

Save AME Zion

Key players line up to preserve Syracuse's past

A lot of Central New Yorkers were blindsided in 2007 when South Presbyterian Church locked its doors and sought permission from the Syracuse Planning Commission to sell its Tiffany stained-glass windows and other fixtures to pay its debt. The urban church was once a thriving congregation and activist community, but its membership had dwindled from more than 1,100 members to just 30 people.

Preservationists argued that the sale of the windows would ruin the church's historic character and limit the likelihood of selling it. After passionate debate, the Planning Commission approved the sale. A couple from California bought the church for \$300,00 and stripped it of its glorious windows.

Many still mourn the loss of the mansions on James Street and the stately residences on West Onondaga Street. And there are many empty spaces or parking lots where lovely buildings once stood.

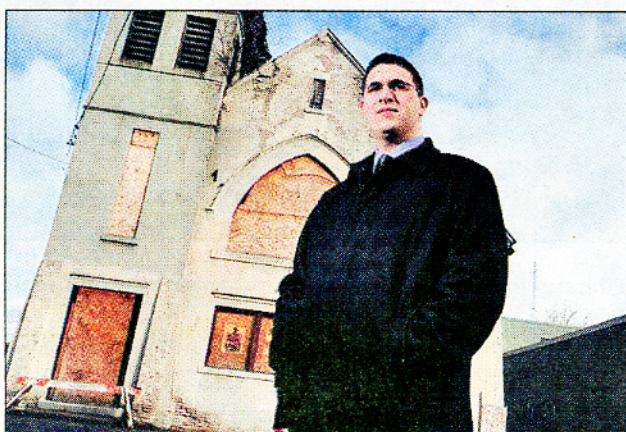
An enthusiastic group of people working to save the AME Zion Church at 711 E. Fayette St., in Syracuse, is taking steps to avoid a similar fate for this historic, 100-year-old city building.

The small building is well worth saving. Its congregation dates to 1835 and was formerly housed at a building at South Crouse Avenue and Water Street. There, the Rev. Jermain Loguen, a former slave and organizer on the Underground Railroad, led worship.

In 1910, the congregation broke ground on Fayette Street, where the church remained a center of African-American activism and culture through the mid-1970s. It is Onondaga County's oldest existing church built specifically for a black congregation.

The church was designed by Charles Colton, the most prominent Syracuse architect of his time. Colton also designed Syracuse's City Hall.

The congregation now worships at a South Salina Street church but



Dennis Nett / The Post-Standard

JEFF ROMANO, president of the Preservation Association of Central New York, stands in front of the AME Zion Church, 711 E. Fayette St., Syracuse.

still owns its former home. Unable to continue its mission on the South Side and maintain the other building, the congregation considered selling the East Fayette site.

A group determined to preserve this historic jewel stepped in. The group has a website (save711amezion.org) and a Facebook presence. Supporters include the Preservation Association of Central New York, the Onondaga Historical Association, Crawford & Stearns architects and the city's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. State Assemblyman Sam Roberts, whose childhood memories include visits to the church, is also on board.

The city paid Crawford & Stearns to assess the building's condition. Interest in preserving 711, as it's being called, is just the latest example of Mayor Stephanie Miner's proactive approach to development and historic preservation. In 2010, Miner created the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability to create a broad, long-term set of priorities, including preservation of the city's historic assets.

Save711 faces a long road. A fundraiser Tuesday night raised \$1,600 — a modest start toward the estimated \$818,00 needed for restoration. It needs to attract a developer with a suitable plan. And it must do so before the elements further damage the building.

But the most important components are in place: an enthusiastic volunteer group in it for the long haul, and support from influential stakeholders determined to keep a piece of history in the community.