



# HBI *nsights*

News From Historic Boston Incorporated • Fall 2003

## Steeple Project celebrates 10th Anniversary

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the Steeples Project, Historic Boston's initiative that awards grants for technical assistance, major repairs, and exterior illumination to Boston's historic churches and synagogues.

We at HBI believe that urban religious properties are crucial landmarks for communities—defining neighborhoods, creating a sense of place, and housing social service programs that strengthen and sustain the shared bonds of communities. As such, they are well worth protecting.

Unfortunately, many are also endangered. This year, the National Trust designated urban churches as one of the eleven “most endangered” property types. This is a reality that Historic Boston has been grappling with for years. Due to a combination of aging structures, deferred maintenance, changing demographics, and rising property values, many historic and architecturally significant religious structures in Boston neighborhoods are in danger of slipping into decline or are already declining.

The Steeples Project works against this decline. It has made, and continues to make, a vital difference in the lives of Boston's historic houses of worship by helping communities identify what needs to be done, and laying a foundation on which to amass the funds required to address these needs.

The origins of the Steeples Project actually date to the mid-1980s, when Historic Boston published two widely disseminated studies on efforts to preserve the interior spaces of two significant Boston religious properties—the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Boston's South End, and the Vilna Shul on Beacon Hill. In both cases, attempts to designate the interiors

of these buildings as landmarks failed. These failures were a rallying point for HBI and the philanthropic community, creating an opportunity to develop a proactive, rather than a reactive, stance. A new goal emerged: identifying problems and suggesting solutions before new crises erupted. HBI first set out to define the scope of the problem. During 1987, Historic Boston identified and catalogued every extant house of worship in Boston. In 1988 and 1989, in cooperation with the Boston Landmarks Commission, the Massachusetts Historical Commission, and supportive city councilors, Historic Boston staff rated each of the properties in this database according to historical and community significance. This led to the research and publication of HBI's “Religious Property Casebook” in 1991, which highlighted 40 of the most significant endangered religious sites.

Each of the 40 properties selected for inclusion in the casebook was in need of careful stewardship and substantial financial investment—resources that their owners lacked. This compelling demonstration of need led, in 1993, to the creation of the “Steeple Project.”

Over the past ten years, the project has awarded close to \$1.2 million in grants to 46 religious properties of various denominations in the city of Boston. These funds have in turn leveraged more than \$10 million in additional investments. Financial support for the Steeples Project has come from the George B. Henderson Foundation, the Boston Foundation, the Harold Whitworth Pierce Charitable Trust, the Herman and Frieda L. Miller Foundation, the Mabel Louise Riley Foundation, the Mifflin Memorial Fund, the Peter and Carolyn Lynch Foundation, the Hyams Foundation,



Workers install a newly-fabricated window in the tower at the Church of St. John the Evangelist on Beacon Hill. The wood frame window, funded with help from a 1996 Steeples Project grant, matches the style of others on the facade and replaces a 1960s concrete block style infill of the opening.

Gap, Inc., Shawmut Bank, the Boston Globe Foundation, the Edward Ingersoll Browne Fund, the Fidelity Foundation, and Save America's Treasures.

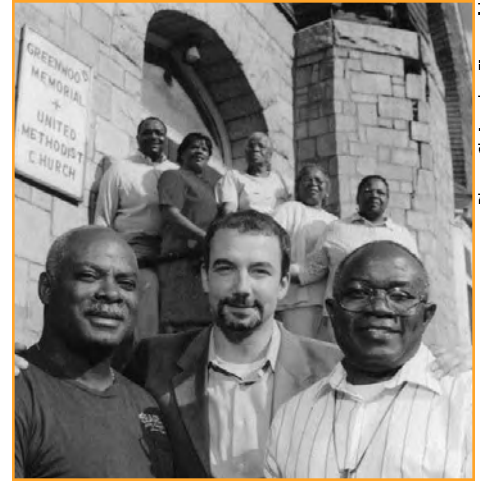
In the 2003–2004 grant cycle, the Steeples Project has awarded an additional \$250,000 to religious properties in Dorchester, East Boston, Beacon Hill, the South End, South Boston, West Roxbury, Brighton, and Jamaica Plain. The grants range from \$5,000 for technical assistance to \$50,000 for major repairs.

