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News and Trends From Brooklyn's Houses of Worship

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Landmark Ft. Greene Church's Tower Is Restored to Glory

Last week, the First Estate published a story about a visit to the Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church that Professor Ken Estey's "Brooklyn & Its Religions" class made. Then, in a moment of synchronicity, another story — this time architectural — developed about the landmark church in Fort Greene.

Seaboard Weatherproofing and Restoration Company recently completed a two-year, meticulous restoration project to repair the tower of the Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church (LAPC), an icon of safe harbor for over 150 years.

"Our church has a long, significant history," acclaims the Rev. David Dyson, LAPC's pastor. "It was founded in 1857 by abolitionists and was extremely important to the abolitionist movement. The church continues to break down dividing walls between people with its multi-racial, multi-cultural congregation that is almost an exact microcosm of our Fort Greene/Clinton Hill neighborhood."

Pastor Dyson and LAPC elders commissioned Walter Sedovic Architects and Seaboard to restore the tower as a way of preserving the integrity of the buildings that house the church's ministries. The church tower was losing pieces of its brownstone blocks and had become less attractive and a public safety hazard.

Each member of the restoration team was taken on a tour of the church to instill in them a sense of history, purpose and mission. "Seaboard was proud to become part of the LAPC family and add another chapter to its long history," says Michael Y. Ahearn, president of Seaboard Weatherproofing and Restoration Company, which recently celebrated its 60th anniversary. The Port Chester, NY company is a leader in the restoration and alteration construction industry, and has received prestigious awards and numerous accolades for its work on high-profile projects, including The Elephant House at the Bronx Zoo, The Cloisters museum, and 90 West Street.

Architect Sedovic explains, “We evaluated the condition of each stone and marked stones that needed to be removed. Our team, headed by Seaboard Weatherproofing and Restoration, dismantled and entirely replaced the four pinnacles and the four gablets on top of the four corner turrets. Four new finials were carved and installed on top of the pinnacles. The corner turrets only required replacement of badly deteriorated stones and the main tower was cleaned and all mortar joints re-pointed. We found a brownstone fabricator in Canada who carved stone replications from English St. Bees sandstone to match the features of the tower’s original Connecticut Portland Brownstone.”

Seaboard’s Ahearn points out, “The Restoration team preserved as many of the original sandstone blocks as possible to preserve the historic nature of the church. Large damaged pinnacle and turret stones were re-carved into Ashlar blocks for replacement of severely damaged stones on the tower’s façade. Stones that could not be reused were donated to International Masonry Institute for training of local artisans on brownstone carving and to Cathedral Stone, a manufacturer of masonry repair materials for teaching historic repair methods to craftsmen nationwide.”

The tower repair was part of LAPC’s master restoration project that began in 1997. Deb Howard, a church elder, chair of the capital campaign, and executive director of the Pratt Area Community Council, explained that after an assessment of building conditions, a roof replacement was given top priority and the tower restoration placed next. The capital campaign involved selling a vacant lot, receiving a Historic Preservation Program matching grant, taking out a loan and congregational fundraising.

“The restoration is an important priority that enables the stewardship of the church to remain viable for generations to come,” she said.

LAPC is referred to as the town hall of North Brooklyn, a reflection of its importance in the community, said Pastor Dyson. “Whenever the community gathers to discuss major issues like development, public safety, or international crises, they gather here. Four non-faith-based community organizations, including Habitat for Humanity and the Pratt Area Community Council, call our parish house home. Many start-up groups come first to LAPC as they work for the betterment of our community. We are a symbol of culture, faith, and social activism.”

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