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David Waters



Mason Temple built for joyful noise, not reverent silence



By [David Waters](#) of *The Commercial Appeal*
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It was the second Sunday in November, Holy Week Sunday in the Church of God in Christ, and Mason Temple was quiet as a mausoleum.

Sadly, that's sort of what it has become since COGIC's "saints" started meeting in St. Louis six years ago.



Mason Temple once was the center of the Pentecostal universe, the Holy Sepulchre in COGIC's Jerusalem.

Now, the House the Holy Ghost built is locked and empty most of the time, save the founder's body entombed in marble.

What a shame. I can't think of a structure in Memphis that has more cultural, historical and spiritual significance than Mason Temple.

Not Graceland, which just scored \$125 million in public incentives from the city. Not the National Civil Rights Museum. Not Beale or Sun or Stax.

In fact, all of those places were influenced in various and important ways by Bishop C.H. Mason, Mason Temple and the Pentecostal movement.

"Mason Temple is a narrative of 20th-century history, not just in Memphis but in America," said Lauren Beaupre of the Shelby County Historical Commission.

Beaupre, a native of Germantown and a Houston High graduate, knows the history of Mason Temple as well as anyone. It was her primary research topic for her master's degree in history from Notre Dame.

"I'd grown up hearing about COGIC and the Holy Convocation every year, but I didn't really appreciate the historical significance of Mason Temple until I started studying it. It's remarkable."

When Mason Temple opened 70 years ago, it was the largest African-American church and meeting hall in the U.S.

Hosting thousands of "saints" every November, it was the city's first convention center, with seats for nearly 10,000 souls, a post office, barber shop, beauty salon, two industrial kitchens, two cafeterias and 36 offices.

Its construction and completion, during the Great Depression and World War II — not to mention extreme racial segregation — was close to a miracle.

Mason and church members raised most of the money and did most of the work, but they got help from unexpected sources. Boss Crump donated \$10,000. Memphis Mayor Walter Chandler and U.S. Sen. Kenneth McKellar helped obtain steel during wartime rationing.

"By claiming space in Memphis, the Church of God in Christ and its leaders asserted power and demanded respectability for African Americans," Beaupre wrote in the *Journal of Urban History* in 2012.

"Within the urban South, in order to gain the metaphorical space to govern, vote, and organize (often seen as the culmination of the Civil Rights Movement), African Americans first had to claim physical space — space to worship, space to live, space to act, and space to stay."

Mason Temple gave Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders space to meet, organize and rally.

King delivered his "Mountaintop Speech" in Mason Temple on April 3, 1968, but he'd spoken there many times before.

It gave rising black gospel stars from Mahalia Jackson to Aretha Franklin space to raise their voices in praise.

That included Sister Rosetta Tharpe, who married a COGIC preacher and whose sound and style influenced a skinny Pentecostal kid named Elvis.

Its space drew the attention of presidents: Roosevelt and Kennedy wrote to COGIC leaders; Clinton addressed them directly in his 1993 speech at Mason Temple.

Ultimately, Mason Temple didn't provide enough space for COGIC's annual gathering. The convocation will be in St. Louis through 2019 at least.

But church leaders are making an effort to bring Mason Temple out of hibernation, prodded by COGIC's leading history buff, Mary Patterson, widow of Bishop J.O. Patterson Sr.

The church is renovating Leila Mason Hall next door. It predates Mason Temple by a decade and was named for Mason's second wife who helped him start the church in 1907.

The renovation, scheduled to be done by spring, will add 14,000 square feet of space for a

Heritage Museum, archives, and a 40-seat theater for tours and meetings.

COGIC leaders plan to continue having their annual meeting at Mason Temple every April.

Meanwhile, Bishop Brandon B. Porter of Memphis is organizing the first of what he hopes will be an annual Watch Night worship service on New Year's Eve.

"We also have big plans for Mason Temple for the 50th anniversary of Dr. King's final speech," Porter said.

Big plans are good. Mason Temple has a magnificent past, but it's more than a monument or museum. It was built as a house of prayer and worship.

There's plenty of space to make more joyful noise. Bishop Mason is entombed there, not the Holy Ghost Himself.

Contact columnist David Waters at waters@commercialappeal.com.



About David Waters

David Waters is a local news columnist for The Commercial Appeal. He writes about people, places and issues that have an impact on the community.



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