

**Final Landmark Designation Study Report
St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church
137 Allston Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts**



Figure 1 St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church. CHC photo.

Summary

St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church at 137 Allston Street was constructed in 1886 as St. Philip's, a mission of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Central Square. It was the first church to open in the Pine Grove neighborhood of Cambridgeport and was so popular that it had to be enlarged two years later. The building was sold in 1928 to the trustees of a new denomination, the African Orthodox Church; one of the trustees was its founder, Bishop George A. McGuire. By 1934, the African Orthodox Church had 30,000 members in approximately thirty congregations in Africa, the United States, West Indies, and South America.

St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church meets criterion (1) of Article III of the city code for its important associations with the broad architectural, cultural, and social history of the city, and criterion (2) for its historical and architectural significance in terms of its period and style. On February 4, 2021 the Cambridge Historical Commission voted unanimously to recommend that the City Council designate the property as a Cambridge Landmark.

**Cambridge Historical Commission
February 9, 2021**

I. Location and Economic Status

A. Address, Parcel Number, Zoning

St Augustine's African Orthodox Church is located at 137 Allston Street in Cambridgeport near the corner of Brookline Street. The parcel is identified as 129 Allston Street, Map 9, Parcel 59, measuring 4,645 square feet. The property is in a Residence C zoning district which allows single- and two-family detached, townhouse, and multifamily dwellings with a 0.6 FAR and a 35-foot height limit. It also requires 1,800 square feet per dwelling unit, meaning that two residential units could be constructed on the parcel as-of-right per zoning. The total assessed value is \$865,900.

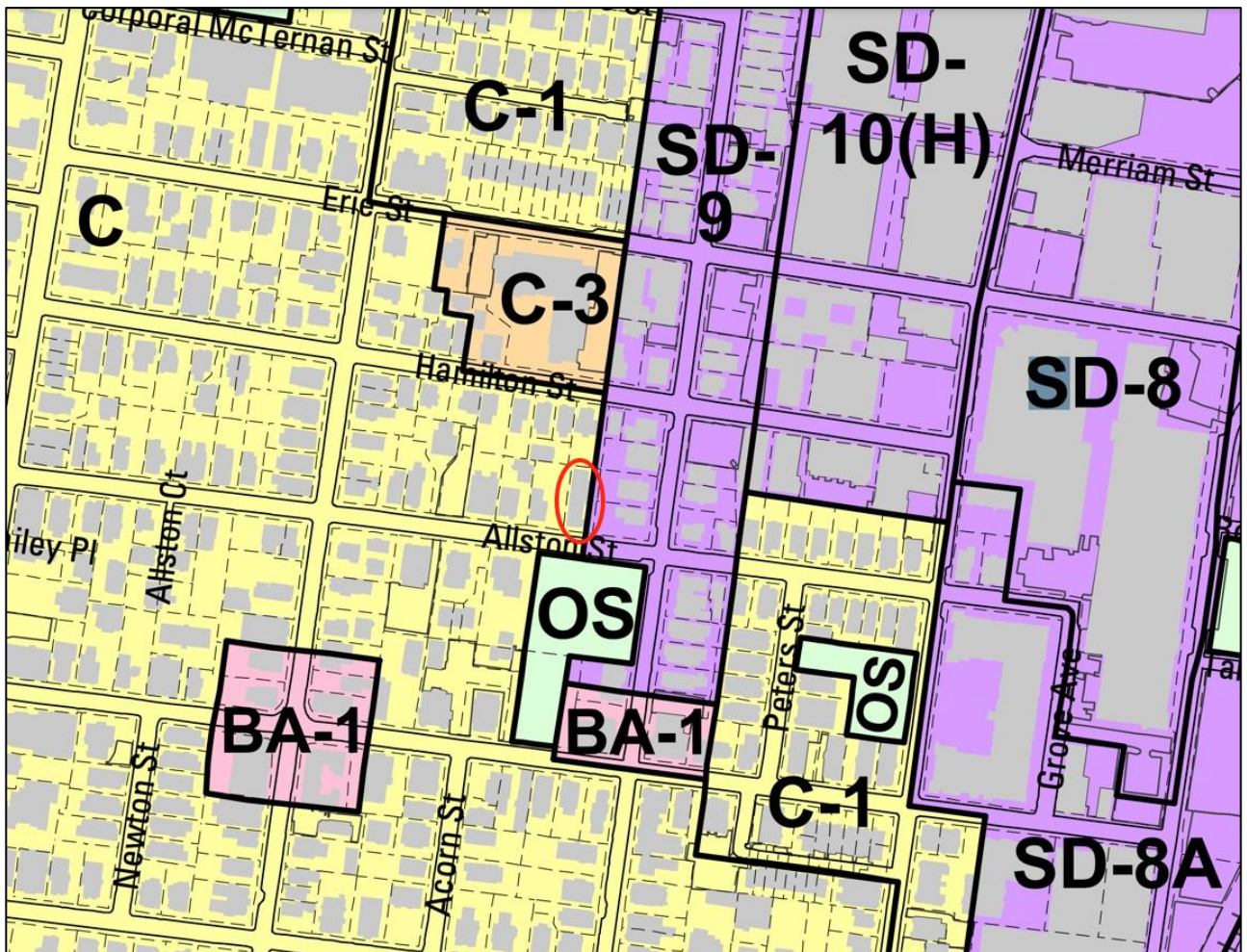


Figure 2 Cambridge Zoning Map showing 137 Allston Street parcel in the Residence C district. City of Cambridge.

B. Ownership and Occupancy

St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church is owned by the Trustees of The St. Augustine's Mission. The church is also the home of Black History in Action for Cambridgeport (BHAC), a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting programs focused on sharing Black culture, arts, history, and education with the general public. BHAC's mission is to sustain and revitalize St. Augustine's as a neighborhood center for assembly, empowerment, and outreach.

