

# HISTORIC PRESERVATION CERTIFICATION APPLICATION

## PART 1 – EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE

Property name Zion-Olivet Presbyterian Church

NPS Project Number \_\_\_\_\_

Property address 134 Cannon Street, Charleston, South Carolina

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### 5. Description of Physical Appearance

The Zion-Olivet Presbyterian Church is a single-story, mid-century modern building constructed in 1964 constructed by the prominent African-American contracting firm, the H.A. DeCosta Company. Constructed on a parcel on the north side of Cannon Street in the Cannonborough-Elliottborough neighborhood of downtown Charleston, the red brick building consists of two sections: the Sanctuary and the Sunday School Building. Both sections are connected and were constructed at the same time. From 1964 to 2015, the church served the needs of the Zion-Olivet congregation before the congregation moved to a new facility out of the city. While the neighborhood's character has changed somewhat, the church's exterior and principal interior spaces are intact. MOJO Arts festival will highlight this building (heritage site).

#### *Site*

The Zion-Olivet Presbyterian Church is located in the Cannonborough-Elliottborough neighborhood in the City of Charleston at the western entrance to the Martin Luther King Memorial District. The area has gone from being largely residential in character with light neighborhood commercial, to being a mix of residential, commercial/retail, and institutional. Some of the iconic "Charleston Single Houses" still survive in the neighborhood. Highway 17, also referred to as the Septima Clark Expressway, for the local Civil Rights leader, runs two north of the church and the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) two block to the south has constructed modern facilities in the area and is the major driver of neighborhood change.

The church building sits on a rectangular lot facing south to Cannon Street and features a grassy lawn at the front with a concrete driveway along the west elevation and a small parking area at the rear of the lot.

#### *Exterior*

The Zion-Olivet Presbyterian Church consists of two main masses: the Sanctuary sitting prominently at the south and east side of the lot with a high gable roof and the shorter Sunday School Wing which begins toward the rear of the Sanctuary and wraps around its west and north sides. The church's design exemplifies some of the key components of Mid-Century Modern design including its prominent, angular front façade.

The entire building is clad in running-bond brick. The south façade at the Sanctuary is angular with two narrow stained-glass windows. A brick wall with concrete lattice insets flanks either side of the façade. The main entrance to the Sanctuary is located at the southwest corner of the Sanctuary and accessed by a flagstone stair and a decorative, angular iron hand rail. A rectangular stained-glass window is located above the entrance, which features a metal overhang, sidelights, and double doors with windows in the shape of a cross. At the southeast corner, two windows, one with stained glass and the other with clear glass, provide further light into the foyer. Both the west and east elevations are dominated by four stained glass windows, each of which has a stacked course brick panel beneath the sill. At the south end of the west elevation, three crosses are built into the brick with raised stacked bricks. The north elevation is covered by Sunday School Wing.

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The Sunday School Wing is a lower one-story section of the building with a flat roof that adjoins the northwest corner of the Sanctuary and wraps around the north elevation. The south elevation of the Sunday School Wing features a bump out from the main wall with three raised brick crosses painted white and a white concrete lattice panel. The exterior entrance into the Sunday School Wing is recessed slightly beneath the flat roof of the building. Double doors with glass panels and transom panels lead directly into the corridor of the wing. The west elevation is punctuated with three sets of 12-pane metal windows. Exposed concrete block is now visible beneath each of these windows after deteriorated Masonite panels were removed. A metal door further north on the west façade leads into the fellowship hall portion of the Sunday School Wing. The rear portion of the west elevation after the north of the fellowship hall returns east into the building creating a loading and parking area. Another set of three raised brick crosses decorates the wall face in this area. A single door with a sidelight provides entry to the north classrooms behind a brick wall and beneath a flat overhang. The north elevation has two single doors that lead into the kitchen of the fellowship hall and four sets of metal-framed, tripartite windows along the classroom wing to the east. At the east elevation, the Sunday School Wing is built almost to the property line. A small courtyard sits between the rear of the Sanctuary and the classroom wing. There are single doors that provide access to the north corridor and classrooms.

The Sanctuary has a gabled roof, which is covered in standing-seam metal. The Sunday School Wing has a flat roof covered with a composite decking...

### *Interior*

The main entrance to the building is accessed by a set of doors at the southwest corner of the Sanctuary. The foyer beyond has a concrete floor and exposed brick walls. Two long, stained glass windows on the south wall, along with two square windows on the east wall, provide light into the space. A set of double wooden doors leads to the Sanctuary with a pierced metal decorative screen above the doors.

The Sanctuary consists of a large open space lit by stained-glass windows, of which there are five on the west wall and four on the east. Each window has an operable hopper panel at the bottom to provide ventilation to the room. The focal point of the space is the chancel, which is raised slightly from the rest of the sanctuary. Decorative white glazed brick screen walls disguise a storage area to the east, and secondary exit to the adjacent Sunday School Wing to the west.

