

Report to LACH on the Fugitive Slave Chapel Preservation Project

In recent days the Fugitive Slave Chapel Preservation Project (FSCPP) steering committee has been asked to report on progress since its creation as a community endeavour in 2013, when the owner of the small chapel building at 275 Thames Street applied for a demolition permit. It was then a house with room divisions rather than a chapel, for it had been a private home for more than 140 years. Following a ground swell of support by many individuals and organizations, the small wood building was moved (on November 12, 2014) through the streets of London to 432 Grey Street. It was positioned onto a cement foundation next to the more substantial Beth Emanuel Church (BEC), its 'daughter' church, and became the property of the British Methodist Episcopal Church.

That dramatic move and new foundation was brought about with fund raising and financial support from a large number of individuals and organizations including, significantly, the City of London. The contribution of Beth Emanuel Church in accepting this property (on its new purpose-built foundation) on an empty lot adjacent to and owned by the church, seemed like the perfect solution. A community consultation process determined that the restored chapel, along with a supporting addition to the north, would become a learning centre about slavery, the Underground Railroad, and London's historic black community reaching back many years before the U.S. Civil War.

A complete report of accomplishments to date by the FSCPP is important at this juncture because our community-based FSCPP steering committee was informed by an e-mail on January 27, 2018 that it had been dissolved and replaced by a committee of the same name, to be led by the Trustees of Beth Emanuel Church. Our great disappointment was that after many months we were unable to achieve a management agreement between the Board of Trustees and the FSCPP, which would outline the responsibilities of each body similar to other agreements between a property owner and a managing body. We believe this unexpected dissolution was undemocratic because the changes made did not respect the FSCPP governance document and gave no opportunity for the existing committee to respond. It was particularly hard to understand because Dr. Chester Searles, leader of the British Methodist Episcopal Church in Toronto, noted the need for and encouraged the adoption of an agreement when we met with him on two occasions, on May 15, 2016 and on November 8 of 2017.

At this meeting with LACH, and for the public record, our committee will articulate the project's goals and **outline the measures we have taken to move it toward the creation of a Learning Centre about slavery, the Underground Railroad and London's historic Black community.** The restored chapel building with an attached addition to the north would accommodate school groups, researchers, tourists, and all visitors. It would teach about slavery and tell London's own story among the existing Black history sites in southwestern Ontario. It would be a community meeting space open to a range of programming.

For ease of reference, the project has been divided into four phases, as follows:

- Phase I – An archeological assessment by Timmins Martel Heritage Consultants of land behind the building on Thames Street, involving many volunteers for the ‘dig’ and for cleaning artifacts at the London Museum of Archaeology. Moving the chapel building from its original location to property adjacent to Beth Emanuel Church on Grey Street, following the construction of a purpose-built cement foundation.
(Phase I completed in 2014)
- Phase II – Planning with heritage architect for the restoration of the original chapel building, preceded by the investigation of its original configuration. Removal of wall divisions and interior and exterior layers added over many years as a home. Construction of a supportive addition to enable the historic building’s use as a learning centre about slavery, the Underground Railroad, and London’s Black history. The planning and promotion of the project and fundraising to enable the actual restoration and construction.
- Phase III - Laying the groundwork for the FSC learning centre including the establishment of operating by-laws, code of conduct, goals, mission statement, and efforts to create a sustainable future through the establishment of the Friends of the FSC group, or other similar organization. Gathering archival information and collecting artifacts for use in the restored building.
- Phase IV –Full implementation of the Fugitive Slave Chapel learning centre and the hiring of a part time administrator.

We will give an overview of what has been accomplished in the period since the building was moved. This report refers to what has been done in Phase II and Phase III

1) PLANNING.

In the spring of 2015, the FSCPP created, discussed and passed a governance document to give some structure to the organization that had formed so quickly in 2013. The project would be led by an executive committee (chair, vice chair, secretary and treasurer) and included the formation of two sub-committees, Fund Raising and Heritage Restoration, the latter to advise on changes to the building. The pastor of Beth Emanuel Church was always a member of the FSCPP steering committee by virtue of her position; in recent months, all three pastors were invited to attend.

