

FEATURE STORY: SAVING MOTHER TRINITY

How a landmark moved from loss to hope in Augusta, Georgia

by Joshua Castaño

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*"In the city of Augusta, where Eighth and Taylor meet
Stands a church with steeple reaching to the sky.
There since eighteen hundred forty devoted C.M.E.s
Have been praising Father, Son and Holy Ghost on high*

Chorus

*Trinity, dear Mother Trinity, for one hundred seventy years
Through faith, toil, prayer and tears
The Lord has worked through thee to serve humanity
And by His grace you'll prosper many more."*

"Mother Trinity" music and lyrics (alt.) by Dr. Ann D. Poole (1990) for Mother Trinity's 150th Anniversary

Mother Trinity CME is a historic sacred place with new hope, new purpose—and now a new location—after being moved earlier this year to save it from demolition. When environmental contamination left this important sacred place vacant and threatened with demolition, a major effort to save it generated a new plan for its future and a remarkable move to a new site in its historic neighborhood.

The congregation's pastor, the Rev. Dr. Skip Mason sums up Mother Trinity's extraordinary story. "We prayed to God to help us save this building. We know it's just a building, but it means so much to our church, the community of Augusta, and our members." Now Mother Trinity continues to stand as a proud and important landmark of faith and the story of African American life for nearly 170 years.

Two decades before the Civil War would alter the destiny of the nation and the 14th Amendment would be passed to permanently end slavery, 125 enslaved persons in Augusta, Georgia came together to build a house of worship at the corner of Eighth and Taylor Streets. As Rev. Mason put it, "This building is a symbol of the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of enslaved people who wanted their own place to worship freely. Out of this church came many great men and women who made great contributions to Augusta and the

world." One of those greats was the godfather of soul, James Brown, who developed a long and loving connection to the congregation.

Over the years, Trinity CME was given the name "Mother" because it was a pioneer in its day, giving determination and hope to enslaved people. Further, it was a founding congregation of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. The CME denomination was formally organized in 1870, and is one of the several historic associations that make up the rich tradition of African-American Methodism that has come to play a large role in defining the Black spiritual experience in America. Today the CME tradition includes 3,500 congregations with almost 850,000 members. Part of the CME denomination's distinctive character is its Social Creed, developed in the 20th Century as the church affirmed its concern with major social issues such as economic opportunity, justice, and human development. The values of the CME's Social Creed are one key to understanding the passionate purpose and mission of the congregation and its allies in the struggle to establish a community-serving future for Mother Trinity's historic home and to save it from destruction.

For over 150 years Mother Trinity was filled with voices of song, prayer, and joy, but for the last two decades it has been vacant and mournfully silent. In the early 1990s, the congregation made the difficult decision to move out of its beloved historic home to larger

and more modern space. It was discovered that the land under the church was contaminated by an adjacent, defunct gas power plant, posing serious health risks that were not readily addressed. Being forced to move only endeared the congregation to the old building even more, and in its new home the congregation refused to forget its original home. For years Mason brought groups of members, clergy and CME bishops to visit the site and pray together—on behalf of the congregation and its historic home.

By 2015, Augusta was increasingly committed to stewarding its historic places, exemplified by the work of the Augusta Canal National Heritage Area (NHA). Like other NHAs across the country, the Augusta group encourages the preservation of a collection of National Park Service, National Historic Landmark, and other related historic sites and landscapes, which form a network of institutions that work cooperatively with shared purpose and thematic unity. Thus, when Atlanta Light Gas Co., a regional utility company, bought the church and intended to raze it to pursue environmental remediation, Augusta Canal NHA and Rev. Mason took action. Many other African American historic sites had been lost in Augusta, and they were determined not to lose Mother Trinity. Staff from the Augusta Canal NHA—Dayton Sherrouse and Rebecca Rogers—initiated a “Save Mother Trinity” campaign to capture the attention of local media and civic leaders across the city.

Next, the Augusta Canal NHA took advantage of an opportunity offered through the National Heritage Areas Development Partnership, supported by funding from the National Park Service, that makes Partners’ services available to encourage preservation of sacred places. Local leaders hoped that Partners’ community engagement work and asset-mapping program could develop practical plans for saving this landmark building and reusing it as a community asset.

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Photograph: Michael Holahan/The Augusta Chronicle

Mother Trinity on the move

National Heritage Area Work

Mother Trinity CME’s salvation was encouraged by a unique collaboration between Partners and the National Heritage Area Development Partnership with support from the National Park Service. Since 2014, Partners’ services have been supported by a series of grants that have helped National Heritage Areas preserve important but challenged historic sacred places. In the case of Baltimore, Partners worked with the NHA to lead a town hall for congregations and artists, but most of the other projects have included community asset-mapping and design charrette work. (Charettes are community-based design events that convene a team of architects and designers to develop initial architectural concepts and visual documents that illustrate the potential for reuse and restoration.)

