NPS Form 10-900a
(Aug. 2002)

OMB Approval No. 1024—0018
(Expires Jan. 2005)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number _____ Page _____

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 05001612 **Date Listed: 2/3/06**

Abyssinian Meeting House	Cumberland	ME
Property Name	**County**	**State**

N/A
Multiple Name

This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

for Erika K. Martin Seibert 2/3/06
Signature of the Keeper **Date of Action**

Amended Items in Nomination:

This SLR amends the nomination to add Criterion A.

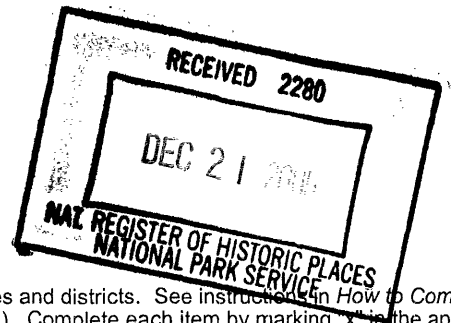
Under Criterion D, Phase I testing has indicated that below ground features are very well preserved, that the property exhibits intact stratigraphy, and that artifacts uncovered in context can provide significant information about the building episodes on the property, the locations of various outbuildings and potentially the spring, and, more importantly, about African American religious and social practices in 19th century Maine.

Under Criterion A, the property exemplifies not only a rare frame public building from the early 19th century that survived the Portland fire of 1866, but visually exemplifies both the important information the property can convey (that of the buildings architecture and layout) as well as the social history of the African-American community in Portland.

DISTRIBUTION:
National Register property file
Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)

NPS Form 10-900
(Oct. 1990)

OMB No. 10024-0018
1612



United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Abyssinian Meeting House

other names/site number Fourth Parish (Abyssinian) Congregational Church

2. Location

street & number 73-75 Newbury Street N/A not for publication

city or town Portland N/A vicinity

state Maine code ME county Cumberland code 005 zip code 04101

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☒ statewide ☐ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title — Date 12/15/05

Maine Historic Preservation Commission
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title — Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

☑ entered in the National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ determined eligible for the National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.
☐ removed from the National Register.
☐ other, (explain): _____

Signature of the Keeper — Date of Action 2/3/06

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)
- ☒ private
- ☐ public-local
- ☐ public-State
- ☐ public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)
- ☒ building(s)
- ☐ district
- ☐ site
- ☐ structure
- ☐ object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
1	0	sites
		structures
		objects
2	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

None

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

RELIGION / Religious facility
EDUCATION / School
RELIGION / Church - related residence
SOCIAL / Meeting hall

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

VACANT / NOT IN USE

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

EARLY REPUBLIC / Federal

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK
walls SHINGLE
roof ASPHALT
other BRICK (CHIMNEY)
PLYWOOD (over windows)

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☐ **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☐ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☒ **D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations
(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☒ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ **B** removed from its original location.
- ☐ **C** a birthplace or a grave.
- ☐ **D** a cemetery.
- ☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ **F** a commemorative property.
- ☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions)

ETHNIC HERITAGE / Black
RELIGION
SOCIAL HISTORY
ARCHAEOLOGY / HISTORIC - Non Aboriginal

Period of Significance

1828 - 1916

Significant Dates

1828-1831
C. 1870-1880

Significant Person
(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation

African - American

Architect/Builder

Unknown

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography
(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):
- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:
- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

Name of repository:

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property .11 acres

UTM References
(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	19	393268	4834889
2	19		
3	19		
4	19		

