

# King's Chapel in Boston reckons with complicated roots as it honors more than 200 enslaved connected to congregation

By [Brian MacQuarrie](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 18, 2023, 1 hour ago



Assistant Minister David Waters, left, and Senior Minister Joy Fallon talk in sanctuary at King's Chapel in Boston, MA on March 15, 2023. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

History is embedded in the thick stone walls of King’s Chapel, founded in 1686 as the first Anglican congregation in New England and later as the first Unitarian Christian church in the United States. For more than 300 years, that story included its share of devout ministers, wealthy benefactors, and famous parishioners from Boston’s past.

Now, the story is expanding.

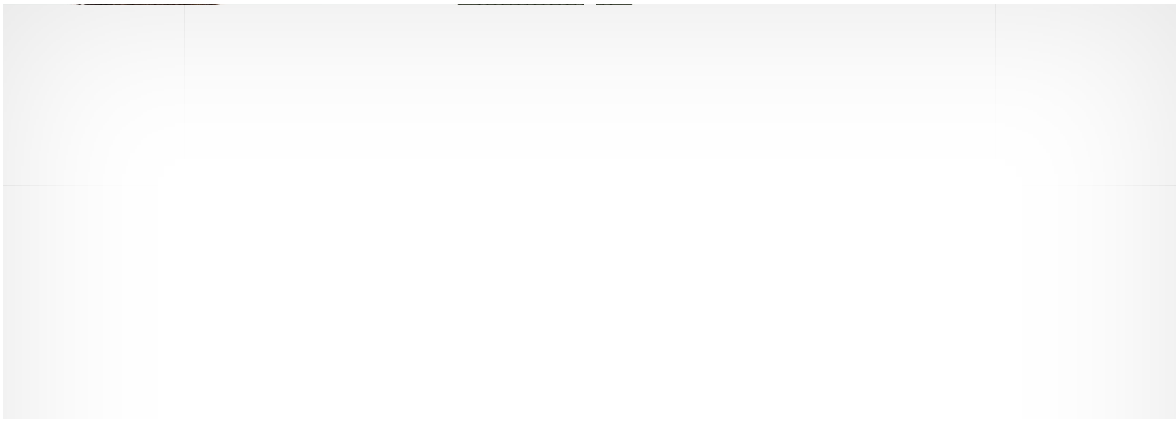
After a years-long reckoning with its complicated roots, the Tremont Street church is embarking on an ambitious, public reinterpretation of its history, one that will acknowledge its links to slavery and the slave trade by honoring more than 200 enslaved people who have been discovered to be connected to the congregation.

It’s a connection that had not been widely known, even within the church, and it’s one more example — joining the [Old North Church](#), [Harvard University](#), and the Boston Athenaeum — of a longtime local institution reexamining its ties to the undertold story of slavery in New England.

At King’s Chapel, the remembrance will consist of dramatic public artwork and a new fund to bolster engagement in social justice and reconciliation.

“We know that we can’t undo the past, but we can tell the truth now,” said the Rev. Joy Fallon, senior minister at King’s Chapel. “Our position on the Freedom Trail requires a full explanation about what freedom meant.”

ADVERTISING



Church-funded research has found that at least 219 enslaved people were owned by at least 55 members of King's Chapel, among them four ministers, when Colonial Boston's daily life and economy were permeated by slavery.

Three slave traders, including Charles Apthorp, the town's richest man, also sat in the congregation. A memorial to Apthorp adorns one of the church's walls.

Enslaved Blacks and Indigenous people were baptized at King's Chapel, and they attended services in the segregated galleries above their enslavers. But their lives also were bound by the whims and wishes of clerics and parishioners who saw no contradiction between the pursuit of a godly life and enslaving a human being.

"We are on a journey with this history," said David Waters, who recently completed a four-year ministry at King's Chapel. "It's difficult to let go of the story that we've grown up with. This is an exercise in truth and truth-telling."

A three-part design by Harmonia Rosales, a Los Angeles-based artist of Afro-Cuban descent, has been chosen for the visual memorial to the enslaved people. A figurative sculpture of a Black woman, seated with opened birdcages and freed birds, will be placed in the church's front courtyard.

Other birds, in bronze, will be perched on the church's exterior and grounds. Inside the sanctuary, a ceiling mural above the galleries will show Black and Indigenous

people releasing birds into the sky. In all, inside and out, 219 birds will be depicted.

A scroll included in the courtyard sculpture will list the names of all the enslaved persons who can be identified, and note all the others who cannot. The MASS Design Group, which collaborated on the Embrace sculpture on Boston Common that honors Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife, Coretta, partnered with King's Chapel to develop the memorial.

Work on the art is expected to begin later this year and take two years to complete. Funds will be raised for the community outreach efforts, and the church also plans to offer interactive displays, guided tours, lectures, and workshops.

“Animated by our faith,” the church’s Memorial Committee wrote, “we speak our difficult truth in pursuit of justice. In this way, we answer the call to become ‘repairers of the breach’ in a society desperately in need of healing.”

Jha D Amazi, director of MASS Design’s public memory and memorials lab, said Rosales’s art proposal “is striking for the regalness” she brought to the design.

“It was very clear that she was inspired by the history that needed to be told and by the church itself,” she said of Rosales’s design, adding that she hopes the art will spark “this curiosity that comes with revelation, and the desire to be empowered by being informed.”

The artist’s plans for the memorial show a Black woman acting as a powerful agent of change, and not as someone being acted upon, added Waters, who served as the church’s minister of education. The difference is important, he said.

The number of enslaved people connected with the church is likely greater than the 219 people discovered in probate and other records by a historian hired by King’s Chapel about seven years ago, according to Waters and Fallon, the senior minister.

“It has been very convenient for all of us in the North to assume that slavery was primarily a Southern problem,” Fallon said. “There was a truth to be known, but we didn’t tell it.”

The church does not plan to remove memorials to Apthorp and other enslavers, Waters said.

Although the new memorial “will reshape our interior,” he said, “it will do so in conversation with the memorials that exist. The impulse is not to erase, but rather to add, to say more, to add nuance.”

In its historic pews, Waters said, “the ghost of the enslaver is sitting across from the ghost of the abolitionist.”

The church’s new attention to its complex past is not an exercise in self-flagellation, Waters said, but rather an acknowledgment that its story — and Boston’s, too — are more layered and fraught than many people realize.

“This is the recognition of a moral imperative,” Waters said, “It’s the moral imperative that we should memorialize these people.”

---

Brian MacQuarrie can be reached at [brian.macquarrie@globe.com](mailto:brian.macquarrie@globe.com).

[Show comments](#)

---

