

SACRED PLACES

PARTNERING IN VERMONT REPRINTED BY PARTNERS FOR SACRED PLACES

**Old South
Congregational
Church
Windsor, Vermont**

www.sacredplaces.org

Strengthening Rural Sacred Places *Partnering in Vermont*

Nestled into the side of Prospect Hill in Orleans County, Vermont — part of a remote corner of the state known as the Northeast Kingdom — lies the village of Brownington. An unlikely location for a slice of African-American history, the community boasts the home of America's first black college graduate, Alexander Twilight, who in 1823 received a degree from Middlebury College and later served as a minister and schoolmaster. The granite-faced dormitory Twilight built for his students in Brownington serves as a local history museum. His headstone graces the village graveyard. And looming over that graveyard is the village meetinghouse, built in 1841, where Twilight served briefly as pastor.

It is easy to slow down in Vermont. Green hills and narrow winding roads discourage speeding, while picturesque villages encourage browsing. Clapboard meetinghouses on village greens seem to be archetypes of a timeless American ideal. Sometimes visitors can forget that bucolic towns like Brownington are inhabited by real people, and that the sacred places that anchor Vermont's communities face many of the challenges that also confront churches and synagogues elsewhere.

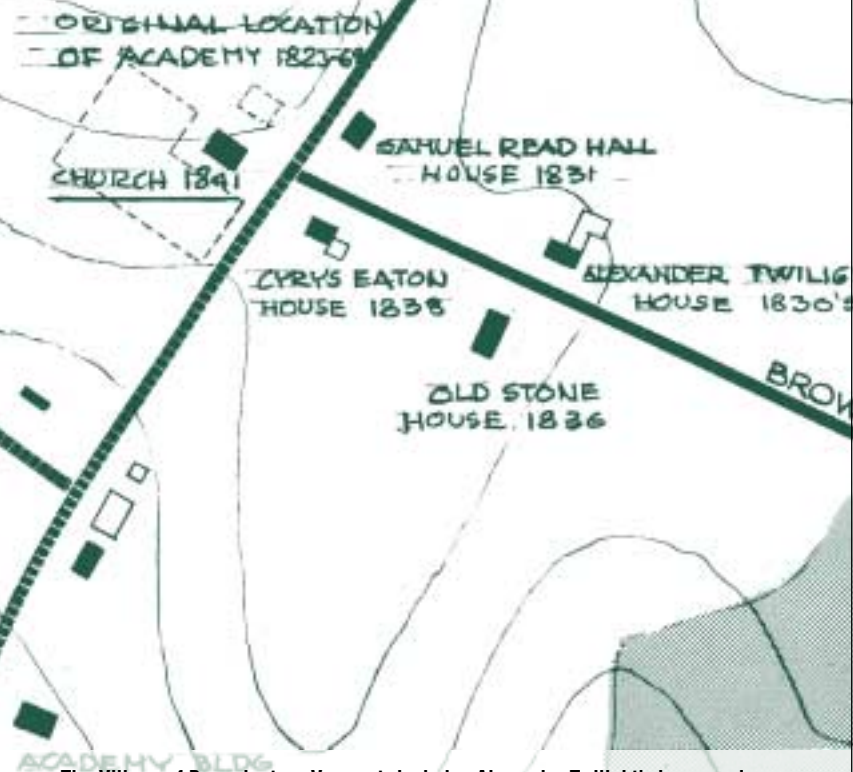
The Brownington Congregational Church is one of hundreds of Vermont sacred places built in the 18th and 19th centuries. Congregations know that these historic buildings demand constant care that can stretch their resources, but they are nevertheless discovering new ways to be vital in the 21st century.

Annual Retreat Serves as Catalyst

For more than 15 years, Partners has been offering help to urban and rural congregations throughout the United States. Much of Partners' work has focused on congregations located in changing neighborhoods in larger cities. However, in the late 1990s, Partners worked with Preservation North Dakota and the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Mountains/Plains Office to help develop a program called *Prairie Churches of North Dakota* to save the state's sacred places.

Like those in North Dakota, Vermont's sacred places are supported by a strong statewide preservation organization. Founded in 1980, the Preservation Trust of Vermont (PTV) supports preservation throughout the state through an annual conference, preservation awards, a historic preservation easement program, an initiative promoting country stores, two separate grant programs, and special-issue retreats.

The retreats have been held for about five years, according to Doug Porter and Ann Cousins, PTV Field Service Representatives. Gathering teams of local leaders from throughout the state who are working on preservation projects, the retreats are an opportunity to present case statements to peers and receive feedback and support. In 2002, for the first time, one was set aside for sacred places, and



The Village of Brownington, Vermont, includes Alexander Twilight's home and school, as well as the 1841 Congregational Church (measured drawing from the Historic American Buildings Survey below).





PTV's Doug Porter describes the building conditions at Bethany Church, Randolph, to New Dollars participants.

Partners was asked to participate as a mentoring organization to explain its approach to community-based fund-raising.

Partners was eager to take part, seeing an opportunity to strengthen services for sacred places in the state. After being invited back for three successive years, Partners had worked with more than 30 of Vermont's historic sacred places — places very much like Brownington Congregational Church.