Other projects have included:

- The Blue Church, Wheeling, WV with the Wheeling NHA
- St. John’s Episcopal Church, Tusculumbia, AL with the Muscle Shoals NHA
- Clinton Church AME in Great Barrington, MA with the Upper Housatonic NHA
- Historic Ely Stake Tabernacle in Ely, NV with the Great Basin NHA

Upcoming projects underway include:

- First Presbyterian Church in Springfield, IL with Lincoln NHA
- St. Thomas Indian Mission in Yuma, AZ with Yuma Crossing NHA

These NHA-Partners collaborations have led to remarkable successes in preserving historic sacred places as community assets. In Great Barrington, Massachusetts, Partners worked with a local advocacy nonprofit, Clinton Church Restoration (CCR), to build on earlier community planning work for the future of Clinton AME, a church with strong connections to W.E.B. DuBois and the local NAACP Chapter. Following the NHA-Partners project, CCR was able to win \$100,000 in Community Preservation Act funding from the town of Great Barrington, and a highly competitive award of \$389,000 from the National Park Service’s African American Civil Rights Program. In rural Ely, Nevada, the community has been able to reorganize its efforts around a strong vision and new plan for the reuse of the former Ely Stake Tabernacle as a center for arts and culture; this project will tap into the many visitors who come annually to the scenic Great Basin National Park.

Photograph: A. Robert Jaeger, Partners for Sacred Places



Asset-mapping event in progress

With Partners’ support, Augusta Canal NHA convened an Advisory Task Force of leaders from across the community. All agreed that the best strategy to persuade Atlanta Light Gas to preserve Mother Trinity was a clearer vision for its future use, one that was supported by a diverse range of residents, leaders, and institutions throughout the city. Partners believed the Asset-Based Community Development approach would develop a vision with wide community support for new uses for the building by connecting its strengths with other assets in the larger community.

Partners worked with the NHA to plan and lead a public Asset-Mapping event in December 2016, bringing together fifty stakeholders, activists, leaders, professionals, and officials for three hours of dynamic conversation, relationship-building, and

new thinking on ways for the building to serve the community. The entire evening event was marked by strong attendance, high energy, and resourceful ideas.

A number of potential reuses emerged during the facilitated conversations, but one of the clearest and most interesting was the potential for Mother Trinity to serve as a place to interpret local African American history within the National Heritage Area. Participants envisioned it as an interpretive and welcome center to help orient visitors coming to enjoy the canal’s trails or engage with the story of African American people and life in Augusta’s past. These and other ideas were compiled, sorted, and organized by Partners following the event and shared with the Advisory Task Force and the Save Mother Trinity circle of supporters.

Rogers, a key leader in the effort, says that a new “community focus came through Partners’ guidance, which was invaluable; otherwise we may have been voices crying in the wilderness. This process brought Mother Trinity to the community’s attention and especially helped bring the value of this place to the attention of Atlanta Light Gas.”

Although Atlanta Light Gas participated in the asset mapping event and was supportive of its conclusions, it faced deadlines to remediate the site by 2019. An initial proposal by the city to move the building to an adjacent parcel was turned down by the utility, but eventually conversations moved towards a solution that Atlanta Light Gas could accept and support, due in no small way to the persistence and hope of the community rallied by the NHA. Not only did the company agree to allow the

building to be moved; but it also deeded its new location to the Augusta Canal NHA and paid almost half of the \$750,000 in moving costs.

In the two years since Partners led the asset-mapping event, the hard work of saving Mother Trinity has continued. “Partners were good cheerleaders for us - this was a slough,” said Rogers. The building was moved in June of this year to its new location, closer to the banks of the Augusta Canal. Local residents watched in astonishment as the entire building was slowly moved, at a rate of about 25 feet a day over several days. A grant from the Georgia Division of Historic Preservation is funding a Historic Structures Report and Preservation Plan that will permit architects and building conservators to develop a careful set of priorities for preserving and restoring the building. In October, the collective effort of local leaders was acknowledged



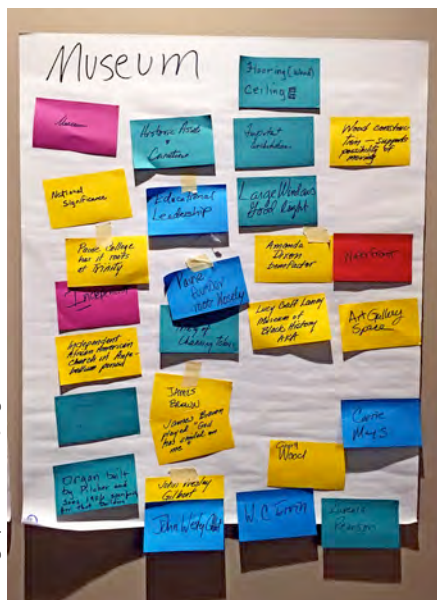
Photograph: Rebecca Rogers, Augusta Canal NHA

when they were invited to a 178th Anniversary Celebration held by the Mother Trinity congregation in its new building.

The congregation’s own reflection on the long journey of its landmark birthplace is summed up by pastor Rev. Mason: “We are so grateful that community stakeholders and everyone saw the value in this building and came together to save it. God answered our prayers. He sent us the Augusta Canal NHA and Partners—and so many wonderful people came. People thought it couldn’t be done but it was tremendous. It means a lot to us physically and spiritually.”

And as Rev. Mason emphasizes, saving Mother Trinity “gives hope to other historic churches” as well; instead of suffering loss or demolition, sacred places can be given new life and new hope. 🌿

Photograph: A. Robert Jaeger, Partners for Sacred Places



Assets identified that would support a potential museum at Mother Trinity