

United States Department of the Interior National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

NOV 28 1988

NATIONAL REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name True Reformer Building

other names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number 1200 U Street, N.W.

not for publication N/A

city, town Washington

vicinity N/A

state District of Columbia code DC county N/A

code 001 zip code 20009

3. Classification

Ownership of Property

- private public-local public-State public-Federal

Category of Property

- building(s) district site structure object

Number of Resources within Property

Table with 2 columns: Contributing, Noncontributing. Rows for buildings, sites, structures, objects, Total.

Name of related multiple property listing:

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of certifying official Carol B. Thompson

State Historic Preservation Officer

Date 11/28/88

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register. determined eligible for the National Register. determined not eligible for the National Register. removed from the National Register. other, (explain:)

Signature of the Keeper Patrick Andrews

Date of Action 1/9/89

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

**6. Function or Use**

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/organizational, financial institution

SOCIAL/meeting hall, clubhouse

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

VACANT/not in use

COMMERCE/specialty store

**7. Description**

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN MOVEMENTS

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation N/A

walls Brick

roof N/A

other Tin

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally     statewide     locally

Applicable National Register Criteria     A     B     C     D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)     A     B     C     D     E     F     G

**Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)**

ETHIC HERITAGE: Black  
\_\_\_\_\_  
ARCHITECTURE  
\_\_\_\_\_  
SOCIAL HISTORY  
\_\_\_\_\_  
COMMERCE  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**

1902-1911  
\_\_\_\_\_  
1937-1949  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Dates**

1903  
\_\_\_\_\_  
1911  
\_\_\_\_\_  
1937  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Person**

N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Builder**

Lankford, John A.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

See continuation sheet

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # DC - 362
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository: \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreeage of property less than one acre

UTM References

A 

1	8	3	2	4	1	2	0	4	3	0	9	2	8	0
Zone				Easting				Northing						

B 

Zone				Easting				Northing						

C 

Zone				Easting				Northing						

D 

Zone				Easting				Northing						

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

Square 204, Lot 131, which is located at the southwest corner of 12th and U Streets, N.W. in Washington, D.C.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire city lot that has been historically associated with the property.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Betty Bird (for Traceries)  
organization N/A date September 27, 1988  
street & number 2025 Eye St., N.W., Suite 801 telephone 202-463-2033  
city or town Washington state D.C. zip code 20006

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The True Reformer Building is a four story rectangular brick building located at the southwest corner of 12th and U Streets, NW. The building, which faces north, is detailed on both the north (U Street) and east (12th Street) facades. The primary facades are executed in buff brick laid in common bond; secondary facades are in red brick. The first floor is occupied by storefronts and the building is surmounted by a flat roof that slopes south. (The storefronts are presently boarded up because of Metro construction.) The structural system appears to be a combination of steel columns and load-bearing brick walls. The building dominates its site, which is an area of low-scale commercial and residential buildings.

Although the first floor and original entrances have been altered, five original brick pilasters remain on the first floor of the east facade. These pilasters have foliated capitals supporting an entablature with egg and dart molding and a modillion cornice. Above the first floor a second series of projecting pilasters with Corinthian capitals divides the north facade into three bays and the east, into four. The bays on the east facade are wider than those on the north. Three windows are located within each bay on the east, two on the north. The second floor is lit by overscaled one-over-one windows (now boarded up) topped by round arches executed from stone that rest on a tin springcourse. The third and fourth floor display standard size one-over-one windows (now also boarded up). On the third floor the windows rest on a modillioned tin sill that fills each bay between the pilasters. The fourth floor exhibits a similar sill without the modillions.

The True Reformer Building is topped by a full entablature below a shallow parapet. The pressed tin entablature is comprised of a simple architrave, a wide frieze displaying swags, festoons, and wreaths, and a cornice with modillion blocks. The brick parapet is plain except for shallow projections above each pilaster. Although the secondary facades are not detailed, the west facade bears evidence of earlier painted signs including one identifying the True Reformer Building.

Because of the evolution in its use, the True Reformer Building has been altered over the years. None of the alterations has affected the essential form and integrity of the building. In 1937 it underwent a \$17,000 interior rehabilitation in its adaptation for use as the Boys Club. John A. Lankford, who designed the building, was the architect for the work. Another \$11,000 renovation took place in 1947. In 1949 fire code regulations dictated that the primary entrance on U Street be reworked. Leon Chatelain was the architect for the alterations, which cost of \$5000; Harwood-Nebel Construction Company was the builder.

