

## **St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church – Exterior Restoration Project**

### **Introduction**

The Cambridgeport Neighborhood Association (CNA) is working with St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church at 137 Allston Street and the Cambridge Historical Commission (CHC) on an exciting project to repair and restore the exterior of this 1886 church and to improve accessibility to the interior. The entire exterior, including the roof, will be stripped of deteriorating materials, insulated, and re-shingled. The original side entrance will be reopened and an ADA-compliant ramp installed. We are honored to be part of this renewal.

On December 6, 2018, the CHC awarded the church an outright grant of \$50,000 and an additional \$50,000 in matching funds. The CNA, a 501(c)3, has undertaken a campaign to raise funds for the match through private donations. All contributions raised by the CNA will be donated to St. Augustine's to be used expressly for this renovation. The CHC will oversee the project, which is slated to begin in the spring of 2019. Gabriel Cira, a CNA Board Member and architect, is managing the project for the church. The Cambridgeport nonprofit group HEET (Home Energy Efficiency Team) has already performed thermal and airflow tests at the church and given guidance on the most effective ways to save energy and improve thermal comfort throughout the seasons.

### **Why?**

St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church, built in 1886 and enlarged two years later, was designed by the notable New Bedford-based architect Robert H. Slack. A significant structure with a complex history, the church has been an open and welcoming presence since its founding as St. Philip's, an Episcopal mission, and has been a welcoming place for Cambridge's West Indian, African American, and other immigrant communities. It is the city's only remaining African Orthodox congregation and was led throughout the 1920s by the founder of the denomination, Bishop George McGuire.

St. Augustine's has been open to local Cambridgeport people and the city's itinerant and student populations for the last 100 years. Its current state discourages use by people with limited mobility and older folks who are sensitive to the extreme temperatures of New England that find their way in through the envelope of the building.

Contributions to this renovation project fund are also contributions to the revival of the structure as a lively community space for all people.

### **Project Details**

1) Insulate and replace roof, install gutters

Currently the asphalt-shingled roof is in disrepair, easily penetrated by rain and melting snow that pours into the sanctuary in several places. Given the age and condition of the existing material, a "spot fix" is not a viable solution; the roof must be stripped and rebuilt. A substratum of rigid insulation will be laid down with the proper vapor barriers and other protective layers. New asphalt shingles of a similar color and profile will be installed. The beautiful interior ship-like roof beams and exposed wood ceiling will not be affected.

## 2) Window protections

The sanctuary's twenty-four windows, probably installed in the 1960s, are single-pane wooden sash windows of good quality, although some need re-glazing and repairs to the wood itself. These windows will be restored as needed, and storm windows will be added for protection and further thermal protection. The specific choices pertaining to the windows will be reviewed with the CHC and will maintain the simple New England aesthetic.

## 3) Replace siding

At present the exterior is covered with gray asphalt shingles that are in disrepair. Some of the original wood shingles are still there beneath the asphalt; they are rotting and many are missing, but some of the original red color is still visible. Our goal is to restore the historic character of the building—to that end, all degraded siding material will be removed, insulation added, and new shingles and trim installed.

## 4) Improve accessibility

The church's original entrance was through a porch vestibule on the building's east side; the front entrance was added in 1949 and does not conform to current accessibility codes. The original side entrance structure is still mostly intact, although it was decorated with trellised woodwork that has been lost. We will eliminate the front entrance and restore access through the side entrance, installing a ramp and more generous stairs to conform to current accessibility standards (ADA and MAAB regulations). All changes and additions will be designed to respect the historic aesthetic and functional requirements of the building.

## **Project Highlights**

- **Project:** Repair and restore the church exterior, including roof and windows; insulate, re-side with similar materials. Make the building ADA-accessible.
- **Why?** St. Augustine's is a significant structure with a complex history and is deeply rooted in the community. Continuing deferred repairs will further damage a structure in urgent need of attention.
- **Why now?** The church has been awarded two grants totaling \$100,000 by the CHC; staff will oversee all work.
- **Timeframe:** All work will be completed in 2019.
- **Organizational support:** Cambridgeport Neighborhood Association, Inc., (a tax exempt, 501(c)3 non-profit), in partnership with St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church and the Cambridge Historical Commission
- **Estimated total project cost:** \$200,000
- **Fundraising Goal:** \$50,000+
- **Contact Information:**  
Gabriel Cira, Project Manager / 774-327-1248 / blue.cira@gmail.com  
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To donate: Check or money order made payable to Cambridgeport Neighborhood Association; note *St. Augustine* on the memo line. Mail to:

Julia Halprin, Treasurer, CNA  
11 Rockingham Street  
Cambridge, MA 02139

To donate online and learn more about this historic preservation effort visit:  
<https://www.cambridgeport.org>.

## **Addendum: An Architectural and Cultural History of St. Augustine's**

### Architectural history

St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church was built in 1886 as St. Philip's, a mission of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Central Square. The New Bedford-based architect Robert H. Slack designed the building and oversaw its construction and enlargement in 1888. In form, Slack's small Episcopal chapel resembles rural English church forebears, but in its wood construction and simple exterior it is distinctly American.

