

**CITY OF CHICAGO
COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS**

December 4, 2025

**RECOMMENDATION TO THE CITY COUNCIL OF CHICAGO THAT
CHICAGO LANDMARK DESIGNATION BE ADOPTED FOR**

ORIGINAL PROVIDENCE BAPTIST CHURCH

515 N. PINE AVENUE

Docket No. 2025-09

To the Mayor and Members of the City Council of the City of Chicago:

Pursuant to Section 2-120-690 of the Municipal Code of the City of Chicago (the “Municipal Code”), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks (the “Commission”) has determined that The Original Providence Baptist Church which consists of a 1902 Church and an attached school from 1928 (the “Church and School Building”), is worthy of designation as a Chicago Landmark. On the basis of careful consideration of the history and architecture of the Church and School Building, the Commission has found that it satisfies the following three (3) criteria set forth in Section 2-120-620 of the Municipal Code:

- 1. Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*
- 3. Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago, State of Illinois, or the United States.*
- 4. Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.*

I. BACKGROUND

The formal landmark designation process for the Church and School Building began on September 11, 2025, when the Commission approved a preliminary landmark recommendation (the “Preliminary Recommendation”) for the Church and School Building as a Chicago Landmark. The Commission found that the Church and School Building meets three of the seven criteria for designation, as well as the integrity criterion, identified in the Chicago Landmarks Ordinance (Municipal Code, Section 2-120-580 et seq.). As part of the Preliminary Recommendation, the Commission preliminarily identified the “significant historical and architectural features” of the Church and School Building as:

- All exterior elevations, including rooflines, of the Church and School Building.

Also, as part of the Preliminary Recommendation, the Commission adopted a Designation Report, dated September 11, 2025, the most current iteration of which is dated December 4, 2025, incorporated herein and attached hereto as **Exhibit A** (the "Designation Report").

At its regular meeting of October 9, 2025, the Commission received a statement from Ciere Boatright, Commissioner of the Department of Planning and Development, recommending approval of the designation of the Church and School Building as a Landmark.

On November 3, 2025, the Commission received written consent to landmark designation of the Church and School Building in a form dated October 26, 2025, and signed by Reverend Daniel E. Jones Sr., representing the congregation of the Original Providence Baptist Church, the owner of the Church and School Building.

II. FINDINGS OF THE COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS

WHEREAS, pursuant to Section 2-120-690 of the Municipal Code, the Commission has reviewed the entire record of proceedings on the proposed Chicago Landmark designation, including the Designation Report and all of the information on the proposed landmark designation of the Church and School Building; and,

WHEREAS, established in 1866, the Original Providence Baptist Church holds the distinction of being Chicago's third oldest Black congregation which is a testament to the congregation's resilience and relevance for over 150 years; and,

WHEREAS, the founding members of the Original Providence Baptist Church began to meet informally in 1863 during the Civil War and were people who had escaped from slavery and came to Chicago via the Underground Railroad and those who had purchased their freedom; and,

WHEREAS, over its long history, the congregation and pastors at Original Providence Baptist Church have committed to not only spiritual development and fellowship, but also to civil rights, education, political engagement, charity, and culture, particularly in music and architecture; and,

WHEREAS, in addition to worship and fellowship, the congregation at Original Providence Baptist Church has engaged in the Civil Rights Movement through support of the NAACP, the Chicago Urban League and nonreligious organization; and,

WHEREAS, from 1866 until displacement by federal urban renewal programs in 1972, Original Providence Baptist Church remained firmly rooted in Chicago's West Side, an area of Chicago with an African American settlement that began before the Civil War; and,

WHEREAS, Original Providence Baptist Church is associated with pastors who made significant contributions to the social and cultural development of Chicago and beyond; and,

WHEREAS, an early pastor at Original Providence Baptist Church was Rev. Thomas Lewis Johnson (1836-1921), a remarkable figure about whom much is known for in 1909 he published his autobiography, *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave: Or, the Story of My Life in Three Continents*; and,

WHEREAS, Thomas Lewis Johnson and his wife Henrietta came to Chicago from Virginia when they were freed from slavery at the end of the Civil War; and,

WHEREAS, under the tutelage of Rev. R. de Baptiste, pastor of Olivet Baptist Church, Thomas Lewis Johnson was ordained as a Reverend in Chicago and went to Colorado to lead a small Black Baptist congregation; and,

WHEREAS, Rev. Thomas Lewis Johnson returned to Chicago in 1873 to take the pastorate of Original Providence Baptist Church; and,

