The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction, which is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If a user makes a request for, or later uses a photocopy or reproduction for or purposes in excess of "fair use", that user may be liable for copyright infringement.
THE SMITH SCHOOL HOUSE

Boston African American National Historical Site

©National Park Service, North Atlantic Region, 1998
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES AND CREDITS ........................................ viii
PREFACE ........................................................................... xiii
INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ....................... xv
EDITOR'S NOTE ............................................................. xvi

I. ADMINISTRATIVE DATA .............................................. 1

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ...................................... 5

Abiel Smith's Legacy, 1815 ............................................. 7
The African School, 1808-1834 ....................................... 9
New School House, 1834-1835 ...................................... 12
Smith School For Colored Children, 1835-1855 ............. 15

  Introduction .................................................................... 15
  Grammar, Primary School, and Other Classes .............. 15
  Physical Appearance, 1835-1848 ................................. 17
  Remodeling, 1849 .......................................................... 19
  Attendance ..................................................................... 23
  Teachers ........................................................................ 25
  Heat and Ventilation ..................................................... 27
  Use of the Smith Fund .................................................. 28
  Efforts to Abolish Segregated Schooling ..................... 29
  Attainment of Equal School Rights ............................... 32

Integrated School, 1855-1882 ........................................ 33

City Storage Building, 1882-1886 ................................... 35
Use by Veterans Groups, 1887-1984 .............................. 35
Architectural and Engineering Study, 1970 .................... 37
Renovations, 1975 ................................................. 39
Offices, 1984-1990 .................................................. 40

III. DESCRIPTION OF PHYSICAL EVOLUTION .................. 57

ORIGINAL APPEARANCE, 1835 ................................. 59
Exterior Appearance .................................................. 59
   General Information .......................................... 59
   Site .................................................................. 59
   Foundation and Walls ....................................... 60
   Doorways ......................................................... 60
   Windows ......................................................... 60
   Roof ................................................................ 61
   Cornice and Gutters ......................................... 62
   Chimneys ......................................................... 62

Structure ................................................................. 64
   General Information .......................................... 64
   Walls ................................................................ 64
   Floors ............................................................. 64
   Roof ................................................................ 64

Interior Appearance .............................................. 65
   General Information .......................................... 65
   Cellar Classroom .............................................. 65
   First Story ....................................................... 67
   Second Story ..................................................... 69

PERIODS OF ALTERATION ..................................... 72
Alterations, 1836-1854 ............................................. 72
   New Closet, 1836 ............................................... 72
   Recitation Platform, 1846 .................................. 72
   Ventilation, 1847 .............................................. 72
   Remodeling, 1849 ............................................. 73

Alterations, 1855-1882 ............................................. 76
Alterations, Circa 1882-1886 ................................. 76
### Alterations, 1887-1970 76
### Alterations, 1970-1984 79
### Alterations, 1985-1990 80

#### IV. EXISTING CONDITIONS 89

**EXTERIOR ELEMENTS** 91

- **Introduction** 91
- **The Site** 91
- **The Building** 92
  - Foundation 92
  - Walls 92
  - Doorways 92
  - Windows 93
  - Roof 94
  - Cornice and Gutters 95
  - Chimneys 95
  - Signs 95
  - Flagpole 96
  - Finishes 96
  - Protection Equipment 96

**STRUCTURE** 106

- Walls 106
- Floors 106
- Roof 106

**INTERIOR ELEMENTS** 108

- Cellar 108
- First Story 121
  - General Information 121
  - Entry and Stairway 121
  - Museum Office 121
  - Northeast Office 124
Second Story ................................................................. 137
  General Information .................................................. 137
  Hall ........................................................................ 137
  Toilet Rooms ............................................................. 137
  NPS Office ................................................................. 139
  Storage Room ............................................................. 141

Attic ........................................................................... 156

