



# Mount Zion Black Cultural Center

Mount Zion Baptist Church  
Revitalization Project

2023



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**Providing community members a unique venue that preserves history, promotes dialogue, and advances intercultural understanding in Appalachian Ohio**



**Mount Zion  
Black Cultural  
Center will  
become the  
first community  
center of its kind  
focusing on the  
rich history of  
Black American  
contributions in  
Southeastern  
Ohio.**

## **Project Overview**

The Mount Zion Black Cultural Center will give the historic Mount Zion Baptist Church new life as an inclusive and safe cultural gathering space for the Black community of Athens and the region to come together. The building will be a “knowledge hub,” providing modern, technology-supported cultural, on-site programming that tells the history of the Black community of the Ohio River Valley through learning activities. The Mount Zion Black Cultural Center will support the community and heritage of the City by serving as an important cultural symbol alongside many other cultural and community heritage destinations throughout Southeast Ohio. Examples of this model include: [The Nelson T. Gant Foundation](#) in Muskingum County, the [Multicultural Genealogical Center](#) in Morgan County, [The Tablertown People of Color Museum](#) in Athens County, and the [John Gee Black Historical Center](#) in Gallia County. It is a top priority of the Mount Zion Baptist Church Preservation Society to create a space that is ADA compliant, in an effort to realize a truly inclusive space for all.

**\$5,152,500**

**Total Project Cost**



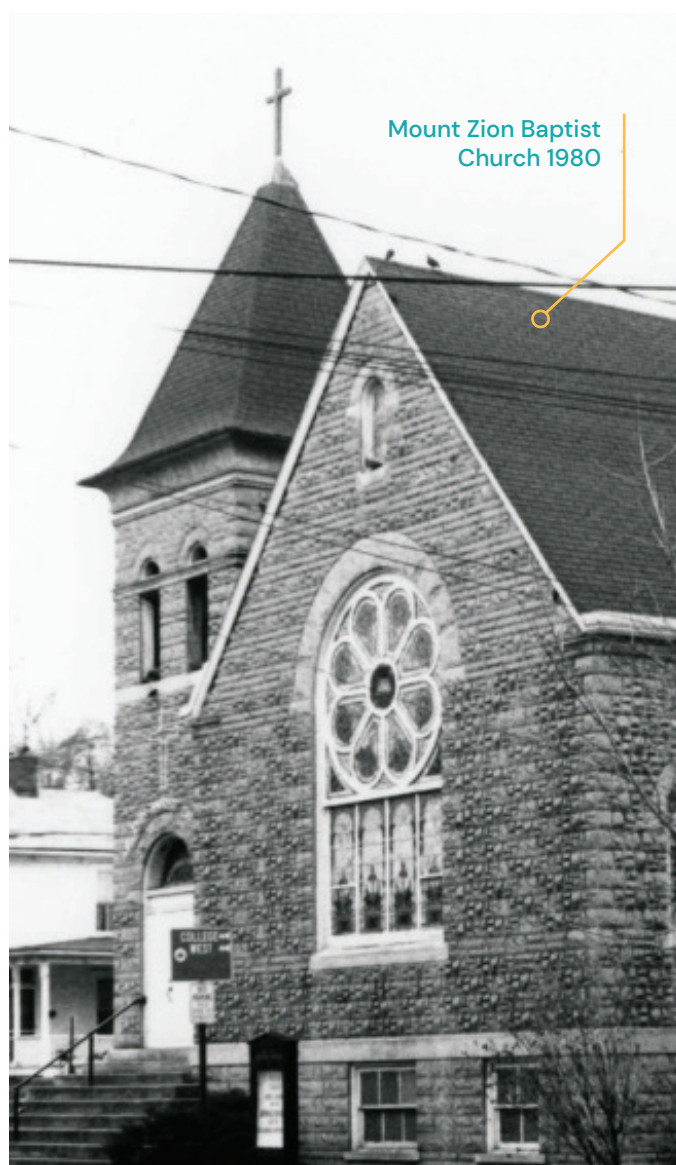
Cab Calloway Orchestra  
visited the church when they  
came to Athens to perform at  
Ohio University.  
March, 1942

