



National Treasures

Clayborn Temple

Location:

Memphis, Tennessee

A stately Romanesque Revival church just south of Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee, Clayborn Temple began life with a white congregation in 1892 as Second Presbyterian. In 1949, the church was sold to an African-American congregation, who changed the property's name to Clayborn Temple in honor of a local African Methodist Episcopal (AME) bishop.

During the Sanitation Workers' Strike of 1968, civil rights and labor activists organized together inside Clayborn Temple. The "I AM A MAN" signs created by the congregation's pastor with his own printing press have since become a universal symbol for human rights and human dignity. Today, the "I AM A MAN" signs remain relevant everywhere, from protests close to home in Ferguson to halfway around the world in Egypt.

Clayborn Temple closed in 1999 and fell into disrepair, but it has since reopened. The building hosts special events like weddings and live performances, is once again home to a congregation, and is also a meeting space for local and national organizations. Most importantly, the community members and preservation organizations who have kept Clayborn Temple alive are dedicated to preserving its legacy as the site where activists first organized around the idea that poverty and race were inextricably bound.

"I AM A MAN"

When it was constructed in 1892, Second Presbyterian was the largest church in the United States south of the Ohio River. Its defining features included monumental stained glass windows and a huge pipe organ, purchased for \$8,400. These features were a rarity in churches at the time.

Through the early decades of the 20th century, the cultural and economic forces of the Great Migration brought increasing numbers of African-Americans to downtown Memphis. In response to these shifting demographics, the congregation of Second Presbyterian Church—in a trend repeated by white urban churches across the South—decided to relocate to a new suburban property. In 1949, they put their historic church up for sale.

The church was purchased that same year by the historic African Methodist Episcopal congregation, who renamed the building Clayborn Temple. As home to a vibrant and active congregation, Clayborn Temple became a hub for the cultivation of religious faith, the proliferation of African-American culture, and the pursuit of social and economic justice.

Its commitment to justice made the decision to use Clayborn Temple as a base for the Sanitation Workers' Strike an easy one. Leading up to the strike, African-American laborers employed by the city of Memphis faced intolerable working conditions and unjust compensation. On February 1, 1968, garbage collectors Echol Cole and Robert Walker were crushed to death by a malfunctioning truck. Ten days later, 700 men attended a union meeting to address their mistreatment, and on February 12, 1968, the Sanitation Workers' Strike began.

Starting on February 26, strikers marched each day from Clayborn Temple to Memphis City Hall. In addition to the marches, the strike also involved a boycott of local businesses and attempts at negotiation with the City Council. The Sanitation workers were met with resistance from all sides. Local government officials and the mayor deemed their union "illegal." The police force attacked protestors and arrested organizers on trumped-up charges like jaywalking. News outlets reported the events of the strike with a heavy racial bias against the protestors.

But strikers also received widespread support from AFSCME (American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees), NAACP, national unions, ministerial alliances and associations,

high school and college students, and others. Many organizations and individuals believed in the plight of these workers and were willing give their time, money, and resources to the cause.

The Sanitation Workers' Strike came to a head when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. joined efforts with the strikers and their supporters. Dr. King first appeared in Memphis for a speech at Mason Temple on March 18, 1968, and he continued organizing around the Sanitation Workers' Strike when he realized how dire the workers' situation had become.

Taken together, the ongoing discrimination against the sanitation workers and the involvement of nationally recognized leaders such as the NAACP and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. pushed the Sanitation Workers' Strike to fundamentally change the nature of the Civil Rights movement and placed a new emphasis on the intersection between race and class.



Getty Images

Thousands gather before Clayborn Temple A.M.E. Church in Memphis March 28, 1968.

Attack on Clayborn

One of the strike's most infamous moments took place on March 28, 1968. In the early morning, nearly 15,000 marchers gathered in front of Clayborn Temple in anticipation of Dr. King, who would lead the march down its usual route from the church through the downtown shopping district.

After half a mile, violence broke out between protestors and the police force. The police, armed with mounted .30 caliber machine guns and tear gas, indiscriminately attacked both rioting and peaceful protestors. One account claims that the violence was so brutal, "you could look around and see blood; people were lying in the street. You couldn't stop to help, because if you did, the police would come and beat you."

Civil rights leader Reverend James Lawson ordered protestors to seek refuge inside Clayborn Temple away from the tear gas and brutality. For a few moments, Clayborn Temple fulfilled its intended purpose, becoming a sanctuary for the beaten and bloodied protestors. But police surrounded and raided the church. They assaulted the terrified marchers with their hands, clubs, and tear gas. Desperate, injured protestors escaped by breaking through Clayborn Temple's stained glass windows and climbing down into alleys below.

By the end of the day, 4,000 heavily armed troops from the National Guard had taken over the city. They made 280 arrests, and between 50 and 85 people were reported injured. The single fatality: a 16-year-old African-American boy named Larry Payne was shot in the stomach by police after peacefully surrendering to suspected charges of looting.

On April 3, 1968, Dr. King returned to Memphis, determined to lead a peaceful march. At nearby Mason Temple, Dr. King gave his famous "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech before being assassinated on April 4 on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel. As they mourned Dr. King's death, sanitation workers continued marching for the ideals that had brought him to the city.

Dr. King had been planning to march with the sanitation workers from Clayborn Temple again on April 8; his wife, Coretta Scott King, took his place instead. She led strikers and thousands of their supporters in a silent march to honor the slain civil rights leader demanding that the mayor give in to the union's requests. Finally, on April 16, 1968, the City Council, the sanitation workers, and AFSCME struck a successful deal and the Sanitation Workers' Strike officially came to an end.



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Sanitation workers pictured on March 28, 1968, outside Clayborn Temple.

Reinterpreting the Past

Throughout the Sanitation Workers' Strike, Clayborn Temple served as a sanctuary for the broken and beaten protestors, an organizing space for anyone willing to take action, and a symbol of the strength of Memphis' black, working-class community. It continued to be a focal point of the strike and a home base for civil rights activists and labor advocates for months.

After decades of service, Clayborn Temple closed its doors in 1999. It sat vacant until it reopened in 2015 under [Clayborn Reborn](https://www.claybornreborn.org/) [Link: <https://www.claybornreborn.org/>] , an organization dedicated to finding new ways to honor the history of the church and to make it an active center of the community once again. In 2016, Downtown Church—a nondenominational, interracial congregation—relocated to Clayborn Temple and began weekly services, and Clayborn Temple has once again become a popular event space for community members. Together, the National Trust and Clayborn Reborn intend to rehabilitate and reinterpret Clayborn Temple as a safe place to explore difficult stories like that of the Sanitation Workers' Strike.

In April 2018, Clayborn Temple will join the community of Memphis in remembering the 50th anniversary of Dr. King's assassination and the Sanitation Workers' Strike. Rehabilitation work on the church will begin in 2019, and interpretive programming will begin on-site after the building is fully restored. Just as the history of the Sanitation Workers' Strike should be long remembered, so too should the history of Clayborn Temple—a symbol of intersectionality, inclusivity, resistance, tragedy, and change for the better.

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The National Trust and Clayborn Reborn will rehabilitate and reinterpret Clayborn Temple as an active center of the community a safe place to explore difficult stories like that of the Sanitation Workers' Strike.

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