

A VISITOR'S GUIDE

The Old South Church in Boston



INTRODUCTION

Looking at Old South Church from Copley Square, you see an outstanding and colorful example of northern Italian gothic architecture, advocated in the late 1800s by the English architectural critic John Ruskin. He favored the use of varied building materials, medieval motifs (such as pointed gothic arches), polychromatic color schemes, hand-carved stone and wood, and designs taken from nature.

This National Historic Landmark building is an unusually ornate design for a New England Congregational church. The church is distinguished by its tall bell tower; brown, pink and grey stonework; walls of Roxbury puddingstone; decorative carvings; a roof striped with tiles of red and black slate; and a cupola, or lantern, of green and russet-colored copper.

ORIGINS OF THE CONGREGATION

Our Descendants: The Old South Church congregation is a Protestant, Congregational church and a member of the United Church of Christ (UCC). It is a descendant of the fusion between separatist and dissenting Pilgrims, Puritan reformers, and Bay Colony merchant adventurers. Members of those groups left England in the 17th century, some to escape persecution and others to forge a more prosperous life in the New World.

The Separation: The congregation was born in controversy in 1669. Both the First Church and Second Church in Boston were Puritan churches. They required that baptized adults have a regeneration experience of God (a born again experience) before they could (become members and) have their own children baptized. That requirement led during a period of some 32 years to fewer would-be-members having their children baptized in those churches.

Recognizing this problem, members of many of the colony's churches held several synods or meetings of ministers and lay member to try to find a solution. On the one hand they wanted to have church members who were saints or at least saintly in their behavior and on the other hand to have church members' children baptized. In about 1662 members of those Synods developed

an approach that allowed childhood baptism of children whose grandparents or parents were church members even if those children were not considered full members. Those children could then have their children baptized but not with a right of full church membership. This approach came to be called the Halfway Covenant.

At that time, the First and Second Churches were headed by ministers who opposed the Halfway Covenant. Their congregations refused to adopt that approach. As a result, 28 lay members of the First Church seceded from that church and founded this church in 1669. They believed, consistent with the Halfway Covenant, that childhood baptism should assure young adults that they would be members (but without a right to communion) and could have their children baptized, who in turn should automatically be members as adults (but again without a right to communion). It was a priesthood of all believers, related to God solely through Christ and justified by grace through faith.

Eventually, many churches in the Bay Colony adopted similar policies.

Trinitarianism vs. Unitarianism: In the early 19th century, this congregation, under the leadership of ministers Joseph Eckley, Joshua Huntington and Benjamin Wisner, again went against the prevailing Congregational theology of the day, and resisted becoming Unitarian. Old South Church remained Trinitarian, worshiping God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Today this Trinity is often expressed as Creator, Redeemer and Holy Spirit.

A DISTINGUISHED HISTORY

Benjamin Franklin was baptized on the day of his birth in 1706 at the congregation's first building, the Cedar Meeting House. Members of this historic congregation include Samuel Adams, Revolutionary patriot and brewer; Samuel Sewall, judge and diarist; Thomas Prince, minister and book collector; William Dawes, Paul Revere's fellow rider in 1775; Phillis Wheatley, America's first published black poet; and Elizabeth Vergoose, thought by some to be the Mother Goose of nursery rhymes. Old South is also known for being the "Church of the Finish Line" for the Boston Marathon.

Old South Church played a significant role in American history by allowing several protest meetings to be held in the church's second building, the Old South Meeting House. There, in 1773, Samuel Adams, the moderator of a meeting protesting a British tax on tea, announced that nothing more could be done to save the country. That statement ended the meeting, but what followed came to be known as the Boston Tea Party.

During the Civil War, 1,019 men enlisted in one day at Old South to fight for the Union cause.

Old South's ministry has been distinguished by eloquent preaching on matters of theology and conscience by Samuel Willard, Benjamin Wisner, Jacob Manning, George Gordon, Frederick Meek, James Crawford and Nancy Taylor. Throughout much of its history members of Old South helped found institutions serving economic and social justice. Recognizing those beliefs, poet John Greenleaf Whittier wrote, "So long as Boston shall Boston be, And her bay tides rise and fall, Shall freedom stand in the Old South Church, And plead for the rights of all."

THE CONGREGATION'S THREE BUILDINGS

The congregation's first building was a meeting house built in 1669 out of cedar wood. South of the First and Second Churches at the corner of Washington and Milk Streets in downtown

Boston, its site was former Governor John Winthrop's garden, sold by his heirs to John Norton, the minister of First Church. His widow, Mary Norton, gave the land to the founders of this congregation, called early on both as the Third Church and South Church. In 1717, it became known as the Old South Church when another church was built further south!

