
Enduring Grace—Historic Downtown Churches (and their later additions) to be Featured

Birmingham Historical Society's Annual Tour of Sacred Places

To celebrate Birmingham's 125th Anniversary, this tour features six institutions established with the city in the early 1870s. Anchored by historic sanctuaries, these contemporary places—added to over time with educational and administrative buildings—remain viable and enduring community landmarks. Indeed, they are the earliest of Birmingham's major landmarks as the city's early public buildings, hotels and train stations burned or were demolished. And graceful landmarks they are!

Church complexes to be visited (in tour order) include St. Paul's Catholic Cathedral (est. 1872), First Presbyterian (est. 1872), Episcopal Cathedral of the Advent (est. 1872), First United Methodist Church (est. 1872), Sixteenth Street Baptist Church (est. 1873) and St. Paul's United Methodist Church (est. 1869, a date we cannot disprove).



View looking Northwest along Third Avenue of two St. Paul's Catholic Churches – the tiny frame church (built 1872 and typical of the city's earliest religious structures, demolished for the 1922 rectory) and today's cathedral completed in 1893 – and of the Jefferson County Courthouse (built 1889, demolished 1930), courtesy The Cathedral of St. Paul 1893-1993.

Donations Spark City Growth

In 1887, Henry M. Caldwell, president of the Elyton Land Company—the real estate firm that founded Birmingham in 1871—claimed to have donated “for public purposes” one half of the original farmland they purchased for the site of Birmingham, lands which comprises today's city center. The company's pro-growth policy of the early 1870s included giving lands to the railroads, industrial firms, the city and county (for parks, schools and streets and alleys) and Christian denominations, both black and white. By the late 1880s, furnaces and rolling mills poured forth iron and industrial products and the city center was humming. Birmingham's population had grown from zero to 26,000. On the city's fast growing skyline, church towers rose, keeping company with the stacks of emerging industry.

Which congregations received land, when and where proved a challenging research topic for BHS's Birmingham Southern College intern Michelle Crunk and BHS staffer Lauren Bishop, a recent UAB history graduate, who spent January reviewing land company Minutes Books

and Probate Court deeds and trying to figure out the churches and whether their congregations remained.

The Elyton Land Company (succeeded by today's Birmingham Realty Company) purchased an original 4,150 acres at the future crossing of two railroads. In late 1871, their surveyor, William P. Barker, laid out the wide streets and avenues parallel to these tracks, reserving space for railroads (stations, shops and yards) and mechanical enterprises (industries) and for three small parks. To the north of the railroad track, Barker projected a central commercial district flanked by residential districts and churches.

Land company records detail a company policy of donating both park and industrial lands, as well that for the city streets and alleys and to churches in locations specified by the deeds. During 1872 and 1873, company officials donated land to both black and white church groups. The first and largest grant with a central location is given to the Episcopalians (the company surveyor, secretary, treasurer and other stockholders being of this faith) for the purpose of “establishing and maintaining” a

church and a school on the site. Presbyterians and Methodists were located a block to the east, Baptists and Catholics a block further east, and then Blacks along 25th Street and also at 13th Street. For all but the Episcopalians land was given for the purpose of “maintaining” churches on the lots granted. Black congregations, however, could not trade their land in if they wished to move from “The Bottom,” an area along 13th Street North near the industrial firms. In the 1880s and 1890s, many congregations did move from their original locations, purchasing additional land, at a sliding scale of prices, within the city center. Here, they constructed, and embellished over the years, the rich collections of sanctuaries and educational buildings comprising today's vibrant and well-maintained “downtown churches.”

At this time, researchers are still trying to track down several successor churches to those originally granted land. Thirteen Christian and Hebrew congregations, including the six featured on this year's Enduring Grace Tour, have been identified. These institutions have also mothered scores of suburban institutions.

Birmingham's Historic Downtown Churches

BASE MAP: A portion of the Elyton Land Company Map showing the original land acquired and subdivided by that company, land forming today's city center, early 1870s.



1 Episcopal Cathedral of the Advent – Church of the Advent (1893), est.1872; Diocese of Alabama given land here, 2/27/1872

2 St. Paul's Catholic Cathedral (1889), est.1872, Bishop of Mobile given land here 4/25/1872

3 First Baptist Church (1902-demolished), est. 1872, given land here 7/11/1872, located on Lakeshore Drive since 1986

4 First United Methodist Church – (1893) First Methodist Episcopal Church South (1891), est. 1872, given land 10/16/1872, located here by 1893

5 Cumberland Presbyterian Church, given land 10/20/1872, current status not known

6 First Presbyterian Church (1888), est.1872, given land here 1/25/1873

7 Sixteenth Street Baptist Church – First Colored Baptist Church (1911), est.1873, given land 9/1/1873, located here since 1884

8 Methodist Episcopal Church of USA, given land 9/1/1873, successor church possibly St. Paul's United Methodist Church

9 AME Zion Church, given land by 1875. possibly today's Metropolitan AME Zion Church

10 St. Paul's United Methodist Church (1925,1951), est.1869, located here by 1904

11 Metropolitan A M E Zion-Scott's Chapel (1958), located here by 1888; established near 14th Street North prior to the 1880s

12 St. John's Methodist Episcopal Church (1971), est. 1873 and located here by 1925

13 Genesis Corner-Health Care for the Homeless, Simpson United Methodist Church-First Methodist Episcopal Church North (1909), est. by 1883 on Southside, located here by 1909, current status of congregation is not known

14 Jefferson County Annex-First Christian Church (1924,1957), est.1874, given land 6/22/1878, relocated here in 1924, moved to Valleydale Road, 1990

15 Temple Emanu-El (1888, demolished), est.1882, located on Highland Avenue since 1914

16 Kneseth Israel Congregation (demolished), est.1889, located on Montevallo Road, Mountain Brook since 1955

17 Temple Beth-El (demolished), est.1907, located on Highland Avenue since 1927

* Current names or uses are given in bold face type, historic names in regular type.