An Application for a Harris County Historical Marker for

SIXTH CHURCH OF CHRIST, SCIENTIST

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and presented to the Harris County Historical Commission

I. CONTEXT

The roots of the Christian Science movement in Texas can be found in the 1889-90 Christian Science Journal, which mentioned services held in Galveston and Austin. The science of healing or “practitioning” may have been the attraction for new converts to Christian Science.

History of Christian Science

In 1866, after many years of study, Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910) discovered what she considered to be the Science of the Christianity which Jesus taught and lived. She dedicated herself to teaching, preaching, and healing others through this system for applying spiritual laws—Christian Science—and in 1875 she published her primary book about it, Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures. By 1879, she founded the Church of Christ, Scientist, “to commemorate the word and works of our Master, which should reinstate primitive Christianity and its lost element of healing.”

Often ill growing up, she experimented unsuccessfully with multiple healthcare systems. A turning point occurred in 1866 when she had a severe fall. After three days her health was not improving, so she asked for her Bible and became completely well after reading two of Jesus' healings. Throughout her life she’d been able to heal others, but now she began to understand the science behind the activity. … Eddy also founded a college for teaching Christian Science healing, an international church, and multiple publications, including the award-winning newspaper, The Christian Science Monitor.

People who practice Christian Science are free to make their own choices about what to think and do in each situation, including health care.

Christian Science … is deeply Christian. Christian Science teaches that it’s never God's will for anyone to suffer, be sick, or die. Instead, it shows how God is entirely good, and therefore His will for each of us is only health and life.

The Church of Christ, Scientist includes branch Churches of Christ, Scientist, as well as smaller organizations called Christian Science Societies. They’re all branches of The Mother Church, The First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Boston, Massachusetts.

In 1899 Ladd M. Waters, manager of the Texas Christian Science Institute in Galveston placed ads for converts in major newspapers. During the year, ten Christian Science churches in...
Texas were established including two each in Dallas and Houston.\textsuperscript{5} El Paso held regular services but did not incorporate as a church. Among the newly organized churches the state now had three teachers and fifty-two practitioners (authorized healers). Seventeen additional Christian Science churches located in large cities east of Interstate Highway 35 were established by 1908, making a total of eight teachers and fifty-eight practitioners.\textsuperscript{6}

None of the aforementioned Christian Science churches established in Texas were colored congregations. In 1914 the first congregation of its kind was organized in Houston.\textsuperscript{7} As of 1913, the city directory listed seventy-three “colored” congregations, including Baptist, Church of Christ, Congregational, Colored Methodist, and Methodist Episcopal.

II. OVERVIEW

Texas’ first Colored Christian Science congregation began with a series of meetings held during August 1914 in the home of Wesley and Patsy Gales, 1419 Grove Street in Houston’s Fifth Ward community. Those present at the Friday afternoon meetings were W. E. Bartlett, Florence Frazier, Alice Jackson, Minerva Thomas, John Snell and his wife Aurelia.

According to the church’s history Mrs. Gales was introduced to Christian Science while employed as a maid for the Alexander Swasey family. Swasey’s wife Zulie was a Christian Science practitioner,\textsuperscript{8} and she along with her daughters were instrumental in teaching the principles to Mrs. Gales, who often witnessed the healing work of her employer. After telling her friends about Christian Science, the Gales and their friends began studying the principles/doctrine established by Mary Baker Eddy.

The group soon held Sunday morning and Wednesday evening services at the First Church of Christ, Scientist, a white congregation located on Main Street. Because of Jim Crow laws, services probably would have been held in another facility on the campus. Mrs. Swasey continued to serve as mentor and practitioner for the group while Mrs. Gales began her study of the method in 1915. Interest in Christian Science grew as new members Alice and Ed Clark, Eudora and Will Peachy, Ben Smith, Mrs. Martha Williams, Mrs. Mattie Blount Wilson and Mrs. Sarah Hanks joined the group. Mrs. Gales served as first reader\textsuperscript{9} and in 1917 Mrs. Swasey appointed her as practitioner for the group. During this time Mrs. Gales was the only colored practitioner in the state until 1935 though she was unlicensed and unregistered. She performed healings of illnesses such as alcoholism, rheumatism, tuberculosis and cancer.

Robert A. Wood (1888-1943), a Christian Science Practitioner (C.S.P.)\textsuperscript{10} and member of the First Church of Christ, Scientist, also served as a mentor to guide the group towards
becoming a society in accordance with the guidelines in Mary Baker Eddy’s manual. In 1922 after being healed of cancer John J. Houston and wife Mae, Mrs. Virgie Green and Jewell Herbert, all related, joined the group. In 1923 the group became an “unrecognized Society,” which meant they had no connection with The Mother Church in Boston, Massachusetts. Elected board trustees were John J. Houston (chairman), Martha Williams and W.E. Bartlett. Mae S. Houston was Second Reader, Mrs. Mamie Cozier, pianist, and Mr. Gales, custodian. New members Sarah Bolden Hall and Mrs. Charlotte Taylor joined the group that year.

