HISTORY of the MOORLAND YMCA
Dallas, Texas

The historic Moorland YMCA building is located at 2700 Flora Street, in what was historically known as “North Dallas” and is now the thriving Arts District at the edge of Dallas’s central business district. The building has served Dallas’s African-American community from its initial construction in 1930 as the city’s only YMCA for this community to its present use as the permanent home of the internationally known Dallas Black Dance Theatre.

History of the YMCA in Dallas

The first YMCA in Dallas was begun in 1885 by 24 young men who met in a church. This initial program was exclusively for young white men, and included religious services, Indian club classes, and an athletic program using dumbbells; the first facility was in rented second floor space at 317 Elm Street1.

In 1902, a group of young African American men formed a similar organization for African Americans to meet; this organization merged with the Dallas YMCA as a branch organization in the aftermath of World War I. At that time, the black YMCA was maintained as a branch of the Dallas Metropolitan YMCA, with an executive secretary presiding over the branch2.

The Founding and Construction of Moorland YMCA

Dallas in the 1920s was a tumultuous period for the city’s African-American citizens, and North Dallas (which extended from Flora Street) was the height of black life and culture at the time, providing for “the educational, social, economic, political, medical, spiritual, and cultural needs of Black Dallasites… It was the birthplace of progressive ideas, the nucleus of Black leadership, and a place that cultivated the hopes

and dreams of Dallas’s African American population. The need for a larger YMCA facility to meet the educational, physical and cultural needs of Dallas’ growing African American population was recognized.

In 1928, new facilities for three branch YMCAs in Dallas were planned. These included facilities that would eventually be located at 605 North Ervay Street (Downtown YMCA, for whites), 101 East 10th Street (Oak Cliff YMCA, also for whites), and the Moorland YMCA at 2700 Flora Street. Dallas’s African American citizens were charged with raising $50,000 in contributions toward the construction of their new YMCA. Despite the recent economic depression, they raised not only the required amount, but an additional $25,000. The chief campaigners for the erection of Moorland YMCA were J. L. Patton, Sr., Dr. L. G. Pinkston, David B. Garner, and M. B. Anderson. The Julius Rosenwald Fund donated $25,000 to the campaign for the construction of the Moorland YMCA. This fund was created in 1917 by Julius Rosenwald, the president of Sears Roebuck & Company, and donated over $4 million to the construction of 5,000 public educational facilities for African Americans. Schools that were built from the fund became known as “Rosenwald Schools” and were mainly located in the American South. This fund also contributed to the construction of teacher housing and YMCAs. Dallas was the 24th city to receive money from the organization for a black YMCA.

The location chosen for the Moorland YMCA was on three lots in North Dallas that had been occupied by houses from at least 1899. The lots were purchased for $22,875, and had, like many houses in the neighborhood, been used for rent housing. In contrast to the nearby State Thomas neighborhood, where large 19th century houses were prominent, the immediate neighborhood was filled with small frame houses. At the time Moorland YMCA was built, the neighborhood was experiencing an increase in density, and even State Thomas was affected. This formerly white neighborhood was transitioning into a predominately African American area, with some of the larger homes being purchased by affluent black doctors, educators, and businessmen, and others being converted to multiple family housing.

In addition to residences, the rest of North Dallas was supported mostly by African Americans. Nearby institutions included Booker T. Washington High School, Colored School #2, St. Paul United Methodist Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and St. John Baptist Church.

Moorland YMCA was named for Dr. Reverend Jesse Edward Moorland, the second secretary of the Colored Men’s Department of the YMCA in Washington, D.C., and an African American himself. Under his tenure, the department opened 107 student associations on predominately African American campuses, 39 city associations in urban areas, 14 industrial associations, and two railroad associations.

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3 Schulte-Scott and Prior, 3.
9 Untitled manuscript, James.
10 Ibid.
11 Sanborn Fire Insurance Company, 1899, page 45; 1905, page 38; 1921, page 219; 1921 (1951), page 5A.
The cornerstone for Moorland YMCA was laid on April 6, 1930 by members of the black grand lodge of the Knights of Pythias of Texas, including Grand Chancellor L. B. Kinchion. A ceremony to place the stone was held at St. Paul United Methodist Church and included such noted figures as A. S. Wells; E. R. Brown, President of the Dallas YMCA; and W. A. Scott. The ceremony was presided over by Dr. Channing H. Tobias, winner of the 1928 Hammond Award for building service to African-Americans and the Secretary of Negro Work of the National Council of the YMCA. In his address, Dr. Tobias stated that “Your beginning is laudable and extraordinary. Now carry on in the same thorough manner.”

