

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

Morris Memorial Building and Its Contribution to Nashville's Religious Printing Tradition



Morris Memorial Building, the last remaining building of a once-thriving downtown African American business district, is an integral part of Nashville's printing industry. The city's entrance into the printing industry dates back to the 1830s. In 1854, when the Methodist Episcopal Church, South established the forerunner of the United Methodist Publishing House, the city emerged as a center for religious printing. The *Tennessee Baptist* became the city's most popular publication, however, the company had no relation to the later Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC, est. 1891). Today, the SBC's Sunday School Board asserts that it is the world's largest publisher of religious materials. African American religious publishing significantly contributed to Nashville's religious publishing tradition as did the Morris Memorial Building, previous home of the National Baptist Publishing Convention, Sunday School Publishing Board, U. S. A., Incorporated. The country's first African American architectural firm, McKissack & McKissack, designed the Neoclassical style edifice, which was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in January 1985.

Constructed between 1924 and 1926, the Morris Memorial Building was designed and constructed for the National Baptist Convention's Baptist Sunday School Publishing Board (SSPB), U. S. A. Inc. In 1924, under the leadership of the publishing board's secretary, the Reverend Dr. Arthur Melvin Townsend, the SSPB awarded McKissack & McKissack a contract to design the Morris Memorial Building at the corner of Fourth Avenue and Charlotte Avenue (now Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd), a site once occupied by the Old Commercial Hotel. This building was commissioned to

hold the offices of the Sunday School Publishing Board of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. Completed in August of 1925 and formally dedicated in April of 1926, this African American religious organization originally used half of the building for its printing operations while the other half provided space for Nashville's growing black businesses.

This four-story Neoclassical building boasts an exterior sheathing of Indiana limestone. Over the main entrance is a large fanlight and Doric motif pilasters are spaced evenly along the first story. Above the first story is a cornice with modillion blocks, metopes and guttae. At the roofline is an elaborate frieze with garlands and wreaths, a modillioned cornice and balustrade. The interior contains significant detailing with a central light well and a stained glass skylight that illuminates the first-floor lobby. Morris Memorial's namesake is the Reverend Elias Camp Morris, who in 1895 became the first president of the National Baptist Convention, when it merged with the Baptist Foreign Mission Convention (1880); National Baptist Convention of America (1886); and the National Baptist Education Convention (1893). Upon the building's completion, McKissack and McKissack moved its firm into offices on the first and second floors. Sixty years after the abolition of enslavement, descendants of the formerly enslaved built and equipped this building, valued at more than \$800,000. It was completely furnished and among the most modern and best-equipped publishing houses of its kind in the country.

During Dr. Morris' twenty-eight year reign, a publishing board was established under the leadership of the Reverend Robert H. Boyd. Disputations arose

This publication is a project of the 2022 Nashville Conference on African American History and Culture. The author compiled the information. The Metropolitan Historical Commission edited and designed the materials. Image credit: Morris Memorial Building, c. 1925. Credit: Tennessee State Library and Archives.

around the independence of the Publishing Board. The Convention insisted that the Publishing Board was answerable to the Convention and the Publishing Board took the opposite stance. The dispute led to the 1915 split between the two entities. Publishing Board supporters organized an unincorporated National Baptist Convention of America, known as the R. H. Boyd Publishing Corporation. The Convention incorporated as the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., established its own Publishing Board, and purchased a site at 4th and Charlotte which prior to the Civil War housed a market that sold the enslaved persons. Under Dr. Morris' leadership, the National Baptist Convention, U. S. A. Inc. organized the Baptist Young People's Union, the Women's Convention Auxiliary, the National Baptist Benefit Association and the Sunday School Congress.

Two years prior to the demise of the Reverend Morris, the National Baptist Convention, Inc. (NBCI) called the Reverend Dr. A. M. Townsend to take over the leadership of its Sunday School Publishing Board. A graduate of Roger Williams University and Meharry Medical College, Dr. Townsend practiced medicine in Nashville and served on the faculty of Meharry Medical College until 1913, when he began his five-year tenure as president of Roger Williams University. In 1918, Townsend resigned as university president and accepted the pastorate of the Metropolitan Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee. He held this position for two years, before becoming secretary of the NBCI's Sunday School Publishing Board. After a lengthy illness, NBCI president Morris died on September 5, 1922, and was later interred at Dixon Cemetery in Helena, Arkansas. In 1922, Dr. Lacy K. Williams succeeded Dr. Morris as president. He organized the Laymen's Department, dedicated the Publishing Board Building and named it in honor of the former president. The Convention partnered with the Southern Baptist Convention to organize the American Baptist Theological Seminary in 1925. Five years after the completion of its new building, the SSPB published Louis G. Jordan's *National Baptist History, U.S.A., 1750-1930*.

Morris Memorial Building's history is also intertwined with the sororal history of Delta Sigma Theta, Inc. Pi Sigma Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. (DSTS) was chartered at the Morris Memorial Building in April 1930, when graduates of Fisk University became the sorority's charter members. One year later, the Pi Sigma Chapter hosted the Sorority's Eleventh Annual National Convention in Nashville from December 27-31, 1931, the first convention held in the South by DSTS. Pi Sigma was renamed Nashville Alumnae Chapter in 1958.

After the Rev. Dr. Townsend's death in 1959, the SSPB operated under the leadership of the Rev. Charles Dinkins, Dr. D. C. Washington, and its first female president Dr. Cecelia Nabrit Adkins. Dr. E. L. Thomas served as Executive Director from 1996-2007. Dr. Kelly Miller Smith, Jr. served as Executive Director from 2007-2013. Dr. Derrick L. Jackson, appointed as the Interim Executive Director in 2013, was officially appointed to the position in 2014. With current operations at the World Baptist Center, the SSPB, as official publisher of the NBCI, offers resources for churches and ministries from curriculums and Bible study materials to publications on leadership and spiritual growth like *Voice Magazine* and Townsend Press Book and Digital Resources. Unfortunately, the Morris Memorial Building, the last vestige of a central African American business district, is in danger of being erased from the public landscape.

In 2016, Morris Memorial Building made Historic Nashville, Inc.'s *Nashville Nine* endangered properties list due of the impending threat of redevelopment. Hope came when city officials announced plans for its purchase and preservation, however the proposal was abandoned. As a result, the edifice remains threatened by potential redevelopment that could compromise the historic integrity through additions or demolition. In July of 2020, the Tennessee Historical Commission approved the placement of the Morris Memorial Building/Pi Sigma Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority historical marker as a reminder to the public of its significant contributions.

Linda T. Wynn