*continued on page two*



Above: Participants at the first training module of New Dollars/New Partners in front of the New Old South Church.

Above Right: Allen L. Merren, Local Project Coordinator at Greenwood Memorial Methodist Church, Anthony F. Papillo, former HBI Project Manager, the Reverend Alex Musoke, Pastor, and congregants. A Steeples Project grant will help pay for emergency repairs to the masonry behind them.



### *continued from page one*

The Steeples Project has also branched out into other areas of aid to local congregations. In 1997 and 1998, with a grant from the Harold Whitworth Pierce Charitable Trust, HBI organized a low-cost energy conservation program for religious property owners. A skilled Philadelphia-based religious property energy consultant, Andy Rudin, prepared customized plans for 16 congregations to help them reduce energy costs. HBI then offered grants to cover half the estimated costs of conservation measures.

These measures turned out to be extraordinarily effective. In 2003, Eric Martin, a recent graduate of the University of Vermont preservation program, gathered data from gas, oil, and electric suppliers to evaluate the success of the program at each location. Together, the 14 fully participating congregations saved more than \$223,000 between 1998 and 2002, freeing up funds to support the mission and maintenance of these properties.

Historic Boston also retained Claude E. Menders Architects in 2002 to prepare historic door studies and oversee door preservation projects at the Church of the Immaculate Conception; Second Church of Christ Scientist, Dorchester; Eliot Congregational Church, Roxbury; and Christ Church of Hyde Park. Collectively, these churches will spend \$150,000 restoring the portals that

welcome worshippers and community members alike.

We look back on the past ten years with a sense of achievement and pride. We also look to the future with energy and commitment, as we continue this important work and further widen our focus.

In June 2003, Historic Boston sponsored the first of four training modules in a yearlong program called “New Dollars/New Partners,” aimed at building the capacity of leaders in Boston’s congregations to act as better stewards of their properties.

Developed by Partners for Sacred Places, with financial support from the Lilly Endowment, New Dollars/New Partners focuses on helping congregations to:

- articulate the historic, social, and artistic importance of their properties,
- quantify the dollar value of the services that their facilities make available to the larger community,
- substantiate the cost and priority of addressing deferred maintenance and of making judicious investments,
- tell their story effectively, and
- mobilize and motivate congregants to procure new resources to support these historic buildings and the programs they house.

Nine Boston congregations are participating in the first year’s training program. They include Brighton

Evangelical Congregational Church; Christ Church, Hyde Park; Church of St. John the Evangelist, Beacon Hill; Church of the Immaculate Conception, South End; King’s Chapel, Central Business District; Old West Church, West End; St. John’s Episcopal Church, Jamaica Plain; Second Church in Dorchester; and Union United Methodist Church, South End.

The program also helps leaders of congregations justify soliciting help for building maintenance when so many other urgent needs are competing for the same dollars, both in the local community and worldwide. The Rev. Dr. Nancy Beuth of the First Presbyterian Church in Germantown—one of several religious leaders who worked with Sacred Places to develop the New Dollars/New Partners program—offers one compelling answer:

Sustaining ... community today requires more than ever a depth of resources, which include a building to sustain us against the magnitude of the world’s needs, a building to stand in the midst of a community, witnessing to the message that is taught within its walls, a building that is recognized as a sanctuary, providing a safe and secure place of refuge, a building that provides ministry and compassion to all.

Beuth’s statement reaffirms the underlying philosophy of the Steeples Project. Historic religious properties tell the stories of people and communities, past and present, and help meet the needs of diverse constituencies. They are an integral part of the rich tapestry that is the city of Boston.

# Update: The Modern Theater... Rescued!

In the last *HBI Insights*, we reported on the plight of the Modern Theater, a once-distinguished cultural space in the downtown Boston arts district which was suffering from more than twenty years of deferred maintenance and downright neglect. Readers will recall that last May, the Henry H. Levin Trust, then the owners of the Modern, asked the Boston Landmarks Commission to allow them to remove the top portion of the building's pediment due to serious instability. In response, on August 11, 2002, the Boston Landmarks Commission designated the site a Boston Landmark; but the Levin Trust responded with a request to demolish the building, while dismantling the façade for later reconstruction.