UTILITY SYSTEMS ........................................................... 160
  Heating System .......................................................... 160
  Ventilation System ...................................................... 160
  Plumbing System ....................................................... 161
  Electrical System ....................................................... 162
  Protection Systems ..................................................... 162
  Energy Conservation ................................................... 163

V. RECOMMENDATIONS ...................................................... 165

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS ........................................ 167
  Recommended Treatment ............................................ 167
  The Name “Abiel Smith School” .................................. 167
  Compliance ............................................................... 167

EXTERIOR ELEMENTS ..................................................... 168
  Introduction .............................................................. 168
  The Site ................................................................... 168
  The Building ............................................................. 169
STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS ........................................... 174

INTERIOR ELEMENTS ............................................... 175
   Introduction .................................................. 175
   Historic Building Elements ............................... 175

UTILITY SYSTEMS .................................................. 177

PROTECTION SYSTEMS ............................................ 178

VI.  APPENDICES ................................................... 179

APPENDIX A. Abiel Smith’s Last Will and Testament, 1814 ....... 181
APPENDIX B. Report on the African School, 1833 ................. 185
APPENDIX C. Deed for Purchase of the Smith School House Lot, 1834 189
APPENDIX D. Address at the Dedication of the Smith School, 1835 195
APPENDIX E. Specifications for Remodeling the Smith School House, 1849 205
APPENDIX F. Mortar Analysis .................................... 211
APPENDIX G. Paint Analysis ..................................... 213
APPENDIX H. Wallpaper Analysis ................................ 225
APPENDIX I. Moldings Analysis .................................. 227

IV.  BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................. 233
LIST OF FIGURES AND CREDITS

1. Portrait of Abiel Smith (1746-1815). This painting was published in *Memories of a Hundred Years* by Edward E. Hale, Vol. II (1902), p. 244, and in *Abiel Smith and Lydia Otis* by Robert Lewis Weis (1923), p. 9. Mr. Weis, who was the great-great-great nephew of Abiel Smith and Lydia Otis, notes on page 2 of his book that the portrait was in his possession in 1923. He also notes that the portrait was painted by Gilbert Stuart (1725-1828) and is listed in "The Life and Works of Gilbert Stuart" by George C. Mason, *Scribner's*, 1879 ................................................................. 42

2. Engraving of the First Independent Baptist Church (African Meeting House), showing the north yard wall of the Smith School House. Published in *The Boston Almanac*, 1843. Courtesy the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (neg. no. 12300-B) ................................................................. 43

3. Watercolor painting of the "Smith School, Belknap Street," circa 1848-49. From the collection of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Department (G Cab. 5.2), Boston Public Library ................................................................. 44

4. Engraving of the "Smith School." Published in *The Boston Almanac*, 1849 ................................................................. 45

5. Photograph of the First Independent Baptist Church (African Meeting House) circa 1860, showing the north yard wall of the Smith School House in the foreground. Photograph by Josiah Johnson Hawes. Courtesy the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (neg. no. 12430-B) ................................................................. 46

6. Plan of the Smith School House and adjacent properties, as surveyed May 28, 1875, and August 1, 1876. *Records of the Boston City Surveyor's Office*, Engineering Division, Public Works Department, City of Boston ................................................................. 47

7. Plan showing the Smith School House, then used as the "City Storage Ho[use]," in the *Boston Atlas*, 1873 corrected to 1882. Fine Arts Department, Boston Public Library ................................................................. 48

8. View of Smith Court and the Smith School House, 1890. Courtesy the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (neg. no. 14858-A) ................................................................. 49


12. Cover page, “Renovation of Old Smith School,” October 3, 1975, by Stahl/Bennett, Inc. Reduced copy of original drawing in Public Facilities Department, City of Boston ........................................ 53

13. Plans, Elevations & Details for the “Renovation of Old Smith School,” Sheet A-1, October 3, 1975, by Stahl/Bennett, Inc. Reduced copy of original drawing in Public Facilities Department, City of Boston ........................................ 54

14. Electrical Plans and Legend for the “Renovation of Old Smith School,” Sheet E-1, October 3, 1975, by Stahl/Bennett, Inc. Reduced copy of original drawing in Public Facilities Department, City of Boston ........................................ 55

The next nine figures are drawings prepared by Jana Gross of the National Park Service, 1990.

