



AFRICAN MEETING HOUSE RESTORATION

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It will be a special day for Boston when the newly restored African Meeting House is open to the public once again. Built in 1806, it was an African Baptist church, a school, and a gathering place for people of African descent.

Thanks to the Obama Administration, work begins this fall to restore this precious building, and reopen it to the public as the final stop on Boston's African American Heritage Trail®. Under the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the National Park Service granted the Museum of African American History a four million dollar grant to bring back the National Historic Landmark.



When the reconstruction is complete and I visit the historic building for the first time, I want to wander the rooms of the 3-story red brick building on Beacon Hill and imagine the sights and sounds that would have been heard within its hallowed walls during the turbulent years of 19th century America.

I will imagine hearing the booming voices of the great abolitionist leaders, Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison, denouncing slavery and developing strategies to end it. I will envision the preachers of the African Baptist Church standing in the oldest black church building in the nation. I will hear them praise the Almighty and pray for justice and freedom. I will hear teachers instructing black children in



reading and arithmetic, and black men enlisting in the Union Army to fight the Civil War with the renowned Massachusetts 54th Regiment.

I also suspect I will imagine hearing conversations between community organizers and runaway slaves who “rode” the Underground Railroad to Boston in need of the food and shelter the African Meeting House community organizations would provide. I will hear the gentle voices of cultured ladies of color explaining to gatherings how to act in Boston society, their etiquette, manners and appearance. I will also hear children in concert raising their voices in songs of freedom. And I will imagine the sounds of spirited debates between various community organizations about the best way to improve the self-sufficiency of people of African descent. Talk about a multi-purpose space.

Few know that 200 years ago, Beacon Hill was an all black neighborhood where the African Meeting House was THE place for almost everything: worship, education, anti-slavery activities, community organizing, lectures, celebrations and concerts. The African Meeting House was the springboard that made Black Bostonians, in the 1800’s, among the most active self-help and educationally motivated African Americans in the nation.

Located in the shadow of the State House, the re-opening of the African Meeting House should engender more city pride because of the illustrious history of its black members in the Bay State’s fight against slavery and their push for black self-sufficiency, education and culture. But the building will not only belong to Boston; it will belong to the nation, another shining example of the triumph of the African American spirit in overcoming the adversities that befell them.

September, 2010