Once the ceremony at St. Paul’s was concluded, “a procession was formed and the hundreds of representatives of both races, accompanied by music of a band and a chorus of negro singers, went to the place where the new building is under construction.”

The YMCA, including site, building, and furnishings, cost approximately $175,000. The architects for the new facility were Ralph Bryan and Walter Sharp of Dallas. The building was three stories in height with a basement, and clad of red brick with cast stone ornamentation. Two arched entries lead from the front steps into the building; these entries arches are constructed of cast stone with “Men” and “Boys” inscribed over each to indicate where each group is to enter. Women were to enter through a side door when attending special events or swimming classes.

The building contained “social, physical and spiritual outlets such as are not now available.

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15 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
19 Untitled manuscript, James.
20 Ibid.
to the young negro in Dallas. Equipped with a gymnasium, club rooms, swimming pool and modern dormitory the building will be unique and is designed as a monument to Christian manhood and good citizenship.\(^{21}\) The building also provided 37 sleeping rooms with 52 beds\(^{22}\) for use by visitors to Dallas; many prominent African Americans stayed at this facility when traveling as hotel facilities for African Americans were limited. When constructed in 1930, the Moorland YMCA was the only YMCA for African Americans in the southwest\(^{23}\).

**The Moorland YMCA, 1930 – 1947**

Each year, Moorland YMCA undertook extensive membership drives, as demonstrated in contemporary notices in the *Dallas Express*, the city’s primary African American newspaper\(^{24}\). By 1935, Moorland YMCA had 65 members. Two years later, membership had increased to 948\(^{25}\). Near Moorland YMCA were B. F. Darrell School, Griggs Park, and Zion Hill Baptist Church\(^{26}\). The location of the YMCA proved ideal, as residents could easily take advantage of its programs to a point where it became integral to the lives of African Americans in the city.

As membership increased, Moorland YMCA became a beacon for the North Dallas community. In a city that offered few places outside of church for African Americans to congregate, the building became the location where professionals could meet, clubs and organizations could come together, and young men could play and engage in extracurricular activities. The building served as the gymnasium for black schools that lacked athletic facilities, and schools even held their proms there\(^{27}\).

Moorland YMCA served as the Dallas post for the Negro American Legion, which was chartered in 1943\(^{28}\). That year, the membership stood at 931\(^{29}\). Programs offered at the time included a health program taught by Dr. J. W. Anderson, honorary chairman of the Moorland YMCA; and a character building program. With World War II ongoing, up to 700 soldiers per month participated in the recreational program, and the building served as weekend housing for many, as they weren’t welcome in segregated hotels and most boarding houses. The housing program was led by A. S. Jackson\(^{30}\). The programs offered at the YMCA had already expanded from its initial services, and more were planned. Extracurricular activities such as grade school (Gra-Y) and high school (Hi-Y) clubs, neighborhood groups, family recreation, expanded athletic programs, and a park and picnic ground were needed to serve the thriving community\(^{31}\). According to YMCA worker J. L. Patton, it stood as the “unifying agency that teaches group work, philanthropy, offers recreation and inspires young men. It gives food, clothing and shelter to those needing it most”\(^{32}\). The Dallas WPA guide listed Moorland YMCA as one of only three establishments offering accommodations for African Americans\(^{33}\).

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22 Ibid.
26 James.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Dallas Public Library: 1992, 16.
The Dallas Council of Human Relations held its meetings at Moorland YMCA. Organized in early 1944, the council was formed by a group of citizens “wishing to study and promote a better understanding of the racial problems in this community.” The chairman was Reverend Robert Raible, who stated upon his appointment, “that knowledge should supplant prejudice and misinformation in all matters involving racial relations is the firm conviction of all council members. We hope to be able to make a contribution in the way of furthering friendly cooperation and mutual understanding among the races which comprise our citizenry.” Other members of the Dallas Council of Human Relations were Gaynell Hawkins and John Rice, vice-chairmen; W. Barton Beaty, secretary-treasurer; and Dr. E. Holmer Browne, executive committee.

Moorland YMCA 1948 – 1950s

In 1947, the need for expanding Moorland YMCA as well as other YMCA facilities within the city was recognized, as more than 600,000 people used the program that year. A campaign to raise $1,062,796 for the city-wide expansions began as YMCA memberships in the city rose from 4,111 in 1935 to 19,000. For African Americans, this meant the construction of a $25,000 camp near Lancaster and a $75,000, 3-story addition to Moorland for auditorium, cafeteria, club room, and dormitory space; the extent of this addition is not known. Once again, Moorland YMCA exceeded its campaign goal. They raised $65,949 - $15,949 above their goal. Included in the donations was $10,000 from Maceo Johnson on behalf of the Negro Wednesday Luncheon Club. In total, the amount raised represented “the largest amount ever raised by Negro citizens from Negroes in any campaign in North America.”

