

BROADWAY

BAPTIST CHURCH



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Broadway Baptist Church selects world-class artist Sedrick Huckaby to honor former janitor, make reparation for racism



Artist Sedrick Huckaby

The historic Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas has selected world-class artist and Fort Worth native Sedrick Huckaby to honor its former janitor John Thomas with a memorial acknowledging the church's former participation and complicity in the practice of racial segregation.

Thomas, who served Broadway from 1924 until his death in 1959, was a pillar within the church, though as a Black man he was barred from formal membership within the congregation. During services he sat in the baptistery behind the pulpit, rather than with the other worshipers in the sanctuary. His funeral took place at Broadway and was one of the first partially-integrated services in the history of Fort Worth, with whites sitting on one side of the sanctuary and Blacks on the other.



Mr. John Thomas

The Thomas memorial was commissioned by Broadway as a part of a larger effort to acknowledge its history of complicity within the racialized caste system of the southern U.S from its inception in 1882 to when it voted to open its membership to non-Whites in 1963. The artwork will be permanently installed at the front door of the church narthex, along with a plaque describing Thomas' life and legacy within the church.

In a statement issued about the project Huckaby, whose portrait of fellow Fort Worth resident and "Grandmother of Juneteenth" Dr. Opal Lee was recently installed in the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, wrote:

"I was particularly interested because it fits my interest precisely: It's local, it's about dignity, change and affirming a person who might otherwise remain unseen.

"During his lifetime Mr. Thomas had to listen to the sermons from behind the baptismal area instead of with the regular congregation. However, through the creative act of painting, he will be permanently seated in a place that was formerly off-limits for Black people. I believe the actual image showing John in this place of acceptance can also represent the changed attitude of the church."

Thomas' descendants are supportive of the memorial and its meaning.

"He was a very proud, gentle giant, strong and compassionate. He felt the doors of Broadway Baptist Church could not open without him. His unwavering dedication taught us to never give up. Our family is honored and thankful to be a part of this commemoration," Thomas' granddaughter, Reverend Dr. Nelda Barrett Murraine said.

"Honoring my grandfather in this way makes a very strong statement for restorative justice, while it honors his memory and commitment to God and this church."

As an act of reparation, the memorial is being privately funded by the Broadway membership with some additional assistance from a grant from the organization Dallas Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation.

"Memorialization makes an important statement about who we are and who we intend to be," Broadway's Senior Pastor Ryon Price said.

"There has been a great interest in the significance of this project. We received many outstanding artist submissions from across the country. We could not be more grateful for Sedrick Huckaby's submission, as we know it will honor the memory of Mr. Thomas and the social and spiritual intent of the memorial."

Price said the church will continue to consider ways in which it can help heal the wounds brought on by slavery, Jim Crow, and the ongoing harm caused by the racial caste system in America.

"This is one act of reparation, of which there must be many," Price said.

Rev. Johnnie Ray Griffin, another of John Thomas' grandchildren, says he appreciates the effort and places it in a broader context of racial reparations.

"Broadway Baptist Church has joined dozens of institutions, including non-profit organizations, religious institutions, universities, and local government bodies who are exploring reparations as a way to remedy the historical harms and their continued impacts upon this society," Griffin said. "We are overjoyed that Broadway Baptist Church is honoring our grandfather in this way."

The memorial will be formally dedicated on Saturday, September 28, 2024, in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Broadway's hiring of Thomas. Huckaby is beginning the initial phases of the work, meeting with the Thomas descendants in order to get a sense of the personhood of their grandfather.

Though the artwork has not yet been created, Huckaby says he already has an idea of what he envisions in mind as it will honor both John Thomas' life as a servant of the church and legacy as a symbol of change.

"Though John is not physically here to witness this milestone, those in his family, church, and community will be inspired and changed by his story," Huckaby said. "Without using any words, I hope the portrait plainly communicates the message, 'Mr. Thomas, please take the seat of honor.'"

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