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The exterior alterations to the first floor and the original entry ways do not affect the essential integrity of the building. Alterations of this kind are typical of commercial buildings that have enjoyed continuous use. Indeed the remaining pilasters on 12th Street are a fortunate survival on a commercial building of this date. The exterior of the upper floors is virtually intact and provides splendid evidence of the design skill of John Lankford and the craftsmanship of the black workers who constructed the building.

Despite the evolution of use within the building, its interior appearance is not greatly changed. Much of the original craftsmanship and spatial character has been maintained. The second and third floor originally housed an auditorium. The stage was located at the south; a horseshoe-shaped mezzanine, supported by cast iron columns, faced the stage. This space was converted to a gymnasium when the Boys Club acquired the building. The outline of the stage is still visible on the floor and the spatial configuration, cast iron columns with decorative capitals, and mezzanine still remain. The fourth floor retains its original appearance. Both the original corridor running along the west side of the building and the original offices remain. The original door and window trim is still present. The corridor and door openings on the fifth floor also remain; the rooms have been enlarged to accommodate a boxing gym and art studio. The basement and first floor, presently used for a paint store and storage, have been completely altered and consist of open plan space. It is significant that many of the major alterations were made in conjunction with the Boys Club, one of the building's most important uses, and that these changes provide evidence of the continuing role this mixed-use structure played in the Black community.

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The True Reformer Building at 1200 U Street, N.W., constructed in 1902, was one of the first secular buildings in the United States to be designed, financed, and constructed by Black Americans. It is a notable work of John A. Lankford, the first Black registered architect in the District of Columbia. From 1903 until 1911, the building housed the United Order of True Reformers, a fraternal benefit organization that was among the most significant cooperative associations serving the economic and social needs of the Black community. From 1937-1959, the building was the home of the 12th and U branch of the Boys Club of the Metropolitan Police, an important institution for Black youth in the District of Columbia. The True Reformer Building is a superb example of a class of multi-purpose buildings developed and constructed by Blacks to meet the need for public accommodations posed by segregation. Its significance is further enhanced by the important historical role the Washington Black community played in the political, economic, and social life of blacks throughout the United States.

The True Reformer Building meets both National Register Criteria A and C. The building meets National Register Criterion A because of its association with the black self-help movement, an important theme in American history. The building also meets Criterion A because of its association with the United Order of True Reformers (UOTF), an excellent example of the fraternal mutual aid organizations that were, along with Black churches, the most important institutions within the Black community. The True Reformer Building meets National Register Criterion C because it is an excellent example of the work of John A. Lankford, the first Black professional architect in the District of Columbia.

The full significance of the True Reformer Building can only be grasped through an understanding of the context in which it was built. In the first decade of the 20th century Blacks were faced with increasing prejudice and discrimination. The hopes born of emancipation and reconstruction had been dashed by the institution of Jim Crow laws and the gradual disenfranchisement of the race. The True Reformer Building, constructed in 1902, is an excellent example of the Black community's response to this increasingly restrictive social and economic climate. As exclusionary practices increased during the last two decades of the 19th century, Blacks created institutions that paralleled those in the white community. Doctrines of racial self-help and solidarity provided a philosophical underpinning for their endeavors. Of the institutions that served their economic and social needs, none were more important than churches and fraternal and mutual aid societies.

Mutual benefit associations, which paid sickness and death benefits and aided the widows and orphans of members, had a long history within the United

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States. Often run through churches or secret fraternal organizations, they enjoyed a tremendous growth within the Black community in the last two decades of the 19th century. In 1881 the Prudential Insurance Company began charging Blacks higher premiums, justifying the rate increase on the basis of higher mortality rates. (August Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, p. 142). Other companies soon followed suit. Spurred by discrimination as well as the movement for Black self-help and racial solidarity, fraternal benefit societies such as the Order of St. Luke and the United Order of True Reformers (both based in Richmond), developed as an alternative to white insurance companies.

These associations, however, possessed a significance within the Black community that went far beyond their goal of providing sickness and death benefits. The capital held by the associations supplied the foundation for Black banks. The True Reformers Bank, founded in Richmond in 1888, was among the first three Black banks in the U.S. and the largest in assets in 1907. (*Ibid.*, p. 143.) The mutual aid societies are particularly significant since they served as the forerunners of mid-20th century Black insurance companies, until recently the most successful Black commercial enterprises. In addition, both churches and mutual benefit associations filled an important need for social institutions in the growing urban population after the Civil War.

The United Order of True Reformers was founded in Richmond in 1881 by former slave and temperance reformer Reverend William Washington Browne. In addition to the insurance provided by this mutual benefit stock association, the order also maintained a home for the elderly, five stores in various cities, a real estate department, a hotel, a weekly newspaper, a farm that was to be the prototype of independent Black agricultural communities, and a bank. The Order disbanded in 1911, one year after its bank, which counted 10,000 depositors, failed.