15. Smith School House: Conjectural cellar plan, 1835 ........................................ 83

16. Smith School House: Conjectural first-floor plan, 1835 ........................................ 84

17. Smith School House: Conjectural second-floor plan, 1835 ........................................ 85

18. Smith School House: Conjectural cellar plan, 1849 ........................................ 86

19. Smith School House: Conjectural first-floor plan, 1849 ........................................ 87

20. Smith School House: Conjectural second-floor plan, 1849 ........................................ 88


All of the following figures are photographs taken by the author in January 1990, except as noted.

24. Smith School House: East (front) and north elevations ........................................ 100

25. Smith School House: East elevation, first story ........................................ 100

26. Smith School House: East elevation, doorway transom ........................................ 101

27. Smith School House: East elevation, doorway steps ........................................ 101

28. Smith School House: North elevation, infill of two former doorways ........................................ 102

29. Smith School House: North and west elevations ........................................ 102
GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommended Treatment

It is the recommendation of the 1984 General Management Plan that the exterior of the Smith School House be preserved, and that the interior be modified as needed for adaptive use. Suggested adaptive uses include office space, exhibit space, visitor orientation, and meeting space for small groups. The 1989 Interpretive Prospectus recommends that the building receive preservation or restoration treatment for interpretive purposes while continuing to serve other functions.

This historic structure report concurs with preserving the exterior of the schoolhouse and adaptively using the interior. It is also suggested that a limited amount of restoration work be undertaken on the exterior. This is explained in more detail in the sections that follow.

Editor's note: As explained previously, a team led by Stull and Lee, Coordinating Architects, investigated the Smith School House and produced a four-volume report Restoration and Adaptive Re-use of the Smith School House and African Meeting House in May 1994. A Preliminary Design was developed and presented in volume IV of the report; the design was approved and used for the preparation of final plans and specifications for a major restoration project, which was begun by the NPS in April 1998. Throughout the design process, the draft historic structure report was available to the design team; its findings and recommendations were considered, although not always followed.

The Name “Abiel Smith School”

Current usage of the name “Abiel Smith School” is inaccurate. Documentary historical research has determined that: (a) the African School was renamed the “Smith School” by the city of Boston on February 10, 1835; and (b) the building was generally referred to during the historic period of 1835-55 as the “Smith School House.” It is therefore recommended that the building be called by its historical name.

Compliance

The Smith School House is a historic building that is listed in the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Beacon Hill Historic District. As such, any changes that are proposed for the exterior of the building must be reviewed by the Beacon Hill Architectural Commission before a building permit is issued.

Compliance with Section 106 of the Historic Preservation Act is required if federal funds are used on the schoolhouse. This is a review process that determines whether or not a proposed treatment will have an adverse effect on the historic character of the building. Work must also be in compliance with state and local building codes, because the schoolhouse is owned by the City of Boston.
EXTERIOR ELEMENTS

Introduction

Preservation and a limited amount of restoration is recommended for the exterior of the Smith School House. “Preservation” is defined in the National Park Service document NPS-28 as an undertaking that “shall maintain the existing form, integrity, and materials of a structure. Substantial reconstruction, restoration of lost features, or removal of accretions are not included in a preservation undertaking.” “Restoration” is defined as “the act or process of accurately recovering the form and details of a structure and its setting as it appeared at a particular period of time by means of the removal of later work or by the replacement of missing earlier work.”

The exterior of the Smith School House as it exists today is little changed from its historic appearance in 1849 when the building was remodeled. This date falls within the historic period of 1835-55 when the building was used as a school for colored children exclusively. The most significant alterations have been made to the cellar story of the west elevation and to the yard wall. Lesser alterations include changes to the front doorway, closure of the cellar entrance off Smith Court, and the installation of modern equipment and signs. Another factor is the general deterioration of the building materials due to settlement, weather, and age.

