



The historic Clayborn Temple, a landmark from the Civil Rights Movement with ties to Martin Luther King, caught fire on Monday in Memphis, Tenn.

Karen Pulfer Focht

# Church pivotal in MLK Jr.’s final days suffers fire

BY ADRIAN SAINZ AND TRAVIS LOLLER  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — A historic Black church in downtown Memphis that was the organizing point for Martin Luther King Jr.’s final campaign in 1968 caught fire early Monday morning on April 28, and suffered significant damage.

“The inside is a total loss, but we’re still somewhat hopeful that some of the façade will be able to be left standing,” Memphis Fire Chief Gina Sweat said at a Monday morning news conference. She said the fire was reported at 1:39 a.m. through a commercial alarm service.

Local fire and police officers are investigating the cause, along with the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. It is “way too early” to know anything more, Sweat said.

King was drawn to Memphis in 1968 to support some 1,300 predominantly Black sanitation workers who went on strike to protest inhumane treatment. Two workers had been crushed in a garbage compactor in 1964, but the faulty equipment had not been replaced. On Feb. 1, 1968, two more men, Echol Cole, 36, and Robert Walker, 30, were crushed in the compactor. The two men were contract workers, so they did not qualify for workmen’s compensation, and had no life insurance.

Workers wanted to unionize, and fought for higher pay and safer working conditions. City officials declared the strike illegal and arrested scores of strikers and protesters.

Before the fire, the Clayborn Temple was undergoing a \$25 million restoration that was slated for completion in 2026. The initiative aims to preserve the architectural and historical integrity of the Romanesque revival church and includes the restoration of a 3,000-pipe grand organ. At the same time, the project seeks to help revitalize the local neighborhood with a museum, cultural programming and community outreach, according



Karen Pulfer Focht

Talibah Safiyah and Tamika Turner grieve outside the historic Clayborn Temple, which caught fire on Monday.



MARK HUMPHREY | AP

This March 25, 2017 photo shows the Clayborn Temple.



AP PHOTO

The historic Clayborn Temple, a landmark from the Civil Rights Movement with ties to Martin Luther King, caught fire Monday, April 28, 2025, in Memphis, Tenn.

to a news release on the renovation.

“This morning we woke up to heartbreaking news: a devastating fire has ravaged one of our city’s greatest treasures, Clayborn Temple,” Memphis Mayor Paul Young wrote in a statement posted to social media. “Clayborn is more than a historic building. It is sacred ground. It is the beating heart of the civil rights movement, a symbol of struggle, hope, and triumph that belongs not just to Memphis but to the world.”

Just south of Beale Street, Clayborn Temple was built in 1892 as the Second Presbyterian Church and originally served an all-white congregation. In 1949, the building was sold to an African Methodist

Episcopal congregation and renamed Clayborn Temple, according to the release.

Memphis sanitation workers started striking in February 1968 after Cole and Walker were killed on the job.

The Clayborn Temple hosted nightly meetings and the campaign’s iconic “I AM A MAN” posters were made in its basement. The temple was also a staging point for marches to City Hall. They included a March 28, 1968, march led by King, a rally that turned violent when police and protesters clashed on the iconic Beale Street, and a 16-year-old was killed.

When marchers retreated to the temple, police fired tear gas inside. People broke some of the stained-glass windows to



MARK HUMPHREY | AP

This March 26, 2017 photo shows the Clayborn Temple before it burned down on Monday.

escape. King promised to lead a second, peaceful march in Memphis, but he was killed by a sniper while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel on April 4.

After King was assassinated and the strike ended with the workers securing a pay raise, the church’s influence waned. It fell into disrepair and was vacant for years before the renovation effort that took off in 2017 thanks to a \$400,000 grant from the National Park Service.

Clayborn Temple was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

Jimmie Tucker, one of the architects who has been working on the restoration for years, said Monday that he spent the morning working on a plan to try to shore up the exterior walls. He had been speaking to some of the people who helped after a similar Memphis fire at First United Methodist Church in 2006. He said that project gives him hope because they were able to rebuild.

“As a native Memphian, this project is personal,” he said. “It has so much meaning.”

Young pledged that the city will “help ensure this sacred place rises again.”

## INSPECTION PERIOD FOR THE PROPERTY TAX ASSESSMENT ROLL

The Graves County real property tax roll will be opened for inspection from May 5th through May 19th, 2025. Under the supervision of the property valuation administrator or one of the deputies, and any person may inspect the tax roll.

This is the January 1, 2025 assessment on which state, county and school taxes for 2025 will be due about October 1, 2025.

The tax roll is in the office of the property valuation administrator in the county courthouse at 1102 Paris Rd, Suite 2 and may be inspected between the hours of 8 am and 4:30 pm.

Any taxpayer desiring to appeal an assessment on real property made by the PVA must first request a conference with the PVA or a designated deputy. The conference may be held prior to the inspection period.

Any taxpayer still aggrieved by an assessment on real property, after the conference with the PVA or designated deputy, may appeal to the county board of assessment appeals.

The taxpayer can appeal the assessment by filing in person or sending a letter or other written petition stating the reasons for appeal, identifying the property and stating the taxpayer’s opinion of the fair cash value of the property.

The appeal must be filed with the county clerk’s office no later than one work day following the conclusion of the inspection period.

Any taxpayer failing to appeal to the county board of assessment appeals, or failing to appear before the board, either in person or by a designated representative, will not be eligible to appeal directly to the Kentucky Claims Commissions.

Appeals of personal property assessments shall not be made to the county board of assessment appeals. Personal property taxpayers shall be served notice under the provisions of KRS 132.450(4) and shall have the protest and appeal rights granted under the provisions of KRS.131.110.

The following steps should be taken when a taxpayer does not agree with the assessed value of personal property determined by the property valuation administrator.

- (1) He or she must list under protest (for certification) what is believed to be the fair cash value of the property.
- (2) A written protest must be filed directly with the Department of Revenue, Office of Property Valuation within 30 days from the date of the notice of assessment
- (3) This protest must be in accordance with KRS 131.110.
- (4) The final decision of the Department of Revenue may be appealed to the Kentucky Claims Commission.

Lee Martin  
Property Valuation Administrator  
Graves County



**CASA**  
Court Appointed Special Advocates  
**FOR CHILDREN**  
casagravesswky.org  
**270-251-2060**