Although the organization that built it no longer exists, the True Reformer Building in Washington is a physical representation of the concepts of self-help and racial solidarity that form a continuing theme in Black intellectual history. Not only is it associated with a significant institution embodying those goals, its very form is a monument to them. Black men developed, financed, designed, and constructed the building which demonstrated the capabilities of their race and offered proof that their united efforts could succeed. The significance of this achievement was magnified by the building's location in the District of Columbia.

Washington held a special position for Black Americans. It had the largest black community of any northern city and it offered Blacks opportunities not available elsewhere. Civil service employment provided a degree of pro-



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fessionalism and security found in few other cities. Nevertheless, during the Taft administration black political appointments declined and the federal government gradually began to institutionalize discrimination and segregation. The Grand Worthy Master of the UOTF made the significance of the True Reformer Building's Washington location clear in his address at its dedication, held July 15, 1903:

I was not willing to put any kind of building in Washington. This is the capital of the nation. The critics from all over the country center in Washington. The Negro is the bone of contention, and there are many that say he is indolent and only fit for a "hewer of wood and a drawer of water." Therefore, I made up my mind, in keeping with Mr. Browne's request, God being my helper, to put up a building in Washington that would reflect credit upon the Negro Race.

...we succeeded in getting a Negro contractor in Lynchburg, Va. to bid. We wanted this building put up to the credit of the Negro Race. So we found a Negro architect in the person of J.A. Lankford. He drew the plans. Then we found the Negro builders at Lynchburg, Messrs. Bolling & Everett. We said to the contractors, "If you cannot get security in the Guarantee Company, give us a good bond elsewhere and we will accept it." They found a Negro, Mr. A. Humbles, who came to their rescue and gave us a certified check for twenty thousand dollars, to hold until the building was completed... (W.P. Burrell, **Twenty-five Years History of the Grand Fountain of the United Order of True Reformers**, pp. 319-322)

The building thus demonstrated that Blacks could successfully execute a major construction project relying solely on resources within their own community.

Among the most important of these resources was John A. Lankford (1874-1946). Lankford was born in Potosi, Missouri and educated at Lincoln Institute in Missouri and at Tuskegee. The commission for the True Reformer Building brought Lankford to Washington in 1902. As the first Black professional architect in Washington, his career furnished the prototype for subsequent 20th century Black architects. Since he worked both as a builder/contractor and as an architect, Lankford exemplified the change from skilled craftsman to professional designer, a transition particularly meaningful for Blacks in the early 20th century. Lankford also established an architectural practice that would serve as a model for future Black architects in the city. Using Washington as a base, Lankford developed a national and international practice

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designing buildings for Black institutions like churches, fraternal organizations, and colleges. Although his clients were predominately Black, Lankford's skill and professional expertise were recognized by his white peers. In 1925 he became the first Black registered architect in the District of Columbia. (Harrison Ethridge, "True Reformer Building" (HABS No. DC-362), p. 2.)

There is presently less known about Lankford's Washington buildings than his other commissions. Because he promoted himself as a national and international architect, the booklet **Lankford's Artistic Churches and Other Designs**, the primary source for buildings designed by Lankford, devotes little attention to his work here. In a 1904 advertisement in the *Washington Bee*, Lankford noted that his office had had "\$500,000.00 worth of work in Washington, D.C." in the preceding 32 months. (*Bee*, December 24, 1904 as quoted in Ethridge, "Black Architects in Washington, D.C.") In addition to the True Reformer Building, Lankford's Washington buildings include the Haven M.E. Church at 1401 Independence, S.E., the Central M.E. Church at 1215 Fifth Street, N.W., the "old" John Wesley A.M.E. Zion, and an Odd Fellows Building. (The location of the latter two buildings is not known.) A substantial portion of Lankford's local business consisted of renovating or enlarging existing buildings. One example of this aspect of his practice is the Ferguson House located at 1207 25th Street, N.W. (Ethridge, *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 18, and 19.) The True Reformer Building appears to have been Lankford's most important secular commission in the Washington area.