The Sanctuary is a double height space features a wood plank ceiling with arched wooden joists. There are exposed oak floors throughout the space; once covered with carpet. The walls are exposed CMU block and were historically covered by thin sheets of faux wood paneling; this paneling was removed due to damage from a leaking roof.

The Sunday School Wing is adjacent to the sanctuary and is accessed from the Sanctuary by two doors; one behind the chancel screen walls and one from the main Sanctuary. A set of exterior doors at the south façade also provides access. The wing is comprised of a central corridor with two classrooms, restrooms and a fellowship hall located adjacent; and a secondary corridor that runs along

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the north side of the building. There are three additional classrooms off the secondary corridor. Most classrooms and spaces do not have doors, but the ones that are still in place appear original and composed of wood composite.

The fellowship hall along the west side of the building comprises the majority of the Sunday School wing. The fellowship hall currently contains exposed concrete floors, painted concrete block walls, and metal framed tripartite windows. Currently the ceiling is open with steel trusses exposed. However, paint lines on the walls show that acoustic tiles previously made up the ceiling. Located along the north wall is a kitchen and a large storage room, both of which have access to the rear parking lot. The south wall is bumped out and contains a small stage area.

In the corridor, there are men's and women's restroom facilities, and access to the east classrooms. These two classrooms are connected by a small corridor and a shared restroom. Both of these classrooms feature a decorative wall with a staggered pattern of protruding concrete blocks. All walls, which are exposed concrete block are painted. Like the fellowship hall, ceilings are exposed with Pratt steel trusses. Each classroom has exterior access to the east courtyard outside. with Poured concrete floors exist throughout this wing, as do painted CMU walls.

The main corridor connects to a secondary corridor that provides access to three classrooms along the north wall. All three of these classrooms have exposed, painted concrete block walls and exposed concrete floors. Like the other spaces in the Sunday School Wing, the ceilings are exposed with Pratt steel trusses. Banks of steel framed windows have six panes per sash.

### 6. Statement of Significance

The Zion-Olivet Presbyterian Church is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C due to its association with Herbert DeCosta, Jr., a prominent African-American contractor in Charleston, South Carolina, and as example of Mid-Century Modern architecture in the City of Charleston. The Zion-Olivet Presbyterian Church has a period of significance of 1964, when it was completed.

#### *Building History*

Zion-Olivet Presbyterian Church was created following the merger of the Zion Presbyterian Church and Olivet Presbyterian Church in 1959. Both of these congregations had a storied history in Charleston, with Zion Presbyterian Church being founded in May 1850. This church had sprung from the Second Presbyterian Church in Charleston, and was led by the brother of that church's pastor, Dr. John B. Adger. After serving in the mission field, he felt the call to minister to the black population of Charleston.<sup>1</sup> Nearly thirty years later, Olivet Presbyterian Church as formed and worshiped at 93 Beaufain until the congregation merged with Zion Presbyterian in 1959. Plans were made to construct a building to house the newly-merged congregation. The H.A. DeCosta Company

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<sup>1</sup> "May 26: Zion Presbyterian Church, Charleston, SC," *This Day in Presbyterian History*, accessed November 9, 2017. <http://www.thisday.pcahistory.org/2015/05/may-26-3/>.

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was chosen as the contractor for the project. Church construction began in 1963 and was completed in 1964, with the dedication occurring on April 26, 1964.<sup>2</sup>

After being used by the congregation for many years, the Zion-Olivet Presbyterian congregation vacated the building in 2015, thus ending its fifty-year use as a church. The building has been purchased by a community minded developer to hopes to see the building repaired and transformed into a community arts center. In 2017, the Zion-Olivet Church was designate a historic site by the City of Charleston Office of Cultural Affairs' MOJA Arts Festival, a celebration of African-American and Carribbean Arts.

### *The H.A. DeCosta Company*

The DeCosta family had a long history of working in the construction industry. Benjamin DeCosta, the grandfather of Herbert, operated a construction business from 1899 to his untimely death in 1911.<sup>3</sup> His son, Herbert A. DeCosta Sr. finished his education and served in World War I before returning to Charleston to revive the family business. In 1919, it became known as the H.A. DeCosta Company. He grew the firm into a company that completed a wide variety of work in Charleston and the surrounding area. While the firm constructed new buildings and repaired existing buildings in the area, a partnership with the famed Simons & Lapham architectural firm shifted much of the company's work towards historic restorations.<sup>4</sup>

