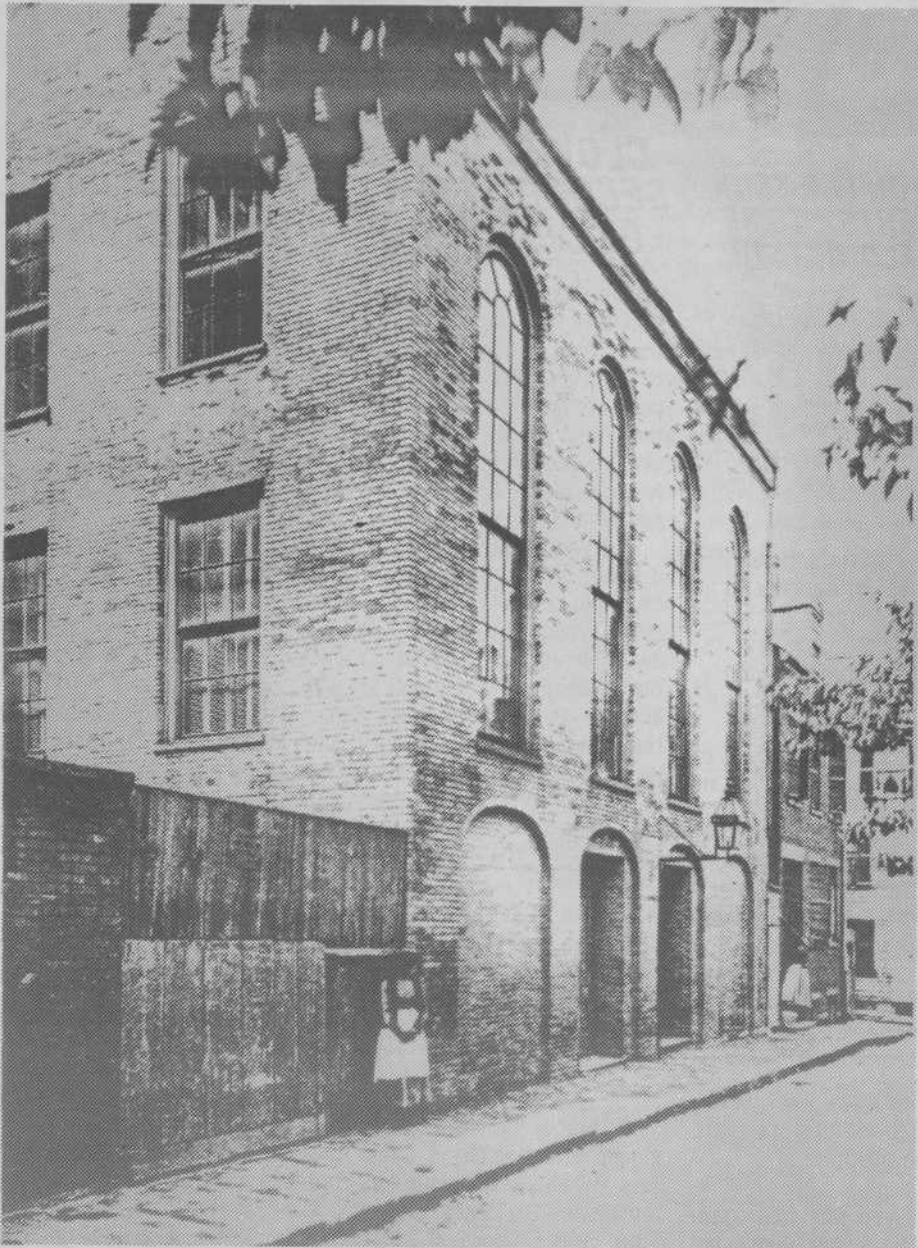


OLDEST BLACK CHURCH BUILDING IN UNITED STATES TO OPEN TO PUBLIC FOR FIRST TIME IN THIS CENTURY



The African Meeting House

BOSTON, Mass. — The African Meeting House, the oldest standing Black church building in the United States, will open to the public for the first time in this century on Sunday, October 11, 1987. The landmark occasion marks the completion of a \$1 million restoration of the African Meeting House, located on historic Beacon Hill in Boston, Mass. The restoration is a joint project of Boston's Museum of Afro American History, which owns the African Meeting House, and the National Park Service, North Atlantic Region Preservation Center, which was responsible for the restoration of the Statute of Liberty completed in 1986.

The first Africans arrived as slaves in Boston in February, 1638 — eight years after the city was founded. The Revolutionary War was a turning point in the status of Africans in Massachusetts; at the end of the conflict,

there were more free black people than slaves. The free black community in Boston was concerned with finding decent housing, establishing independent supportive institutions, educating their children, and ending slavery in the rest of the nation. All these concerns were played out in the Beacon Hill neighborhood centered in the African Meeting House.

The African Meeting House was built when the city's black community moved from the crowded North End to farmland on the north side of Beacon Hill. The Meeting House was constructed to encourage blacks to move to this new area. Land was purchased in 1805, and the Meeting House was completed the following year and dedicated on December 6, 1806. Its first occupant was the African Baptist Church, formed a year earlier and led by the Reverend Thomas Paul, a black minister from

New Hampshire.

The Meeting House was in every way the focus of the new community — the center of its political, social and spiritual life. The building served concurrently as a church, a school, a meeting hall, and often as a residence as well. It also provided physical and emotional security, a place where Afro-Americans could escape from the powerful everyday reality of 19th-century racism.