☐ See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description
(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification
(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title CHRISTI A. MITCHELL, ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIAN

organization MAINE HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION date 29 August 2005

street & number 55 CAPITOL STREET, STATION 65 telephone (207) 287-2132

city or town AUGUSTA state ME zip code 04333 -0065

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items
(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name _____
street & number _____ telephone _____

city or town _____ state _____ zip code _____

DESCRIPTION

MATERIALS, continued

Foundation:	Concrete
Walls:	Vinyl

DESCRIPTION

The Abyssinian Meeting House is a vernacular wood-frame building constructed between 1828 and 1831 to serve Portland, Maine's African American community. Remodeled by the Congregation in the decade after the Civil War, it was used for religious, social, educational, and cultural events until its closing in 1916. Eight years later the structure was substantially renovated into tenement apartments, which were occupied continuously until the building was condemned by the City of Portland in 1991. In 1998 the former meeting house was sold for back taxes to the *Committee to Restore the Abyssinian*, a non-profit organization formed to preserve and restore the structure. As a historic, nineteenth-century structure, the integrity of the Abyssinian has suffered first from its conversion to domestic residences and later from deferred maintenance and neglect. However, extensive research and documentation has revealed that the structure continues to be an important source of data for investigating African American religious and social practices in 19th century Maine.

The following description of the Abyssinian is largely excepted from *"Historic Structure Report: Abyssinian Meeting House"* (March 2005) by John A. James, et al.

Location and Site Description

The Abyssinian Meeting House is located on a broad slope that descends south from Eastern Cemetery to the Portland, Maine waterfront. It is surrounded by a dense residential neighborhood of small, brick and wood-frame houses and cottages on very small parcels, most of which were erected after the Portland Fire of 1866. Just southwest of the meeting house is a large manufacturing plant that was originally the site of a sugar refinery and now serves as a brewery. Along the short block of Newbury St. between Hancock Street to the west and Mountfort Street to the east the narrow asphalt roadway is edged by a granite curb and lined with brick and concrete sidewalks. There is no tree belt and plantings are sparse on each parcel.

The meeting house structure occupies a .11 acre parcel that runs from Federal Street on the north to Newbury Street on the south. On the south side of the parcel (front), the grade is level and the building's main entry is located about fifteen feet from the public way, and is set off by a wooden picket fence enclosing a small patch of lawn. On the west side, the area between the building and the lot line contains a narrow strip of concrete paving known as Abyssinian Court before it was discontinued in 1952. On the north side, the area behind the meeting house is currently vacant and

overgrown. A high brick and stone retaining wall provides support for the bank on which Federal Street is built and is topped by a wooden stockade fence. On the east side of the parcel, the building sits almost on the lot line, and is located within a few feet of the frame apartment building, set at a higher grade, on the next lot to the east.

A concrete walkway and wooden picket fence in front of the former meeting house are 20th century elements that may have had earlier counterparts on the site. There are currently no outbuildings or other structures on the site, although earlier buildings on Federal Street and behind the meeting house appear on maps in 1871, 1882 and 1909.[1]

Building Exterior

The Abyssinian Meeting House is a traditional building type with vernacular allusions to the Federal style expressed in the overall proportions of the structure, the relatively shallow slope of the roof and the orientation of the gable end toward the street. The rectangular building features a symmetrical three-bay main elevation facing south towards Newbury Street and long four-bay side elevations with regular fenestration. The visual height of three and a half stories includes a brick basement level fully exposed at grade (formerly the vestry and kitchen), two primary levels (formerly the open sanctuary), and a low attic with modern shed dormers. The single ridge roof line presents a broad gable above the front and rear elevations.

The lower section, or raised foundation, of the Abyssinian Meeting House consists of a common bond red brick foundation, fully exposed on the south and west sides and partially exposed along the sloped grade on the north and east sides. On the south elevation, the central entry is enclosed within a modern wood-frame airlock and flanked by a single window opening on each side fitted with two-over-two wood sash. The west sidewall of the lower level incorporates four window openings and a secondary entrance near the northwest corner. The rear elevation is clad with vinyl siding and has no openings at the lower level. The east elevation features two large and one small window openings before the foundation meets the adjacent slope. Along the side and rear elevations, the base of the brick wall is reinforced with poured concrete.

