

# MEET

**MR. ROBERT R. CHURCH, SR.**

**1839 - 1912**



PRESENTED BY

**MEMPHIS CHAPTER OF THE**

**SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE, INC**

**ROBERT REED CHURCH SR. (JUNE 18, 1839 – AUGUST 29, 1912) WAS AN AMERICAN ENTREPRENEUR, BUSINESSMAN AND LANDOWNER IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE, WHO BEGAN HIS RISE DURING THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR. HE WAS THE FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN "MILLIONAIRE" IN THE SOUTH.[1] CHURCH BUILT A REPUTATION FOR GREAT WEALTH AND INFLUENCE IN THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY. HE FOUNDED SOLVENT SAVINGS BANK, THE FIRST BLACK-OWNED BANK IN THE CITY, WHICH EXTENDED CREDIT TO BLACKS SO THEY COULD BUY HOMES AND DEVELOP BUSINESSES. AS A PHILANTHROPIST, CHURCH USED HIS WEALTH TO DEVELOP A PARK, PLAYGROUND, AUDITORIUM AND OTHER FACILITIES FOR THE BLACK COMMUNITY, WHO WERE EXCLUDED BY STATE-ENACTED RACIAL SEGREGATION FROM MOST SUCH AMENITIES IN THE CITY.**

**THE SON OF A BLACK MOTHER AND WHITE FATHER, CHURCH BEGAN WORKING AS A STEWARD, WITH HIS FATHER, A STEAMBOAT OWNER. YOUNG CHURCH WAS TAKEN ALONG WITH HIS FATHER ON HIS ROUTE BETWEEN MEMPHIS AND NEW ORLEANS. ROBERT CHURCH BOUGHT HIS FIRST PROPERTY IN MEMPHIS IN 1862. HE WAS WELL ESTABLISHED BY 1878-79, THE YEARS OF DEVASTATING YELLOW FEVER EPIDEMICS WHICH RESULTED IN DRAMATIC DEPOPULATION IN THE CITY. WITH PROPERTY DEVALUED, CHURCH BOUGHT NUMEROUS BUSINESSES AS WELL AS UNDEVELOPED LAND, WITH THE LONG-TERM VIEW OF THEIR APPRECIATION AS THE CITY RECOVERED. HE BUILT HIS GREAT WEALTH ON REAL ESTATE INVESTMENTS. HE PURCHASED THE FIRST \$1,000 MUNICIPAL BOND TO HELP THE CITY RECOVER FROM BANKRUPTCY AFTER IT WAS REDUCED TO A TAXING DISTRICT.[2]**

1. JESSIE CARNEY SMITH, ED., "ROBERT REED CHURCH SR.," IN NOTABLE BLACK AMERICAN MEN, 1 (DETROIT: GALE RESEARCH, 1999), 202.

2. JESSIE CARNEY SMITH, ED., "ROBERT REED CHURCH SR.," IN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF AFRICAN AMERICAN BUSINESS, VOLUME 1 (WESTPORT: GREENWOOD, 2006), 165.

## **CHURCH PARK (1899-- )**

**In 1899, the city of Memphis did not provide recreational facilities such as parks and playgrounds for its black citizens, nor were there any suitable places where black theatrical troupes could perform. It was to meet these needs that Robert R. Church bought a tract of land and built on it an auditorium with funds he had accumulated since the Civil War. The park was called "Church's Park and Auditorium" and was located on a site of over six acres on Beale Street near Fourth and Turley. The grounds were handsomely and generously landscaped, and the auditorium, equipped with the best and most modern accommodations of the time, could seat 2,200 people.**

**Church's Park and Auditorium was built by Church, owned by Church, and managed by Church. It was heralded as the only business venture of its kind in America and represented an unusual business feat for anyone at any time in history. An article in the September 15, 1906 Planter Journal noted that the auditorium cost \$50,000 and that it was well equipped and had one of the largest stages in the South, completely furnished with all modern equipment, including a fire-proof curtain. The Planter's Journal also pointed out that the park and auditorium were without a doubt the most beautiful of its kind in the entire country.**

**Beneath the stage in the auditorium was a large banquet hall and bar, and a soda fountain was located near the entrance to provide refreshments for visitors. The fire-proof drop curtain on the stage of the auditorium was a copy of an oil painting of the burning steamer, Bulletin No. 2, which hung in the parlor of the Church residence. In addition to the auditorium, there was a large bandstand where evening band concerts were performed for the public during the summer months. Bands of fraternal organizations and other groups played for picnics and various events held in the park. Also contained in the park was a playground with recreational facilities, including slides and swings, for the entertainment and pleasure of children.**

**Among the popular theatrical troupes that toured the country prior to 1920 and performed at the Church Park Auditorium were the Black Patti Troubadours, with John Rucker (known as "The Alabama Blossom"), Madame Sissieretta Jones (the famous "Black Patti"), the Smart Set with S. H. Dudley (advertised as "The Greatest Colored Show On Earth"), and the Fisk Jubilee Singers.**

