



## CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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January 27, 2020

To: Members of the Historical Commission  
From: Charles Sullivan  
Re: L-133: St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church, 137 Allston Street

### Background

A petition with eighteen signatures was received on December 18, 2019 requesting that the Historical Commission initiate a landmark designation study of St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church at 137 Allston Street. The lead signer of the petition, Edward (Ned) Eccles, is a member of the church's governing board. The Cambridge Election Commission has verified that more than ten of the signatories were registered voters.

St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church was constructed in 1886. It is the only building on its 4,645 square foot lot (Map 97/Parcel 59). The total assessed value for the land and buildings is \$845,700. The property is in a Residence C zoning district.



St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church, 137 Allston Street.

## Landmark Criteria and Goals

Landmarks are enacted by the City Council upon recommendation of the Historical Commission. The Commission commences a landmark designation study process by its own initiative or by voting to accept a petition of ten registered voters. The Commission may decline to accept petitions that do not meet the criteria for landmark designation.

The criteria provided in the ordinance outlines eligible properties as:

any property within the city being or containing a place, structure, feature, or object which it determines to be either (1) importantly associated with one or more historic persons or events, or with the broad architectural, aesthetic, cultural, political, economic, or social history of the City or the Commonwealth or (2) historically or architecturally significant (in terms of period, style, method of construction or association with a famous architect or builder) either by itself or in the context of a group of structures... (2.78.180.A)

The purpose of landmark designation is described in the ordinance, which was enacted to,

preserve, conserve and protect the beauty and heritage of the City and to improve the quality of its environment through identification, conservation and maintenance of neighborhoods, sites and structures which constitute or reflect distinctive features of the architectural, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City; to resist and restrain environmental influences adverse to this purpose; to foster appropriate use and wider public knowledge and appreciation of such neighborhoods, areas, or structures; and by furthering these purposes to promote the public welfare by making the city a more desirable place in which to live and work. (2.78.140)

## Relationship to Criteria

St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church was built in 1886 as St. Phillip's Church, a mission of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Central Square; the architect was Robert Slack of New Bedford. The Cottage Style church was the first to open in the Pine Grove neighborhood of Cambridgeport and was so popular that it had to be enlarged two years later. It is a frame building originally covered in cedar shingles with a simple belfry and double-hung windows. The roof has recently been replaced with an Institutional Preservation Grant from the Cambridge Historical Commission and matching funds raised by the Cambridgeport Neighborhood Association; future plans include restoration of the shingled exterior and provision of an access ramp.

St. Philip's was a personal project of Rev. Edward M Gushee, the minister of St. Peter's Episcopal in Central Square; he subsidized its operation until his death in 1917 and bequeathed the property to his son Richard, an Episcopal minister in California. After Gushee's death the diocese supplied a priest for a few years, but the congregation dwindled. In 1927 his son put the building up for sale as suitable for "storage, church or remodeled for dwelling" (Cambridge Chronicle, August 26, 1927).

In August 1928 Richard Gushee sold the property to Morris Bobrick, a furniture dealer; two years later Bobrick sold it on to the trustees of a new church, identified in the newspapers as the African Orthodox Society. Among the trustees listed by the Cambridge assessors in 1932 were George Alexander McGuire, Rev. Gladston St. Clair Nurse, and Elvira Headley.

George A. McGuire (1866-1934) was a founder and patriarch of the African Orthodox Church, which was for a time the religious arm of the Marcus Garvey movement. McGuire was born in Antigua and trained to be a Moravian minister in the Danish West Indies. After he came to the U.S. he served the African Methodist Episcopal church before joining the Episcopal denomination in 1895. Ordained in 1897, he served congregations in Ohio and Virginia and in 1905 became archdeacon of the diocese of Arkansas.

McGuire came to Boston in 1907 to enter medical school at the College of Physicians and Surgeons. The next year he became minister of St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, which was then located on Columbia Street. This congregation was made up of African Americans and immigrants from the West Indies and Canada who had formerly belonged to St. Peter's Episcopal on Massachusetts Avenue.

McGuire received a medical degree in 1910. He resigned from St. Bartholomew's in 1911 after struggling with discrimination in the Episcopal hierarchy. He went to Antigua to preach and practice medicine but returned to the United States in 1918.

Marcus Garvey, the charismatic leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) made McGuire chaplain-general and "titular archbishop of Ethiopia" in 1919. Garvey's movement, the establishment of an independent African-American state, was extremely popular for over a decade. McGuire left the Episcopal ministry to found churches under the auspices of the UNIA. In 1921 he organized these congregations into the African Orthodox Church, in which he was ordained a bishop. By 1934 the church claimed approximately 30,000 members in thirty congregations in the United States, the West Indies, South America, and Africa. St. Augustine's is now the only remaining African Orthodox church in New England.

#### Staff Recommendation

For the reasons stated, it is the staff opinion that St. Augustine's African Orthodox Church at 137 Allston Street is eligible for landmark designation under criterion (1) for its associations with the cultural, economic, and social history of the city, and under criterion (2) for its architectural significance in terms of its period and style.