The upper section of the Abyssinian Meeting House is a 2 1/2-story wood frame structure conforming to the rectangular footprint of the exposed brick foundation. The south elevation is a flat facade with ranks of three windows symmetrically positioned at both the first and second floor levels. The low-pitched roof forms a gable end with a crown molding along the rake edge, this trim is now partially concealed by vinyl siding. The modest cornice returns point to a single center window flanked by smaller vents. The entire south elevation is currently covered with 20th century wood shingles in a mustard yellow color and edged with narrow corner boards. Plywood panels cover all

[1] Beers Atlas of Cumberland County, Maine, Plate 48 B (1871); Portland Reevaluation Plan Goodwin, (1882); Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Portland, - Plate 16, (1909).

the window bays on the building, and none of the window sash survives in place.

On the west elevation, the long sidewall is divided by windows on the first and second floor levels into four nearly equal bays. The wall surface is covered by mustard yellow wood shingles with narrow corner boards at the north and south corners and a shallow projecting cornice at the roof line. A section of the wood shingles has been pulled off to reveal the original wood sheathing nailed to the framing underneath. On the lower north end of the west wall shingles have been removed to expose a broad water table and two rows of skived clapboards fastened with cut nails. At the north end of the wall, at basement level is a plywood covered door, which was at one point surmounted by a low gabled entry hood, as evidenced by the outline of the hood preserved in a line on the sheathing above the door. The north gable wall is covered with white vinyl siding and features irregular fenestration consisting of one large and one small window at the first floor level and two large windows at the second floor level. On the east elevation, the long sidewall is mostly concealed by the close proximity of the adjacent building. The entire elevation is covered with white vinyl siding in very poor condition. Portions of the siding have been pulled away to reveal wood shingles and original wood sheathing on the wall. The east elevation is marked by an irregular fenestration pattern of five windows at both the first and second floor levels, each also covered with plywood panels.

The gabled roof is covered with gray asphalt shingles. On the west slope, a shallow shed dormer rises from the roof in the northern third of the structure. On the east slope, two shallow shed dormers are set in the middle third of the structure. A single brick chimney extends through the roof ridge at the southern third of the building.

Interior

At the basement level, the shallow entry vestibule leads directly to the front staircase which is flanked by the east and west apartment doors. The stairwell is finished with bead board wainscot, and 20th century stock moldings trim the hallway doors. The basement level is currently configured as a series of small rooms on either side of a central bearing wall with an unfinished workroom with raised concrete floor occupying the northernmost bay. An interior stair has been inserted in this room to access the upper floors. At one time this level was configured to have three room deep apartments on either side of the center wall, with a utility area at the north end. The east side apartment was subsequently adapted as a furnace and utility area and now accommodates the boiler room, a lavatory, and a series of small storage rooms, as well as a small kitchen and pantry in the southeast corner. With the exception of four doors, described below, all of the remaining interior finishes (plaster, hardwood floors, stock molding and bead board wainscot) date to the early 20th century.

Adjacent to the furnace area are two large closets or storage areas. The door to the northern one shows four, simple, non-edge molded raised panels, however the door's middle rail is quite low, suggesting a Victorian date. The back side of this door begins its paint series with a painted graining.

Two other doors, to the southeast corner room and the small west side lavatory to the north of the furnace, also contain four panels, this time with simple cyma profile edge moldings. The front of the lavatory door preserves a bold polychrome with dark panels and light rails and stiles. The rear side (as installed) was grained. While these doors are stylistically too late to be original, they could plausibly date to the postulated c.1870 renovations. A fourth type of reused door in the furnace area serves the small southeast corner closet. This four panel door has edge moldings with a late Greek Revival or Italianate look. The lowered middle rail suggests a date midway at least through the nineteenth century. Stylistically, this door seems to be the strongest contender for a surviving Meeting House period wooden trim element.

On the first floor the front stair leads to a common landing, that again accesses two parallel sets of apartments flanking the center dividing wall. As constructed in the 1920s, each apartment contained four rooms arranged in a linear pattern, with kitchens and baths positioned along the central divider. For research purposes, portions of this wall have been removed between the northerly two ranks of rooms. The floor plan on the third floor mimics that of the level below, however its partition walls remain in place. The third floor is accessible only from this rear staircase. Because of the pitch of the roof, the third floor has only a single apartment unit with dormers providing additional clearance.