In 1730, a Georgian brick building was built to replace the Cedar Meeting House. That building was called the Old South Meeting House. During the Revolution it was nearly destroyed by the British army who seized the building and desecrated the sanctuary, using it as a riding school for its dragoons. They burned much of the furniture as well as many of Rev. Prince's books, using them as tinder. The church was repaired in 1783, after the Revolution, and worship services were resumed.

In 1869, the congregation bought a new church site in Boston's Back Bay, deciding that "downtown" had become too noisy and commercial. Not everyone agreed, and the fierce community argument that ensued was resolved when the Old South Meeting House was sold and preserved as the first historic preservation building in this country. Today, the Old South Meeting House is a museum on Boston's Freedom Trail. To continue its link with history, the congregation returns to this historic site, its ancestral home, to worship on the Sunday before Thanksgiving.

Construction of the "New Old South Church," one of the first buildings in the newly filled-in and fashionable Back Bay, began at the corner of Dartmouth and Boylston Streets in 1872 and was completed in 1875. It was designed by architects Charles A. Cummings and Willard T. Sears using ideas promoted by John Ruskin. Their faces are carved just above the capitals of the columns on the Boylston Street portico. Look also for the animals in the stone carvings of vines to the right of the front door.

(Photo of Church Entrance)

In the 1930s, senior minister Rev. Russell Henry Stafford, convinced that the church should serve the social needs of the times, spearheaded an expansion. The parsonage that had been the home of his predecessor, Rev. George A. Gordon, was renovated and turned into much needed office space for staff. The Gordon Chapel was built with large function rooms above it to serve as places for people to congregate, enjoy fellowship, and do social service projects and conduct plays..

At that time, the grand tower was leaning precipitously due to faulty construction and a poor foundation. It had to be taken down and was rebuilt in 1937 to a height of 221 feet, 15 feet lower than the original. Underneath the church building, supported by thousands of wooden pilings, the water level is monitored frequently as a precaution against the pilings drying out and rotting.

In the 1950s, the **Sanctuary** walls were painted a pale grey, covering a 1905 Tiffany gold and purple pattern and the original 1875 stencil painting. A remnant of the original pattern was used in 1985 to create new stencils when a major restoration project was undertaken by the firm Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson, and Abbott under the leadership of senior minister Rev. James W. Crawford, who served the congregation from 1974 thru 2002.

United Church of Christ

Old South Church joined the UCC, a socially inclusive and progressive church denomination, at its birth in 1957, when the general synods of the Congregational Christian Churches and the

Evangelical Reformed Church merged, uniting descendants of independent congregations in the German and Dutch Reformed, Lutheran, Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist, African American and ethnic traditions. The UCC has over 750,000 members in over 4,700 autonomous U.S. congregations, which are subject to no bishop, presbyter or temporal authority other than themselves. United, they covenant with one another and pay dues to the UCC for work in the wider world (see <http://www.ucc.org>).

In the tradition of Congregational churches, the Old South Church congregation elects its ministers, who then become members whose function it is to interpret and teach the Word of God. In October 2004, the Rev. Dr. Nancy S. Taylor was elected to be Old South's first female senior minister. She retired from that position in May 2022. The congregation also elects its deacons, trustees, and the members of the Church Council as well as various other committees. The council is the representative government of the congregation.

OLD SOUTH IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Today, Old South Church is a spiritual home to more than 650 people raised in many different faiths. Written in stone above the front porch arches are Christ's words, "Behold, I Have Set Before Thee An Open Door" (Revelation 3:8).

The purpose of Old South Church, expressed in its bylaws, is "to worship God, preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to celebrate the Sacraments; to realize Christian fellowship and unity within this Church and in the Church Universal; to render loving service towards humankind; and to strive for righteousness, justice and peace."

Every Sunday our church bulletin states that we affirm "each individual is a child of God, and recognize that we are called to be like one body with many members, seeking with others of every race, ethnicity, creed, class, age, gender, marital status, physical or mental ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression to journey together toward the promised realm of God. We invite everyone to join in the common life and mission of our reconciling community through participation and leadership in this congregation, and by fully sharing in worship, rites, and sacraments of this church. As we all move forward with the work of this church, we commit ourselves to making justice and inclusivity a reality in this congregation and in the world. On the threshold of Christ's open door, we rely upon the healing, unconditional nature of God's love and grace to be our help and guide."

Inside the Sanctuary

(Diagram)

1 As you enter the sanctuary, pause in the center aisle near point (1) on the diagram. Notice the warm glow of the cherry wood pews and paneling, the ornately stenciled painted walls, and the vibrant stained glass windows. Look straight ahead (east) and you will see, hung above the chancel area, the delicate **Great Cross**, designed by John McConnell and installed in 1990.

