

TEXAS HISTORY

How a Construction Crew Stumbled Upon a Cornerstone of San Antonio's Black History

St. James AMEC Culture Crossing, a new public art installation and pavilion built atop the foundation of the original church, opens Juneteenth weekend.



By Michael Hall

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St. James AMEC Culture Crossing, designed by Gordon Huether.

Photograph by Brenda Bazán

For decades, San Antonio drivers parked their cars in the surface lot on Houston Street between the old Alameda Theater and the old county jail. The lot was like dozens of others downtown—hard, flat, dirty. Nobody thought much about what lay beneath it.

Then, in February 2020, just before the COVID pandemic, construction workers were digging up the asphalt, pounding the dirt and rock with jackhammers, clearing out the whole area to widen the nearby San Pedro Creek as part of an ambitious city flood-control and beautification project, when one of the crewmembers hit a patch of limestone wall. It was the foundation of a building, clearly from another century. Suddenly the excavation site became an archaeological site. Digging was now done by hand, with trowels and brushes, following the lines of the foundation until, three months later, workers found a large square cornerstone on the northeast corner. The letters on it read: AME CHURCH 1875.

The project manager knew who to call: Everett Fly, a San Antonio landscape architect and well-known history buff. For years Fly, who was born and raised in the city, had been researching local African American history, receiving a National Humanities Medal in 2014 and helping found the San Antonio African American Community Archive and Museum (SAAACAM) in 2017.

When the project manager described the cornerstone, Fly was stunned—and thrilled. “Do you think this is significant?” she asked him. “Yes,” Fly replied, “it is absolutely significant.”



A plaque honors the original parishioners of St. James AME Church.
Photograph by Brenda Bazán

Fly knew all about the St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church. Numerous times in his research he had come across mentions of St. James, the second Black church in San Antonio (St. Paul United Methodist Church was the first), founded in the aftermath of the Civil War and inhabiting a building near San Pedro Creek. He also knew that before this structure was a

church, it was the city's first soap factory, started in 1847, just after Texas became a state. The workers had literally stumbled upon history.

Now it was time to figure out what to do about it. For the next six years, Fly, along with numerous others—engineers, archaeologists, architects, city officials, urban planners, artists, and members of the present-day St. James AME Church—worked to resolve how to honor the past, to make sure the history didn't stay hidden anymore. He knew, as did his peers, that San Antonio has a long track record of overlooking its African American history. This Juneteenth weekend, in the shadows of the old Alameda Theater, which screened Spanish-language movies from 1949 to 1989, and the Frost Tower, the glassy skyscraper erected in 2019, the city will try to change that.



The former St. James AME Church building in Alameda Plaza, circa 1870s.

Courtesy of St. James AME



The congregation of St. James AME at its current location on Richter Street during construction.
Courtesy of St. James AME

The first African Methodist Episcopal churches were founded in Philadelphia in 1816, though since enslaved persons were forbidden to have their own places of worship, none were allowed in the South until after the Civil War. The first Texas AME church was founded, fittingly, in Galveston, not long after Juneteenth, when, on June 19, 1865, federal troops arrived in town and announced that the enslaved were in fact free—and had been for two and a half years.

St. James AME Church was founded in San Antonio two years later. At first members met in one another's homes or buildings they rented. Churches were an important part of post-Civil War African American society, places to not only worship but also build communities—often in the face of violence from white neighbors and groups like the Ku Klux Klan. Freedmen and freedwomen had to learn to be free. They had to learn how to read and get

jobs, educate their children, and figure out how to vote and be active citizens. In 1870—the year of the city's first recorded Juneteenth celebration—Bexar County had some 18,000 residents, and more than 3,300 of them were Black.

By December 1872, St. James AME had one hundred members and a new pastor, Reverend W.R. Carson. But it needed an actual church building, and in February 1873 a group of congregants borrowed \$2,000 at 10 percent interest and bought a small limestone building called the Menger Soap Works, along San Pedro Creek near West Houston Street. Back in 1849, the building had been the site of the first soap factory in San Antonio, started by **Charles Frederick William Klemcke**, using water from the creek. Klemcke, a candle and soap maker from Silesia (part of modern-day Poland) had emigrated to Texas with his wife, Emilie, in 1846, arriving in Galveston and becoming part of Castro's Colony, near San Antonio.

Fly has found in his research that while most church members had formerly been enslaved, many were skilled: barbers, carpenters, stonemasons. The church, like others in the area, also schooled its children—and grown-ups. “The churches would use meetings and events to teach people to read and write,” says Fly. “Several of the St. James trustees became schoolteachers and actually led the effort in San Antonio to start what they called a free colored school.” White firefighters wouldn't put out fires in Black houses, so members of the church became part of a local group called Fire Company No. 3. St. James was also the birthplace of the state's first Black Masonic lodge.