The upper levels of the building are built on floors inserted into the main sanctuary or auditorium space. The floors, walls, ceilings, and finishes on the upper floors all date from the tenement period (after 1924). Some of the perimeter walls have been opened recently to reveal the structural framing for the original window locations.

Framing

The Abyssinian is a timber frame structure on a high masonry basement. It is framed in five large bents, with massive two story posts supporting timber trusses, forming four bays, front to back. The bents are spaced plus or minus twelve feet on center, for an overall north to south outside dimension of approximately forty eight feet. The narrower east to west dimension is three bays wide, formed by two corner and two intermediate posts, also spaced plus or minus twelve feet on center, for a total exterior measure of approximately thirty six feet. The major timbers, including the principal rafters and purlins, the king post trusses and chords, the posts, and the plates are hewn and are approximately eight by eight inches in section. All common rafters, roof braces, rising braces, and studs are mill sawn.

The roof is supported by king post trusses with braces rising from either side of the lower portions of the king posts to the outer rafters. The west brace of the center truss (as well as others) was removed for the creation of the attic apartment. The mortise pockets have been exposed, showing a bit of the brace tenon surviving on the beam side and the entire pin surviving in the post mortise. The lower chords of all three interior trusses have also been cut and removed. Removal of plaster and lath has exposed these cuts on the east side of the first interior bent (of three) from the south, and

the west side of the middle bent. (The major east-west apartment period walls run in the planes of the bents. Therefore the truss cord mortise evidence is located at points where apartment period walls meet exterior side walls.)

The roof is framed in a principal and common rafter system, with the outer beams of the trusses constituting the principal rafters. These are joined by one large approximately eight by eight inch purlin per bay. The purlins are braced to the truss rafters by two large diagonal braces rising and falling at each end. The purlins support common rafters spaced approximately twenty four to twenty five inches on center. There is no ridge pole.

Two large diagonal braces rise from the upper ends of all posts to the side plates and end girts. Many of these were cut for the installation of apartment windows in the 1920s. The sawn studs, mortised into the frame, are of approximately three and seven eighths by five inch scantling.

Structural Evolution

As originally constructed in 1828 the Meeting House was entered through a high brick basement which also contained a vestry (meeting room) and kitchen. The placement of the original main staircase to the wood framed auditorium above has been obscured by later changes, but appears to have been in the center of the entry area. The entry hall was served by two doors and lit by a single window between them. This arrangement is shown in an 1836 engraving and an early sketch by a local antiquarian. During the later nineteenth century, probably in 1870, the first entry and stairs were removed: a central door was installed and the two original doors were converted to windows. A staircase was built in each front corner, with the southeastern stair rising another story to serve the gallery on the south end of the auditorium. The location of these stairs are marked by floor patches in the southeast and southwest corners of the first floor. Excellent evidence also indicates the newel placements and implies the direction of the stairs' rise during this period. The central staircase was re-established after 1924 (and the corner stairs removed) when the building was altered for tenement use.

On the main level the space was divided between a southern stair hall (or vestibule) and the auditorium or sanctuary. The original pine plank flooring that covered this level was discovered under later layers: it clearly shows the locations of the post 1870 staircases, the partition wall between the two rooms, the location of the doors and the location of the pews.

Two doors led from the stair hall to the auditorium's two aisles. Nine rows of panel-ended pews with graceful curving arms formed a large block in the center whereas narrower blocks were located on each side. The pews and associated wainscoting were removed from the Abyssinian Meeting

House in 1916, but survive in their new location at Mission Congregational Church in West Paris, Maine.[2] The pulpit was in the front or north end of the auditorium. While no specific information about it has yet been found, it was referred to as "old fashioned" in a 1916 newspaper article. It sat on a raised dais whose height and width are recorded in paneling moved with the pews. The auditorium was lit by three large windows on each side, and by the tops of two matching facade windows which were visible above the gallery. The bottoms of these windows lit the upper stair hall. The pulpit wall had no windows. The lower walls were sheathed in a wainscot of wide, hand planed horizontal boards. The upper walls were flat plastered. There are remnants of old plaster on the north wall, above the second floor level, that suggests that the sanctuary may originally have had a cove ceiling, but it was removed when the second floor was added.