# Historical Overview

**The congregation that built Mount Zion traces its origins to the home of Joseph and Henrietta Miller, where a small group of Black Athenians started gathering for religious services in 1872.** By 1876, the congregation had grown large enough to construct a wood-framed single room church on Lancaster Street. Formalized as the Mt. Zion Baptist Church in their new home, the congregation became known by the performances of their choir, the Athenian Jubilee Singers, at regional church festivals and conventions.

In 1902, church members started a fund to construct the larger building that stands today. Edward and Mattie Berry, who had gained national recognition as hoteliers of the former Berry Hotel in uptown Athens, donated a corner lot uptown as land for the new building which is where it stands today. Between 1905 and 1909, a thriving community of free born and formerly enslaved Black Americans built the church as a place of spiritual solace and social connection. When its cornerstone was laid in a public ceremony on 12 November 1905, many items were placed including copies of Black Ohio newspapers; their inclusion reminds us today, 118 years later, of the church's important mission: to amplify the perspectives and accomplishments of Black Americans.

In 1974, when Dr. Francine Childs moved to Athens to join the faculty of Ohio University (where she became the school's first Black female tenured professor) she encountered a dwindling membership of only ten congregants at Mount Zion. To help rebuild the community, Dr. Childs spearheaded a door-to-door campaign and involved university students in a new



Mount Zion Baptist  
Church 1980





## BROKE DIRT FOR NEW CHURCH

Zion Baptist Organization Will  
Have a Beautiful Church  
Edifice.

choir called the Gospel Voices of Faith. Congregation numbers then swelled again to over 150 and the choir, which regularly featured anywhere from 35 to 100 university students, toured nationally.

Throughout the 20th century, this building functioned as a worship, educational and social space for the members of the Black community. This vital piece of Ohio history was listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NR 80002938) in 1980. The 118-year-old building is one of the last remaining Black-owned and built historical buildings along the Southeast Ohio River Valley's Underground Railroad corridor, and the only one remaining in Athens County. The Mount Zion Baptist Church Preservation Society is committed to seeing that this site will again become an important anchor for current and future Black community members of the City of Athens and the region as a whole.

Today, Mount Zion Baptist Church stands in uptown Athens at the intersection of Carpenter and Congress streets. In 2013, The Mount Zion Baptist Church

**Mt. Zion was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980. This 118-year-old building is one of the last remaining Black-owned and built historical buildings along the Southeast Ohio River Valley's Underground Railroad corridor.**

Preservation Society (MZBCPS), was founded by a group of community members with a mission to restore, preserve, and transform the church into the "Beacon of Light" it once was. In 2016 it became a 501(c)3 certified non-profit organization and title-holding stewards of the building and property. This historic building needs important updates to the structure to make it ADA compliant and accessible to all. In addition, extensive repairs are necessary due to water damage. With the necessary repairs and