Slack was a talented and prolific architect. "When you begin looking for his buildings, they are everywhere," writes Peggi Medeiros, a Cape-based journalist and historian. Slack designed private homes, institutional facilities, commercial buildings, and houses of worship. His work included a new wing for Harvard's Peabody Museum in Cambridge; a brick orphanage, a furniture store, a congregational church, and several large houses in New Bedford; and an addition to the county house of correction in Fall River. He was the sole architect of research facilities for a short-lived marine biology school on Penikese Island in Buzzards Bay, and he donated his architectural services to build the outstanding Southworth Library in South Dartmouth.

In the early 1900s, Slack responded to a notice in a national Episcopal journal seeking an architect to design a church in Forney, Texas. It appears that Slack never visited Texas but designed the entire structure by mail, exchanging drawings and ideas with the rector. Holy Trinity by the Lake is somewhat similar to St. Augustine's, particularly in the form of its bell-cote and wood shingling. Slack sent two design schemes to Forney; the drawings for the scheme that was not chosen were given to another Episcopal congregation in the neighboring town of Kaufman, who used it to build their own church. Both Texas churches still stand today, although the Forney church was moved in 1973 to nearby Heath.

### Cultural history

The church called St. Augustine's was built in 1886 as a mission of St. Peter's Episcopal Church at 838 Massachusetts Ave and named St. Philip's. The ground for the new building was consecrated in early December 1886; the *Cambridge Chronicle* quoted the founding rector, Rev. Edward Gushee: "By reason of the great distance from St. Peter's Church of that part of the Parish, it became necessary to have a branch" in lower Cambridgeport. On April 2, 1887, the *Chronicle* reported that the outside of the church was finished and "shingled and painted a dark red color ... the main entrance is through a porch on the side." The new church was an immediate and resounding success and had to be enlarged within a year of its founding. Rev. Gushee preached at the reopening, in September 1888: "The immediate district where we stand today was unsupplied with a church and [a] hearty welcome ... has been given to this parish by people residing hereabouts." As an 1887 newspaper explained, "communication with St. Peter's Church by horse car was very indirect."

Rev. Edward A. Gushee was a wealthy, retired Episcopal priest, who owned the building, presided at services, and was the parish's sole financial support. At least 250 worshippers gathered each Sunday; 500 came on special occasions [*Chronicle*, July 10, 1920]. Membership records are unavailable, but most communicants probably came from the surrounding neighborhood, although some may have followed the priest from St. Peter's, where he had been rector. From its inception, the church accommodated diverse immigrant populations from the surrounding neighborhood. Rev. Gushee died in 1917; he willed the church to his son, Richard, an Episcopal priest in California, but made no financial provision for the church. Gradually, the congregation dwindled to only three. In 1920, past and present parishioners tried to revive the parish, highlighting social and fundraising events. The success of their efforts is unclear, but the church was advertised for sale in the summer of 1927: "Can be used for storage, church or remodeled for dwelling [*Chronicle*, August 26, 1927]."

In 1921, after a long spiritual journey, Bishop George A. McGuire (1866-1934) established the African Orthodox Church denomination. McGuire was born, raised, and educated on Antigua; he came to the U.S. in 1894 and two years later was ordained an Episcopal priest. He served in numerous parishes and was praised for both his preaching and his organizational skills. In 1910 he attended Boston University's medical school; in 1913 he went back to Antigua to nurse his mother. Following her death in 1918, McGuire returned to the U.S. and began to move in a new direction: he campaigned for equal rights for black Americans and severed his ties with the Episcopal Church due to its systemic racism and discrimination against black clergy. McGuire became an associate of Marcus Garvey and worked with Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA); Garvey in turn endorsed McGuire's idea that true equality and spiritual freedom could only be achieved by an all-black religious denomination—a church attended by people of color and administered by black clergy. Bishop McGuire and Garvey broke in 1924; Garvey had been dubiously convicted of mail fraud in 1923; he was imprisoned in 1925 for three years, and upon his release took his political work to Jamaica. McGuire continued his leadership of the African Orthodox church until his death in 1934.

In the fall of 1921, St. Luke's African Orthodox Church opened its doors at 252 Green Street (now the site of the Green Street Garage); in 1922, Bishop McGuire officiated at their first anniversary service. In 1931 the group took possession of the dilapidated St. Philip's and renamed it St. Augustine's African Orthodox Pro-Cathedral. (A pro-cathedral is a church named by a bishop to serve as his seat but which remains under the governance of the vestry.) Although Bishop McGuire died in 1934, St. Augustine's had a thriving congregation throughout the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In a 1976 "Message to the People of Cambridge" in the *Cambridge Chronicle*, the church announced it was planning to move "in a very new direction" to address social issues involving the larger Cambridge community. The church planned to offer a job placement program, free courses in English grammar and composition, consumer advice, and other services.

St. Augustine's African Orthodox Pro-Cathedral hopes that the restoration project will revive the place of the church in the community and allow them to provide a center "where the problems of the community can be discussed, shared, and ameliorated [*Chronicle*, 1976]."