(Photo of Great Cross, Chancel and Christmas Stained Glass Window)

At the east wall, a five-paneled stained glass window depicts the **Announcement of the Birth of Christ to the Shepherds**. Above it are round windows depicting the **Manger Scene** surrounded by seven angels playing musical instruments. To the left and right are the **Alpha** and **Omega** windows symbolizing that God is the first and last, the beginning and the end (Revelation 22:13).

The birth of Christ and the risen Christ, represented by the empty cross, are the central theological themes of this Congregational sanctuary.

2 At point (2), you are standing under the roof's **Lantern**, or cupola. Look up and you will see gold stars stenciled on a background of blue representing the firmament of God. The lantern is above the point where the north-south transepts and the east-west nave of the church form a cross. **Great Wooden Trusses** in the style of northern Italian gothic architecture are supported by four **Masonry Piers** located at the front corners of the side balconies. The **Pulpit** dominates the chancel portion of the nave, symbolizing the Congregational emphasis on preaching the Word of God. The original 1875 pulpit, put on wheels in a track in 1985, may be moved either to the right or left side, opening up the chancel platform for use in weddings, concerts, Communion services, graduation ceremonies, and other public gatherings.

The sacrament of Communion is celebrated twice weekly, at First Worship on Sundays at 9 a.m. and Jazz Worship on Thursdays at 6 p.m., as well as five times a year, usually in February, April, June, October and December at our 11 a.m. Festival Worship. On these occasions, a Communion table is set on the chancel platform or in front of it, and the gathering of Christ's disciples is celebrated in remembrance, hope and renewal. All are welcome to celebrate Communion. The **Baptismal Font** of polished brass stands to the left of the pulpit. This font, from Mt. Vernon Church, replaced the carved stone original now found in the Gordon Chapel. The congregation of Mt. Vernon Church joined with Old South in 1970. Part of the proceeds of the sale of its building, located at the corner of Beacon Street and Massachusetts Avenue, were put into an Old South fund to help build elderly and low-cost housing in Boston.

(Photo of Skinner Organ)

The 1921 **Skinner Organ** – Opus 308 has 110 stops and 115 ranks. It was installed in 1985 after being rescued from the Ordway Civic Theater in St. Paul, Minnesota before that building was demolished. The organ **Console** is located behind the pulpit and is on a hydraulic platform so that it can be raised or lowered for concerts and worship services. The organ's 7,625 pipes are located behind and to the right and left of the chancel and also at the back of the rear balcony above the entrance to the sanctuary. Ten ornately **Painted Wooden Pipes** are mounted at the front of each side balcony. The choir sits on either side of the organ. The church's music program is extensive, and the congregation uses the UCC's New Century Hymnal. The church has two pipe organs and seven pianos.

The **Cherry Wood Screen** below the Christmas window is a 19th century copy of the stone screen on the second floor of the Doge's Palace in Venice. At its top is a stenciled frieze of Vines and Flowers. This motif is seen also in the Venetian style **Mosaics** by Salviati of London above the exit doors at either side of the chancel.

The church's stained glass, installed in 1875, was designed and produced by the firm of Clayton and Bell of London. It is in the fifteenth century English style. Above the left balcony in the north transept are the stained glass windows depicting the **Miracles of Jesus**. From left to right, they show The Calming of the Storm: "Peace Be Still" from Mark 4:35-41; The Raising to Life of Jairus' Daughter: "Damsel, I Say Unto Thee, Arise" from Mark 5:22-42; The Changing of Water into Wine in the Marriage at Cana: "This Beginning of Miracles Did Jesus At Cana" from John 2:1-11; The Raising of Lazarus from the Dead: "Lazarus, Come Forth" from John 11:1-44; and the Resurrection of Christ, "He Is Not Here, But Is Risen" from Luke 24:6. High above the Miracle windows are seven round windows in which angels proclaim Paul's Fruits of the Spirit

(Galations 5:22, King James Version): Love, Joy, Peace, Long Suffering, Gentleness, Goodness, and Faith. In the center is the Lamb of God. Above the right balcony in the south transept are the **Parable Windows**. From left to right they depict the parables of The Laborers in the Vineyard: “Didst Not Thou Agree With Me For A Penny?” from Matthew 20:1-16; The Maidens and the Wedding Feast: “They That Were Ready Went In With Him To the Marriage” from Matthew 25:1-13; The Good Samaritan: “Go, And Do Thou Likewise” from Luke 10:25-37; The Prodigal Son: “This My Son Was Dead, And Is Alive Again” from Luke 15:11-32; and The Sower: “The Seed Is The Word of God” from Matthew 13:3-8. Above the Parable windows are seven angels surrounding the Dove of the Holy Spirit. The angels represent the virtues Wisdom, Pity, Strength, Counsel, Understanding, Cunning (knowledge), and Fear (of God). A flower-like pattern is stenciled around the three great arches surrounding the Miracle, Parable and Christmas windows. You will see this same pattern repeated in the **Carpet**. Look under the two balconies and you will see stained glass windows of sunflowers and lilies.