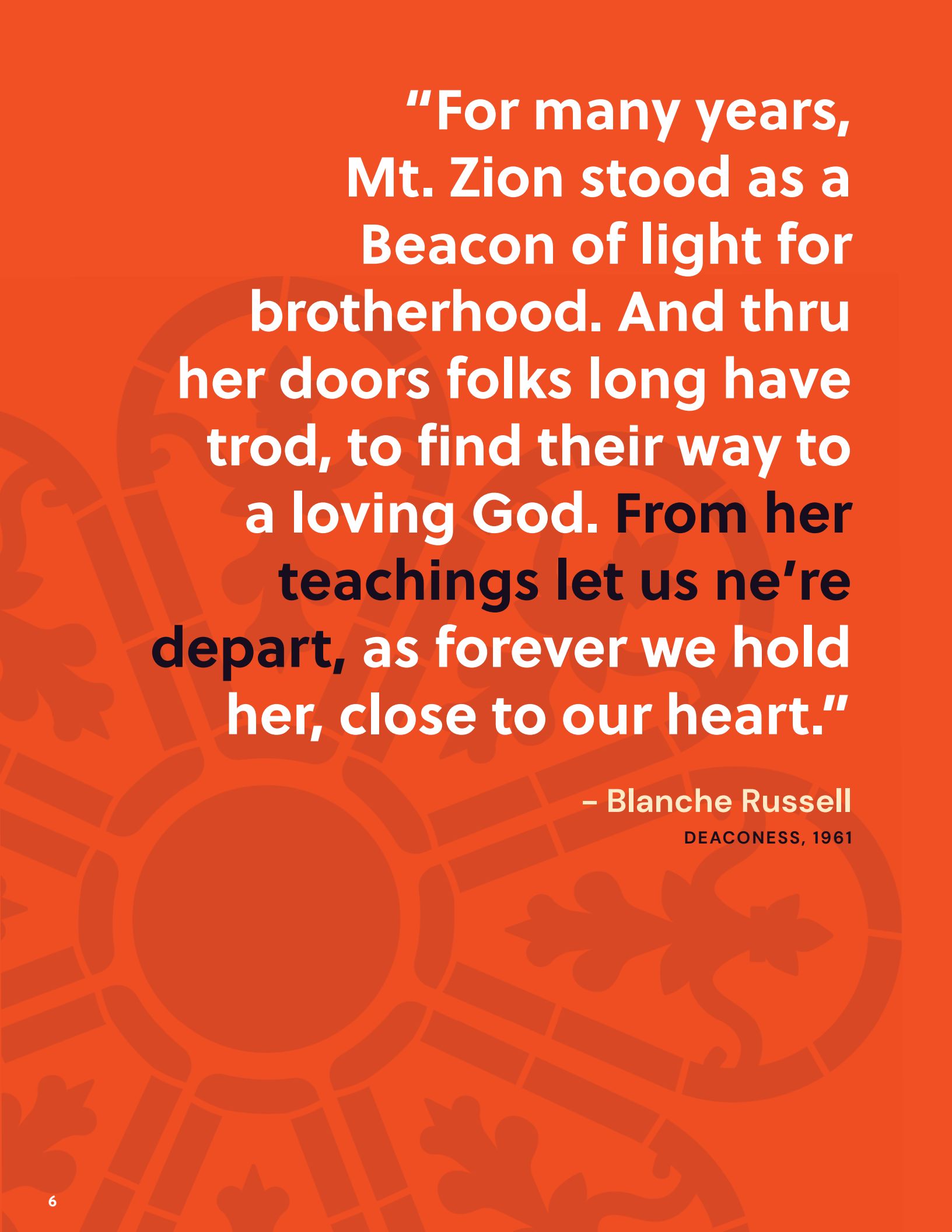
changes, Mount Zion Black Cultural Center will become an important part of Southeast Ohio's continuing history.



Francine Childs  
in 1980 speaking at  
Ohio University

PC: Ohio University





**"For many years,  
Mt. Zion stood as a  
Beacon of light for  
brotherhood. And thru  
her doors folks long have  
trod, to find their way to  
a loving God. From her  
teachings let us ne're  
depart, as forever we hold  
her, close to our heart."**