It is therefore recommended that the existing exterior of the schoolhouse, including the site, be preserved. Selected features that have been altered since 1849 should be restored to their 1849 appearance, based on the physical evidence. Deteriorated historic building materials should be repaired using great care.

The specific work that is needed to preserve and restore the Smith School House exterior to its 1849 appearance is summarized below.

The Site

North Sidewalk

- Remove the nonhistoric asphalt paving and replace with brick paving similar to the east sidewalk paving.

The Yard Wall

- Remove the doorway from the north yard wall and close the opening with bricks.
- Remove the electrical conduit from the interior side of the north yard wall.
- Remove the steps from the interior side of the north yard wall, but save the steps for reuse elsewhere.
- Restore the missing west and south yard walls, based on the physical evidence and the architectural plans of 1970.
The Yard

- Maintain the historic (1849) grade of the yard, based on the findings of the archaeological investigation recommended previously. Some compromises may be necessary to accommodate aspects of desired reuses (e.g., handicapped access into the cellar from the yard).

The South Building

- Address the intrusive presence of the 1909 apartment building immediately adjacent to the Smith School House through the interpretive program. A house was located close to the schoolhouse during the historic 1849 period but did not touch it; the house was later replaced by a stable. A precise restoration of the site to the 1849 period would require removing the present south building. This is not feasible: the apartment building is privately owned, and its removal would be prohibitively expensive.

The Building

Foundation

- Repoint mortar joints where necessary, using the same mortar mix recommended for the exterior restoration of 1975.

- Restore the historic appearance of the west wall of the cellar by restoring the cellar doorways there (see “Doorways,” below).

Walls

- Repoint mortar joints where necessary, using the same mortar mix recommended for the exterior restoration of 1975.

- Remove the nonhistoric signs from the east and north walls.

- Retain the eight star-shaped tie-rod plates in the east, north, and west walls, even though they are not historic. These were installed in 1975 to stabilize the second floor and thereby serve an important function. Some consideration might be given to painting the stars to match the brick wall, to make them less obvious. (They are now painted black.)

Doorways

Repair Front (East) Doorway

- Remove the nonhistoric door and wood side panels.
• Design and install a front door based on the historic six-panel door on the second story.

• Design and install sidelights based on the style of the historic transom above the doorway.

• Design and install cast-iron boot scrapers on either side of the doorway. Their style should be based on old boot scrapers that survive on Beacon Hill. Their location should be based on the existing iron stubs.

• Assess the condition of the parged brownstone lintel and repair as necessary.

Recreate Side (North) Cellar Doorway

• Remove the asphalt sidewalk paving from the area over the stairwell, and remove the concrete blocks from the doorway opening.

• Install steps if these are found to be missing upon the opening of the historic stairwell.

• Design and install a door that is based on the historic six-panel door on the second story.

• Design and install a bulkhead covering for the stairwell.

Recreate Rear (West) Cellar Doorways

• Remove the present metal doors from the 1835 doorway at the north end of the west wall, and the concrete-block infill from the 1849 doorway at the south end of that wall.

• Restore the stairwell and steps based on the findings of the archaeological investigation. Consideration may also be given to installing a ramp instead of steps to enable handicapped access into the cellar.

• Investigate both doorway openings closely for evidence of their historic frames and doors, including possible sidelight configuration.

• Design and install doorway frames and doors based on the findings of the physical evidence.

Windows

Nonhistoric Elements

• Remove the boards covering the cellar windows.

• Remove the four air-conditioning units from the north and west windows.

• Remove the flagpole from the second-story window in the front (east) elevation, if further research proves that no flagpole was present here historically.
Cellar Windows

- Examine the cellar windows for evidence of the historic 1849 frames and sashes.
- Restore the cellar frames and sashes based on the information obtained.

