

106 SUCCESS STORY

Restoration of African American Church Interprets Abolitionist Roots

Boston, Massachusetts



“It makes me extremely proud to know that people around the world look to Massachusetts as the anti-slavery hub for the important gatherings that took place inside this national treasure. On behalf of the Commonwealth, I congratulate the Museum of African American History for clearly envisioning how this project could be properly executed and applaud the entire restoration team for returning the Meeting House to a place ideal for civil discussion about social and economic issues of the day.”

— FORMER MASSACHUSETTS
FIRST LADY DIANE B. PATRICK
Rededication press release
December 2011



THE STORY

In 1805, Thomas Paul, an African American preacher from New Hampshire, with 20 of his members, officially formed the First African Baptist Church, and land was purchased for a building in what was the heart of Boston’s 19th century free black community. Completed in 1806, the African Meeting House was the first African Baptist Church north of the Mason-Dixon Line. It was constructed almost entirely with black labor using funds raised from both the white and black communities.

The Meeting House was the community’s spiritual center and became the cultural, educational, and political hub for Boston’s black population. The African School had classes there from 1808 until a school was built in 1835. William Lloyd Garrison founded the New England Anti-Slavery Society in the Meeting House in 1832, and the church provided a platform for famous abolitionists and activists, including Frederick Douglass. In 1863, it served as the recruitment site for the famed 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry regiment, the first African American military unit to fight for the Union in the Civil War. As the black community migrated from the West End to the South End and Roxbury, the property was sold to a Jewish congregation in 1898. It served as a synagogue until it was acquired by the Museum of African American History (MAAH) in 1972. The next year, a fire destroyed the roof and framing. The museum rehabilitated the second-floor sanctuary and provided contemporary exhibit space, and in 1974 the African Meeting House was designated a National Historic Landmark (NHL).

THE PROJECT

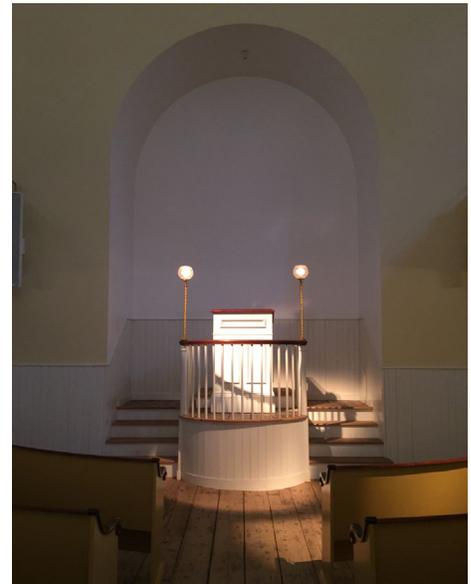
In 2004, MAAH applied for a grant from the Save America’s Treasures program, administered by the National Park Service (NPS), to restore the building to its 1855 appearance and meet modern accessibility, safety, and building code requirements with a new elevator, stair tower, climate system, and accessible courtyard entryway. The new construction outside the building envelope would require excavation of the surrounding grounds, raising concerns about disturbing centuries-old archaeological resources including the historic privies.

Photos: Above, African Meeting House, the home of the Museum of African American History, 46 Joy Street, Boston; Right, inside the meeting house (photos courtesy NPS)

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Photos: Above, Ranger Dana Smith addresses a teachers' conference in the African Meeting House; Right, a view of the pulpit (photos courtesy NPS)



THE 106 PROCESS

NPS was the federal agency responsible for conducting the Section 106 process under the National Historic Preservation Act. Section 106 requires that federal agencies identify historic properties and assess the effects of the projects they carry out, fund, or permit on those properties. Under Section 106, agencies also consult with Indian tribes, state and local governments, and organizations and individuals that have an interest in the historic property to seek agreement on measures to address the effects.

NPS used the Section 106 consultation process to address the potential impacts of the project. To avoid compromising the building's historic integrity, the elevator and fire stair were designed outside the building envelope, and heating and cooling equipment was located in a new underground vault. In 2005, MAAH, NPS, the Massachusetts State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), and the Boston Landmarks Commission entered into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) addressing the architectural designs for the historic and new construction as well as mitigation for the necessary archaeological excavations in the yard and alleys for the new construction. The Fisk Center for Archaeology carried out the excavations and uncovered more than 38,000 artifacts revealing important information about the lives of free blacks in 19th century Boston. The archaeological investigations discovered architectural fragments which were used for modeling historically accurate replacements for missing building details. The curved pews were re-created using remnants of the 1855 pews and scribe marks on the floor. The interior was finished with period wainscoting and wall finishes, cast-iron posts, and a gilded chandelier.

Consulting Parties:

National Park Service
 Massachusetts State Historic Preservation Officer
 Museum of African American History
 Boston Landmarks Commission

THE SUCCESS

The Save America's Treasures grant leveraged private funding and paved the way for an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) grant for the \$9.5 million, seven-year rehabilitation and restoration of the NHL African Meeting House. Today it is the centerpiece of the MAAH. The treatment of the significant archaeological resources as specified in the MOA had enormous public benefits by providing the MAAH with information that fulfills the decades-long dream of interpreting the lives of free blacks in Boston in the 19th century. Thanks to the comprehensive approach in the MOA, in 2010 when the ARRA funding was approved, the project was "shovel ready," and accessibility and modern mechanical systems were introduced in a sensitive manner, ensuring the building's continued use as a place of public assembly and exhibition. Through the Section 106 process, the African Meeting House, the oldest surviving African American church building in the U.S., is equipped to continue to preserve and interpret the contributions of African Americans in New England from the colonial period through the 19th century.

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Preserving America's Heritage

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