Hoping to preserve the structure, HBI initiated a study to help the Boston Redevelopment Authority and the Boston Landmarks Commission analyze the situation. The study focused on the means, methods, techniques, and costs of eliminating the structural hazards posed by this designated Boston Landmark.

There was another plot twist still to come. In November of last year—just as our last newsletter was going to press—a judge ordered the owners to demolish the building as a public safety hazard within weeks, unless the Boston Redevelopment Authority acquired it and submitted plans both to preserve the building and to ensure public safety.

It is gratifying for us at HBI to report that since then, the Boston Redevelopment Authority has taken the Modern Theater by eminent domain, stabilized it, and tentatively designated a team—headed by Boston philanthropist Robert C. Sager—to redevelop the site. A task force at the Sager Family Traveling Foundation

and Roadshow is currently working on plans to redevelop the building with community uses in mind.

The architectural firm of Levi Newcomb and Son designed this 16,840 square-foot Washington Street structure in 1876 as a mercantile building. Originally known as The Dobson Building, it spent its first half-century as a carpet warehouse. In 1913, the well-known Boston entrepreneur and philanthropist George R. White hired Clarence H. Blackall, one of America's leading early 20th century theater architects, to add a theater on the lower floors for the presentation of "high class photo plays." Blackall created a striking three-story, 800-seat auditorium with a graceful marble-faced arched entry.

Despite the building's slow but steady decline in subsequent decades, we at HBI believe that the Modern is worth saving and redeveloping, and we applaud the foresight and courage of those who have brought the building back from the brink of destruction.



Above: A line drawing by of the Modern facade by F.C. Detwiller.

Right: Structural Engineer John Wathne bought a remote-controlled toy car to photograph conditions in areas of the Modern Theater where it was deemed unsafe to walk.



## Next steps: The Alvah Kittredge Park Row Houses



Before and After; Alvah Kittredge Park Row Houses.  
Photo by Chris Brown

The Alvah Kittredge Park row houses have long been a missed opportunity for both the preservation and the affordable-housing communities. These four historic brick “Second Empire” row houses in Roxbury’s Highland Park neighborhood, only 15 minutes southwest of Boston’s central business district, have gradually fallen into decline over the past half century. Three of the buildings were uninhabitable for more than a quarter of a century—surely an unacceptable situation in light of the critical shortage of housing in Boston.

In 2000, at the request of one of the private owners, HBI completed a feasibility study on these four structures. During the next two years, HBI invested more than \$450,000 in two of the houses, which the Boston Redevelopment Authority had acquired, to do exterior restoration and structural stabilization. The George B. Henderson Foundation, the Massachusetts Historical Commission, and Historic Boston funded the work. Amory Architects completed the feasibility study and prepared plans for the renovations.

HBI is extremely pleased to report that in July, after a long and careful process, the Boston Redevelopment Authority issued a Request for Proposals for potential developers of its two Alvah Kittredge Park row houses. Proposals are due on September 30, 2003. Soon, after many years of neglect, these units may once again be fulfilling the purpose for which they were constructed—that is, offering comfortable homes to their residents—and will once again be contributing to the long-term stability of the Highland Park neighborhood.

## Baker Mill Powerhouse: Then and Now

One of the 40 pivotal, endangered historic properties highlighted in HBI’s 1999 Casebook is still deteriorating. (Notice especially the destroyed parapet wall in the 2003 photo.) A lengthy permitting process and soft development market have not been kind to the Baker Mill Powerhouse in Dorchester Lower Mills. The site’s developer is now working to secure financing and hopes to move forward with residential redevelopment of the mill complex in the first quarter of 2004.



1999



2003



Stanley M. Smith

Photo: Christopher Fitzgerald

## Letter from the Executive Director

We are in the midst of an exciting year for Historic Boston, in part because we are celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Steeple Project.