WHEREAS, as pastor of Original Providence Baptist Church, Rev. Johnson made contacts with London, England, where he was invited to receive formal education and training in abolitionist Charles Haddon Spurgeon's Pastors' College in London; and,

WHEREAS, in his training at Pastors' College in London, Rev. Johnson was joined by his wife Henrietta T. Johnson, his brother-in-law Rev. Calvin H. Richardson and his wife Issadorah T. Richardson. All four would travel to West Africa in 1878 to preach and teach, fulfilling Johnson's lifelong hope that mission work in Africa would be most effectively led by people of African descent; and,

WHEREAS, after returning from Africa, Rev. Johnson travelled to Chicago, the rest of the United States, England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland to raise money for mission work and education in Africa; and,

WHEREAS, in 1896 Rev. Abraham S. Harris became pastor of Original Providence Baptist Church. Harris developed a number of new programs, including a Baptist Young People's Union, a choir, and a Young People's Forum for intellectual development; and,

WHEREAS, in 1906 Rev. Robert L. Darden took the helm at Original Providence Baptist Church. Darden supported the development of the Wendell Phillips Settlement, a social settlement like Hull House to serve African Americans on the West Side; and,

WHEREAS, in 1910, Jamaican-born and Oxford-educated Rev. Dr. S. L. M. Frances became pastor of Original Providence Baptist Church and oversaw the construction of a new church building for the growing congregation; and,

WHEREAS, 1929 saw the beginning of the pastorate of Rev. R. Wendell Phillips who would lead the Original Providence Baptist Church for nearly three decades. Phillips grew the congregation and was active in the Chicago Urban League, the NAACP and the Negro Press Association; and,

WHEREAS, Rev. Dr. Edgar T. Thornton II guided Original Providence Baptist Church from 1958 until 1996. Thornton led the church through two eminent domain battles where the congregation lost two church buildings to urban renewal. Despite being uprooted twice, the congregation was not dispersed and remained intact and continued to grow; and,

WHEREAS, in 1996 Rev. Beverly Finley-Gardner became the first woman to be licensed to preach and ultimately ordained as a minister in Original Providence Baptist Church after earning her Master of Divinity Degree from Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary in 2000; and,

WHEREAS, in 1971, Original Providence Baptist Church moved to its current church at 515 N. Pine Ave. in the Austin neighborhood. The property consists of a church building built in 1902 and attached school building from 1928, both built by the First Baptist Church of Austin; and,

WHEREAS, the church is an excellent example of early twentieth century church architecture in an eclectic Neo-Tudor style built according to the "Akron Plan" in 1902. It is one of the few remaining "Akron Plan" churches in the city of Chicago; and,

WHEREAS, the church building is clad with brownish yellow brickwork on its primary elevations along with various Tudor elements such as Tudor four centered arches, window hood moldings and false machicolations giving it a commanding appearance; and,

WHEREAS, the overall design, plan configuration and detailing of the original building displays the skill and experience of the Church Building's architects, William Brown and David Davis, specialists in church architecture; and,

WHEREAS, in 1928 a large school building was added to the church. Its red brick walls with limestone trim; the use of quoining, or tabbed stones framing the windows, leaded glass casement windows with stone mullions and transoms, and the arched entrance portico with decorative plaque are all characteristics of the Collegiate Gothic style of architecture; and,

WHEREAS, the Church and School Building meets three criteria for landmark designation set forth in Section 2-120-620 (1), (3) and (4) of the Municipal Code; and

WHEREAS, consistent with Section 2-120-630 of the Municipal Code, the Church and School Building has significant historic, community, architectural, or aesthetic interest or value, the integrity of which is preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, and ability to express such historic, community, architectural, or aesthetic interest or value; now, therefore,

THE COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS HEREBY:

1. Adopts the recitals, findings and statements of fact set forth in the preamble and Sections I and II hereof as the findings of the Commission; and

2. Adopts the Designation Report, as revised, and dated this December 4, 2025; and,
3. Finds, based on the Designation Report and the entire record before the Commission, that the Church and School Building meets three criteria for landmark designation as set forth in Section 2-120-620 (1), (3) and (4) of the Municipal Code; and,
4. Finds that the Church and School Building satisfies the "integrity" requirement set forth in Section 2-120-630 of the Municipal Code; and,
5. Finds that the significant historical and architectural features of the Church and School Building are identified as follows:
 - All exterior elevations, including rooflines, of the Church and School Building.
6. Recommends the designation of the Church and School Building as a Chicago Landmark.

This recommendation was adopted unanimously (8-0).


Ernest C. Wong, Chair
Commission on Chicago Landmarks

Dated: December 4, 2025