

# St. James church, heart of 'the Scrub,' will be African-American museum

The black neighborhood razed during urban renewal is now home to the Tampa Housing Authority's Encore development.



The St. James Episcopal Church in Tampa opened in 1921 in the African-American neighborhood known as The Scrub. St. James is being restored again, to serve a community center and museum in an area that has become the Encore community. [ JAMES BORCHUCK | Times ]

TAMPA — St. James Episcopal Church once was a hub for the African-American community known as the Scrub.

Besides regular services, St. James hosted picnics, holiday events and other gatherings for the community located between downtown and Ybor City.

Then, the Scrub was razed, the congregation moved, and the original brick St. James building fell into disrepair.

The Tampa Housing Authority began restoring the century-old St. James structure three years ago and the the work is nearly complete.

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The housing authority hopes the building at 1202 Governor St. resumes its role as epicenter of the community, this time the community known as Encore — the authority's \$425 million redevelopment of property known earlier as the Central Park Village public housing project.

The old church will reopen in mid-2020 as a community center for Encore residents. In the next two to three years, it will take on another role — as home to a local African-American history museum.

"This has cost way north of a million bucks," said David Hollis, the Housing Authority's neighborhoods grant administrator. "The easy fix, the quick fix, would have been to tear it down and build something modern. But the right thing to do is what we are doing. The history needs to be saved."

St. Petersburg has the Dr. Carter G. Woodson African American Museum, where there is an ongoing debate over whether it should stay at 2240 9th Ave S or move elsewhere.

The history of African-Americans in the Tampa area is featured in places, such as the Tampa Bay History Center and the Robert W. Saunders Sr. Public Library. But there's no museum dedicated solely to the subject.

"This is the right spot," Hollis said during a visit to St. James church, "because this dirt was the epicenter of the African American community as it

developed in Tampa."

David Hollis with the Tampa Housing Authority tours renovation work under way at the St. James Episcopal Church. Built in 1921, St. James was once a hub for the community known as The Scrub. [ JAMES BORCHUCK | Times ]

The Scrub was founded by freed slaves after the Civil War and grew into a thriving business and entertainment district that included Central Avenue, known as the Harlem of the South. Central Avenue is where top black musicians of the day went to perform — Ray Charles, Cab Calloway and Ella Fitzgerald among them.

St. James was established in a wooden building during the early-1890s to serve the black Bahamians and Afro-Cubans who moved to Tampa to work in the cigar industry. Construction of a brick sanctuary for St. James began in 1918, according to news archives, and the church held its first service there March 20, 1921.

Other churches served the community then, too. St. Paul AME, built in 1913

at 510 E Harrison St., is one of them.

Still, in 1925, the *Tampa Tribune* wrote that St. James was the most "most pretentious and best equipped" black church in Tampa and its central location within the Scrub made it the top destination for community events.

"A big section of Tampa's colored population attended the annual street dance and carnival held" outside St. James, the *Tampa Times* wrote in July 1931. "A parade forming at Central Avenue and Scott Street will be held prior to the dance. Two orchestras will furnish the music."

St. James Episcopal Church in 1933, when it served as a hub for the African-American community known as The

Scrub. [ Hillsborough County Public Library ]

But by the late 1950s, the city of Tampa had declared the Scrub a slum and most of it was demolished to make way for segregated Central Park Village.

The new development "abolished Tampa's greatest eyesore, the Scrub, 29 acres of ramshackle unpainted dwellings in the heart of the city," the *Tampa Tribune* reported Oct. 21, 1954, the day Central Park was dedicated.

Urban renewal took away the Central Avenue entertainment district in the 1970s.

The St. James congregation moved in 1980, first to North Boulevard and later to 2708 N. Central Ave., where it remains today as St. James House of Prayer Episcopal Church.

The Housing Authority used the original church building as a medical clinic until vacating Central Park Village 12 years ago so the site project could be redeveloped into Encore.

The Tampa Bay History Center's Rodney Kite-Powell said less than a dozen structures from the Scrub remain standing.

They include the St. Paul AME Church building, re-purposed as the clubhouse for the Metro 510 apartment complex.

"When we started preserving St. James, it was pretty much shot," grant administrator Hollis said. "Everything is new except the brick and the bell."

The original 1,800-pound bell is too heavy for the restored tower so it will be sand blasted, cleaned and mounted in front of the building as "an art piece for the neighborhood," Hollis said.

"This is going to be an amazing historically restored building," he said.

"When we commit, we commit. We don't put a big toe in the shallow end. We jump into the deep end. We're doing this right."

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