

Legislation Text

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Also naming Christian Street, between Broad and 20th Streets, “Black Doctors Row,” to recognize its designation as Philadelphia’s first African-American historic district.

WHEREAS, On July 8, 2022, the Philadelphia Historical Commission unanimously approved a special designation for Black Doctors Row, an area in South Philadelphia that was the home of several prominent Black doctors, pastors, and other prominent professionals and business leaders during the early 20th century; and

WHEREAS, The majority of the buildings included within the six blocks of Black Doctors Row Historic District are three-story brick rowhouses, constructed between the 1860s and 1890s. From 1860 until around 1900, the neighborhood was predominantly Irish and was known as St. Charles Parish, then from 1900 until 1910, the neighborhood entered a period of demographic transition. Finally, from 1910 until the postwar period, the neighborhood became associated with Philadelphia’s Black elite; and

WHEREAS, Among the more than 150 properties included under the first Black historic district is the Christian Street YMCA, which originally opened in 1889 and moved to its current location in 1914, where it became a popular meeting place for Black community members. Also included are multiple prominent churches including the First African Baptist Church, as well as the Ebenezer Seventh-Day Adventist Church, which was formerly the Eighth United Presbyterian Church; and

WHEREAS, In the 19th century this section of Christian Street was settled by prominent Black Philadelphians. At its peak from 1910 through at least 1945, these six blocks of Christian Street were home to Black pastors, doctors, teachers, architects, politicians, pharmacists, small business owners, a funeral director, and postal workers; and

WHEREAS, Charles Albert Tindley, the influential Pastor, begun his career in Philadelphia at Bainbridge Street Methodist Church, ultimately growing his congregation to over 10,000 members and eventually becoming Tindley Temple United Methodist Church. Tindley also rose to national prominence because of his preaching and his popularization of gospel music that he had composed, creating numerous important pieces such as are “I’ll Overcome Someday,” “Go Wash in the Beautiful Stream,” “(Take Your Burden to the Lord and) Leave It There,” “Stand by Me,” and “We’ll Understand it Better By and By.” He also pioneered the use of radio to broadcast church services, and actively fought for social change; and

WHEREAS, Julian Francis Abele was a prominent Black American architect, and chief designer in the offices of Horace Trumbauer. He contributed to the design of more than 400 buildings, including the Widener Memorial Library at Harvard University, Philadelphia's Central Library, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and was the primary designer of the west campus of Duke University; and

WHEREAS, John C. Asbury was one of the most prominent African American politicians in Pennsylvania in the first half of the 20th century. In 1897, Asbury moved to Philadelphia and became one of the few African-American members of the Philadelphia Bar, and worked for the Keystone Aid Society and the Eden Cemetery

Company. Asbury served as City Solicitor, and was later elected by the voters of the Thirtieth Ward to serve in the Pennsylvania State Legislature as an Assemblyman. In this position, Asbury introduced Pennsylvania's first civil rights bill-the so-called "Asbury Equal Rights Bill". Later in his career, Asbury was appointed Assistant District Attorney, which made Asbury one of the most powerful African Americans in the city; and

WHEREAS, Walter P. Jerrick was one of Christian Street's great "clubmen," a doctor who was known as much for his charm as for the medical service he provided to Philadelphia's African American community. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Jerrick's medical specialty was obstetrics and gynecology. He served as associated gynecologist at the Joseph C. Price Hospital, eventually opening a private office on Christian Street, which included a second-floor medical library, an operating room, and laboratory for blood tests. In 1938, Walter Jerrick was elected first president of the Pyramid Club, which became the "mecca" of the black elite throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Dr. Jerrick was one of the City of Brotherly Love's most respected physicians; and

WHEREAS, Other influential residents and business owners included Josiah Caldwell, Frederick McDonald Massiah, William Burton Crawford, Lydia White, Walker Killingsworth Jackson, Wilon Jackson, William H. Fuller, Samuel Bythewood, William "Bill" Allmond, Lydia White, Rev. William A. Harrod, Andrew F. Stevens Jr., Emma Royall, Thomas C. Imes, David McHarris, Agnes Berry Montier, Cornelius G. Wooding, Hazel Augustus, Marion Turner Stubbs Thomas, Rev. Wesley F. "Pop" Graham, William Augustus Hazel, John M. Brown, Adolph Hodge, Harold Norwood, M.D., George L. Bayton, M.D., and many more; and

WHEREAS, This historic designation by the Philadelphia Historical Commission makes it the first to be recognized primarily based on the historic contributions of Black Philadelphians. The designation will preserve older homes from the rapidly encroaching gentrification of the neighborhood, and will protect this Black history for the benefit of future generations; and

WHEREAS, Granting the historic designation was just one piece of a years-long effort to preserve the South Philadelphia community. Through community activism and legislative action initiated by Councilmember Kenyatta Johnson, the physical and cultural fabric of the neighborhood has been protected and should be celebrated; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, THAT THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, Also names Christian Street, between Broad and 20th Streets, "Black Doctors Row," to recognize its designation as Philadelphia's first African-American historic district.