C. Area Description

The church is in a neighborhood of single- and multi-family dwellings. David Nunes (Old Morse) Park is directly across the street and provides open space and play activities for people of all ages. The neighborhood is traversed by four parallel streets – Pleasant, Magazine, Pearl, and Brookline – that run in a north-south direction from Massachusetts Avenue to the Charles River. Cross streets are narrower than the dominant thoroughfares and are staggered slightly so that most are not more than one or two blocks long. Allston Street is one of four streets that extend across the entire area in an east-west direction.



Figure 3 Aerial view of St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church and surrounding neighborhood. City of Cambridge.

D. Planning Issues

The immediate issue confronting the property is the condition of the building itself. Through various fund-raising efforts and grants, the Church is moving forward with efforts to restore and update the building. These efforts have been spearheaded by the Cambridgeport Neighborhood Association (CNA) and Black History in Action for Cambridgeport (BHAC). The CNA worked with the church's trustees to publicize the building's deteriorating condition and raise funds for the restoration project. The BHAC has taken up stewardship of the building with the goal of preserving the community service legacy of St. Augustine's with programs focused on Black culture, arts, history, and education for all.

The roof was insulated and replaced in 2020 using a \$100,000 Institutional Preservation Grant from the Cambridge Historical Commission that was matched with funds raised by the CNA and donated to the church. In addition to being in disrepair, there was no insulation between the subsurface and the asphalt. The entire roof was replaced with a new insulated roof with 30-year shingles, and structural steel bracing and tension tie-rods supporting the existing rafter trusses were installed.

A second Institutional Preservation Grant of \$50,000 and additional matching funds will be used to restore the shingled exterior, close the present entrance and restore the original side entrance, and install an access ramp. The current wood sash windows were most likely installed in the early 1970s and are in varying states of deterioration. The double window below the bellcote appears to contain the only original window sash. The building is clad in asphalt shingles applied over the original cedar shingles. The exterior walls are not insulated. The original entrance was through a side vestibule that is now used for storage. Restoration of the original entrance would provide an opportunity to create an accessible entrance and eliminate the current non-historic front entrance.

The Cambridge Historical Commission initiated a landmark designation study of St. Augustine's Church on February 6, 2020. On February 4, 2021 the Commission held a public hearing and voted unanimously to recommend that the City Council designate the property as a Cambridge Landmark.

E. Location Map

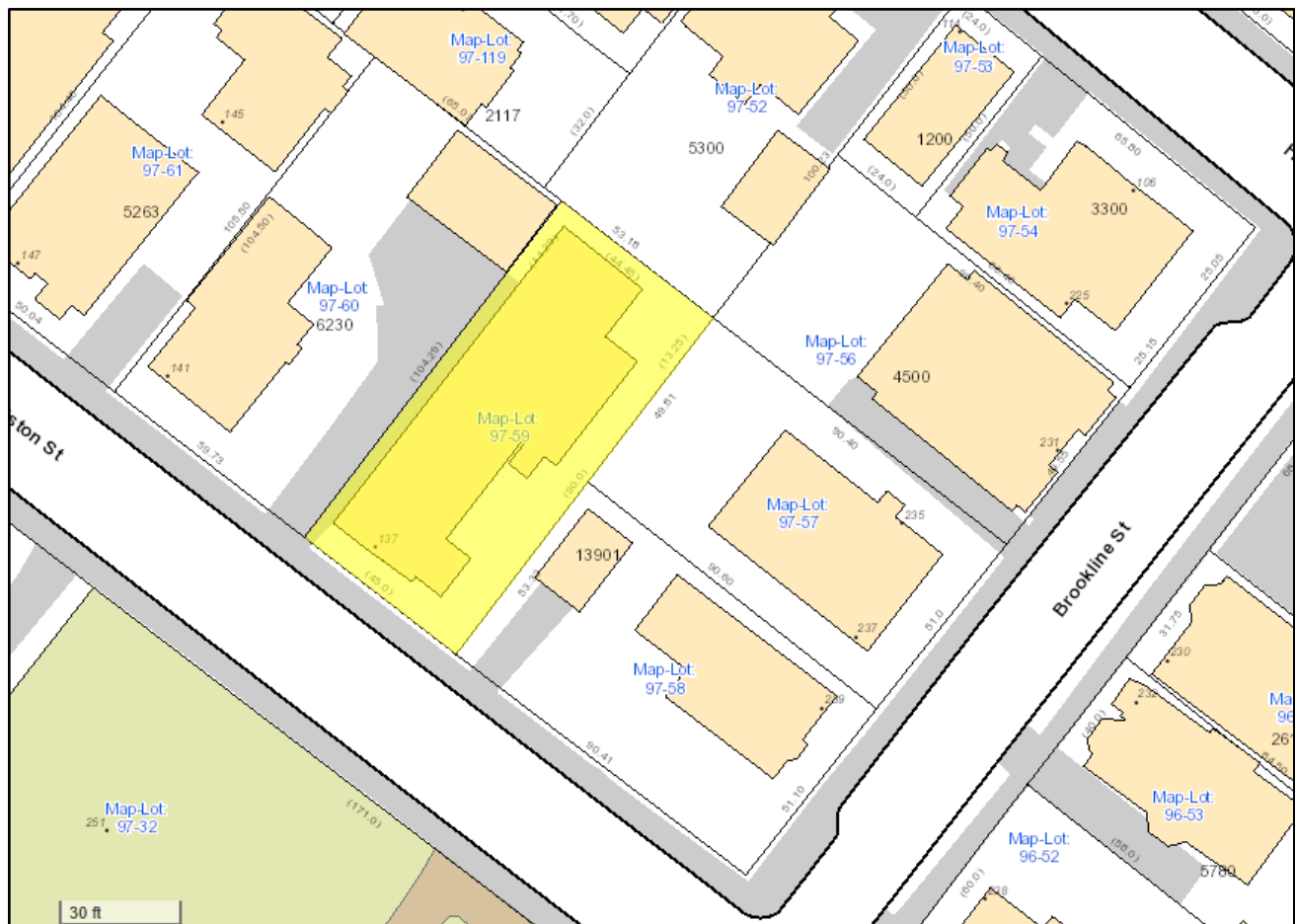


Figure 4 St. Augustine's African Orthodox (Map 97/Parcel 59) in yellow. Cambridge Assessors.

