



PRESERVING HISTORY

San Antonio art exhibit honors recently uncovered history of 1875 church

By Francisco Ortiz

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Artist Gordon Huether's rendering shows part of a planned public art project, Presence of the Past and Culture Crossing Pavilion. Courtesy San Antonio River Authority

Come February 2025, visitors to San Pedro Creek will be able to check out a new public art installation that will pay tribute to part of San Antonio's heritage.

California artist Gordon Huether is creating *Presence of the Past and Culture Crossing Pavilion*, a two-part, \$2 million project that will represent the legacy of the [St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church](#). Renderings of the art project were unveiled at a September 4 press conference.

Construction crews worked to restore and improve San Pedro Creek on the western edge of downtown in 2020, while archaeologists uncovered the cornerstone of the church, which was laid in 1875.

Over the past four years, church members worked with the San Antonio River Authority, which maintains the creekway, to come up with a permanent way to memorialize the congregation's origins and the church's impact on the community.



African Americans were able to gather and worship under the direction of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The first congregation members initially met in each other's homes between 1867 and 1871, until they secured a central place to worship — the former San Antonio Soap Works along San Pedro Creek.

St. James AME Church these days sits on North Richter Street on the city's West Side; part of the original church site is now home to the Soap Factory Apartments.

According to a news release, Huether is putting together historic quilt patterns to lead visitors through the *Presence of the Past*, which is designed to resemble the church's façade, and examine its emergence as the first AME church in San Antonio from 1867-1878.

The art installation will feature the AME shield, which will guide visitors to an altar bearing the names of the original church parishioners, and commemorate their contributions. The pavilion, the release says, will engage today's church and community members, and encourage them to share their tales that will act as a larger story of San Antonio's evolution.

The September 4 event, which happened at the future art installation site on West Houston Street, included San Antonio Poet Laureate Emeritus [Andrea "Vocab" Sanderson](#) reading a poem inspired by the site's story. Sanderson collaborated with several San Antonians to craft personal quilt patterns inspired by their individual histories, which will appear above the dais at the exhibit. These patterns are meant to bring to life a lively tapestry reflecting an important yet often-overlooked portion of San Antonio's history.

"We are thrilled with the entire project, from the discovery of the St. James foundation and cornerstone to the unveiling of this innovative design that creatively and architecturally preserves the original structures," Rev. Cynthia Ladson, St. James' pastor, said in a statement.

Leaders from SARA and the river authority's nonprofit arm, [San Antonio River Foundation](#), said Huether's previous large-scale public art installations around the nation will serve to inspire a unique exhibit commemorating St. James AME Church and early contributions of San Antonio's African-American community. They also said the art installation will be a welcome addition to [San Pedro Creek Culture Park](#).

"Thanks to careful assessment and input from the community, this site will be rehabilitated into a gathering place where people can connect with San Antonio's dynamic and multi-layered history, honoring the contributions of the diverse ethnic groups that shaped the city's unique culture," Frates Seeligson, SARF's executive director, said in a statement. "The site remains a tangible landmark of the thriving Reconstruction-era African American community."



“The church quickly became a beacon on the west side of San Antonio, championing political participation, education, civil rights, public service, and economic empowerment,” he said in a statement.

The river foundation is accepting [donations](#) toward the completion of the project.

BOUND TO HAPPEN

San Antonio poet books prestigious Texas literary award

By Brandon Watson

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primary-series-image

generation of voices as a writer-in-residence at Texas State University. Her work garnered lifetime achievement awards from the Texas Institute of Letters, the Arab American Museum, and the National Book Critics Circle.

The Palestinian poet and educator can now add another honor to the list. On October 1, the [Texas Book Festival](#) (TBF) named her the 2024 Texas Writer Award, recognizes writers who have profoundly impacted Texas literature.

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“Naomi Shihab Nye is not only a profoundly gifted and accomplished writer, but also a dedicated educator and cherished figure in the Texas literary community,” said TBF Literary Director Hannah Gabel via a release. “We’re thrilled to celebrate her remarkable body of work.”

Nye, a resident of San Antonio, is known for a genre-hopping bibliography that includes poetry, fiction, and children’s literature. Her best-known works include *Everything Comes Next*, *The Tiny Journalist*, *Voices in the Air*, *Sitti’s Secrets*, and *Habibi*. A native of Jerusalem who moved to Texas in 1966, Nye has frequently returned to her identity in her work.

As part of the Texas Writer Award, TBF will bestow Nye with an aptly Texas gift: a pair of custom handmade boots from El Paso’s Rocketbuster. Attendees will also get a chance to congratulate her first-hand during festival sessions for her two 2024 releases: an editorial work, *I Know About a Thousand Things: The Writings of Ann Alejandro of Uvalde, Texas*, and poetry collection *Grace Notes*.

This year’s festival takes place November 16-17, with signings, readings, and panels in and around the State Capitol. Admission is free, save for two [ticketed appearances](#) from headliners Matthew McConaughey and Malcolm Gladwell.