Over the past ten years, the Steeple Project has made a vital difference in a wide range of Boston neighborhoods. Recently, for example, HBI staff and a Steeple grant spearheaded efforts to address unforeseen structural defects at the onset of a rehabilitation project at Greenwood Memorial Church near Codman Square. Cracks that were thought to be in the stone veneer instead turned out to be symptomatic of serious underlying structural defects, caused by water infiltration over many years. The congregation's leaders could have given up; instead they rose to the challenge, obtaining financial commitments from individuals to supplement grants from HBI and the Massachusetts Historical Commission. This intervention may never be written up in the newspapers, or highlighted on the evening news—but it is by any measure a *critical* one.

We are very proud of the success this project has had to date, and we look forward to more successes, including those that will grow out of the first year of the New Dollars/New Partners initiative. (see page 2)

Not all of the news this year has been good. In the last *HBI Insights*, we reported that HBI and Roslindale Village Main Street—a member of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Program—had completed a feasibility study on the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) substation, which occupies a prominent corner of Roslindale Square. Our study suggested that more than \$1 million in subsidies would be required to transform this landmark into an economically viable contributor to the social and economic health of Roslindale Square.

The Roslindale Substation is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (and the comparable register of the Commonwealth). For more than a decade, Roslindale Village Main Street has considered the substation a key element for the long-term commercial vitality of the Square, which is now undergoing a welcome renaissance. Historic Boston selected the substation as one of the pivotal endangered properties targeted in its 1999 Revolving Fund Casebook.

We were hopeful that our feasibility study would help lead to a positive and creative disposition process. To our dismay, however, the MBTA chose to use the highest bid as the sole criterion for selecting a buyer—ignoring other factors such as envisioned uses, the experience and qualifications of the bidder, the likelihood of timely success, and potential impact of the property transfer. In March 2003, the MBTA received a high bid of \$212,000 from an individual who has given no indication that he is considering the significance of the building to the surrounding community or that he has a plan which addresses the financial challenges.

We feel that the MBTA, as a public agency, has a responsibility to follow a property disposition process that respects and reflects the community's best interest and preserves its heritage.

There is still hope. The MBTA's *Request For Proposals* states that the authority reserves the right to reject any and all bids. If the high bidder cannot come up

with an acceptable development and financing plan for MBTA and public review, the MBTA has the option—if not the moral obligation—to embrace an alternative strategy that can succeed!

For the last century, decisions by the MBTA have exercised enormous influence on the appearance and economic vitality of communities throughout the Massachusetts Bay area—in many cases, for the good. Today, the MBTA has the opportunity to exert that positive influence once again. We urge the "T" to do the right thing for the Roslindale community and for Massachusetts.

A little closer to home, we at HBI have some personnel changes to announce. In April 2003, we were pleased to welcome Matthew J. Kiefer and Carter Wilkie as Historic Boston's president and vice-president, respectively. They replace Paul F. McDonough, Jr., and Edward P. Lawrence who, having shared with us their expertise for 19 years, now assume the positions of president and vice-president *emeriti*, respectively.

In addition, in March of 2004, I will be retiring as executive director of Historic Boston. This will mark the end of a very rewarding and happy phase of my professional life: 25 years in Boston's preservation community—first with the Boston Landmarks Commission, where we assembled a plan to establish a preservation revolving fund for the City of Boston, and then with Historic Boston. Over the next few months, Technical Development Corporation will be managing a search process to help the Board select my successor.

I know that when the time comes, it will be very difficult to take my leave of Historic Boston. At the same time, I will have the great satisfaction of knowing that this organization will continue to do the important and exciting work that has made my time here so rewarding.

Stanley M. Smith  
Executive Director

## 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.

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.

Currently, Historic Boston owns two properties: the Old Corner Bookstore Buildings, acquired in 1960, and the Hayden Building, acquired in 1993. Both of preeminent significance to Boston and the nation, threats to their future inspired Historic Boston to marshal the resources to purchase and rehabilitate them. Today they provide continuing income streams while serving as examples of the impact a proactive preservation organization can have upon a city.

*HBI is a charitable, non-profit organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and a private operating foundation under code Section 4942 (j)(3). Tax-deductible gifts or bequests may be sent to Historic Boston Incorporated at 3 School Street, Boston MA 02108.*

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