Lankford was active in civic affairs as well as in his profession. In 1905 he spearheaded the organization of the D.C. branch of the National Negro Business League, a self-help organization founded by Booker T. Washington in 1900. Despite the long-standing conflicts between followers and foes of Washington, the local organization boasted 100 members only four months after it was founded. The Colored Men's Business League, as it was known in D.C., held meetings at the True Reformers Building. In 1906 Lankford, introduced by Booker T. Washington, spoke on "The Negro as an Architect and Builder" at the sixth annual national meeting of the National Negro Business League. In his address Lankford noted the contribution Blacks made to the building of the pyramids and southern antebellum architecture. After acknowledging the role Tuskegee played in training Black architects and builders, Lankford set forth a fascinating account of the influence of Blacks in the physical development of the District of Columbia. His account of his own practice provides an eloquent summary of what the True Reformer Building represented and continues to represent:

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... In the past three years, I have designed for Washington and fifteen states of the Union nearly six million dollars worth of buildings. I have designed, overhauled and built in Washington and vicinity over seven hundred thousand dollars worth of property during the same time. I had the pleasant pleasure of designing and supervising the construction of the one hundred thousand dollar office, lodge and store room building for the True Reformers of Richmond, Va. The building is 60x100, five stories and basement, located on a corner lot of one of the principal streets of Washington, and being in Washington, it stands out to the civilized world as a sample or an example of what the Negro can do and has done with his brain, skill and money. This building was designed, built, paid for in cash, is occupied and controlled by Negroes. It has done more to give new life to the Negro architects and builders and lift the standard of work of this kind and character in Washington and in fact, throughout the country than any other one thing we know of. (Report of the Sixth Annual Convention of the National Negro Business league held in New York City, August 16, 17, 18, 1905, p. 182, as quoted in Ethridge, *Op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.)

Upon its completion, the True Reformer Building played a significant role in the social and commercial life of the segregated Black community. Like other Black fraternal buildings, its offices and auditoriums accommodated a variety of uses and activities. The mix of activity within the building indicates the extent to which Black architecture reflected the displacement of Blacks from white services and public accommodations. Its first occupants were the True Reformer organization and a drug store. Prior to 1911, when the United Order of True Reformers declared bankruptcy, the building was the site of church and social gatherings, including activities of the local YMCA. Located in the heart of the thriving Black commercial district, the building also served as the armory for the District of Columbia's segregated National Guard units. After the bankruptcy the property was deeded to another Black benevolent organization, the Knights of Pythias. As the True Reformers had done, the Knights of Pythias extended use of the building to other organizations and interests within the Black community. In addition to the storefront drug store, medical offices and a notions store were housed within the building.

The True Reformer Building was located in the heart of the Black community. Seventh Street, U Street, and near by Howard University provided a focus for Black activity in segregated Washington. The size and scale of the building dominate its immediate neighborhood of rowhouses and small commercial

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structures creating a congruence between the monumental character of the building and its unique contribution to the community it served.

One of the most important activities the building housed was the Boys Club of the Metropolitan Police of the District of Columbia. The Boys Club was organized in 1934 to combat juvenile delinquency and to provide constructive direction for Washington's youth. In 1937 the Boys Club leased the True Reformer Building and renovated the building to fit it to its new use. Supervised by John Lankford, the renovation provided facilities for a gymnasium, locker room, library, music room, and game room at a reported cost of \$17,000. The Boys Club at 12th and U Streets was the fourth branch in the city and was designated specifically for Negro youths.

The opening of the club was a celebrated occasion. First lady Eleanor Roosevelt dedicated the building before a crowd of over 2000 people. Within a month of the club's opening its membership was numbered at over 1600. This figure jumped to 4100 within another two months, giving the 12th and U branch the largest membership of the city's four clubs. The Boys Club was credited for providing wholesome, supervised activities for Washington's Black children. Because of the restrictions of segregation, the 12th and U branch offered services that would not otherwise have been available to young blacks. The branch was initially criticized because it was located in the heart of the Black commercial district near middle and upper class neighborhoods rather than in a deprived area. Ironically, the Boys Club's success and the high regard it still enjoys today are undoubtedly due to the significant role it played for the entire Black community precisely because it was so centrally located.

The Boys Club operated at this location for 20 years. In 1957 the District Commissioners banned police participation in fundraising after court cases and demonstrations challenged the Boys Club policy of racial segregation in its branches and summer camps. In 1959, six of the Boys Clubs, including the branch at 12th and U, were closed as a result of fundraising problems precipitated by the withdrawal of the Metropolitan Police. (Washingtoniana Division Vertical Files)

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Ethridge, Harrison. **The Black Architects of Washington, D.C., 1900-Present.** Diss. Catholic University, 1979. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University, 1979.

Ethridge, Harrison. True Reformer Building. Historic American Buildings Survey Documentation, HABS No. DC-362. Washington, D.C.: Historic American Buildings Survey, 1979. (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress)

Green, Constance McLaughlin. **The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital.** Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967.

Jones, William H. **Recreation and Amusement Among Negroes In Washington, D.C.** Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1927. (Library of Congress)

Meier, August. **Negro Thought in America 1880-1915.** Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966.

Vertical Files on Metropolitan Police Boys Clubs, Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Library.