**– Blanche Russell**

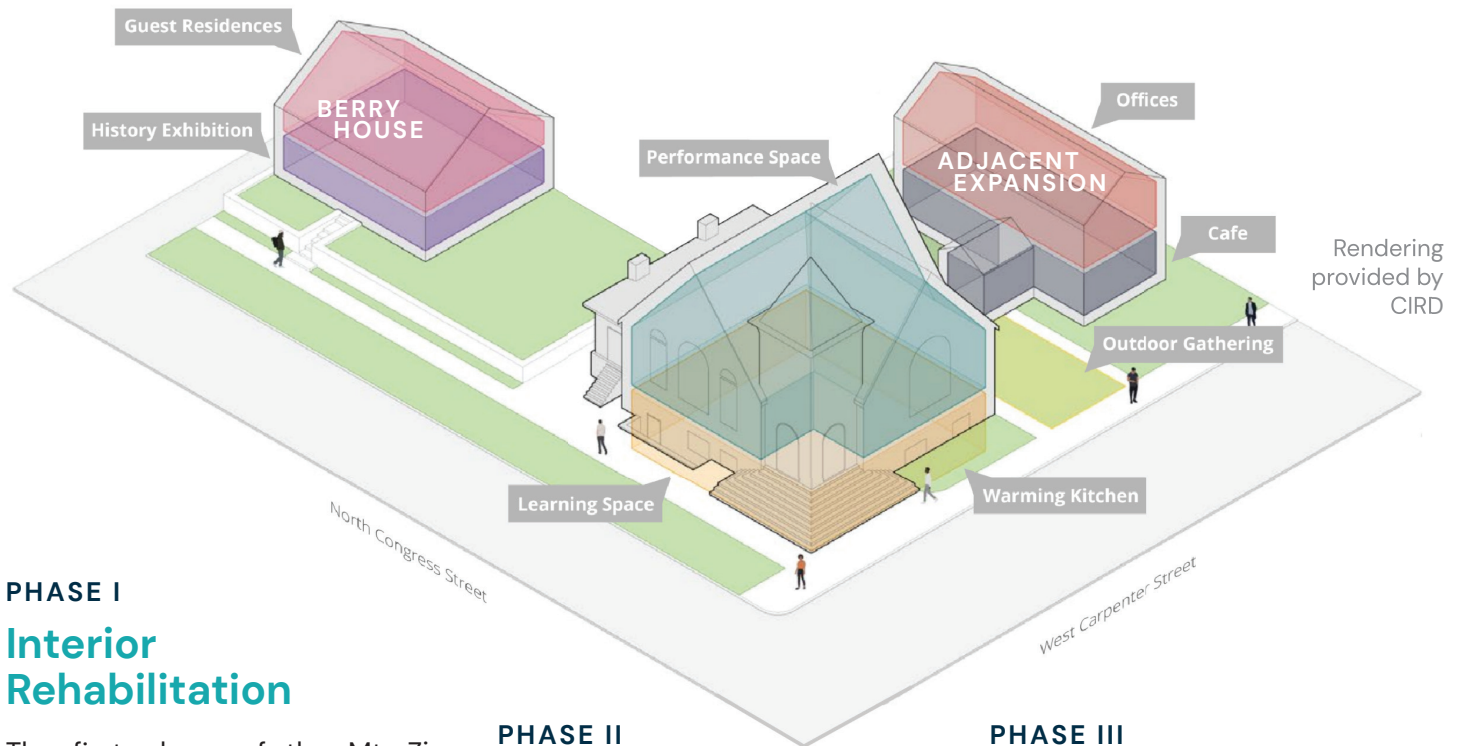
**DEACONESS, 1961**



# Revitalization Plan

## Mount Zion Black Cultural Center

The design and implementation plans for the historic Mount Zion Baptist Church will transform the building into the Mount Zion Black Cultural Center, a hub that will provide social, cultural, and economic opportunities for minority residents. This revitalization effort includes converting it into a multi-functional space that includes flexible space for art exhibitions, musical/theatrical performances, lectures, banquets, meetings, classes, and workshops.



