



HBI *Insights*

NEWS FROM HISTORIC BOSTON INCORPORATED • FALL 2000



Steeple Project Soars to Funding Milestone

St. Gregory Parish in Dorchester (inset) is reinstalling its original stained glass doors with funds from a Steeples grant. St. Gregory Pastor Msgr. Paul Ryan and Chad Perry of HBI stand in front of one of the historic church's original doors (right) which Msgr. Ryan recently tracked down.



Photos: Christopher Fitzgerald

What are the lifelines of Boston churches looking for funding and technical assistance to preserve their buildings for future generations?

Historic Boston's Steeples Project is one. Twelve charitable foundations have pumped \$1,068,000 into the matching grant program since its inception in 1993.

The George B. Henderson Foundation and Save America's Treasures (a partnership between the White House Millennium Council and the National Trust) awarded grants for the Steeples Project this year, propelling it over \$1 million in total funds raised.

The funding milestone indicates a growing support for HBI's historic religious properties preservation initiatives, according to HBI Executive Director Stanley Smith.

"Stimulating new investments in historic religious properties is at the core of the Steeples Project," Smith said. "Systematically redressing legacies of deferred maintenance not only preserves community landmarks and cherished houses of worship, but also perpetuates social services which bind communities together."

The Steeples Project distributes the money it raises in the form of competitive matching grants to Boston churches, all of which are listed or are eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The grants are used for technical assistance, major structural repairs, and exterior lighting.

Casebook Properties Reveal Opportunities and Obstacles for Historic Preservation

Bold steps forward, new challenges, and the unfortunate loss of two historic structures marked HBI's initiatives this year to save endangered historic properties in Boston.

Following up on its 1999 Preservation Revolving Fund Casebook which profiled forty significant endangered properties in the city, HBI completed a feasibility study this spring on redeveloping the Alvah Kittredge Park Row Houses in Roxbury into eight condominium units.

HBI also secured a grant from the Keen Foundation to study other Casebook properties that might be suitable for redevelopment as affordable housing.

As HBI Project Manager Chad Perry notes, however, critical preservation

projects are going unrealized despite recent preservation successes and the current economic boom.

"The prosperity and preservation accomplishments of the past few years, while certainly laudable, have nonetheless generated a false sense of security that historic buildings somehow just get saved," said Perry. "While people face high rents and insufficient housing, historic properties are being torn down or allowed to deteriorate. We need to show that redeveloping these historic properties can help alleviate the housing crunch that many neighborhoods are feeling."

Already this year, the owners of the Town Houses in Bay Village (formerly 17

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Casebook

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and 19 Shawmut Street) and the Hoosac Store in Charlestown tore down their historic properties with official sanction from the city, despite major redevelopment occurring nearby.

In the face of these setbacks, and recognizing that the fate of many other historic buildings is precarious, HBI is actively looking for opportunities to invest its own capital and that of others in Casebook properties.

The Alvah Kittredge Park Row Houses feasibility study, prepared with Amory Architects of Brookline, concluded that rehabilitating the property as eight condominiums would require a subsidy of \$150,000 per unit. (See photo above.)

Perry admits that the million-dollar shortfall and the separate ownership of each of the four lots remain major obstacles in the redevelopment of the Second Empire-style row houses. But he maintains that the row house block can add much-needed housing to an improving urban neighborhood.

“In the current housing shortage, it would be a tragedy to let the property simply languish,” he said.

Marcia Myers, an HBI board member and preservation consultant, said that HBI’s initiatives focus on pivotal properties whose redevelopment could have a positive ripple effect on the surrounding community.

“These projects aren’t just about saving buildings,” said Myers. “They’re also about saving neighborhoods.”

More information on the properties profiled in HBI’s Preservation Revolving Fund Casebook can be found on the HBI Web site at www.historicboston.org.



Photo: Christopher Fitzgerald

Horace Crockett, who has owned and lived in the leftmost house since 1946, and HBI Executive Director Stanley M. Smith, in front of the Alvah Kittredge Park Row Houses. The right three dwellings, one owned by the Boston Redevelopment Authority, have been vacant for more than a quarter-century. Structuring investments and subsidies to restore housing to this pivotal Roxbury site is high on HBI’s list of priorities.

HBI Publishes Study on the Old Corner

When it comes to preserving historic buildings, planning for the future invariably involves looking at the past. In an effort to guide its own future preservation efforts, Historic Boston looked “back to the future” this spring with the publication of a comprehensive Historic Structures Report on the Old Corner Bookstore buildings it owns in downtown Boston.

The report details the architectural history of the Old Corner and outlines standards and criteria for future changes to the buildings.

According to Ned Miller, a project manager at HBI who worked on the report, the Historic Structures study fills an important void in the documentation of the city’s architectural resources.

“A group of buildings as historically significant as the Old Corner Bookstore merits an authoritative account of its development, evolution, and uses,” said Miller. “Our goal was to amass and verify all of the piecemeal research that existed on the Old Corner and put it into a useful format for future reference.”

HBI will use the Historic Structures Report as a planning tool for interpretive changes to the Old Corner, which may include rebuilding the pitched roof along

School Street and recreating the buildings’ former signage.

The Old Corner actually consists of five distinct buildings built between 1718 and 1828, explained Tobin Tracey, the architect consulting with HBI on the report. Tracey noted that the significance of the complex spans three centuries.

“The Old Corner buildings are very representative of eighteenth and nineteenth-century architectural design, and the fact that they still exist today is a testament to successful preservation efforts in the second half of the twentieth century,” he said.

In 1960, the Old Corner became a seminal building in the city’s preservation movement when a group of citizens formed HBI to save the structures from demolition.