The planned purpose for the building and its addition were developed through a community consultation process, inviting participants to give their ideas and select preferences for the building’s future use. This consultation was held at an open house held by Beth Emanuel Church on the weekend of March 27-28, 2015.

In early summer 2015, we invited proposals and selected John Rutledge, a highly respected heritage architect, to plan with the committee the careful restoration of the chapel and the construction of a supportive addition at the north end. Through Mr. Rutledge, the plans for both restoration and construction have been drawn up.

2) RESTORATION.

We have consulted with heritage professionals to assure that high restoration standards and guidelines will be met. These include architect Rutledge and James Knight, a wood engineer who prepared a preliminary condition assessment on the chapel building. We engaged the services of heritage consultant Nancy Tausky and her team, who in the summers of 2015 and 2016 coordinated the removal of exterior and interior layers, including wallpaper and wall divisions that had been added over the more than 140 years that it was a private home. We also have as a resource on our committee several members of Architectural Conservancy Ontario with a solid understanding of and some experience in heritage restoration.

A report by Nancy Tausky follows this overview.

3) HISTORY.

In the last three years, we have connected with historians at both Western and Huron University College through participation in conferences and teaching experiences; we initiated an oral history project led by Natasha Solomon, which should continue; and we have consulted with archivists to develop an archives report. The history of the chapel and of London's Black community, its historic context in Upper Canada in the mid-1800s, has been (and continues to be) researched by historian Hilary Neary.

A report by Hilary Neary follows this overview.

4) OUTREACH.

We have engaged with Londoners through talks to groups in London, Stratford, and Thorndale and through visual presentations at community and neighbourhood fairs and events, such as Gathering on the Green, the opening celebration of Black History Month (2016 and 2017), Doors Open (2015 and 2016) and the Woodfield Spring Fair (2015-2017) and the Heritage Fair at London Public Library (2016 and 2017). We have raised funds through small sales and a quilt raffle for a patchwork quilt specially created for that purpose.

For Black History Month in 2017, we commissioned and produced at the ARTS Project a new play, *My Name is Margaret Harmon*, by Jason Rip. This highly successful drama included a true story based on a local woman's surprising discovery of an ancestor, a fugitive slave who came to this area with a white woman and lived in Thorndale. George McNeish designed and crafted an innovative set composed of white three-dimensional forms that magically came together as the slave chapel building at play's end. The total net proceeds were \$4,672.05.

We have connected with leaders of Black History sites in southwestern and central Ontario by visiting these sites and meeting key people. These include the sites in Dresden, North Buxton, Amherstburg, Chatham and Oro-Medonte. We have also talked about our plans with members of Ontario Heritage Trust.

We sent annual updates to our list of donors for fund raising purposes, and have prepared status reports for different community organizations. Long-time supporters continued to give, but we quickly learned that larger public and corporate funds needed to complete this project required a clear separation between the FSCPP as a community project and the BME as a church.

5) CONTINUITY.

Over three years, we have explored options for future sustainability by first establishing a governance framework as mentioned earlier, which was passed by the project committee in April of 2015, and with the intent this year to review and improve it.

We adapted, from an existing management agreement for the historic Old St. Thomas Church and proposed a draft agreement that would clarify roles of the FSCPP steering committee vis à vis the Trustees of Beth Emanuel Church. This has not been signed or responded to by the Trustees of Beth Emanuel Church. Planning long term, we had hoped to create a sustainable future through the establishment of a Friends of the Fugitive Slave Chapel group, or other similar organization.