### PHASE I

#### Interior Rehabilitation

The first phase of the Mt. Zion Masterplan will focus on an interior rehabilitation of the building in order to offer safe, reliable, and diverse community programming. This includes an addition to the North side of the building to allow for an elevator to make the space ADA compliant. The main sanctuary space will be used as an indoor gathering and performing arts space, preserving existing elements such as some of the pews and stage. Near the front entrance will be an exhibition honoring the history of the Ohio River Valley Black Community.

The basement space will be retrofitted as a digital learning and teaching space equipped with computers, desks, small library space, and communal kitchen.

**PHASE I COST \$5.2m**

### PHASE II

#### Adjacent Expansion

After the church gains community support from its rehabilitation, the Preservation Society will invest in purchasing the adjacent house. A cafe will operate on the main floor to aid in revenue generation for the Society, as well as job placement and workforce development for community members.

With the growth of Mt. Zion will come a need to expand management facilities, and so the second floor of the purchased property will be used as office space. The adjacent plot will serve as an outdoor space for both the cafe and church as use for seating, dining, gathering, and performances.

**PLANS TBA**

### PHASE III

#### Berry House Expansion

Using the generated revenue from the main building and adjacent property, the Preservation Society will invest in re-acquiring the Berry House in order to properly honor the legacy of the church's original benefactor.

The first floor will become home to a permanent historical exhibition on Mt. Zion Baptist Church and the local Black Appalachian community, and the center for the Mt. Zion Baptist Church Historical Society. The upstairs bedrooms will be used as accommodations for visiting guests and performers, as well as rooms for rent by community members and visitors.

**PLANS TBA**



# Why Mount Zion?

**Southeast Ohio was once nationally renowned for Black entrepreneurship, education, and community building.**

The restored Mount Zion will serve as the cornerstone of a phased plan to serve marginalized communities in Appalachian Ohio through workforce, technology, and community development services within a space that holds significant historic value for Southeast Ohio while continuing to display the contributions, history, and ongoing concerns of Black Americans in Southeastern, Ohio.

There is a significant lack of cultural community hub spaces in Athens. There is paramount value and need for a space where people can come together that is free of cultural biases, stereotypes, stigma, and distrust. The entire Athens community has benefited from greater cultural diversity and cultural tourism taking place in the community as a result of efforts like these.

Mount Zion Black Cultural Center is located in the heart of Athens, easily accessible to Athens residents, Ohio University students, and visitors. It is one of the anchors of Heritage Square, which also includes the historic Athens Armory, the Southeast Ohio History Center, and the site of the historic Berry Hotel.





# Project Finances

The Mount Zion Baptist Church Preservation Society (MZBCPS) is actively continuing to seek support from the community, businesses, as well as public and private foundations.

When the Covid-19 pandemic occurred MZBCPS was forced to stop any in-person programming and fundraising and, like many organizations, lost forward momentum, which they are continuing to rebuild. In the meantime, the deterioration of the building accelerated.

In the past, **MZBCPS raised \$190,000 to begin the historic building’s revitalization efforts.** This funding went towards various projects including a new roof, building assessment reports, and to begin telling the story of the efforts to save the building through a documentary titled *Black Wall Street Athens, Episode 1*.