In one sense, the Brownington meetinghouse is a convenient metaphor for Partners' work in general. Brownington is not *unique* — other congregations across the state have similar challenges and assets. But neither is it completely *representative*. It has an unusual story — including its small but significant place in African-American history — as well as a congregation with particular strengths and a building with particular needs.

In a similar way, the help Partners can offer to Vermont's sacred places is neither unique nor a cookie-cutter template for Partners' work elsewhere. Vermont's village meetinghouses struggle with different challenges than do North Dakota's prairie churches, San Francisco's suburban parishes, or Philadelphia's urban congregations. But Partners can nevertheless share its 15 years of experience working with congregations throughout the United States, and congregations in Vermont have much to learn from one another.

Making New Connections

Partners' collaboration with PTV led to an unexpected new relationship with one of the state's principal religious denominations. Excited about Partners' participation in PTV's retreats, Board Chair Gerrit Kouwenhoven introduced



The Rev. Dr. Arnold Thomas and New Dollars participants in Randolph, Vermont.

Partners to local leaders of the United Church of Christ, where he coincidentally chairs the Board of the Vermont Conference.

Many New England meetinghouses, including most calling themselves "Congregational," have been part of the United Church of Christ (UCC) since 1957, when a merger between the *Evangelical and Reformed Church* and the *Congregational Christian Churches* created that new denomination. The national UCC body is made up of regional jurisdictions called *conferences*, and the Vermont Conference oversees more than 150 congregations from its headquarters in Randolph.

When Kouwenhoven introduced Partners to the Rev. Dr. Arnold Thomas, who as Conference Minister is the chief executive of the Vermont Conference, both leaders realized that the *New Dollars/New Partners* training program would be a natural fit. Thomas liked Partners' emphasis on *assets* — like historic buildings and people who care about their communities — rather than *problems* like deferred maintenance and declining membership. In his address to the Vermont Conference this year, he contrasted "independent, autonomous churches" that say "our budget is too small" with his goal of nurturing congregations that understand their vital connection with one another and with the larger community.

New Dollars/New Partners in Vermont

Eight UCC congregations are now participating in *New Dollars*:

- Brownington Congregational Church
- First Congregational Church of Randolph
- Old South Congregational Church, Windsor
- Pittsford Congregational Church
- Richmond Congregational Church
- United Church of Northfield
- United Church of Putney
- United Church of South Royalton

These are tired, precious and lovely places where the life of the community is reflected in the coats of paint on the clapboards, in the church suppers through the years. Everyone has a stake in seeing that they are held together. These places can't do it alone anymore.

— Gerrit Kouwenhoven,
Preservation Trust of Vermont and Vermont
Conference, United Church of Christ

PTV's Services for Sacred Places

The Preservation Trust of Vermont offers an array of services to sacred places.

- Annual conference provides presentations and hands-on workshops.
- Field service program offers individual guidance for congregations.
- The Robert Sincerbeaux Fund provides small one-to-one matching grants for specialized consultants.
- Sacred places can apply for preservation grants of \$10,000 to \$50,000.
- Retreat program brings together people to foster peer support and momentum for preservation projects.

For more information, including commentaries and preservation success stories to inspire stewards of historic sacred places nationwide, visit www.ptvermont.org

Although each congregation has its own particular character and history, their general profile is as follows:

Members: Fewer than 100

Average age of congregation or building: About 150 years

Community population: Less than 3,000

Religious profile of community: The New Dollars congregation is often the only active church in the community

Annual budget: \$150,000 or less

Leadership: About half have full-time clergy

Capital campaign experience: Most have not conducted one in recent years

Adapted to address the particular concerns of rural congregations, the *New Dollars* program in Vermont has reinforced the goals of the Conference and its individual congregations. During one training module, Luther Snow, an expert in Asset-Based Community Development in small-town and rural contexts, coached participants to start with their strengths instead of focusing on small-congregation

limitations. Partners is also highlighting small-town case studies and success stories so that the Vermont congregations can find inspiration from congregations around the country.

PTV serves as a

valuable partner in the *New Dollars* training in Vermont. PTV's Doug Porter joined the first training module to lead some of the day's training agenda and to explain the organization's slate of services.

Looking Forward

From Partners' point of view, the cooperation between the statewide preservation organization and the denominational office is the fruit of years of work — precisely the cross-pollination that New Dollars fosters nationwide. Thus, in a remote area like Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, leaders in preservation and architecture, on the one hand, and those in



Old South's oldest and youngest members cut a ribbon to dedicate the church's reconstructed steps.



PHOTOS BY PAOLA DANGELO

The Rev. Amanda Lape-Freeberg dedicates the newly reconstructed entrance steps of Old South Church, Windsor.

the religious sector, on the other, are coming together to work in new ways.

Can such collaboration be a model for other states? Gerrit Kouwenhoven thinks so. He hopes that Vermont's example can be useful in other rural and small-town communities as congregations learn to be *compelling and persuasive* in the 21st century — to show why their old buildings should be preserved, creating a vocabulary that religious and non-religious people alike can understand.

It is easy to think that Alexander Twilight, the pioneering African-American educator and minister buried in the Brownington churchyard, would approve.



Measured drawings (one shown at right) and photographs (example above) of Old South Congregational Church, Windsor, were taken in 1959 by the Historic American Buildings Survey.