Brownstone Sills and Lintels

The brownstone window sills and lintels date to the original construction of the schoolhouse in 1834-35 and should be preserved if possible. This presents a challenge, because some of the brownstone is parged with a pigmented mortar that was applied in 1975, and the brownstone that remains exposed is in deteriorated condition. A study needs to be done to determine the following:

- can the nonhistoric parge be removed without damaging the brownstone?
- should the parge be retained even though it is not historic?
- should parge be applied to the brownstone that is still exposed to arrest its deterioration?
- does another treatment option exist that would not cover over the brownstone as does the parge?
- is the brownstone so badly deteriorated that replacement should be considered?

First- and Second-Story Windows

- Preserve the window frames and sashes on the first and second stories, even though they are reconstructions installed in 1975.

Window Shutters

- Preserve the window shutters on the east elevation, even though they are reconstructions installed in 1975.

Roof

Slate Shingles

- Preserve the slate shingles on the north side of the roof.

Asphalt Shingles

- Replace the asphalt shingles on the south roof slope with new shingles. The new shingles should match the color of the historic slate shingles on the north roof slope as closely as possible.
Vent Stacks

- There are two sewer vent stacks on the roof, one on the north side and one on the south side. The north stack is highly visible and detracts from the historic 1849 appearance of the building. It should be removed entirely or relocated.

Cornice and Gutters

- Assess the condition of the brickwork cornice; repoint as necessary using the same mortar mix that was recommended for the exterior restoration in 1975.

- Maintain the existing gutters, which were installed in 1975. Address the problem of the south gutter that freezes and backs up water into the building at the southwest corner.

Chimneys

East Chimney

- Clean the furnace flue if necessary.

- Assess the condition of the brick mortar; repoint if necessary using the 1975 mortar mix.

West Chimney

- Remove the two metal antennae straps.

- Assess the condition of the brick mortar; repoint if necessary using the 1975 mortar mix.

Finishes

- Prepare and paint the exterior woodwork, including the doorway frames, doors, transom, sidelights, window frames, and window sashes. The paint type should be an alkyd with a gloss finish. The paint color should be yellow, similar to the color that was on the building in 1849.

- Prepare and paint the exterior window shutters in the east elevation a color that is appropriate to the 1849 period. The paint type should be an alkyd with a gloss finish. The paint color should be green, similar to the green that was used on the African Meeting House. The exact color that was used on the schoolhouse could not be determined because the existing shutters are reconstructions installed in 1975.
Protection Systems

The existing fire-protection equipment was installed in 1987. It includes emergency lights over the front and rear doorways, and an alarm on the upper north wall near the east corner. The equipment is intrusive and detracts from the historic 1849 appearance of the schoolhouse. Several treatment options exist, as follows:

- retain the equipment, because the safety of the building and its occupants is more important than the historical appearance of the exterior;
- remove the equipment, because it detracts from the historical appearance of the building; or
- install new equipment that is less intrusive.
STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS

The second floor of the schoolhouse was stabilized in 1975. Some consideration should be given to stabilizing the first floor today. It is recommended that a structural engineer be consulted for this work. Stabilizing the first floor will likely involve removing the nonhistoric plaster ceiling in the cellar to assess the condition of the floor structure. Several benefits will be derived from this work, including the opportunity to examine the historic framing, the removal of four nonhistoric support posts in the cellar, and the achievement of a safe floor.
INTERIOR ELEMENTS

Introduction

Adaptive use of the Smith School House is recommended, as suggested by the General Management Plan. No specific use is recommended by this historic structure report. Instead, the several issues that need to be considered when deciding how the building will be used are presented here.

The Smith School House played an important role in the history of the black citizens of the City of Boston in the 19th century. It is situated immediately adjacent to the African Meeting House and it is on the Black Heritage Trail. A use that is in keeping with the historical significance of the schoolhouse would be most appropriate.

The Smith School House is a small building by modern standards. It consist of three stories only—a cellar, a first story, and a second story. Each story has a gross area of approximately 1,612 square feet.