II. Description

A. Type and Use

The wood-frame building at 137 Allston Street was constructed as a house of worship in 1886 and enlarged in 1888. It continues in that use today.

B. Physical Condition

St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church is a one-story, wood-frame structure with rubble stone foundation, front gable, and central pedimented entrance. Above the entrance is a bellcote topped with an Orthodox cross. The building measures 90 feet by 24 feet, with 2,412 square feet on the main level and 1,748 square feet in the basement. The central front entrance was constructed in 1949, replacing the original entrance located on the east side with a porch vestibule. The vestibule is currently used for storage and retains the original painted wood interior. Two additional doors are located on the side. One leads down to the basement level, and another door further to the rear leads to the chancel. The exterior was clad in asphalt shingles in 1949, covering the original wood shingles. The original 16+16 pattern double hung sash with central colored glass panels in the sanctuary were replaced with 6+6 true divided light sash sometime after 1969 (see Figure 15). In all, most of the 24 double-hung windows and five decorative chancel windows over the altar are replacements. The interior, which can accommodate 400 people, features a sanctuary with open timber roof beams. The roof was replaced and insulated in 2020.



Figure 5 View of St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church front façade with entrance. CHC.



Figure 6 View of St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church front and east façades with new roof. CHC.



Figure 7 View of west façade of St. Augustine's. CHC.



Figure 8 Asphalt siding with exposed original cedar shingles. CHC

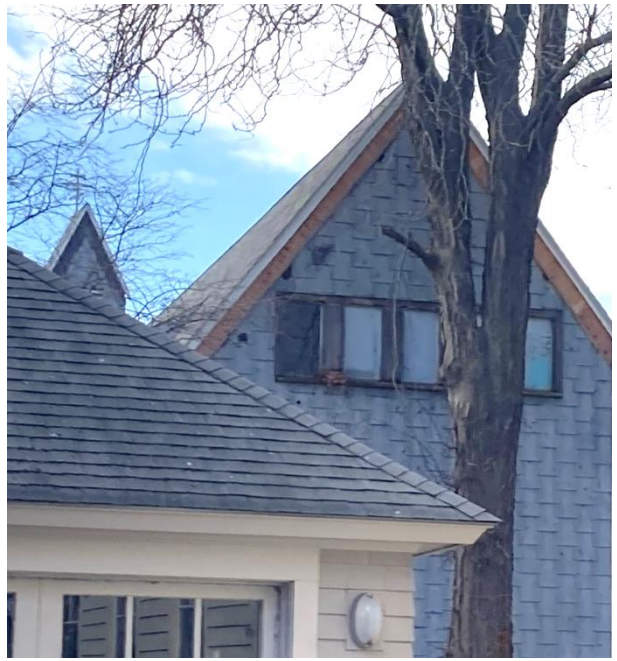


Figure 98 Chancel windows on rear façade. CHC.



Figure 10 Non-original bulkhead entry. CHC

III. History of the Property

A. Historic Development Patterns

1. Deed History

The property was originally part of the estate of Mrs. Washington Allston [Martha Remington Dana Allston] as drawn on a survey by William A. Mason and W. S. Barbour dated May 1, 1862 and filed in the Middlesex County (South District) Registry of Deeds, Plan Book 33, Plan 5. The rector of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Central Square, Rev. Edward M. Gushee, acquired the property in 1886 to construct a mission of St. Peter's. Rev. Gushee died in 1917 and bequeathed the property to his son Richard, an Episcopal minister in California. A new priest was appointed by the Diocese of Massachusetts, but the congregation dwindled over the next few years and could not sustain the church financially even though Rev. Richard Gushee continued to own the property. In 1927 Rev. Gushee sold the property to Central Square furniture dealer Morris Bobrick, who may have intended to use the property for storage but who defaulted on his mortgage. The property was bought at auction by Nettie E. Fernandez who in turn sold it to individuals associated with the African Orthodox denomination in 1931. (Book 5620, Page 136) The St. Augustine's property continues to be owned by the trustees of The St. Augustine's Mission.

2. Development History of Parcel and Surroundings

Allston Street was named for Washington Allston (1779-1843), an artist who pioneered America's Romantic movement of landscape painting. He married Martha Remington Dana, the daughter of Chief Justice Francis Dana, who owned most of the property in this area. Allston Street is a through street parallel to Putnam Avenue and intersecting with the main thoroughfares in the neighborhood, including Magazine, Pearl, and Brookline streets. The neighborhood is characterized by dominant north-south streets, uniform intervals between the cross streets, and sustained setbacks. Only on four streets – Green, Franklin, Allston, and Putnam – can one traverse the entire area in an east-west direction. Early building locations appear to have been determined by land elevation or proximity to Central Square. In 1830 there were only three cross streets; in 1854 there were six; and by 1873 the current street layout was virtually complete.

