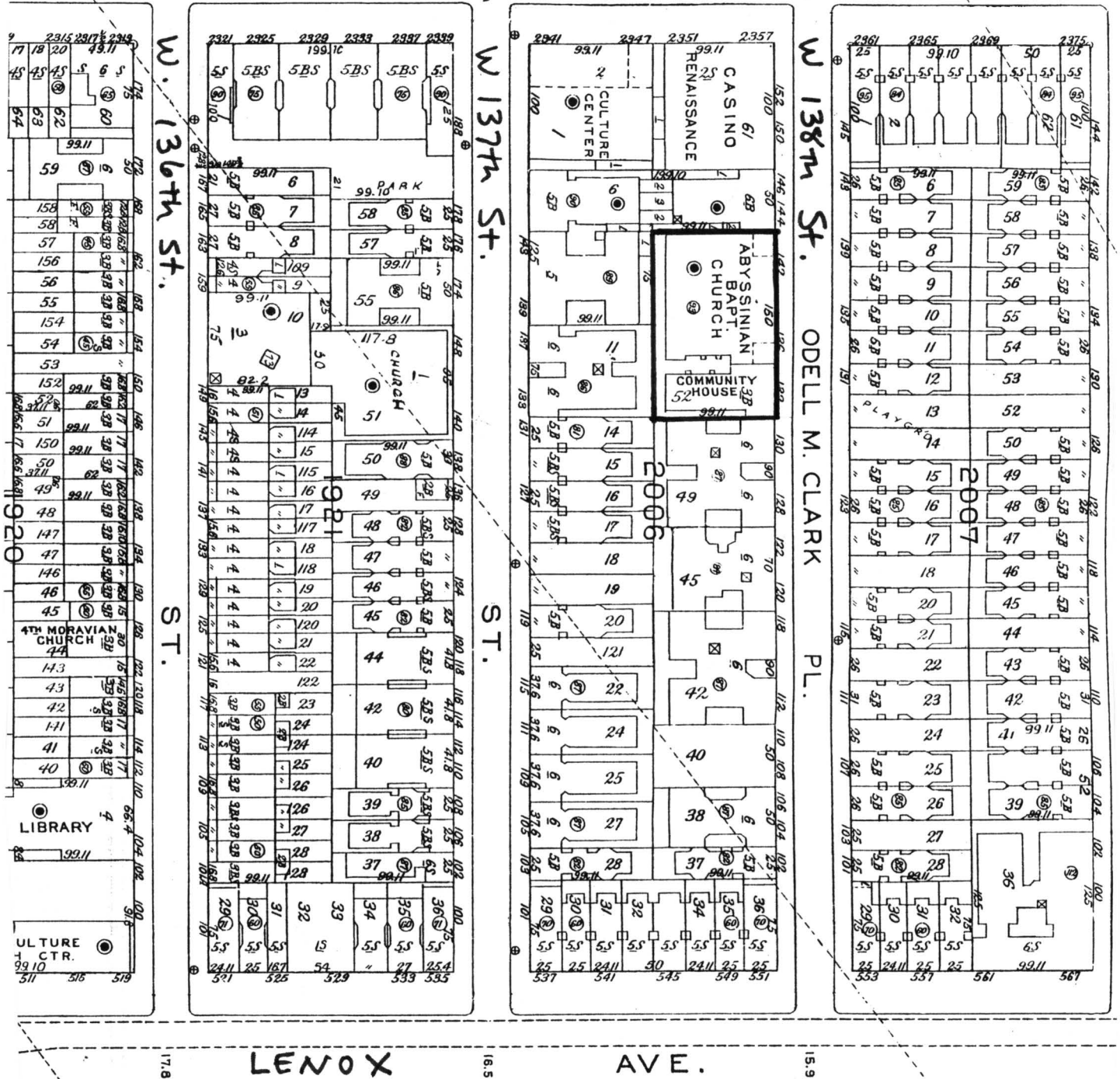
Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Abyssinian Baptist Church and Community House, 136-142 and 132-134 West 138th Street (Odell M. Clark Place), Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 2006, Lot 52, Borough of Manhattan, as its related Landmark Site.

The Migration of Abyssinian Baptist Church



1808 - 1993
New York City

ADAM CLAYTON POWELL, JR. BLVD.



Abyssinian Baptist Church and Community House
 132-142 West 138th Street, Manhattan

Landmark Site: Manhattan Tax Map Block 2006, Lot 52

Graphic Source: Sanborn Manhattan Land Book, 1988-89.



Abyssinian Baptist Church and Community House, Manhattan
Community House (132-134 West 138th Street) and Church (136-142 West 138th Street)

(Photo: Carl Forster, LPC)



Abyssinian Baptist Church, Church Building (136-142 West 138th Street)

(Photo: Carl Forster, LPC)



Abyssinian Baptist Church, Community House (132-134 West 138th Street)

(Photo: Carl Forster, LPC)