The schoolhouse today has only one means of egress from each of its three stories. This limits the number of people who can be on any one story at any given time, as defined by the State Building Code. The code allows approximately 16 people in the cellar, 32 people in the first story, and 16 people in the second story (780 CMR Section 436.4.4).

Neither the historic (1849) or current configuration of the schoolhouse is suitable for wheelchair accessibility. The front doorway is three steps above the level of the sidewalk, and the rear doorway is four steps below the level of the sidewalk. No elevator or other lift exists in the building to provide access between the stories. The introduction of handicapped access will therefore necessitate an alteration to the historic appearance of the building. Such an alteration would have the least impact if it were incorporated into the cellar story of the west elevation, where it would not be visible from Smith Court. Similarly, the introduction of an elevator within the building would have the least impact on historic building materials if it were installed in the northeast corner of the building.

Public parking at the Smith School House does not exist. Parking on Beacon Hill is severely restricted and is limited primarily to residents with resident stickers. Smith Court is a private way that allows limited parking for official business only.

Historic Building Elements

General Information

The layout of the schoolhouse today is little changed from its appearance in 1849. Historic elements that should not be changed include the three-story staircase, the configuration of the rooms in the first story, and the configuration of the rooms (except the toilet rooms) in the second story.
Many historic building elements dating to 1834-35 and 1849 survive in the schoolhouse and should be preserved. These are itemized below by story.

**Cellar**

- stairway (1849)
- exposed granite walls (1834-35)

**First Story**

- stairway (1849)
- floorboards (1834-35)
- exterior walls (1834-35)
- partition walls (1849)
- wainscot (1834-35 and 1849)
- doorway openings (1849)
- window openings (1834-35 and 1849)

**Second Story**

- stairway (1849)
- floorboards (1834-35)
- exterior walls (1834-35)
- partition walls (1849)
- wainscot (1834-35 and 1849)
- arched plaster ceiling (1834-35)
- ceiling openings (1834-35 and ca. 1847)
- doorway openings (1849)
- trim at one doorway (1849)
- one six-panel door with hinges (1834-35)
- window openings (1834-35)

**Attic**

- floorboards (ca. 1834-35)
- four king-post scissors trusses and other structural members (1834-35)
- ventilation equipment (ca. 1847)
- hatches (1834-35)
UTILITY SYSTEMS

Heating and Cooling Equipment

Some thought should be given to installing a new heating and cooling system. Several problems exist with the present steam-heating system that are discussed elsewhere in this report. The rooms on the first and second stories are cooled with window-mounted air conditioner units that detract from the historic appearance of the building’s exterior.

Plumbing Equipment

None of the plumbing equipment is historic. It may therefore be altered as required. Consideration need only be given to minimizing the impact of new plumbing equipment on the historic building elements listed previously.

Electrical Equipment

There is no historic electrical equipment in the building. The electrical system may therefore be altered as required for the building occupants. Special care should be taken to minimize adverse impact on the historic building elements listed previously.

Energy Conservation

Some steps could be taken towards making the Smith School House more energy efficient. These include:

- schedule a free “Energy Audit” with Boston Gas;
- install weatherstripping on the interior sides of the windows;
- install a new and efficient heating and cooling system; and
- install set-back thermostats.
PROTECTION SYSTEMS

**Fire-Protection Equipment**

The existing fire detection and alarm system was upgraded in 1987. It is an adequate system, although the equipment is intrusive on the historic appearance, both exterior and interior, of the building.

It is recommended that the present fire-protection system be evaluated after it is decided how the building will be used. This evaluation should determine whether or not the system is in compliance with the State Building Code for its intended use. The evaluation should also ascertain if it is possible to replace the existing equipment with devices that are more in keeping with the historic schoolhouse.

**Intrusion-Detection Equipment**

An evaluation should be made as to the adequacy of the present intrusion-detection equipment, and the advisability of installing a more comprehensive system.