South of Allston Street is a slightly elevated and once heavily wooded area known in the 19th century as Pine Grove. In 1838 Edmund Trowbridge Hastings (1789-1861) and other Dana heirs laid out the Pine Grove subdivision with 131 house lots on Allston, Chestnut, Henry, Waverly, Sidney, Brookline and Pearl Streets. The original plan included a residential square around Fort Washington and another on Brookline Street that became today's Hasting's Square. Although some lots were sold, the area was too isolated to attract development even after the Cottage Farm (B.U.) Bridge was completed in 1851. Martha Allston's land on the north side of Allston Street (including the site of St. Augustine's Church) was subdivided in 1862 but remained substantially undeveloped until the 1880s, when the neighborhood began to fill up with one- and two-family houses. Construction of the Morse School in 1890 spurred development, and by 1910 the neighborhood was complete. It remains essentially unchanged today, although the school was demolished in 1957 and the site became a park.

B. Historic Maps



Figure 11. The Pine Grove subdivision of 1838 with the future site of St. Augustine's Church. H.F. Walling, Map of Cambridge, 1854

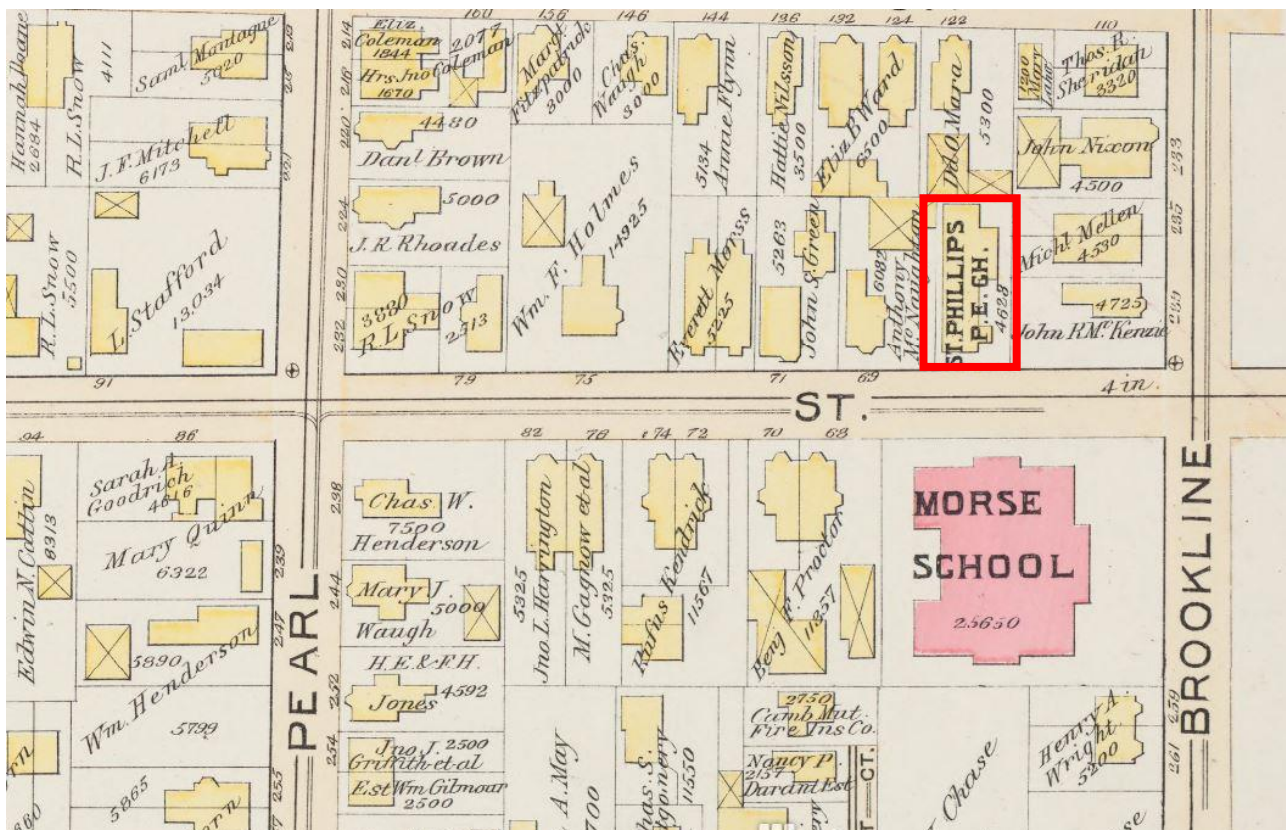


Figure 11. 1894 Bromley atlas showing building originally known as St. Phillips [sic] Protestant Episcopal Church.