Landscape architect Everett L. Fly in San Antonio.
Kin Man Hui, Staff/San Antonio Express-News

Church members paid off their loan—and, since the congregation was growing fast, decided to expand the building. “When completed,” Carson told the *San Antonio Daily Express*, “it will be a monument to the city of San Antonio.” The expansion cost another \$2,300 and was finished in 1875, doubling the church’s size, which was good, because by this point the congregation had doubled too. Members laid the cornerstone at a ceremony on August 1. Fly would write that it was placed at the northeast corner because of Masonic guidelines: “to petition heavenly bodies for regulation of life, fortune, and success and bring harmony and prosperity to the building and its owners.” The congregation prayed, sang a hymn, took a collection, and listened to an address from a Reverend Horton that was, the *San Antonio Daily Express* said, “very plain, practical and Christian like and much appreciated.”

But only two years later, in late 1877, church members moved their congregation to a larger building half a mile away, near the Santa Rosa hospital. Fly isn’t sure why they left so soon. “That’s still one of the mysteries,” he said. Maybe they were growing too fast. Maybe they got tired of praying in an old soap factory. The AME building became the Alamo Ice

Company and then the Alamo Ice House and Brewing Company. San Antonio was growing fast too, and Houston Street was widened in the 1890s. By 1905 the building had been knocked down—and a parking lot was eventually put in its place.

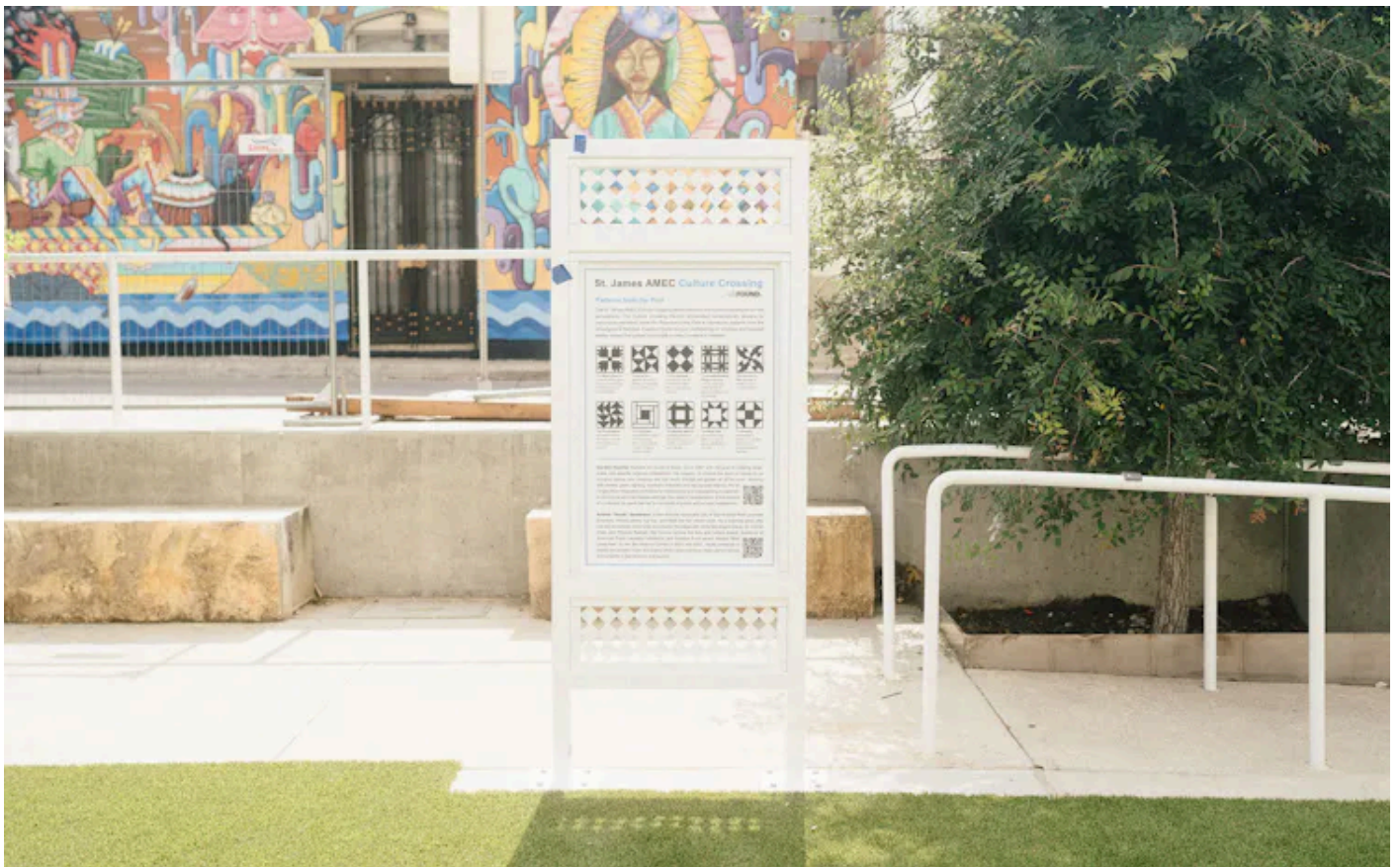
When the archaeology team started exploring the lot in 2020, it found remnants from the brewery (bottles, cans, weights) and the ice factory (charcoal used to fire the furnaces). Then came the foundation, and under it lay a foot-deep layer of crushed limestone. Under the limestone, about three and a half feet down from the surface, the team found detritus from the soap factory. In the nineteenth century, soap was made with lye, fat, and salt. “That’s what we were finding,” said archaeologist Steve Tomka. “Layers of soap, a greasy mess.” When they were done investigating under the earth, workers laid a protective decking over the foundation and everything else.

