

Churches tied to civil rights movement awarded National Park Service preservation funds

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Tabernacle Baptist Church in Selma, Alabama. (Photo by Nyttend used via Creative Commons license)

Six churches are among 39 projects being awarded grants from the National Park Service to preserve historical examples of the civil rights activism of Black people in the United States.

The recipients of the \$23.4 million in awards include the Historic Tabernacle Baptist Church Selma AL Legacy Foundation. The foundation will receive \$744,545 to help protect the interior of the building and enhance its air quality. The church was the

site of the first mass meeting for proponents of the voting rights movement and the spiritual home of several presidents of the National Baptist Convention USA Inc.

“The Interior Department and the National Park Service are entrusted with using the power of place to tell the story of our country,” Jordan Fifer, a spokesperson for NPS, said in a May 3 statement.

“Across America’s National Park System and in local communities throughout our nation, NPS is working to preserve and protect historic sites across the nation that hold the physical memory of our nation’s history.”

Since 2016, the park service has awarded more than \$126 million for various preservation projects through the same African American Civil Rights grants program that will aid the new awardees.

Fifer said that “a large number of our African American Civil Rights grants fund churches and faith-based projects, as they were such an integral part of the Civil Rights movement, hosting meetings, speeches, experiencing violence — and even where several marches started, like in Selma.”

Other church-related recipients include:

Historic Campbell Chapel Restoration Project Inc., which will receive \$750,000 for structural damage repairs of the Historic Campbell Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Americus, Georgia. This building was designed by Louis H. Persley, the state’s first Black registered architect, and an influential figure in the civil rights protest in Americus.

Friends of Antioch Inc., which will receive \$750,000 for exterior and interior repairs of the Antioch Baptist Church and Cemetery in Crawfordville, Georgia. The church was the site of voter registration drives and planning meetings for civil rights activists.

The Famicos Foundation, which will receive \$750,000 for rehabilitation of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church in Cleveland for use as commercial space and a community center. The church was a central meeting place for Black activists.

The Montana Historical Society, which will receive \$497,712 for repairs to stabilize the brick exterior and increase accessibility at Union Bethel AME Church in Great Falls, Montana. It was the state’s only Black church in operation when it was

organized in 1890.

Augusta Canal Authority, which will receive \$750,000 for the rehabilitation of the Mother Trinity Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Augusta, Georgia. It was the first and oldest church in the historically Black CME denomination after enslaved and free Black people who were worshiping at another church formed their own congregation.

Other grant recipients will be using the funds for work to conserve historical sites such as the Howard Theatre, a Washington, DC, location known for featuring Black performers and prominent speakers, and Atlanta's Ashby Theatre, where Black people could watch movies without being segregated from White moviegoers and relegated to less desirable balcony seats.

Other grantees will use the NPS funding to conduct historical surveys, including one in Detroit that will explore "the role of religion in the struggle for equality," the park service said. —Religion News Service