

A Legacy of Action

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

The church, now located at 3138 N. Vancouver Ave. in the Albina district of inner north and northeast Portland, was originally established in 1944 across the Columbia River in Vancouver, Wash., at the site of a housing project called Burton Homes where it was known as the First Baptist Church.

Thousands of shipyard workers who came to the Northwest during World War II—many of whom were Southern and black—helped the congregation get formed.

“What people were looking for was a better life, better opportunity, a place to raise your family without all the blatant signs of Jim Crow and racial prejudice and bias and things of that nature,” Hennessee said.

It relocated no fewer than three times over the next decade as the ending of WWII saw the closures of many housing projects. The church then established itself in Albina—where many of the city’s African Americans resided. In 1951 it moved to its current location, a former Methodist Episcopal church, built in 1909.

From 1951 to 1967 the membership grew from 650 to 2,000 and during that period became a town hall for local African Americans. At the time it was the largest black church in the entire Pacific Northwest.

“If there were things that were related to community activities, such as the NAACP, The Urban League, or anything related to improvement in terms of better conditions for blacks—like housing, employment, education—the church played a role in helping to foster those social/economical improvements for blacks in the 50s and 60s,” the church’s historian

and archivist, Raymond Burell III, told the Portland Observer.

In 1961, the Urban League selected the church as one of the stops on Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s national speaking tour. The national civil rights leader met with clergy and delivered a speech entitled “The Future of Integration,” commenting that “if democracy is to live, segregation must die. Segregation is a cancer in the body of democracy that must be removed if the health of the nation is to survive.”

Rev. King’s message was undoubtedly resonant to the then-segregated neighborhood residents. The church would later be the site of the statewide memorial service held for King after his death in 1968. In 2006, the church also hosted a memorial service for Coretta Scott King, who was Hennessee’s godmother.

Rev. O.B. Williams, who passed away in 1993, and wife Ida, who passed away in 2010, were given numerous community recognitions in their lifetimes. That included a community award for Ida by the Black Caucus of Portland in 1979; and then-Mayor Bud Clark proclaiming May 27 as O.B Williams Day in 1986.

Since 2007, under the leadership of Pastor Hennessee, the church hosts Drum Major celebrations each year in tribute to Dr. King on the weekend of the national holiday honoring the civil rights icon. In January the church hosted Ambassador Attalah Shabazz, the eldest daughter of Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz, as its keynote speaker. The celebration annually honors community leaders and provides scholarships for local college-bound high school students.

In 2016 the church was official-



PHOTO COURTESY VANCOUVER AVENUE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

The Vancouver Avenue First Baptist Church in the 1950s when it was the largest black congregation in the Pacific Northwest, a meeting place for social justice groups like the Portland NAACP, the Portland Urban League, and even hosted Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1961. Today, the church continues to be a central part of African American community life.

ly listed on the National Register of Historic places thanks in part to the efforts of Burell, who wrote a 133-page nomination report for the listing. He also authored a coffee table book of the history of the church and its leadership, “Vancouver Avenue: Yesterday, Today, and Forever,” in 2009.

By 2016, the membership of the church dwindled to 400, coinciding with the gentrification and displacement of black community members from the church’s Eliot neighborhood over the last couple of decades.

Current plans would bolster the church’s prominence in the community for decades to come by establishing a new African-American Museum at the church. Plans call for an exhibit gallery, spanning a little over 1,000 square feet, which will showcase the legacy of blacks in the community, Burell said.

“There’s a lot of history in this area and yet there’s no one place you can go to kind of say, let’s go look at the exhibits, so our goal is to develop that,” Hennessee said.

Thanks to a \$175,000 grant

from the National Fund for Sacred Places, and other pending grants and donations, the museum will be part of a larger renovation project that will unfold over the next year.

It will include the formation of a dedicated space for iUrban Teen, a partnering organization that brings together underrepresented teens and young adults for career exploration and mentoring in the science, technology, engineering, math, and arts fields. A board room for community use is also in the works.





Michael E Harper
Agent
Providing Insurance and Financial Services

Home Office, Bloomington, Illinois 61710

We are located at:
9713 S.W. Capitol, Portland, OR




503-221-3050 • Fax 503-227-8757
michael.harper.cuik@statefarm.com

World Water Day is in March

At this moment, thousands of Portlanders are turning on the tap.

At 1.5 gallons of water for a penny, Portland tap water is a better value than any bottled water.

The Portland Water Bureau and Bureau of Environmental Services are here to assist those who need help paying their bill.

Call **503-823-7770** or visit portlandoregon.gov/water to learn more.