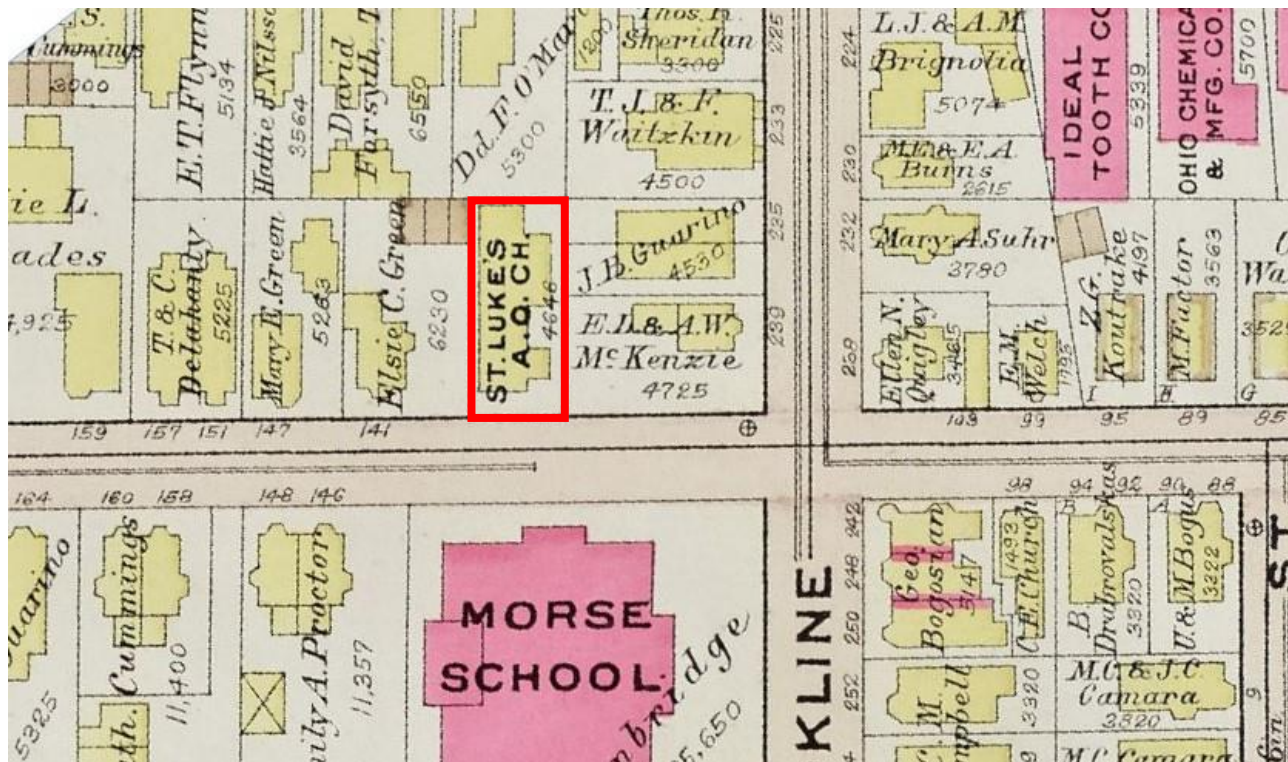


Figure 9 1930 Bromley atlas showing structure named St. Luke's A.O. Church. This may be a mistaken reference to another A.O. church on Green Street.

IV. Significance of the Property

A. Historical Significance

From the founding of Cambridge in 1630 to the construction of the West Boston (now Longfellow) Bridge in 1793, only three families lived east of Quincy Street on “the Neck,” a marshy, wooded peninsula formed by the Charles and Millers rivers. The opening of the bridge spurred development. By this time two Cambridge men owned most of the land in Cambridgeport: William Jarvis controlled properties north of Massachusetts Avenue and Justice Francis Dana to the south. (Much of the rest - and all of East Cambridge - fell to Andrew Craigie.)

Jarvis was the U.S. Inspector of Revenue. Dana, who descended from an old Cambridge family and resided on a large estate on Dana Hill, served as Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court from 1791 to 1806. The two men worked with the Proprietors of the West Boston Bridge to lay out Massachusetts Avenue and Main Street but did not otherwise develop a master plan for the area. Justice Dana developed his holdings slowly and carefully. In 1798 Jarvis was convicted of misappropriation of customs duties; the federal government seized his properties and sold them off to multiple owners.

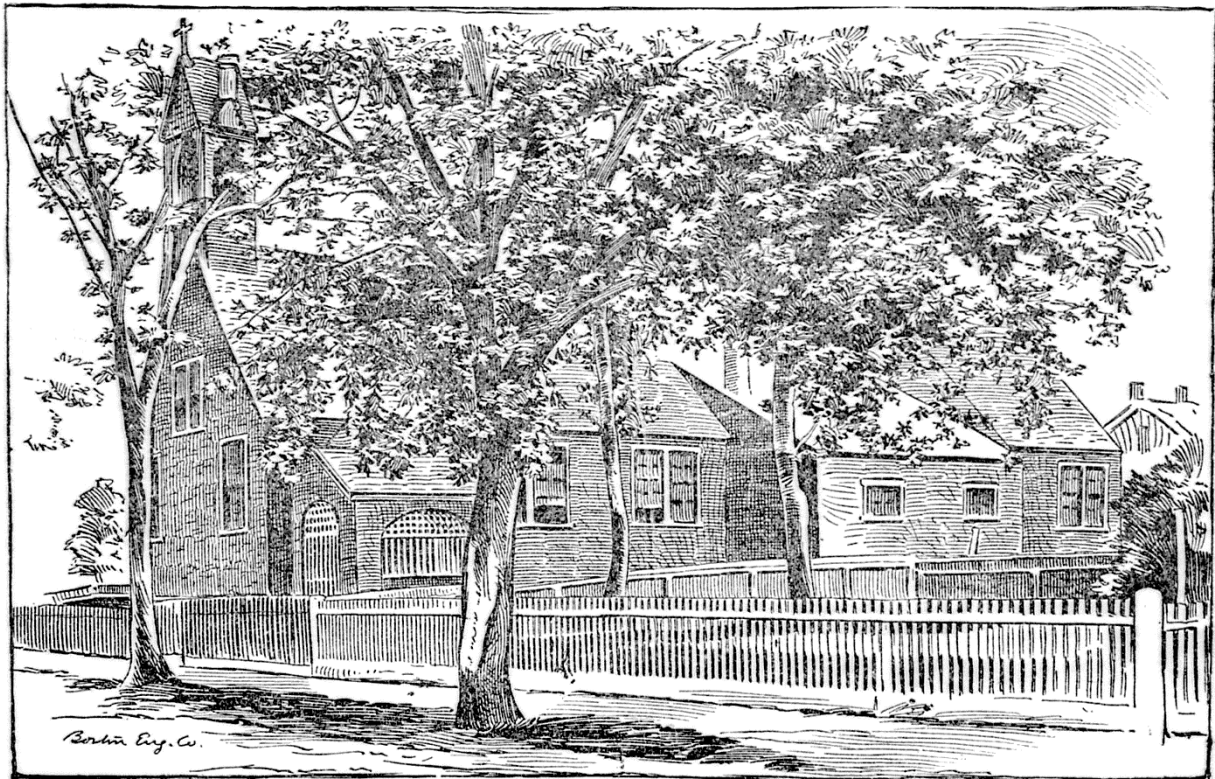
Justice Dana died in 1811, and his heirs continued to develop Cambridgeport in the same careful pattern. What is now Allston Street was a part of Justice Dana’s estate left to his daughter, Martha Remington Dana Allston (Mrs. Washington Allston).

