

CLARK & GREEN ARCHITECTS HIRED TO COMPLETE DESIGN FOR DU BOIS FREEDOM CENTER

Local Firm Returns to a Project They Know Well

GREAT BARRINGTON (September 20, 2022) — The W. E. B. Du Bois Center for Freedom Center (formerly Clinton Church Restoration) has announced that it has hired Clark and Green Architects to complete the architectural and engineering plans for the African American cultural heritage center it is developing in downtown Great Barrington. The Du Bois Freedom Center, as it will be known, is restoring the historic Clinton A. M. E. Zion Church at 9 Elm Court to house its new cultural entity.

“When we first started out, Steve McAlister of Clark and Green did an excellent job on our historic structure report and we’re very happy to have the firm on board as we move forward,” said Wray Gunn, Sr., president of the nonprofit. “The team is extremely well qualified — and they really care about the project.”

Gunn, who is a fifth-generation descendant of Revolutionary War veteran Agrippa Hull, attended the Clinton Church for more than seventy years. He remembers the men of the church digging out the basement by hand in 1949, the community suppers and NAACP meetings held there in the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s, and community celebrations of W. E. B. Du Bois under the tenure of Reverend Esther Dozier in the 2000s.

Gunn and his wife Cora Portnoff, who also attended the church and serves on the Center’s board, are eager to see the historic 1887 building restored and returned to the center of community life, something they think would please Rev. Dozier, who died in 2007.

Portnoff said they appreciate Clark and Green’s understanding of the deep significance of the property’s history and future, recalling an email McAlister sent to them while conducting the historic structure report in 2017:

“It’s always a melancholy experience to work on an empty building that once teemed with life, joy and occasional sorrow” McAlister wrote, “but we have to look forward at those times, and approach the building with a sense of respect.”

McAlister said that the project means a great deal to his team — and the town as a whole — noting that the building and its site are among the remaining few in Great Barrington associated with Du Bois and the historic Black community in South County.

“We plan to approach the project with a lot of humility and extra effort, to contribute all we can to ensure that a place is established from which the timeless, message of freedom, justice and democracy can go forth,” McAlister said. “We consider ourselves very fortunate to be working on it once more.”

Once completed, the Du Bois Freedom Center will house exhibits and programming that educate the public about the life and legacy of civil rights pioneer W. E. B. Du Bois, the Berkshires’ rich African American history, and the church’s central role in community life. It will also be home to the Du Bois Forum for scholars, writers and artists of color.

Stabilization and roof work on the former church began in late 2019 but was substantially delayed by the discovery of extensive, unanticipated structural damage several months later, and then by the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional structural work, funded by the National Park Service and Town of Great Barrington, will be overseen by Clark and Green, as will subsequent construction phases. McAlister's team has already begun working with Proun Design, the project's exhibition designer, on plans for the build out of the Center. Proun completed an interpretive plan for the Center in 2020.

Consultants on the Clark and Green team, led by McAlister, include Structures North Consulting Engineers, Landmark Facilities Group, Foresight Land Services, Walter Cudnohufsky Associates, Finch and Rose, Talevi and Haesche, the Jackson Design Group, and Epsilon Associates.

To support the Du Bois Freedom Center or learn more about the project and upcoming programs and tours, visit duboisfreedomcenter.org.