The Old Corner achieved national prominence as a meetingplace for American and English writers during the mid-1800s. At the time, the booksellers Carter & Hendee and publishers Ticknor & Fields occupied the building, and literary giants like Hawthorne, Emerson, Dickens, and Harriet Beecher Stowe regularly gathered at their offices.

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1999/2000 Steeples Project Grant Awardees

Albanian Orthodox Cathedral of St. George,
South Boston

Blessed Sacrament Church, *Jamaica Plain*

Brighton Evangelical Congregational Church,
Brighton

Christ Church of Hyde Park, *Hyde Park*

Church of the Immaculate Conception,
South End

Dorchester Temple Baptist Church,
Dorchester

Ebenezer Baptist Church, *South End*

Eliot Church, *Roxbury*

First Baptist Church of Boston, *Back Bay*

First Church in Jamaica Plain, *Jamaica Plain*

First Haitian Baptist Church, *Roxbury*

Grace Church Federated, *East Boston*

Greenwood Memorial United Methodist
Church, *Dorchester*

Holy Family Church, *Dorchester*

Holy Trinity German Catholic
Church, *South End*

Jamaica Plain Spanish Seventh Day
Adventist Church, *Jamaica Plain*

Mission Church, *Mission Hill*

Old North Church (Christ Church),
North End

Old West Church, *West End*

St. Brendan Church, *Dorchester*

St. Gregory Parish, *Dorchester*

St. John's / St. James Episcopal Church,
Roxbury

St. Peter's Parish, *Dorchester*

St. Stephen's Church, *North End*

Theodore Parker Unitarian Church,
West Roxbury

Steeples

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Monsignor Paul T. Ryan, pastor of St. Gregory Parish in Dorchester Lower Mills, says that facing up to the many steps involved is a difficult first step toward refurbishing an aging church.

"There is often strong resistance at the outset, when people discover that you have to hire an architect, obtain bids, draw up contracts — and find money to pay for it all," he explained. "That's when HBI's encouragement and helping hands go a long way."

HBI awarded St. Gregory's a Steeples grant of \$3,500 last fall to undertake a rehabilitation assessment of the ornamental rear entrance stairway and to replace the church's doors.

In June, however, Msgr. Ryan discovered that the original wood and stained glass doors of the church still existed and had been sitting in a warehouse for nearly thirty years. Now, he plans to have the original doors cleaned and reinstalled.



Photo: Christopher Fitzgerald

To leverage a Steeples Grant award for the Greenwood Memorial United Methodist Church, Christine Arato (left), a historian with the National Park Service, shown here with Pastor Marcelle Dotson, volunteered her time to write a National Register of Historic Places nomination for the church. The nomination will make the church eligible to apply for a Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund grant next year.

Illuminating the skyline of Back Bay soon will be the tower of the First Baptist Church of Boston, thanks in part to an \$8,000 Steeples Project lighting grant. The new lighting plan highlights the tower's decorative frieze designed by

Statue of Liberty sculptor Frederic Auguste Bartholdi.

First Baptist board member and church clerk Donald Thacker says the illumination will help kick off a campaign of major renovations for the 1871 structure designed by H.H. Richardson.

"Bringing attention to our great tower will help us rally the community in a preservation campaign to restore this historic building to its original grandeur," said Thacker.

HBI awarded \$195,000 in matching Steeples grants to 25 local churches in the 1999–2000 grant round. Over its seven-year history, the project has assisted 43 different religious properties in Boston, most of which are located in the city's transitional neighborhoods.

The \$571,000 disbursed by the Steeples Project so far has leveraged an additional \$4,865,000 in investments and contributions toward critical repairs to historic religious properties in the city.

Two Steeples grants to the Albanian Orthodox Cathedral of St. George spurred the cathedral's \$1 million rehabilitation project, which is now seventy-percent complete.

HBI awarded the cathedral a technical assistance grant in 1998 for a comprehensive assessment of its failing structure. The report called for repairs to the masonry structure, façade, towers, roof, and stained glass windows of the South Boston landmark.

According to Denise Lymperis, volunteer project manager for the cathedral restoration, even as the church grew in members and expanded its outreach internationally, its physical structure was crumbling.

"We realized that restoring the cathedral building was essential to continuing our numerous cultural, social service, and humanitarian programs. Without one, we couldn't have the other," said Lymperis.

Old Corner

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The report includes a narrative history of the Old Corner's development, an illustrated description of the building fabric, and CAD drawings of existing conditions and suggested future improvements.

A Preservation Projects Fund grant from the Massachusetts Historical Commission funded half of the cost of the report. With the grant award, HBI recorded a five-year preservation restriction agreement on the Old Corner requiring any proposed exterior alterations to be reviewed by the State Historic Preservation Officer.



The Old Corner Bookstore circa 1895

Photo: HBI Archives

About Historic Boston...

Historic Boston Incorporated is a private, non-profit organization that puts people and resources together to preserve endangered historic sites in the city of Boston. It gives priority to projects which will leverage additional public and private commitments, embody thoughtful restoration standards, catalyze neighborhood renewal, and protect cultural resources.

To accomplish these objectives, Historic Boston engages in a variety of entrepreneurial activities which include buying property, making grants, providing technical assistance, lending money, building the capacity of other organizations with similar goals, and seeking new funds. Over the past 15 years, Historic Boston's revolving fund has invested \$4.6 million for 14 preservation projects, which has leveraged more than \$25 million of additional investments in Boston neighborhoods.

Historic Boston provides leadership, leverage and focus for people and organizations throughout the region who share the ideals and objectives of safeguarding America's heritage.

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