But what next? The San Pedro Creek Culture Park project was in the process of widening more than two miles of the creek, clearing out the areas overgrown with trees and trash, planting native plants, creating public spaces, adding trails, and putting up murals celebrating the city’s long history. Originally, the plan called for turning the parking lot into an entertainment plaza. With the new discovery, officials had to call an audible.



The installation is located at the original site of the church next to San Pedro Creek.

Photograph by Brenda Bazán



A sign details the quilt patterns that adorn the installation.

Photograph by Brenda Bazán

In February 2021 the city began hosting virtual public meetings to discuss options. A focus group was formed and began coming up with ideas: one was sticking to the original plan of building an entertainment plaza; another was removing most of the stone walls and displaying the church site under structural glass for viewing. Fly and others objected. “San Antonio is an international leader in historic preservation and multicultural arts and humanities,” he said. “Why would we do this to one of the most unique and rare archaeological pieces that we have?”

In 2023 the River Authority, which was in charge of the project, reached out to the nonprofit San Antonio River Foundation to put together a panel of stakeholders, including Fly, members of SAAACAM, and congregants from the modern-day St. James AME Church (which, since 1928, has sat on Richter Street, about a mile west of the original structure). The panel decided to commission a public art project that would “focus on the contributions of the formerly enslaved African American community to the development of San Antonio along San Pedro Creek.” There would be two parts to the finished project: the church and a public space for community engagement. It would be called the St. James AMEC Culture Crossing.

The committee sent out requests for proposals, and the winning design came from California artist Gordon Huether, who had created more than seventy other public art projects—including ones in the William P. Hobby Airport, in Houston, and the Salt Lake City International Airport. Using the only photo of the church that existed, taken in the mid-1870s and showing the front facade, Huether came up with an idea. He'd use the church's foundation as an outline—and quilt patterns for the walls. He took nine different patterns from freedom quilts—ones like the Monkey Wrench and the Flying Geese were used in quilts made by enslaved women that many believe were used as codes to send messages to people fleeing the South on the Underground Railroad. Then he duplicated the patterns in steel (each square having as much open space as art), powder coated them white, and cast them into

panels for the walls and roof. Inside the structure would be the crest of the AME church and an altar bearing a plaque with the names of three hundred early congregants gathered by various researchers.

Huether designed the community engagement pavilion too, a small stage next to the church that has a tilted circular roof. Engraved in the roof are more quilt patterns and the words of a poem by Andrea “Vocab” Sanderson, a former city poet laureate who was chosen by the committee to capture the import of the church—and the soap factory. Her poem is called “Suds to Salvation,” and she composed it after attending a forum at the modern St. James AME Church where the native San Antonian talked with members (some were descendants of the original congregants) about their lives and what finding the old church meant to them. “The more they talked,” said Sanderson, “the more they had to say, because sometimes you don’t think you know that much, but when you put your piece of the puzzle with someone else’s, it paints a bigger picture.”



The pavilion's circular roof contains quilt patterns and the words of a poem by Andrea “Vocab” Sanderson. Photograph by Brenda Bazán

Fly, who was working on the project before it actually became a project, is happy with the result, titled Presence of the Past. "It's beautiful," he said. "An African American historic resource has never been physically preserved at the center of downtown until the St. James Culture Crossing project. The city came together to save an irreplaceable piece of our collective history."

The structure is airy and free, the sides wide-open to the world and the quilt patterns on the roof letting in the light. There are so many things to study inside—the shape of the Monkey Wrench patterns, the names of the three hundred members, the AME crest on the back wall. Or you can just walk across the decking over the ground where freedmen and freedwomen once prayed together, learning to be free.

On June 18, the River Foundation will host the official opening of Presence of the Past at 302 W. Houston, San Antonio, with a press conference. Friday night (Juneteenth), Fly, Huether, Sanderson, and others will take part in a panel discussion. On Sunday, St. James AME pastor Cynthia Lawson will give a sermon and the church's praise singers will perform.