Herbert DeCosta, Jr. would soon follow in his family's footsteps. After spending time around his father's jobsites as a child, DeCosta, Jr., enrolled in the Avery Institute. A prominent African-American school that promoted both academics and vocation, Avery was where DeCosta, Jr. gained the skills and knowledge that laid a foundation for his success. DeCosta, Jr. enrolled in Iowa State University (then Iowa State College) upon graduating from Avery in 1940. He majored in architectural engineering, which led him to employment with the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, now known as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). After working with NACA, DeCosta, Jr. returned to Charleston in 1947 to join his father's business.<sup>5</sup>

Following his father's death in 1960, Herbert DeCosta, Jr. became the president of the H.A. DeCosta Company. Like his father, he continued to divide the company's efforts between rehabilitation and new construction; DeCosta spent a great deal of time on rehabilitation projects and in 1961, he hired William Clement to help with new construction. According to various articles and advertisements in the *News and Courier*, the firm completed a number of commissions in Charleston either as designer or contractor, or sometimes both. During the 1960s and 1970s, the

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<sup>2</sup> Lois Averetta Simms (compiler and editor), *A History of Zion, Olivet, and Zion-Olivet Churches, 1850-1985*, Charleston, South Carolina (unpublished, 1987), 41.

<sup>3</sup> "Business Makers: Herbert A. DeCosta, Jr.," *History Makers*, accessed November 8, 2017. <http://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/herbert-decosta-jr>

<sup>4</sup> Alissa Clare Keller, "Turning Shambles into Showcases: Herbert A. DeCosta, Jr.'s Role in the Ansonborough Rehabilitation Project in Charleston, South Carolina," (master's thesis, Clemson University/College of Charleston, 2011), 13-14.

<sup>5</sup> "Business Makers: Herbert A. DeCosta."

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firm completed: Mount Pleasant Elementary School (1962), the Brooks Motel (1963), Water Works Building Annex (1963), Zion Olivet Presbyterian (1964), Brooks Restaurant (1967), Emanuel-Morris Brown-Ebenezer Apartments (1970), and Line Street Apartments (1971). Many of these buildings reflect the Mid-Century Modern movement in Charleston, but buildings associated with DeCosta often vary in their design since he worked primarily as contractor and not always as a designer. He worked with many of Charleston's most prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century architects including Albert Simons of Simons and Lapham and Augustus Constantine. Simons often worked in more traditional modes while Constantine is known for imbuing the Charleston landscape with Art Moderne architecture.

The H.A. DeCosta Company also worked throughout the state of South Carolina, with projects in Anderson, Columbia, and Newberry. DeCosta also became a real estate developer under the HADCO Realty Company and the Midway Company.<sup>6</sup> In a February 21, 1973 article in the *News and Courier*, he was listed as a developer and builder who used federal subsidies to construct low income housing.

DeCosta's interest in preservation eventually led to the company's involvement with the Ansonborough Rehabilitation Project, spearheaded by the Historic Charleston Foundation (HCF). The project sought to save historic buildings in the Ansonborough neighborhood from destruction due to neglect and development pressures. The H.A. DeCosta Company, already well established as a reputable construction firm, became the contractor of choice for the HCF project. He completed thirty-six dwellings for the project over its ten-year span.<sup>7</sup>

The H.A. DeCosta Company's involvement in the Ansonborough Rehabilitation Project led to a steady stream of jobs from the Preservation Society of Charleston, the College of Charleston, and the City of Charleston.<sup>8</sup> The firm was responsible for the renovation of several private residences as well. With the company's continued work in restoration, its reputation grew, leading to a contract to restore the Herndon Mansion in Atlanta, Georgia. The mansion was the largest African-American owned residence in the city when it was constructed.<sup>9</sup>

The H.A. DeCosta Company's success eventually led to a listing in the 1979 edition of Black Enterprise magazine's top 100 grossing black businesses in the nation.<sup>10</sup> Even earlier, DeCosta's business acumen was recognized by the Congressional Black Caucus, who invited DeCosta to participate in the National Black Enterprise Conference, a conference designed to set measurable goals for African-American enterprise in the nation.<sup>11</sup> Lauded in the black community, DeCosta was respected in the white community, even in the era of turmoil as civil rights were hotly contested. DeCosta was often elected to serve on the boards of pivotal community organizations,

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<sup>6</sup> "An Inventory of the H.A. DeCosta, Jr Papers," Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>7</sup> Keller, 121.

<sup>8</sup> Keller, 44-45.

<sup>9</sup> "An Inventory of the H.A. DeCosta, Jr Papers."

<sup>10</sup> Robert Small, "Local Black Firms Among Top 100 List," *Charleston News and Courier* (Charleston, SC), June 24, 1979.

<sup>11</sup> "Honorees," South Carolina African American Commission, February 1993.