Numbering about 2,000 at its pre-Civil War peak, the Beacon Hill black community exerted national influence by confronting institutional racism within the city and Commonwealth, and by mounting an organized and spirited harassment of the forces of slavery throughout the country.

The African Meeting House was the center of much of this anti-slavery activity. It was there in 1832 that William Lloyd Garrison's New

England Abolitionist Society issued its Declaration of Anti-Slavery Sentiments beginning the Abolitionist Movement. In the ensuing years, prominent abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, Wendell Phillips, and Charles Sumner spoke from the pulpit to denounce slavery and to organize against it.

In reaction to the Fugitive Slave Law enacted in 1850, Boston's Afro-American community developed a network of "safe" houses on the north slope of Beacon Hill. This free black community's involvement in the maritime trades helped to aid the escape of many slaves, and it established Beacon Hill as an important "station" on the Underground Railroad to Canada and as one of the largest concentrations of freed slaves in the nation.

During the Civil War, Boston's free Afro-Americans volunteered to fight with the Union Army. With the encouragement of respected leaders such as Lewis Hayden and Frederick Douglass, Blacks were recruited from throughout North America and also

Africa, and — using the African Meeting House as a center — the 54th Colored Regiment was organized as the first regular Afro-American regiment in the Civil War.

The African Meeting House continued to serve its congregation and community until the close of the century. By the 1890's, however, the Afro-American community on Beacon Hill began to dissipate, as families moved to the South End, Roxbury, and other Boston neighborhoods. The Meeting House was sold in 1898, and was converted by a Jewish congregation into a synagogue in 1904 and served in that capacity for 68 years.

The Museum of Afro American History acquired the building in 1972, and became the first proponent of the idea that the meeting place and homes of the nineteenth century Black community on Beacon Hill should be recognized and protected as a national historic site. This led to Congress's establishment of the Boston African American National Historic Site in 1980. In 1983, Congress

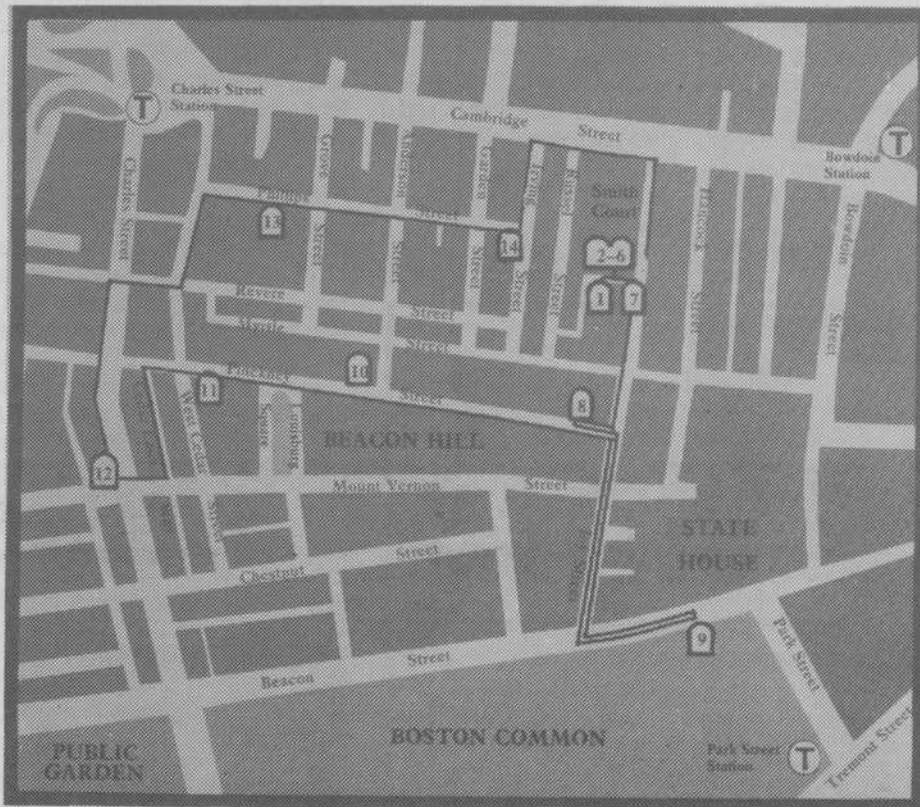
made a special \$1 million appropriation toward the complete restoration of the African Meeting House. The restoration began on September 2, 1986.

"The Museum's mission," states Ruth Batson, president, "is to provide Boston and New England with a constant reminder of the important role Black citizens played in the development of this country as one of the largest free Black populations in the 1800's. Boston's Black community made a major contribution in the struggle for human rights. This story must not fade from the collective conscience of this nation."

Historians, religious leaders, politicians, and interested citizens from throughout the U.S. will gather in Boston for the official rededication ceremonies and a week-long series of commemorative events planned by the Museum for October 11 through 16, 1987.

"The reopening of the African Meeting House is more than a rededication of bricks

See MEETING HOUSE, Page 13



Black Heritage Trail

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|---|---|
| 1. African Meeting House | 11. John J. Smith House |
| 2-6. Smith Court Residences | 12. Charles Street Meeting House |
| 7. Abiel Smith School | 13. Lewis Hayden House |
| 8. George Middleton House | 14. Coburn's Gaming House |
| 9. Robert Gould Shaw and 54th Regiment Memorial | Boston African American National Historic Site |
| 10. Phillips School | National Park Service |
| | U.S. Department of the Interior |