St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church was built in 1886-87 as St. Philip’s, a mission of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Central Square. The remote site was chosen to attract parishioners from the surrounding neighborhood who found it difficult to get to church in Central Square. It was the first

house of worship to open in the former Pine Grove neighborhood and attracted so many worshipers that it needed to be enlarged two years later.

St. Philip's was designed by the New Bedford architect Robert Slack, who oversaw both the original construction and the 1888 expansion and worked with the local builders Kelley & McKinnon. Talented and prolific, Slack did not specialize in one style; he designed private homes, churches, and institutions, including a new wing at Harvard's Peabody Museum.

The church is reminiscent of an English village chapel but is distinctly American in its wood construction and simple expression. The exterior was shingled and stained dark red with trimmings of dark blue. The 50-foot-tall tower was surmounted by a gilded cross and enclosed a bell made at the Meneely foundry in Troy, New York. The main entrance was through a foyer on the right front. The interior featured an open-timbered auditorium with rows of cane chairs with hassocks for the congregation, double-hung windows with colored lights, and five decorative chancel windows high above the altar. The 1888 expansion involved cutting off the chancel end and moving it back 31 feet and building a section between with a transept on the south side, making the inserted section 31 feet by 34 feet. This increased the overall length from 60 to 90 feet and doubled the seating capacity to about 400. The basement was finished for use as Sunday School and guild rooms.



THE ENLARGED ST. PHILIP'S CHURCH.

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Figure 13 Image of church after expansion. Note the original side entrance on east facade. Cambridge Chronicle, Sept. 15, 1888.

St. Philip's was a personal project of Rev. Edward M. Gushee, who served at St. Peter's Episcopal in Central Square until Easter 1888, when he became rector of St. Philip's. A wealthy, generous man, Rev. Gushee owned the building, presided at services, and was the parish's sole financial benefactor. Gushee died in 1917, leaving a small allowance to the parish but bequeathing the building to his son Richard, an Episcopal minister in California who apparently had no wish to return to Cambridge.

The diocese supplied the parish with a priest for a few years, but the congregation dwindled and could no longer support either a rector or the building. In 1927 Richard put the building up for sale, advertising it as suitable for “storage, church or remodeled for dwelling” (*Cambridge Chronicle*, August 26, 1927).

In August 1928 Richard Gushee sold the property to Morris Bobrick, a furniture dealer in Central Square who may have used it for storage. Two years later Bobrick sold it to the trustees of a new church, identified in the newspapers as the African Orthodox Society. In 1932 the Cambridge assessors gave the trustees as George Alexander McGuire, Rev. Gladstone St. Clair Nurse, and Elvira Headley.

Bishop George A. McGuire (1866-1934) established the African Orthodox Church in 1921. 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, but in 1913 he went back to Antigua to nurse his mother.

