

ARTS & CULTURE

Public art, poetry to adorn St. James AME Church historic site on San Pedro Creek



by **Nicholas Frank**
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Architectural renderings of *Culture Crossing Pavilion* and *Presence of the Past* will be installed marking the historic site of the St. James AME Church along San Pedro Creek. Credit: Courtesy / San Antonio River Foundation

The San Antonio River Authority and San Antonio River Foundation jointly announced a new \$2 million public art project that will serve as the culmination of the discovery of an 1875 church foundation along San Pedro Creek.

An open-air structure and pavilion by California artist Gordon Huether and San Antonio poet laureate emerita Andrea “Vocab” Sanderson will pay homage to the historic St. James African Methodist Episcopal (AME)

Church uncovered in 2020 at the site along Camaron Street near West Houston Street, now designated as the St. James AME Culture Crossing.

Huether was selected from among 100 artist applicants, five of whom made it to the finalist phase from a San Antonio River Foundation open call, said public art curator Ashley Mireles during a Wednesday morning public announcement at the site.

Mireles said the foundation will seek donations for the \$400,000 community engagement phase of the **project**, for “thinking about the future and how we want to keep this space activated as it had been in the past.”



An architectural rendering of *Presence of the Past*. Credit: Courtesy / San Antonio River Foundation

Reconstruction period history

The church was built during Reconstruction in the aftermath of the U.S. Civil War as a place of worship for formerly enslaved San Antonians. The cornerstone of the AME church remains today, its carving, “AME CHURCH 1875,” still visible from the sidewalk.

The contractor for the **San Pedro Creek renovations project**, Sundt Construction Inc., carefully preserved and restored the original stone outer walls of the church, which have been incorporated into the St. James Culture

Crossing linear park.

Huether based the block-and-gable shape of *Presence of the Past*, a cut metal open-air building, on the facade of the historic church, visible in a single photograph in the Texas A&M University-San Antonio archives and on an information placard at the site.

A Sanderson poem drawn in part from oral histories of St. James AME Church congregation members will adorn the *Culture Crossing Pavilion*, also made from cut metal, to be set facing Huether's church building form.

Sanderson said she had been part of two other applications that were not selected for the project, but said she prayed to somehow be part of a project so meaningful to her native San Antonio's Black community.

"I was definitely exposed to the African Methodist Episcopal community and practices of faith at a young age, and so when I saw and caught wind of this project ... I knew in my heart — in my knower, as we say in the Black church, in my knower — I knew that I was supposed to be a part of this," Sanderson said.

And despite the earlier setbacks, she said, "God has a way. When He wants something done, He will bring it to the light."



Andrea "Vocab" Sanderson, poet laureate emeritus, recites the poem that will adorn the public artwork titled *Culture Crossing Pavilion*. Credit: Scott Ball / San Antonio Report

Ready by February

Dan Green, senior project manager at Sundt, echoed Sanderson's sentiment in emphasizing that his company recognized the importance of preserving the church remnants.

"We value the importance of what this history is to San Antonio," Green said. "So it's important for us to make sure that we're a part of that process and bringing that to light."

Green pointed out that the St. James AME church maintains an active congregation "just a couple blocks off this creek." The church's pastor, Cynthia Ladson, was on hand to offer a blessing for the announcement of the public art project.

Ladson gave thanks to God for faithfulness to the 19th-century congregants of the church.

“We thank you for spearheading the uncovering of the cornerstone and foundation we stand on today, and thank you for guiding the minds and the hearts of the individuals who have worked to preserve this space as a place that can be enjoyed by all,” Ladson said.

According to the San Antonio River Foundation website, its St. James AME Culture Crossing Design Enhancements Project will be completed in February.

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