In conclusion, as the former chair and speaking on behalf of the community-led FSCPP steering committee, we are proud of our work towards establishing a future use for the small but very important building known as the Fugitive Slave Chapel. We are concerned about the future of the historic building and whether the original intent to restore the chapel 'in keeping with good heritage stewardship' (a phrase used by Councillor Harold Usher in seeking city support in 2013) will proceed as expected. The donations given by the many individuals and organizations to support the project as outlined over the last three years must be used for the purpose for which they were given. The necessary separation of financial records and funds between church and the FSCPP must be maintained.

We have been invited by Pastor Delta McNeish, the new chair, to participate in the 'new' FSCPP under church control. However, the substantial funds necessary for restoration and construction can only be raised and disbursed by a committee at arm's-length from the church.

Because we are concerned about the future of the chapel, we are requesting that the London Advisory Committee on Heritage designate the building for its significant cultural heritage value.

Genet Hodder
Former FSCPP chair, March 2015-January 2018
31 March 2018

Fugitive Slave Chapel Preservation Project

Report to LACH on archives management, historical research, and building resources for future programming

11 April 2018

1. In order to plan for the preservation and care of archival material, books and artifacts to be housed in the renovated chapel, I consulted local experts in the field of archival management in the summer and fall of 2015. My recommendations, submitted to the Steering Committee on 8 December 2015, included guidelines to advise the project architect, John Rutledge, in his design of storage and conservation space in the chapel basement. It also contained preliminary advice to the Steering Committee regarding future collection building and maintenance, which was framed to encourage conversation at the committee level regarding the chapel's future programming mandate.

2. The FSCPP has moved on many fronts to develop community interest in the restoration of the chapel and to increase knowledge about the history of the Black community in London. The history of the AME Church in London and the building it once occupied have long been subjects of my own historical research. In the spring of 2013, when the owner of 275 Thames Street sought a demolition permit from the City of London, I reported to the Heritage Planner and LACH on the history of ownership and occupancy of that property. Subsequently, with the formation of the FSCPP, I undertook to continue my research to discover as much of the history of the AME/BME churches in London as possible. My work will continue, independent of the governance issues currently affecting the FSCPP. Some accomplishments to date are:
 - 2.a. I have compiled information on those men who were the trustees of the AME Church that built the chapel on Thames Street, on those who sold it as trustees of the BME Church, and on those who were responsible for constructing Beth Emanuel on Grey Street. In the future, this database could grow to include information about all known members of London's early Black community.

 - 2.b. To learn more about the history of the AME Church, I have surveyed contemporary histories of that institution, and using those histories and other tools, have compiled a chronology (with bibliographic sources) of the AME/BME Church in Upper Canada and Canada West.

 - 2.c. Reverend Lewis Chambers was stationed at the chapel on Thames Street in London by the American Missionary Association during the early 1860s. I borrowed on interlibrary loan the two-reel collection of correspondence written by AMA missionaries stationed in Canada West to the AMA secretary in New York. I then made copies of all correspondence therein relating to London, and transcribed those letters with the intention of creating a source for the history of an important period of the growth of the Black community in London. Subsequently, those reels

were purchased by the D.B. Weldon Library at UWO to augment its already rich collection on Black history.

2.d. On 30 May 2017 I gave a talk at the Central Library in its “Terrific Tales of London & Area” series on “Rev. Lewis Chambers’ London Ministry to Blacks”. My interest in Chambers’ time in London grows, and I am working on an edition of his letters for possible publication.

3. As part of the application of funds from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the FSCPP engaged Natasha Solomon to carry out an oral history project. She interviewed Londoners whose families had connections to Beth Emanuel Church, whose backgrounds trace directly to slavery in the U.S., or who have a long history in London’s Black community. These recorded stories and archival material relating to them will be available for research and as a resource for future programming when the learning centre opens.
4. During the work on this oral history project, Natasha worked closely with Stephen Harding, a local historian and collector. He has since donated to the FSCPP the material he assembled over many years on the history of the local Black community. It will be a valuable resource for those developing interpretive programs and is being kept safe in the London Room at Central library until the learning centre opens.

Hilary Bates Neary

27 March 2018