3 Standing at point (3), look up at the south wall of the sanctuary to see the windows of the **Four Evangelists**: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Below them are two arches with **Tablets** inscribed with the names of the Old South Church’s twenty senior ministers from 1669 to 2022. Adjacent to these tablets at the southwest corner is another **Tablet** dedicated to Samuel Sewall, the diarist and judge who, in 1697 at the Cedar Meeting House, publicly recanted the error of his rulings as one of the nine Salem witch trial judges who condemned 32 women and men to death in 1692. On the north wall, opposite the Evangelists, are the four windows depicting the **Old Testament Prophets**, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Below the Prophets, at the corner, is a **Plaque** honoring Edward Newton Whittier, 1841-1902, a Union Army officer awarded the Medal of Honor. High on the west (back) wall, is a **Tablet** in memory of the Revolutionary patriot and brewer Samuel Adams, who joined the church in 1789. To the right of the doors is a **Plaque** in memory of Associate Minister Robert H. Christenson, who died in 1989 and in whose honor the Great Cross was hung.

(Photo of Frieze)

4 As you walk up and down the side aisles, you will notice the **Frieze** along the church walls at top hat high level. Varied floral and plant motifs of the Bible are cast in plaster and painted to look like woodcarving. Another example of this “trompe l’oeil” (fool the eye) technique can be seen in the thin columns around the Christmas, Parable and Miracle windows. These are made of stone but painted to look like highly polished wood. Carvings of plants and small animals by Robert Ellin are found in the cherry wood throughout the sanctuary and a different plant motif is carved on each pew’s finial. The friezes carved in cherry wood, on the façade of the two balconies added in 1884, feature 38 different biblical flowers. Animals and plant motifs also were carved by W.G.H. Smart and John Evans into the screen of soft limestone from Caen, France, which frames the doors at the entrance of the sanctuary. See if you can spot a snail, a lizard, a squirrel and an owl as you examine the features around the sanctuary at close range.

(Photo of Carved Animal)

The eight **Chandeliers** overhead were designed in 1985 especially for the newly restored sanctuary. The quatrefoil, an architectural form like a flower with four petals, is seen on the base rim of these chandeliers. You will see this motif (and trefoils and cinquefoils) many times around the church.

5 At the rear of the sanctuary are glass panels depicting the 13 generations of the history of the church and a rack holding informational pamphlets.

A donation box is also located in the rear of the sanctuary. We would be most grateful for your donations to help maintain this historic church.

As you leave the sanctuary and enter the **Narthex**, notice the pictures on the upper part of the walls. They are images of people and events that have played significant roles in the more than 350-year history of Old South. Opposite the entrance to the sanctuary on the west wall of the Narthex is the Old South Honor Roll memorializing the church's World War I veterans.

Please visit the Front Desk. There you can purchase a book containing brief essays describing events and other aspects of the church's history written by over 100 friends and members of Old South to commemorate the church's 350th anniversary in 2019, as well as various publications, postcards, and a replica of the Great Cross.

6 As you leave the narthex and enter the **Vestibule**, you will see two **Tablets** on the left explaining the rebuilding of the church's tower in the 1930s, and the donation of the carillon in 1970. Over the doors in between the narthex and the vestibule is a **Tree of Life Mosaic** by Salviati of London. Above the great wooden doors to Boylston Street is the circular stained glass window representing Revelation 4:8, "And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him and they were full of eyes within; and they rest not day and night, saying, 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come'."

7 Outside, placed in the wall of the **Portico** are three **Gravestones**, removed from other sites. They memorialize sea captain and church founder John Alden (son of John and Priscilla Alden of Plymouth); founder Joshua Scottow; and Ann Quinsey, a 13-year-old niece of founder John Hull, minter of the Pine Tree shilling, the first American coin. Adjacent to these tablets there is a **Plaque** commemorating the congregation's start in 1669. From the sidewalk, see if you can find the faces of the architects carved in stone. Above the Portico roof, you can see a plaque recording those years in which services began in the three church buildings: 1670, 1730, 1875, and inscribed above the portico arches are the welcoming Words "Behold, I Set Before Thee An Open Door."

We hope you have enjoyed this tour. Thank you for visiting Old South Church in Boston.