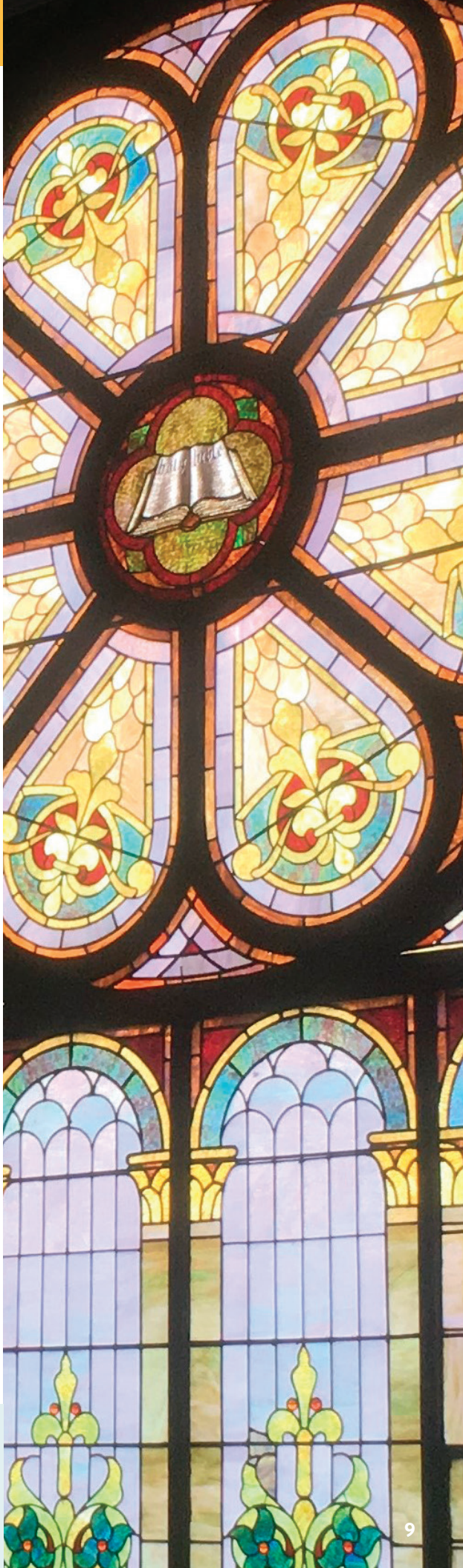
Donations and funding have been received from organizations including:

Ohio History Certified Local Government	Athens Morning and Noon Rotary Clubs
Central Appalachian Seed Learning Pilot Project	National Trust for Historic Preservation, African American Cultural Heritage Fund
Citizens’ Institute on Rural Design (CIRD)	Athens County Foundation
	Waymakers Collective
FAO–African American Community Fund	Appalachian Community Fund
	Charles O’Bleness Foundation

The total project cost for Phase 1 includes hazard abatement, water intrusion control, demolition of the unusable interior remains and rebuilding of the new space according to new needs. An addition to the north aspect of the building is planned to allow for an elevator and other requirements to make the space ADA compliant. Architectural and Engineering fees are included.

\$5,152,500

PHASE I  
Total Project Cost





# Projected Revenue

Based on the planning efforts of the Citizens’ Institute on Rural Design in 2019 and 2020, students at the School of Business at Ohio University developed a business plan for the vision of the Mount Zion Black Cultural Center.

The business plan was developed with calculated revenues, total expenses, and operating incomes that were based on a variety of revenue-generation uses, which predicted **the Mount Zion Black Cultural Center to be financially solvent within three years of operating**. The scope of the forecast does not include the cost of renovations to the building. The students completed profit and loss measurements, cash flow, and other balance sheets to determine efficient operations. These forecast estimates were calculated by analyzing similar organizations and the market in Athens, Ohio. After accounting for perceived expenses, the revenue streams are anticipated to provide the following annual net operating income for the Mount Zion Black Cultural Center.

**The space will utilize 3 different business techniques to build revenue.**

## Educational Programming

The Mount Zion Black Cultural Center will serve as a living museum, and will be rentable for educational programming, networking and teaching opportunities.

## Event Venue

Group meetings, weddings, poetry nights, music performances, etc.

## Catering

Specialize in soul food, Offer carry-out options for individuals and small groups, Catering for all events.



REVENUE	EXPENSES & COST	PROFIT
\$262k YEAR 1	\$263k YEAR 1	(\$923) YEAR 1
\$335k YEAR 2	\$227k YEAR 2	\$108k YEAR 2
\$430k YEAR 3	\$275k YEAR 3	\$156k YEAR 3



# State of the Building

**4,712 sq ft. of Space**

The building has Neo-Romanesque style, equipt with a bell tower, metal-pressed ceiling, minimally functioning organ, and original wooden pews that remain well preserved. One of the most prominent features of Mount Zion Baptist Church are its 14 leaded stained glass windows on the South, West, and East sides of the building. The south window holds a large rose window which is the identifying feature of the building. The plexiglass which currently protects the windows externally hides the colorful glass, which from inside the building provides inspirational light. The building also formerly featured a fully functioning kitchen located in the basement.



