

## **Abyssinian Baptist Church and Community House**

Individual Landmark

136-142 West 138th Street

Designation Date: July 13, 1993



*Abyssinian Baptist Church and Community House. Photo: Solana Lynn Mahabeer*

The Abyssinian Baptist Church, built in 1922-1923, is the home of one of New York City's oldest church organizations and the second oldest within the family of African American churches in Manhattan. Organized in 1808 by a small group of black worshippers who withdrew from the predominantly white First Baptist Church on Gold Street, the Abyssinian Baptist Church was incorporated in the following year, adopting the ancient name for Ethiopia.

The northward movement of the Abyssinian congregation, which occupied several successive locations from its first home in a wooden church on Worth Street to its imposing stone edifice in Harlem, followed the residential patterns of New York's black population. Under the leadership of the Reverend William Spellman during the second half of the 19th century, the church grew rapidly into one of the wealthiest of the "African" congregations. In the 20th century, the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell Sr. 's "social gospel," blending social activism with spiritual leadership, set the tone for Abyssinian's ongoing mission to serve its community.

Commissioned during Powell's tenure, the striking church building and the adjoining community house were the work of Charles W. Bolton & Son, a productive Philadelphia firm which specialized in churches. The neo-Gothic design of the church reflects the tradition of Protestant church architecture of the 1920s. Powell's son and successor, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., who also served 11 terms as a U.S. Congressman, put Abyssinian at the forefront of the

national crusade for social reform and civil rights. During Powell Jr.'s pastorate, the church membership grew to over 10,000, placing it among the largest Protestant churches in the world. Today, the church continues its commitment to religious and social service, and economic development in Harlem.

[Read the full NYC LPC designation report here.](#)