Fifteen members donated weekly contributions to a building fund and in 1927 a cottage was erected at 1417 Grove, next to the Gales’ home, to accommodate the ever-growing society. The doors of the cottage were officially opened in 1928 for Sunday school and first Wednesday meetings. The group held a special meeting in 1938 for the purpose of organizing as a society according to the principles and teachings of Christian Science. Mrs. Gales died in August of that year and Mae Smith Houston became practitioner for the group. The group, then consisting of 68 members, was formally organized and recognized by The Mother Church in Boston, Massachusetts as the Christian Science Society, Colored, of Houston, Texas, on May 23, 1940.

The congregation needed a larger worship facility and agreed to relocate from 1417 Grove in the Fifth Ward to 2202 Elgin Street, located in the heart of the Greater Third Ward community, across the street from historic Emancipation Park. On 22 July 1940, Board of Trustees president John J. Houston and his wife, Mae, also a member of the Board of Trustees, donated the property to the other Trustees. According to a 1953 Braceys' Block Book Map, the congregation purchased adjoining lot 9 after this time.

The congregation incorporated as the “Christian Science Society (Colored) of Houston, Texas” on January 15, 1941. Board trustees named in the charter were Rachel Pendleton, Minerva Thomas, Samuel D. Brown, Haywood Smith and Fred Bolden.

Proceeds from the sale of the cottage at 1417 Grove Street were applied to the cost of the building. February 10, 1941, the Society acquired the services of architect Henry Donald Frankfurt, A.I.A. (1884-1963), a member of the Seventh Church of Christ, Scientist in Houston to design the new worship facility. Contractor G. L. Christian completed the new structure (in 120 days), which included an auditorium, reading room, Sunday school room, reader rooms, distribution room, check room and ladies lounge. The building’s modernistic architecture, (described below) was characteristic of the 1930s and '40s, but was rarely applied to religious structures in Houston, according to architectural historian Stephen A. Fox, and as illustrated in

The Sixth Church of Christ Scientist is a one-story, wood-framed, brick veneered building at the southeast corner of Elgin Avenue and Hutchins Street in the Holman Addition of the [Greater] Third Ward of Houston. The church is symmetrically organized in plan. Two wings advance forward to frame the recessed entrance bay facing north on Elgin. The east and west ends of the church are framed by projecting wings. The rear (south) elevation of the church contains a windowless projecting central bay symmetrically framed by recessed wings. The church fills its corner lot. The building is built almost to (or on) the property line on all four sides. The ground floor is set atop a raised basement. The front (north) elevation facing Elgin consists of a pair of arched apertures, side by side, within which flat-headed, double front doors are set. These arches occupy the church's recessed central bay. Steps lead from the sidewalk on Elgin up to the entrance bay. The inset bay is framed by wings, each lit by four, flat-headed, six-over-six-paned wood sash windows. Subsidiary entrances, each shielded by a projecting canopy, are set within the re-entrant angles at either end of the Elgin front of the church. The west face of the Hutchins Street wing is lit by three windows. There is a rear entrance set in the west side of the projecting rear bay.

The church is faced with white-painted brick. Sloped brick sills project beneath each window opening. Beneath each window is a basement-level aperture faced with an interlocking open grill. A decorative vertical slit is stationed in the wall above each window. The parapet line is marked by a brick soldier course. The pair of entrance arches is outlined with double brick courses. Above the entrance arches, the church's name is spelled out in thin metal letters. The church's most distinctive feature is an elongated octagonal planned lantern above the worship area. Capped by a low hipped roof with raised-seam metal facing and a central ventilator, this lantern identifies the location of the worship space from outside. The rigorous simplicity, geometric clarity, and insistent symmetry of the Sixth Church of Christ Scientist ally it to such neighboring buildings of the same period as the structures in Emancipation Park, across Elgin from the church (1939), and the Eldorado Ballroom (1939) at Elgin and Dowling.¹⁹

Nineteen members withdrew from the congregation in October 1941 and formed an unrecognized society that remained in the Fifth Ward. It met for a time at Wheatley High School, then located on Lyons Avenue at Gregg Street.²⁰ Mr. Gales died the following month.²¹ In September 1945, The Mother Church in Boston, Massachusetts recognized the Society on Elgin Street as a branch church. On July 11, 1963, the church formally changed its name to “Sixth Church of Christ, Scientist, Houston, Texas” and amended the duration of the corporation from fifty years to perpetual.”²²

The Handbook of Texas notes that even though Christian Science congregations remained segregated in 1955, a total of 228 practitioners, including four blacks, and seven teachers resided in the state. The Handbook notes that Houston and Dallas were the only two
cities with “colored” societies, although the Houston group had been already established as a branch church by this time.  

