

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 1, 2021

Shawn Bengel, Deputy Director, Operations  
National Park Service  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Deputy Director Bengel:

We are writing to request a reconnaissance survey of Roberts Temple Church of God In Christ, located at 4021 South State Street, in the Bronzeville area of Chicago, Illinois. Roberts Temple is the site of the memorial service for fourteen year-old Emmett Till, who was abducted, tortured, and lynched in Mississippi in 1955. Till's memorial service, which was attended by thousands of mourners, was a catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement.

We believe Roberts Temple, which is in dire need of structural repair and rehabilitation, should be designated as a new unit of the National Park System. The Chicago City Council has designated Roberts Temple as a Chicago Landmark, affording the site some limited protection, but the condition of the building, juxtaposed with its prominence in American Civil Rights history, warrants federal protection and interpretation.

Roberts Temple achieved national and international recognition as a result of hosting Emmett Till's memorial service on September 3, 1955. Emmett's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, made the courageous decision to insist on an open-casket wake for the mutilated body of her son, in order to "let the world see what I've seen." According to papers at the time, the church filled to its capacity of 1,700 people, with nearly 10,000 people standing outside to listen to the memorial service over loudspeakers. Due to the overwhelming number of people seeking to view Emmett's body, Mamie decided to delay the burial to allow more time for mourners to pay their respects. It has been estimated that more than 100,000 people filed past Emmett's casket in Roberts Temple in the three days before his burial.

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks designated this site a Chicago Landmark in 2006, writing in its official report that Roberts Temple "is the surviving Chicago building that best exemplifies the national importance of Emmett Till and the tragic event of his death to the history of the civil rights movement in the United States."

In addition to hosting Emmett Till's memorial service, Roberts Temple served as a central place of worship and political organizing for many African Americans during the Great Migration of the early 20th Century. Today, the building remains in use by the Church of God In Christ denomination, and the Pastor is Elder Cleven Wardlow.

Roberts Temple is an ideal candidate for inclusion in the National Park System: a nationally significant cultural resource that represents a crucial part of American history, and a site that can serve as a beacon for public awareness and education about the way the Civil Rights Movement reshaped the fabric of our nation.

Roberts Temple Church of God In Christ presents the National Park Service with a rare opportunity to significantly enhance the representation of the Civil Rights Movement in our National Park System. I urge you to give the most serious consideration to this reconnaissance survey request. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



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Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator



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Tammy Duckworth  
United States Senator