

Mother African Union Church
Statement to Cool Spring/Tilton Neighborhood Association (CSTNA)
March 12, 2013

Hello, My name is Rev. Dr. Lawrence Michael Livingston, and I am the senior pastor of the Mother African Union Church at 9th and Franklin Streets. Thank you for inviting us to your meeting. We are here to assure you that plans and concerns for our building conform with being good neighbors, and also we are concerned about the historic nature of our church and the community.

Our congregation was founded 200 years ago by Peter Spencer, and we were the first independently incorporated African American Congregation in the entire United States. We represent 200 years of a history that has national significance; we are the beginning of what is conceivably called *the Black Church* in the United States. Our congregation has survived 200 years, including the city's eminent domain claim to our original building and land in the 800 block of French Street to build what is now the municipal center.

In recent years there has been a thrust to reclaim, recover, and restore the history of this great nation through various forms of historic preservation--of sites, of cities, and of neighborhoods. Historic preservation, which is a worthy undertaking, is about more than bricks and mortar, but the humanity these things represent in communities, in individuals, in neighborhoods, and in organizations. Incidentally, many African American sites in our city and across the nation have been lost to eminent domain, other municipal projects, or simply suffered under wear and tear before the nation's current love affair with building preservation. Even though the historic sites are long gone the people they represented remain.

The building we now use in freedom of religion to worship our God and articulate the mission God calls us to perform represents our congregation of the last 200 years, not just the congregation present today. We moved into our building in 1969, the 156th year, yet it represents the entire 200 years of our history, not only the last 44. We are clear that we are an historic church, which represents history and 200 years of freedom of religion in the age when many churches are modernizing their look and appearance.

We, like our founder Peter Spencer, want nothing more than to be able to worship our God in the manner we see fit without infringing upon the rights or quality of life of our neighbors around us. We are quite concerned with some of the insidious banter that has found its way onto the blogosphere concerning our desire to demolish a building owned by our congregation. We have tried to be good neighbors and we do not understand the glee with which you have approached the obstacles we have faced in our current building project. Our need to raze the building is twofold. Our most immediate need to demolish the building is for safety because the building is in extreme disrepair and it's a haven for rodents and animals, including some not too small or too friendly raccoons. Also, we want to advance the freedom of religion to which we have come to

worship God and articulate the ministry to which we feel we are called. We are continually challenged by limited space in our current physical plant, which gets smaller every day due to the many activities that operate out of our building.

Our congregation does not have to be reminded of the value of historic preservation of neighborhoods, cities, sites and more importantly the people they represent. Our prayer is that we have been good neighbors. We realize because we are so active, from time-to-time, parking is an issue but we are sensitive to your need to park near and in front of your homes. We certainly discourage parking in front of driveways, blocking entrances, etc. We have supplemented our parking needs by encouraging our church members to park at the Cool Spring Reservoir, next to Tilton Park, and on 9th Street next to the University Whist Club. Sometimes when there is a funeral a serendipitous double parking occurs without our organization or encouragement.

Now concerning the house at 812A (its address alone suggests that it was not original but more like a postscript after the neighborhood was already developed—but I digress). First of all let me rush to say, our plans for the space are still in development, and when we come to some resolution about those plans we are more than happy to comply and conform to the historic nature of the neighborhood and share those with you. Again, such conformity complies with the historic representation we believe we are called by God to represent as a congregation. Having said that, we have resolved to demolish the building at 812A, and that is as far as we have gone in the discussion. Our plans are to either leave it as open space, with a yard and grass for our many children's programs, or to build an extension to our building, most likely a fellowship hall on the first floor. If we build (remembering we are a historic church and represent that history) the façade will absolutely have to match the stone structure of our main building. We will not be modernizing the façade to reflect or represent something other than what we now have. Further (to dissuade the rumors that are out) we will not be looking to develop a parking venue as the demolition of 812A would not add adequate parking spaces and ingress and egress.

We thank you for the opportunity to present at your meeting, and we will be looking to be an active member organization of your association. We met with you some time ago, and we have consistently made our building available for CSTNA activities. As I said, we desire to be good neighbors and we look forward to a long, cooperative and shared relationship.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Lawrence Michael Livingston, DMin.
Senior Pastor, Mother African Union Church