Several members of the Sixth Church of Christ, Scientist congregation were HISD educators who made a significant impact in the community. Ilma Lawrence Smith (1894-1977), granddaughter of Richard Brock, Houston’s first black alderman, taught for over 49 years in the Houston Independent School District. She authored Phillis Wheatley High School’s school song, founded the Troubadours, a mentor group for students, and established the Negro Child Center. Smith retired from Wheatley High School after 30 years.  

Band musician and inventor Conrad O. Johnson, Sr. (1915-2008), affectionately known as “Prof,” taught more than 30 years, and while at Kashmere Gardens High School groomed the school’s bands into powerhouses that rose to national acclaim. The band competed in 46 festivals in the U.S., Europe and Japan between 1969 and 1977 and won first place in 42 contests. The band also recorded eight albums and while touring Europe in 1977 won the Sweepstakes Award. The high school’s summer jazz workshop named in “Prof’s” honor continues today.  

Charles P. Rhinehart (1921-1977) joined the Texas Southern University faculty in 1950 and was an assistant professor of music working toward a doctorate degree in 1962 when he became the first Negro to enroll at the University of Houston under the Board of Governors integration program. Rhinehart became a full professor after earning several degrees in piano and music theory and became an accomplished musician. He was invited to play with the Houston Symphony in the 1950s, and during 1958-1968, several of his students also played with the Houston Symphony. In 1958, a 450-seat music auditorium was constructed on the Texas Southern University campus in Rhinehart’s honor.  

Pearl C. Sue (1909-2001) was also a historian and published author. She piloted the first official course in Afro-American studies in the Houston Independent School District. She was co-founder, president and director of the Houston Chapter of Carter G. Woodson’s Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH).  

The end of legal segregation contributed to the decline of separate colored congregations. The Sixth Church congregation dwindled by 2005, when members disbanded to attend other Christian Science congregations in the city. The Sixth Church worship facility is still an important architectural and historic landmark and is the oldest Christian Science church in Texas built for African Americans.
III. SIGNIFICANCE

The Sixth Church of Christ, Scientist, was Houston’s first African-American Christian Science congregation. Its roots were planted in 1914, when the founding members who were enlightened by the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science, met in the home of Wesley and Patsy Gales, 1419 Grove Street, in the Fifth Ward. In 1927, as attendance grew a cottage was built nearby at 1417 Grove Street.

The group was formally organized and recognized by The Mother Church in Boston, Massachusetts as the Christian Science Society, Colored, of Houston, Texas, on May 23, 1940. Its main objective was the support of public worship and charitable work in accordance with the principles of Christian Science taught by the Bible and expounded in Mrs. Eddy’s book, “Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures.”

The group incorporated in January 1941, and later that year a new modernistic structure designed by architect H. D. Frankfurt was constructed on property located at 2202 Elgin Street, in the heart of the Greater Third Ward community, across the street from historic Emancipation Park. The building’s architecture, characteristic of the 1930s and ‘40s, was rarely applied to religious buildings in Houston.

Members Ilma L. Smith, Pearl C. Suel, Charles P. Rhinehart, and “Prof” Conrad O. Johnson were influential in educational, social, and civic organizations that are still vital to the Houston community. The Sixth Church congregation dwindled by 2005 and members disbanded to attend other Christian Science congregations in the city. The Sixth Church of Christ, Scientist was the first African-American congregation of its kind organized in Houston. The worship facility is still an important architectural historic landmark and is said to be Texas' oldest Christian Science church built by African Americans.
IV. DOCUMENTATION

1 Most of the information in this narrative was taken from History of the Sixth Church of Christ, Scientist (Colored), Houston, Texas. Unpublished manuscript, circa 1940. Courtesy of the Mary Baker Eddy Library.


3 Christian Science Website: http://christianscience.com/what-is-christian-science#history-of-cs


5 1897-1898 Houston City Directory, pg. 35; 1899 Houston City Directory, pg. 365.


7 The History of the Sixth Church of Christ Scientist (Colored), Houston, Texas, pg. I.

8 1912 Houston City Directory, pg. 663.
Christian Science churches do not have individuals as pastors, but instead the Bible and *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* by Mary Baker Eddy serve as pastor. These are read at Sunday services by a First and Second Reader.

Houston City Directory, 1920-1921, pg. 1393.

History of the Sixth Church, pg. IV.


Texas Sanborn Maps. 1924-1951, Vol. 9, pg. 904.

Harris County Deed Records, Volume 1117, pg.24.

Texas Secretary of State Records. Document Number 3148476


History of the Sixth Church, pg. VII.

Fox, Stephen A. (2013, July 13). Email interview.


Texas Secretary of State Records. Document Number 217314070002


“U. of Houston Admits Negro,” *Dallas Morning News*, June 12, 1962, Section 1, Page 5.


Texas Southern University Inventory of Permanent Buildings, September 1988.


Kurt Morris, Researcher, Mary Baker Eddy Library, email to author, July 12, 2013; February 19, 2016.