Moorland YMCA was an important place for the 1948 presidential election, having served as a polling place and speakers’ venue. Early voters in the 1948 Democratic Primary were disappointed to learn that after they cast their votes, it was revealed that seals on seven of the voting machines at Moorland YMCA had been broken, leaving their votes void. Following the primary, Progressive Party nominee Henry Wallace attended a luncheon at the YMCA, where he discussed his platform. Refusing to appear before segregated audiences or patronize segregated restaurants and hotels, the Moorland YMCA welcomed him. Speaking against “Jim Crowism” that pervaded Dallas and the rest of the south, Wallace advocated an end to segregation, full voting rights for blacks, and universal health insurance.

38 Ibid.
sponsored by the government. Wallace came in distant from Harry S. Truman in the 1948 election, gaining only 2.4 percent of the popular vote.\textsuperscript{41}

The 1950s was another period of growth for Moorland YMCA. In 1951, a new Board of Management was installed at Moorland YMCA. Dr. L. G. Pinkston began his 11\textsuperscript{th} term as chairman, J. L. Patton was named vice-chairman, and H. I. Holland was elected secretary. Board members that year included A. A. Braswell, W. J. Durham, C. S. McMillan, and Nathan Williams. T. D. Marshall was named as an honorary board member.\textsuperscript{42} By 1956, Moorland YMCA had 2,716 members.\textsuperscript{43} Board members for 1956-1959 were M. A. Prestwood, Harold Harden, Jack Clark, Monard Gregg, Reverend C. A. W. Clark, Dock Wade, Dr. C. F. Toles, Howard Daniels, and C. S. McMillan. The advisory committee for that year consisted of Reverend E. C. Estell, Dr. L. G. Pinkston, S. H. Davis, G. L. Allen, A. Maceo Smith, and H. I. Holland.\textsuperscript{44}

**Moorland YMCA and Civil Rights in Dallas: 1950s – 1970**

Throughout its history at 2700 Flora Street, Moorland YMCA served as a meeting place for various groups. It was “neutral ground” for different church groups to meet with one another. It also was the meeting place for civil rights advocacy groups.\textsuperscript{45} Much of the civil rights movement in Dallas was based at Moorland YMCA. In the 1950s, the NAACP held its public meetings at the YMCA, and many travelers who would come to the area throughout this time and into the 1960s stayed at Moorland when no other facilities would shelter them.\textsuperscript{46}

In 1963, in the heat of the Civil Rights Movement, the Dallas Committee for Full Citizenship was formed. Calling for full desegregation of Dallas schools and “dedicated to working for the complete desegregation of the greater Dallas community through nonviolent methods,” the 50-member group was one of several that met at Moorland YMCA.\textsuperscript{47} The Committee for Full Citizenship, led by Dr. George Deen, staff psychiatrist at Timberlawn hospital, went on to participate in statewide demonstrations for integration.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{41} Hatfield.
\textsuperscript{42} “Moorland Y Installs Board of Management,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 13, 1951, section 1, page 23.
\textsuperscript{43} “Moorland YMCA Exceeds Goal,” *Dallas Morning News*, February 16, 1956, part 1, page 11.
\textsuperscript{44} “8 to Take Board Jobs for Moorland YMCA,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 13, 1951, section 1, page 3.
\textsuperscript{45} “YMCA Was Hub for Blacks,” Dallas Public Library, Vertical File, YMCA-Moorland Branch.
\textsuperscript{46} ibid.
Moorland YMCA relocates to Oak Cliff - 1970

By 1967, it was recognized that additional space for Moorland YMCA’s many programs was needed to meet demand. Once again, the community responded to a call for donations to construct new facilities. This time, the challenge was given by Dallas Mayor Erik Jonsson, who pledged $8.00 for every dollar raised by the community. Approximately $50,000.00 was raised, and Jonsson pledged his support.49 Other leaders in the fundraising campaign included A. Maceo Smith, C. J. Clark, Dr. E. J. Mason, Dr. Judge Page, and Professor Charles Asberry. Samuel Hudson, Jr. acted as vice-chairman of the fundraising campaign.50 With all of the contributions, the amount raised once again proved to be the largest amount ever raised by African Americans for a cause in Dallas.51

The building committee was reported at the time to have struggled with the relocation of the YMCA, but after deliberating the benefits of moving or remodeling, relocation was chosen.52 The choice to relocate the building to Oak Cliff was based on studies undertaken in 1967 that showed that the African American population had shifted away from the North Dallas area and into Oak Cliff, and also on what was termed “transportation innovations.”53 This probably referred to the introduction of Central Expressway, which had in 1949 cut across North Dallas near Moorland YMCA and isolated the area from the rest of downtown.54 Later, Woodall Rogers Freeway was constructed, further changing the landscape of the neighborhood.