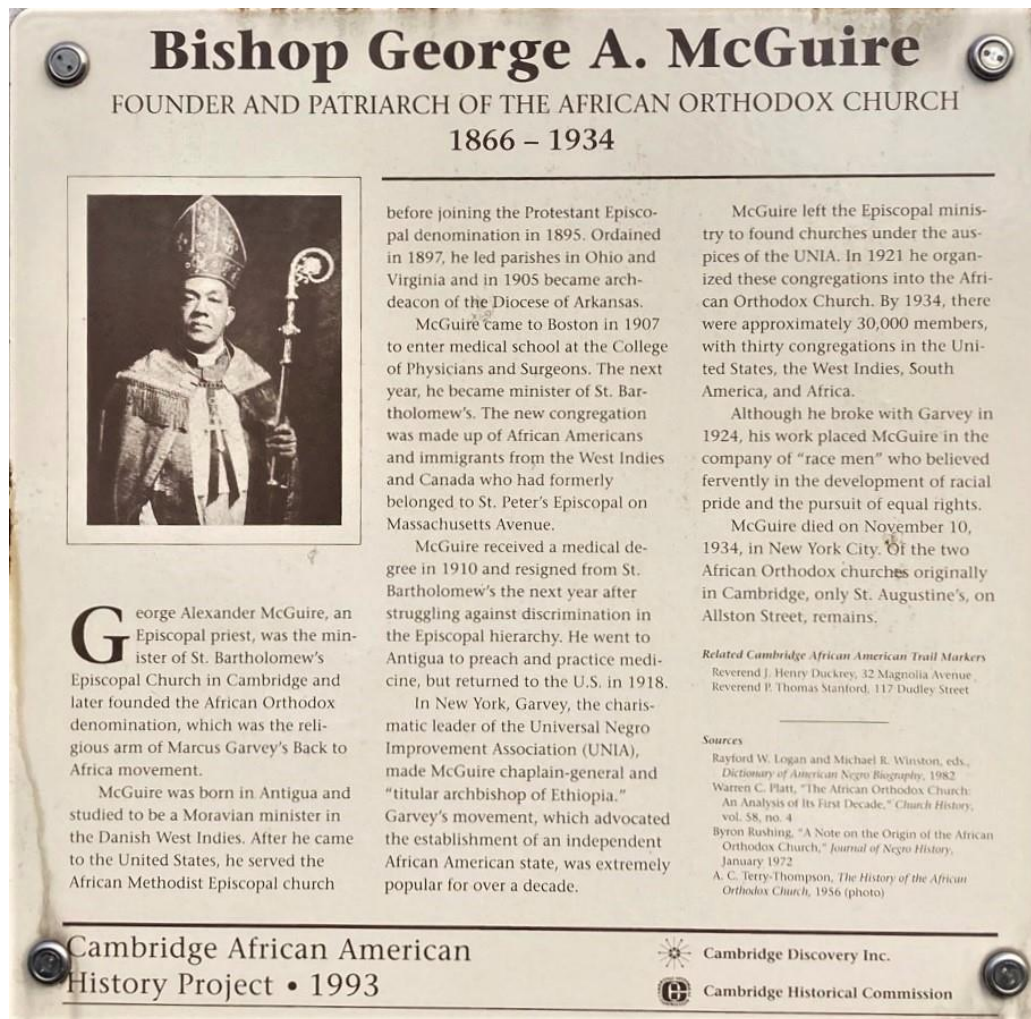


Figure 14 Historic plaque located on site. CHC

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 to protest 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. The bishop broke with Garvey in 1924, probably over the latter's increasingly radical ideas on racial nationalism.

In the fall of 1921, St. Luke's African Orthodox Church opened at 252 Green Street (now the site of the Green Street Garage). In 1931 the denomination took possession of the dilapidated St. Philip's and renamed it St. Augustine's African Orthodox Pro-Cathedral, with Bishop McGuire at its head. (A pro-cathedral is a church named by a bishop to serve as his seat but which remains under the governance of the vestry.) When Bishop McGuire died in 1934 the African Orthodox Church could claim approximately 30,000 members in thirty congregations in the United States, the West Indies, South America, and Africa.



Figure 105 St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church, 1969. Note the window patterns and bell visible in tower. CHC.

B. Architectural Significance

St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church is architecturally significant as an example of the Cottage Style designed by Robert H. Slack. The style is reflected in the simple one-story rectangular chapel form, open-timbered auditorium, center bellcote, and five chancel windows above the altar. The building was expanded a year after construction to accommodate the growing congregation by moving the chancel end back 31 feet and creating a 31- by 34-foot addition to the structure. The addition maintained the open roof system.

V. Relationship to Criteria

A. Article III, Chapter 2.78.180 a.

The enabling ordinance for landmarks states:

The Historical Commission by majority vote may recommend for designation as a landmark any property within the city being or containing a place, structure, feature, or object which it determines to be either (1) importantly associated with one or more historic persons or events, or with the broad architectural, aesthetic, cultural, political, economic, or social history of the City or the Commonwealth or (2) historically or architecturally significant (in terms of period, style, method of construction or association with a famous architect or builder) either by itself or in the context of a group of structures...

B. Relationship to Criteria for Landmark Designation

St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church is eligible for landmark designation under criterion (1) of the enabling ordinance for its important associations with the broad cultural, economic, and social history of the city based on its history of inclusiveness, community engagement and leadership of its pastors. It is also significant under Criterion (2) for its architectural significance as an example of the English Gothic Revival chapels prevalent in Cambridgeport in the mid-nineteenth century that served as mission stations established by parent churches.

VI. Recommendations

A. Article III, Chapter 2.78140

The purpose of landmark designation is contained in the enabling ordinance, which is to:

preserve, conserve and protect the beauty and heritage of the City and to improve the quality of its environment through identification, conservation and maintenance of ... site and structures which constitute or reflect distinctive features of the architectural, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City; to resist and restrain environmental influences adverse to this purpose, [and] to foster appropriate use and wider public knowledge and appreciation of such...structures...

B. Preservation Options

There are two options available to accomplish the long-term preservation of 137 Allston Street. The first is through a City Council vote to designate the property a landmark, the second through the owner's voluntary donation of a preservation restriction or easement to the Historical Commission or some other qualified body.

According to Article III, Chapter 2.78.190, designation as a landmark establishes a process wherein “the Historical Commission . . . shall review all construction, demolition or alteration that affects the exterior architectural features, other than color,” of the landmark. Chapter 2.78.210 states, “No building permit for alteration of an exterior architectural feature of a landmark . . . and no demolition permit for demolition or removal of a landmark . . . shall be issued by the City or any department thereof until the certificate required by this article has been issued by the Historical Commission. . . .”

A certificate of appropriateness, hardship, or non-applicability is issued by the Historical Commission depending on the nature of the alteration or construction proposed for the landmark. Applications for certificates of appropriateness or hardship are reviewed by the Commission at a public hearing, with 14 days notice provided to affected parties by legal notice and first class mail. The staff issues certificates of non-applicability administratively. The intent of the review process is to prevent “developments incongruous to the historic aspects, architectural significance, or the distinctive character of the landmark” (2.78.220) The designation report may be drafted to allow specific alterations to take place.

Preservation easements may be donated to the Historical Commission or another qualified historic preservation organization under Chapter 184 of the Massachusetts General Laws. An easement is a “non-possessory right to control what happens to buildings or land owned by others.” It is voluntarily conveyed by the property owner to an entity, such as the Historical Commission, which holds the right and enforces the terms. To be effective, the easement must protect the publicly visible features of the property from alteration without the Commission’s prior approval. It may also be drafted to allow specific development opportunities to take place or to protect significant interior features.

