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Art installation to mark downtown San Antonio site of one of Texas' first Black churches

The rectangular outline will represent St. James AME Church over its foundation stones along San Pedro Creek and is set for completion in early 2025.

By **Scott Huddleston**, *Staff writer*

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San Antonio River Authority board chairman Jim Campbell at Wednesday's unveiling of renderings of public art to be installed at the site of the St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church. The church was founded in 1867 and a cornerstone dated 1875 was discovered in 2020 during construction of the San Pedro Creek Culture Park.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

A new art installation at the downtown San Antonio site of one of the oldest Black churches in Texas will inspire feelings of optimism and reverent contemplation, officials said as they announced plans for the project Wednesday.

California artist Gordon Huether said his rectangular outline of the 1870s-era St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church will celebrate the building's original shape and use laser-cut geometric patterns reproduced from freedom quilts that marked safe houses for fugitives escaping slavery.

He and his team plan to begin constructing the art installation in January and complete it in February. The work, "Presence of the Past," will be made of durable materials in white and illuminated at night.

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Gordon Huether, an artist based in Napa, Calif., talks Wednesday about the inspiration behind the art installation honoring the St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church site. Discovered along San Pedro Creek in downtown San Antonio during a park construction, it was one of the first Black churches in the state.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

“The color white represents hope, clarity and promotes open-mindedness and self-reflection. We’re creating this space for inspiration, for contemplation, for fellowship and for learning,” Huether said.

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An adjacent area highlighted by a round art feature will be called the “Culture Crossing Pavilion” and will showcase “Suds to Salvation,” by local poet laureate

emerita Andrea “Vocab” Sanderson. It tells the story of the St. James followers who “invested the resources of their emancipated hands” to build a church on the site of a former soap factory.

St. James AME, which was founded in 1867 and had about 100 worshipers in the 1870s, still has a presence in San Antonio, a 1935 church built on the near West Side. The original church along San Pedro Creek is mostly gone, its location near Houston and Camaron streets marked with interpretive signage and a composite deck flooring.

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San Antonio River Authority board chairman Jim Campbell, left, introduces U.S. Rep. Greg Casar during Wednesday's unveiling of renderings of an art installation that will be built on the site of the St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church along San Pedro Creek.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

Sanderson was involved in community engagement for the project and met with today's St. James parishioners, studying the church's history and hearing their stories "about why this church means everything to them," she said.

"I knew that I was supposed to be a part of this," as soon as she heard about the project, Sanderson said.

The nonprofit San Antonio River Foundation is raising \$2 million for the project, the final phase in a long journey that began when the church's cornerstone, dated 1875, was discovered under a parking lot during construction in February 2020.

As part of a Bexar County-funded, federally aided \$300 million flood control and beautification project on the creek through downtown, a large entertainment plaza had been planned for the site, near the historic Alameda Theater.

Through an extensive public engagement process led by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and San Antonio River Authority, the creek project manager, a new design was created that preserved most of the church's historic foundation walls. The west wall facing the creek bank was carefully deconstructed and rebuilt stone-by-stone as part of a design solution to balance flood control with historic preservation.

Jim Campbell, the river authority chairman, said he decided once he saw the cornerstone that the site had to be preserved as much as possible.



People get a first look at an art installation that will be built at the site of the St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown San Antonio. The church was founded in 1867 and a cornerstone dated 1875 was discovered in 2020 during construction of the San Pedro Creek Culture Park.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

“This congregation of people with new freedom and new vision and new power had decided to establish a church here on the banks, and in 1875 had the courage to expand that footprint. And I knew at that moment, we were going to have to find a solution,” he said.

The river foundation, the authority's nonprofit partner, has repeatedly “filled the void” by fundraising for public art and other enhancements along the San Antonio River, and is now leading “this incredibly exciting project” at the church site, Campbell said.

Like the river's Mission Reach and Museum Reach, the new San Pedro Creek Culture Park will attract private investment that will more than offset its costs — “with or without a baseball park,” he added — referring to a planned San Antonio Missions ballpark to be built a few blocks north of the St. James site.



People attend an event held Wednesday to unveil renderings of an art installation that will honor the site of the St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown San Antonio. The church was founded in 1867 and a cornerstone dated 1875 was discovered in 2020 during construction of the San Pedro Creek Culture Park.

Sam Owens/San Antonio Express-News

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The Rev. Cynthia Ladson, the St. James pastor, said the project “affects the whole community of San Antonio, and it even affects this whole country that we live in.”

“This speaks to the faithfulness and the love of God, of a people that have been through some very, very difficult times,” she said. “I thank everyone that had anything to do with preserving this, because it could’ve been so different. ... I thank you for listening to the man upstairs and doing the right thing.”

U.S. Rep. Greg Casar said the project celebrates people of the 1800s who “really led the way, both on emancipation and reconstruction and the continued work that we need to do to make sure that everyone’s civil rights are protected.” The artwork, he said, will “inspire the next generation of young people for whatever it is that they desire and they imagine for this community.”

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Scott Huddleston

REPORTER



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