The year 1969 brought the appointment of George Brown, teacher and Assistant Principal at Pearl C. Anderson Junior High School, to the executive director position of Moorland YMCA. Brown was a graduate of Bishop College, and had served previously as the coordinator for the War on Poverty under Frank Clarke55. That year, Moorland YMCA was able to provide basketball, volleyball, indoor soccer, swimming, clubs, crafts, drama, harmonica, tumbling, bingo, dancing, aerial tennis, and tutoring during the week. On the weekends, members could participate in swimming, beauty culture, leather crafts, and gym activities. Wrestling, weight training, and gourmet cooking were also offered.56

After 40 years of service, Moorland YMCA closed in 1970.57 Ground was broken at the new Moorland YMCA at 907 Ledbetter on January 22, 1972.58 The building opened on July 1, 1973, and cost approximately $1.5 million.59,60 The new facility stands on a 10 ½ acre site, and includes a gymnasium, sauna, game and conference rooms, exercise rooms, computer center, tennis courts, swimming pool, baseball and football fields, a playground, and a picnic area.61 Moorland YMCA continues to serve its community as it had at its original location at 2700 Flora Street. In 1997 nearly 3,000 children used its child care facilities, and more than 1,600 teenagers participated in its many programs.62

50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Govenar, 189.
Moorland YMCA’s Important Role in Dallas
Moorland YMCA served as the Dallas African American community’s social, civic, and political center. During segregation it provided a place for black men to stay while in Dallas, and during the Civil Rights movement, “it was the ‘town hall’ for leaders of the black community”63. Many of the most prominent African Americans in the city were supporters of the organization. These included board members Dr. Joseph J. Rhoads who was the first African American president of Bishop College, Judge George L. Allen, prominent physician and businessman Dr. L. G. Pinkston, civil rights activist A. Maceo Smith, historian J. Leslie Patton, and Dr. J. W. Anderson64,65. In 1967, Dallas Morning News reporter Julia Scott Reed summarized its impact, stating that Moorland YMCA had “served as a focal point in the shaping of the destiny of a total community…Between these walls momentous decisions have been made. Historical meetings have been had which have resulted in better understanding between the races. Little children have been helped to know a better life through its Christian programs, camps and recreation facilities. It has, through the years, provided the space for all citizen groups, meeting in forums, seminars, bi-racial meetings, and has even served as hotel accommodations for railroad men. Through these doors, great personalities have passed.”66

Indeed, great people had passed through the doors of Moorland YMCA. Welterweight champion Curtis Cokes began boxing there. Professional football player Jimmy (“Iron Claw”) Hill got his start at Moorland YMCA; as did Chicago Cubs shortstop Ernie Banks, who was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 197767. In 1959, Banks returned to Moorland, his own childhood YMCA, to talk to the boys about “the value of participating in sports, getting a good education and learning to cooperate with fellow players.” Banks recalled his days at the YMCA, where he played and also worked as a boy68.

When segregation prevented African Americans from staying in local hotels, Muhammad Ali, Justice Thurgood Marshall, and other national figures stayed at Moorland YMCA69.

Moorland YMCA – subsequent owners and the Dallas Black Dance Theatre
A year after it closed, Mrs. Pearl Forester bought Moorland YMCA, and there she consolidated Forester Telephone Answering Service, which had been in business since 1921. The company remained until Forester’s retirement in 1985 at age 86. At that point, the building’s tenant was Proxy Answering Service, owned by Gail Thoma Patterson70. Dallas Black Dance Theatre purchased the historic former Moorland YMCA from Gene Forester, who with his sisters held the property through a trust.71 Dallas Black Dance Theatre originally attempted to purchase the building in 1999; they were turned down by

63 Foster.
67 Ibid.
70 Foster.
“every major financier in Dallas” until it successfully financed the project in 2002 through major gifts, grants, and a city of Dallas bond program.  

Dallas Black Dance Theatre raised approximately $10.3 million to purchase and renovate the building and moved into Moorland YMCA in December 2007. The 32,000-square-foot building provides the company with a permanent facility with three rehearsal studios, training classrooms, administrative offices, and space for community events and meetings. The largest rehearsal studio is located in the former gymnasium. With additional space provided by several small additions at the sides and rear of the building, Dallas Black Dance Theatre expects to increase student capacity from 300 to 1,000 students per week.

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74 Jolly.
76 Jolly.
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