Preservation easements protect significant property in a similar manner to landmarking, that is, through review and approval of the Historical Commission and issuance of a certificate of appropriateness or hardship for any proposed repairs or alterations that affect protected portions of the property. Unlike landmarking, a preservation easement can protect significant interior features. However, drafting and executing a preservation restriction requires a substantial investment of staff time, which may not be warranted by protecting an interior that is unlikely to be altered by any foreseeable use.

C. Staff Recommendation

The staff recommends that the Historical Commission endorse the designation of 137 Allston Street, Cambridge as landmark.

VI. Standards and Criteria

A. Introduction

Under Article III, the Historical Commission is charged with reviewing any construction, demolition or alteration that affects the exterior architectural features (other than color) of a designated landmark. This report describes the exterior architectural features that are among the characteristics that led to consideration of the property as a landmark. Except as the order designating or amending the landmark may otherwise provide, the exterior architectural features described in this report should be preserved and/or enhanced in any proposed alteration or construction that affects those features of the landmark. The standards following in paragraphs B and C of this section provide specific guidelines for the treatment of the landmark described in this report.

B. General Standards and Criteria

Subject to the review and approval of exterior architectural features under the terms of this report, the following standards shall apply:

1. Significant exterior historic and architectural features of the landmark shall be preserved.
2. Changes and additions to the landmark which have taken place over time are evidence of the history of the property and the neighborhood. These changes to the property may have acquired significance in their own right and, if so, that significance should be recognized and respected.
3. Deteriorated architectural features should be repaired rather than replaced.
4. When replacement of architectural features is necessary, replacements should be based on physical or documentary evidence.
5. New materials should, whenever possible, match the material being replaced in physical properties, design, color, texture, and appearance. The use of imitation replacement materials is discouraged unless necessary to support sustainability of the architectural feature or the structure as a whole.
6. The surface cleaning of a landmark shall be done by the gentlest possible means. Sandblasting and other cleaning methods that damage exterior architectural features shall not be used.
7. New additions shall not destroy significant exterior architectural features and shall not be incongruous to the historic aspects, architectural significance, or distinct character of the landmark, neighborhood, and environment.
8. New additions should be designed in a way that if they were to be removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the landmark would be unimpaired.

C. Suggested Review Guidelines

1. Site Development

There appears to be no further as-of-right potential for development on the site. Partial demolition seems unlikely because the space lost could not be replaced easily. Full demolition is also unlikely because the building appears to exceed the present allowable FAR and that volume would be difficult to recapture through the special permit process. Expansion of the structure or the footprint should be confined to the east elevation, behind the vestibule. No such addition should rise higher than the eaves of the sanctuary.

2. Alterations

Publicly visible exterior alterations are subject to review and approval by the Historical Commission with regard to their design, appearance, dimensions, and materials.

a. Exterior surfaces and features

Removal of the asphalt siding and restoration of shingled exterior is the main priority for restoring the historic character of the structure. The siding should be removed carefully to reveal the shingle pattern and exposure so that it can be replicated. The original color of the shingles and trim should also be documented.

Original shingles and trim are unlikely to be salvageable. Replacement shingles should be either white cedar or cementitious material that duplicates the original in dimension, thickness, surface texture, and pattern. Replacement trim should be either pressure-treated pre-primed wood trim boards or PVC, matching original materials in dimension, texture, and method of installation.

Replacement siding may be installed over 1" rigid foam insulation and 3/8" battens, in which case the window jambs will be extended an equivalent amount.

Consideration should be given to restoring the bellcote to make the bell visible again.

b. Fenestration

Existing true divided light wood sash are not inappropriate, but if they are replaced consideration should be given to replicating the original sash, especially in the sanctuary.

Introduction of new window openings will be discouraged. Except in the sanctuary, windows that are not original should be restored to previous material and configuration. Storm windows may be installed or upgraded without review in conformance with Commission guidelines. Re-introduction of original window openings will be, subject to approval of construction details and replacement sash.

The original east entrance may be restored, subject to Commission approval of design and construction details. The existing entry door and steps are not original, and the front façade may be restored to its original appearance.

c. Accessibility

A code-compliant access ramp and a new entry (if necessary) on the east elevation will be approved subject to Commission approval of location and construction details.

d. Interior Features

Although interior features are not subject to the jurisdiction of the Cambridge Historical Commission, the owner is encouraged to preserve original spaces and their materials and detailing such as the trusses, beams, columns, cornices, wainscoting, staircases, and window trim. The stained woodwork of the interior should not be painted.

VIII. Proposed Order

ORDERED:

That St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church at 137 Allston Street be designated as a protected landmark pursuant to Chapter 2.78, Article III of the Code of the City of Cambridge, as recommended by vote of the Cambridge Historical Commission on February 4, 2021. The premises so designated consist of parcel 59 on Assessor's Map 97 as recorded in Book 5620, Page 136, at the Middlesex South Registry of Deeds, and the historic church building thereon.

This designation is justified by the important associations of the church with the historical, social and architectural history of Cambridge, specifically in that the building was the first church constructed in the Pine Grove neighborhood in Cambridgeport as part of the mission of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Central Square and then became St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church, the home of an important ministry founded by George A. McGuire in 1921, and that the church was designed in the Cottage Style by noted architect Robert Slack.

The effect of this designation shall be that review by the Cambridge Historical Commission and the issuance of a Certificate of Appropriateness, Hardship or Non-Applicability shall be required before any construction activity can take place within the designated premises or any action can be taken affecting the appearance of the premises, that would in either case be visible from a public way.

In making determinations the Commission shall be guided by the terms of the Final Landmark Designation Report dated February 9, 2021, and by Section VI, Standards and Criteria, and the applicable sections of Chapter 2.78, Article III, of the Cambridge Municipal Code.

IX. Bibliography

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