**President Theodore Roosevelt was a guest at a reception given by the black citizens of Memphis and addressed an estimated audience of over 10,000 citizens there on November 19, 1902. Booker T. Washington and party, who were touring Tennessee, also were guests there for breakfast in the banquet hall of the auditorium on November 24, 1909. James Shilliday, Herbert J. Seligmann, James Weldon Johnson, and Walter White, all officials of the national office of the NAACP, visited the location.**

**The Lincoln Republican League, founded and organized by Robert R. Church, Jr., held its meetings in the auditorium, as did the first Memphis Branch of the NAACP. The Church of God In Christ, founded by Bishop C. H. Mason, held its convocations in the Church Park Auditorium before Mason Temple was built. William C. Handy, the world famous "blues" composer and musician, was employed to play for dances in Church's Park and Auditorium. The Cotton Makers' Jubilee, the black arm of the spring Cotton Carnival festival, was held on the site. World-acclaimed musicians Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Cab Calloway all played jazz there. Numerous school activities, including LeMoyné Owen College athletic games, dances, and other events were held there.**

**Much of Memphis' early black history took place on Beale Street in Church's Park and Auditorium. During the 1940s, a hostile City of Memphis administration changed the name of the park and auditorium to "Beale Avenue Auditorium." Some years later, structures on the site were demolished under the government's urban renewal program. The site was empty and barren until 1987, when the park was refurbished and landscaped into a tree-shaded grassy area.**

**In 1993, the park was listed in the National Register of Historic Places and was made a part of the Beale Street Historic District. In 1994, Roberta Church, the granddaughter of the founder, gave the park and city a large 22,000-pound white granite and bronze memorial monument, erected in memory of and dedicated to her father, Robert Church, Jr. The monument features a bronze bust of Robert R. Church, Sr., and is inscribed with historical information.**

## HISTORICAL USE

- 2,000-seat auditorium
  - Banquet Hall
- Commencement exercises for local high schools
  - Civic meetings
  - Guest lecturers
- Concerts/Dances
  - Office Space
  - Green Space

## POTENTIAL USE

- Senior Citizen Services
- African American Museum
  - Child Care
- Community Recital and Outlet
  - Event Center
  - Office Space
- Concerts/Civic Meetings
  - Green Space
- Basketball Courts
  - Tennis Courts
  - Walking Trails

# TIME LINE

## The Time Line for The Church Park and Auditorium -391 Beale St.

- In 1899, Robert R. Church Sr., the first black millionaire in The South, built Church's Park and Auditorium on six acres of land, exclusively for African Americans. He built the park when the city of Memphis refused to build parks and recreational outlets for African Americans. Special features of the auditorium and park included walks, flower beds, and free roaming peacocks punctuating the landscape. The auditorium could seat 2,000 in its theater and there was a large banquet hall beneath the stage.
- In 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt spoke at the auditorium to an overflow crowd of 10,000 that spilled out into the park.
- In 1909, Booker T. Washington appeared at the auditorium as guest speaker.
- In 1917, the first branch of the NAACP in Tennessee was organized in the church auditorium by Bob Church, Jr.
- In 1921, the Church family sold the park and the auditorium to the city of Memphis for \$85,000. The original auditorium was razed and a new one built. Mayor Walter Chandler renamed the Church Park and Auditorium to The Beale Street Park and Auditorium.
- In 1953, The City of Memphis burned the church home to the ground.
- 1956 The public outcry forced the city to restore the original name, Church Park and Auditorium.
- 1970's The wrecking ball demolished all buildings on site and left an open space. Mayor Henry Loeb made a public pledge to rebuild the auditorium park in 1970 during the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Memphis, Tennessee.

**KEY CONCEPT ENDORSEMENTS  
(PARTIAL LIST)**

**Memphis Chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference**

Dr. L. LaSimba M. Gray, Jr. - President

**Heritage Tours**

Elaine Turner, CEO

**Rainbow Push (Memphis)**

Rev. Dr. Joseph Kyles

**April Fourth Foundation**

Dr. Johnson Saulsberry, President

**Memphis Baptist Ministers Association**

Rev. Dr. James Glover

**First Baptist Beale Church**

Rev. Cory Helton, Pastor

**Neshoba Community Resource Center**

Dr. Darell Harrington, President, CEO

**Africa In April**

Dr. David L. Acey

**ASALH**

Yvonne B. Acey

**WLOK Radio Station**

Art Gilliam, Owner

**Past Chair of Shelby County Historical Commission**

Andrew Pouncey

**PROJECTED COST TO REBUILD**

**TWENTY MILLION DOLLARS.**

**CONSULTING ARCHITECTS:**

**JIMMY TUCKER**

**JOHN JACKSON**

**IMPACT OF THIS PROPOSED PROJECT:**

**IMMEDIATE INFUSION OF ECONOMIC GROWTH FOR  
THE EAST END OF BEALE STREET**

