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Secretary of the Commonwealth

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**ST. JOHN'S CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH AND PARSONAGE/PARISH HOME FOR
WORKING GIRLS, SPRINGFIELD, APPROVED FOR NOMINATION TO THE NATIONAL
REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**

Secretary of the Commonwealth William F. Galvin is pleased to announce that the Massachusetts Historical Commission recently approved St. John's Congregational Church and Parsonage/Parish Home for Working Girls in Springfield for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. The nomination will be submitted to the National Register of Historic Places at the National Park Service in Washington, DC, for final consideration and designation.

"The Massachusetts Historical Commission is dedicated to preserving the Commonwealth's rich historic, architectural, archaeological, and cultural resources," Secretary Galvin said. "Inclusion of St. John's in the National Register will help to preserve two buildings associated with a congregation that built a groundbreaking and unparalleled program of social service for Springfield's African American population."

Completed under the direction of the Reverend William Nelson DeBerry in 1911, St. John's Congregational Church, 643 Union Street, is an intact, distinguished example of a small church planned by and designed for an African American congregation. Rev. DeBerry not only presided over St. John's Congregational Church for thirty-one years, but he also put in place a program of institutional activity that promoted the moral and social betterment of its congregation, gaining the church nationwide acclaim for its exemplary mission.

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The son of emancipated slaves, William N. DeBerry was born in 1870 in Nashville, Tennessee. His father worked as a railway shop painter during the week and preached at the city's Mt. Zion Baptist Church on Sundays. DeBerry put himself through Fisk University and Oberlin Theological Seminary by working as a sawmill laborer, summer-session schoolteacher, hotel waiter, and Pullman porter. Upon his 1899 graduation from Oberlin, he initially sought a pastorate in the South, where he and other black pastors believed there was the greatest need.

However, he agreed to become minister of St. John's in Springfield if the church would provide a broader service to the city's African American community. The church served people on workdays and Sundays alike with programs including its home for working girls and women, boys' and girls' clubs, employment bureau, domestic science night school, and Camp Atwater in North Brookfield (listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1982), the nation's first overnight camp specifically intended to serve African-American children.

In the absence of any sort of governmental assistance, the church played a critical role in helping southern African Americans adjust to the inequities of northern urban life. Its struggle against racially based housing and employment discrimination and advocacy of African American educational and political achievement continued after DeBerry resigned the pastorate in 1930, and as the city of Springfield experienced the greatest African American population increases in its history.

Located in Springfield's Old Hill neighborhood, the nominated property includes both the church and its associated Parish Home for Working Girls, situated on an adjoining lot, which opened two years after the church's 1911 completion. Both buildings were designed in a similar style by local architect B. Hammett Seabury, who created plans for numerous church, school, civic, and residential buildings in Springfield throughout a career that spanned more than 50 years. Sheathed with wood shingles and distinguished by traditional Gothic elements, the buildings exhibit an overall influence of the Shingle Style. The church's Hancock Street façade features eight art-glass memorial windows by an unknown designer, dedicated to John Brown, "the hero of Harper's Ferry"; the African American poet and activist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, given by a church literary club; and six prominent church members.

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The subtle use of memorial windows for abolitionist figures conveys the congregation's African American presence, and the incorporation of a social room adjoining the sanctuary represents the inseparability of the church's religious and social missions. Built to function both as the pastor's residence and as a boarding house for working girls and women, the two-story, hipped-roof parsonage resembles the many two-family houses in the neighborhood, but with an interior plan more appropriate for a boardinghouse. Both buildings retain original exterior and interior materials and design features, and although St. John's Congregational Church moved many of its functions to a much larger religious and social facility across the street, both historic buildings are still in use by the congregation.

St. John's Congregational Church is one of six historic resources around the Commonwealth approved for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places by the Massachusetts Historical Commission at this meeting.

Secretary Galvin serves as Chairman of the 17-member board, which meets regularly and considers historic resources eligible for the National Register four times a year.

The National Register is the nation's official listing of significant historic resources. In Massachusetts, there are more than 70,000 properties listed in the National Register. The Massachusetts Historical Commission has been administering the National Register of Historic Places program in Massachusetts since 1966.

The Massachusetts Historical Commission is the office of the State Historic Preservation Officer and the State Archaeologist. It was established in 1963 to identify, evaluate, and protect important historical and archaeological assets of the Commonwealth. Visit our website to learn more about the Commission's programs (www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc).

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