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including the Business and Professional Men's Association, the YWCA, the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce, and the Charleston County Democratic Convention. He also served as junior warden and in the vestry for St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Charleston.<sup>12</sup>

Herbert A. DeCosta retired from practice in 1990, selling the H.A. DeCosta Company to two associates. He continued to serve as a restoration consultant and in various community capacities including the City of Charleston Board of Architectural Review. DeCosta was recognized with the South Carolina Governor's Award for Historic Preservation in 1998 and the Frances R. Edmund's Award for Historic Preservation from the Historic Charleston Foundation in 2002.<sup>13</sup> He died in 2008 and was memorialized at St. Mark's Episcopal with a concert by the Charleston Symphony Orchestra and eulogies by several prominent Charleston community leaders.

### *Mid-Century Modern Architecture in Charleston*

Zion-Olivet Presbyterian Church is one of several examples of Mid-Century Modern public architecture in the City of Charleston. Built on the Charleston peninsula, the church is surrounded by 19<sup>th</sup> century Charleston Single Houses, a style that dominates residential architecture in the city. The move to Mid-Century Modern architecture was slow in coming, primarily due to the City's many mechanisms to protect historic properties and redevelop in a manner that was architecturally sensitive to extant buildings.<sup>14</sup> Many architects, such as Albert Simons, chose to design buildings that reflected traditional architectural styles. But some architects, such as Augustus Constantine and the firm of Halsey and Cummings, were determined to bring the newer styles to Charleston.

Albert Simons was heavily entrenched in the early preservation movement in Charleston. His great love for traditional architecture and his desire to protect Charleston from incompatible architectural design translated into a portfolio of buildings that captured the essence of historic Charleston.<sup>15</sup> His firm of Simons and Lapham was responsible for several prominent Charleston buildings being built in the classic tradition. These buildings included Memminger Auditorium (1939), which was constructed in the style of Robert Mills; the College of Charleston Gymnasium (1938-1939) which was echoed Classical Revival design; and Robert Mills Manor (1939-1940), which was one of the first public housing complexes in the nation, and took its design cues from Colonial period.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast, Augustus Constantine ushered in the beginnings of the Mid-Century Modern period with his Art Moderne buildings. Many of his works appear along King Street and are in flagrant contrast to the two- and three-story, late 19<sup>th</sup> century commercial buildings that are norm. The American

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Behre, "DeCosta was early force in preservation," *Post and Courier*, December 28, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Ryan Thomas Pierce, "404 King Street: The Charleston County Library and Modern Architecture in Charleston", Master's Thesis, Clemson University/College of Charleston, 2011, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Ralph Muldrow, "Simons and Lapham," *The South Carolina Encyclopedia*. Accessed November 8, 2017. <http://www.scencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/simons-lapham/>

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan H. Poston, "The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City's Architecture," (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 345-490.

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Theatre (1942;1947) and the Chase Furniture Building (1946) are similarly styled with monumental facades of stucco and streamlined parapets along the roof.<sup>17</sup>

By the 1960s, architects were getting bolder with their designs. The Charleston County Library (1960), designed by Halsey & Cummings, was the typical steel framed box but incorporated unique pink marble panels on the exterior. Its proposed construction touched off one of the most heated battles in Charleston. Even though the area was not under the purview of the Board of Architectural Review, the Preservation Society of Charleston came out against the proposed plan, which also called for the demolition of the west wing of the Old Citadel on site. A straw poll conducted by the *Post and Courier* found that 85% of Charleston residents were against the proposed building's modern design.<sup>18</sup> While the building did get constructed, perhaps it was the echoes of past dislike that led to its demolition in 2015. The Mendel Rivers Federal Building (1963-1965), which was designed by Lyles, Bissett, Carlisle, and Wolfe, is one of the more prominent Mid-Century Modern buildings in Downtown Charleston. Commissioned while President John F. Kennedy was still in office, the building is notable not only for its height, but also for its sleek design featuring brick and marble.<sup>19</sup> The Downtowner Motor Inn (1963), now College Lodge Residence Hall, is another example of mid-century modern architecture in Charleston. With exterior corridors and brightly colored panels along one façade, the Downtowner opened to great fanfare in the early 1960s and featured many modern amenities including a heated swimming pool and on-site restaurant.<sup>20</sup>

While Mid-Century Modern architecture thrived in the suburbs of Charleston, there are few examples still remaining on the Charleston peninsula. Zion-Olivet Church is one such example that should be considered an important entry to the architectural historical record in Charleston.

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<sup>17</sup> Poston, 388.

<sup>18</sup> David Payne, "Appropriate Architecture for Charleston, SC," *Traditional Building Magazine*, July 17, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> "The Dewberry, Charleston, SC," Dewberry Capital, accessed November 13, 2017,  
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<sup>20</sup> Robert Behre, "College Lodge becoming (almost) historic," *Post and Courier*, January 9, 2011.

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