## Work Already Completed

In 2017, the Board began the process of revitalizing the building and necessary repairs were made to the roof by autumn of 2018. This work included, removing the worn asphalt shingles and underlayment, replacing any damaged wood beneath, installing new sheathing, underlayment, and fiberglass shingles, new eave and gable trim, and new gutters and downspouts.

Acoustic Distinctions, Burgess & Niple, Inc., Lawhon & Associates, Kabil Associates, and Karpinski Engineering firms assisted with engineering services that included acoustics, geotechnical, environmental, structural, civil, mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and fire protection. The team recommended the work be completed in phases, if not all at once. The MZBCPS has been working hard to complete projects outlined in Phase 1, beginning with the removal and safe storage of the 65 stained-glass window panels.

Redesign and rehabilitation of the building will be celebrated with the opening of the new Mount Zion Black Cultural Center. The second phase, obtaining the former parsonage, will result in the opening of a cafe on the main floor to aid in revenue generation as well as job placement and the second floor will be used as an office space.

## Work to be Done

As it stands today, the building is structurally sound. While there is no concern regarding the overall structural integrity of the space, Mount Zion Baptist Church has extensive water damage and its effects are the main issues regarding this historic piece of Ohio’s past. The building shows presence of ground water or water infiltration in the below-grade walls. Redesign and rehabilitation of the building, along with ADA accommodations will allow legal occupancy and use of this space.

### Exterior

The main issue concerning the exterior of the building is the need to seal the masonry to protect it from moisture. Other items include the exterior wood trim, door, and window framing as they are found to be in poor condition. The stained glass windows are in critical condition and their protection and restoration is an immediate priority of the Board. Some panels have been broken, including during a recent storm. Extensive repair of structural wood components is also needed.

### Lower Level

Many areas of the floor in the lower level have collapsed and water collects after a hard rain. Identifying the sources of water intrusion, creating proper drainage and constructing a water-tight foundation are imperative to the longevity of the space. In addition, hazard abatement for lead paint, mold, and asbestos, and new HVAC, electrical, plumbing, and fire protection systems that will service the entire structure are all needed. Funds will also go to the construction that provides accessible restrooms in the lower level with an elevator and an egress stairway.

### Main Floor

The moisture present in the building has led to failure of the interior paint and plaster as well as extensive mold and mildew resulting in the main level being deemed uninhabitable. The metal-pressed ceiling has been impacted by the moisture resulting in rust in some areas while there is complete deterioration in others.



Immediate Building Needs
The following areas have been deemed logical and necessary next steps in the preservation and rehabilitation of Mount Zion:
Removal of dangerous floor structure in basement
Installation of temporary access stairs (interior and/or exterior)
Necessary to gain access to crawl space/ subfloor to examine conditions
Engineering study and evaluation of ground water conditions
Plan of action for dealing with wet conditions
Removal and safe storage of the stained glass windows
Hazardous material remediation
Mold and mildew
Lead paint
Asbestos – minor areas in caulking around windows





**Mount Zion  
Business Plan**

Abby Espaillat, Austin McClain,  
Eric Smith, Hannah Mehalik,  
and Summer Tingley

**2020, Citizen's Institute on  
Rural Design (CIRD)**

Bob Reeder, Brent Leggs, Jeremy Biddinger,  
Jennifer Hughes, Courtney Spearman, Omar  
Hakeem, Zain Islam-Hashmi, David Lipsetz,  
Evelyn Immonen, and Stephen Sugg

## Sources