

February 9, 2023

Commission on Chicago Landmarks

Chicago City Hall

121 N. LaSalle Street

Chicago, Illinois 60606

c/o Chairman Ernest Wong

Re: Greater Union Baptist Church, 1956 W. Warren Boulevard, Chicago

Dear Mr. Chairman and Members of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks,

We at Preservation Chicago unequivocally support the Final Landmark Recommendation for the Greater Union Baptist Church, originally constructed as The Church of the Redeemer, and located at 1956 W. Warren Boulevard, on Chicago's Near West Side, and part of the "Chicago Park Boulevard System, National Register Historic District."

Greater Union Baptist Church building has been a cornerstone of Chicago's Near West Side for generations and has endured many changes to the community over the past 137 years, including vast nearby Urban Renewal projects, social unrest and riots following the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., along with the expansion of multiple institutions surrounding this magnificent church. It's a testament to the long-term commitment of its leadership and congregation, that Greater Union continues its service to the community, over the past nine decades, in which it has been located within this historic structure.

Constructed in the Richardson Romanesque Style, with its high gables of richly-colored red brick, ornamental terra cotta and sandstone, the building is a remarkably beautiful and elegant structure. The organization of its principal facades, along both Warren Boulevard and Damen Avenue, is highly disciplined and further embellished with a variety of arched openings, often filled with highly decorative art glass windows. Its beautiful volumes are a commanding and monumental presence. This is especially noteworthy, as the building's design captures one's eye from a far distance, despite not having a tall tower or belfry, which is a more typical anchor and component of such an important edifice.

Greater Union Baptist Church is truly a remarkable structure, modern for its time, and with a remarkable column-free interior sanctuary, located on the second floor, with its wood-beamed ceiling, original brass chandeliers, converted to electricity, organ case, curvilinear pews and richly-colored art glass by the Chicago firm of McCully & Miles. This designation may also further elevate the work of McCully & Miles, to join that of such firms as Tiffany, LaFarge, and Healy & Millet, all working in about the same time period, as the art glass windows at Greater Union are of such excellent quality.

Of great importance is the architect of Greater Union Baptist Church, William LeBaron Jenney (1832-1907). Jenney, an architect and structural engineer, who experimented with metal framing, noting his experience in the American Civil War as a bridge engineer for the Union Army, and is recognized on the world stage as the "Father of the Skyscraper," or first steel/metal-framed building. That first early skyscraper, "The Home Insurance Building," of 1884-1885, located on Chicago's LaSalle Street (demolished in 1931), was designed a year prior to Greater Union Baptist Church building.

In the years following the construction of the church, originally known as “Church of the Redeemer,” William LeBaron Jenney went on to design some of the Chicago’s tallest structures and recognized Chicago Landmarks, including the Manhattan Building, the Ludington Building, Second Leiter Building, the New York Life Building, among others, while also influencing a generation of architects and the design of their buildings around the world. Jenney’s work and achievements are recognized as the beginnings of the Chicago Commercial Style and Chicago School of Architecture.

Several of William LeBaron Jenney’s buildings were also included in a UNESCO World Heritage Nomination for “Chicago’s Early Skyscrapers.” We at Preservation Chicago, along with many of the City’s architecture and preservation organizations and our partners, along with members of the DPD-Historic Preservation Division at City Hall, were part of a committee that selected these buildings for nomination and consideration in 2017. The final determination of Chicago’s early skyscrapers as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, should be concluded in 2027, as it’s a ten-year process. Great Union Church, while not a steel-framed skyscraper, like those included in the UNESCO World Heritage Nomination, is indeed an important building in Jenney’s career and a seminal structure attributed to his life’s work in the field of architecture.

Preservation Chicago has worked with the Greater Union Baptist Congregation, Board of Directors, and both Pastor Dr. McCray and former pastor Willie Morris of Church, for over seven years towards a designation of the church as a Chicago Landmark.

We were very pleased to assist the City of Chicago’s Historic Preservation Division of the Department of Planning and Development to capture oral histories of the Pastor and many of the longtime members of the Congregation. We are also extremely grateful for this opportunity to offer this building as a “Suggestion for Landmark” with the support of the Congregation, and assist with the Chicago Landmark Designation Report, while bringing this great honor to this amazing West Side institution.

Special thanks to the DPD-Historic Preservation Staff and especially Matt Crawford, who researched and authored this amazing and beautifully written report. Also, most importantly, Pastor Dr. McCray and the many members of Great Union Baptist Church, the Congregation and their Board of Directors, over many years, for their help, commitment, dedication and stewardship towards this important moment in our collective history.

With that said, Preservation Chicago fully and enthusiastically supports the Final Landmark Recommendation and Chicago Landmark Designation for Greater Union Baptist Church.

Sincerely,

*Ward Miller*

Ward Miller, Executive Director