[2]Continued study of the surviving pews may disclose their numbering system which, combined with several surviving pew lists, would allow the location of specific families' pews to be known. Some of those families customized their pews with interior paints and cushions.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The former Abyssinian Meeting house in Portland, Maine, is historically significant as the religious, educational and cultural center for Portland's nineteenth century African American population. It is the earliest meeting house associated with a black congregation in Maine (1828). Prior to and during the Civil War the Abyssinian was associated with abolitionist activities in Portland, and the property also hosted a school for African American children, a residence for the minister, and may have been the site of a community spring or well. Although greatly modified by conversion to apartments in the early twentieth century, the Abyssinian Meeting House survives in its original location with deep roots and associations with the neighborhood. While the building itself is significant as the location of African-American religious practices, social and community life, the lot upon which its sits is undisturbed land harboring archaeological sites that have the potential to illuminate the history of Portland's African American community. This property is nominated at the state level of significance to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion D, as a source of above-ground and below-ground (archaeological) information that will help to round out the understanding of nineteenth-century Portland's African-American population in the areas of religion, education, social and cultural history, land use, and architectural practices. Criterion consideration A also applies, as the structure was initially used as a church, however, the significance of this property also reflects its function as a school, residence, and center of community activity.

The following statement of significance for the Abyssinian is largely excepted from *"Historic Structure Report: Abyssinian Meeting House"* (March 2005) by John A. James, et al.

Site History:

The land upon which the Abyssinian Meeting House was constructed was sold by Samuel Freeman to Reuben Ruby, both residents of Portland, on November 11, 1826. The lot that Ruby purchased ran between what is now Newbury street and the Eastern Cemetery on the north. The church building was erected on the southern portion of the lot, and in 1831 Ruby sold this section of the land to the Abyssinian Society (this portion of the property is represented by tax map 20-B-6). Three years earlier he had severed a small section at the north end of the lot and sold it to Blackstone Driver (another founder of the Abyssinian Church), in two conveyances. This back lot, (now identified as tax map 20-B-5 and which is situated at a significantly lower grade than Federal Street, which technically forms its northern border), was historically accessed by the narrow Abyssinian Court, located to the east of the Meeting House. In 1917 both lots were purchased by David Finkleman and have been conveyed together ever since.

Between 1828 and 1917 the use of the back lot was both separate from and connected to the activities of the Abyssinian Church. There is historical evidence to support the existence of at least three previous structures on the north lot. The maps of 1871, 1882, and 1909 show a small freestanding wood structure directly behind the Meeting House and two freestanding buildings at the northwest and northeast corners of the parcel. According to an 1862 division of the property (by their

heirs of Blackstone Driver) the north lot was occupied by a two-family house, a shop, a shed and a privy. There is some question as to whether one of these buildings, an approximately 10 x 20 foot structure located directly behind the Meeting House, was actually situated on the church lot or the northern parcel. The Church records from 1867 and 1868 refer to the construction and proposed sale of a dwelling house on the rear of the Abyssinian lot, and according to city directories, the Rev. John Hayslett in 1866 lived at 50 Sumner Street, presumably at the rear of the Meeting House, which was then numbered 46-50. The 1882 citywide revaluation map continued to show a small detached building directly behind the meeting house. Since all the minsters after 1870 lived in other locations, this small house may have been rented to another tenant. The last year a resident was listed as living on Abyssinian Court was 1892. This building did not appear on the 1896 Sanborn Map, however in the 1909 Sanborn map a similarly scaled building reappeared along Federal Street, in the northeast corner of the lot. The brick and stone retaining wall that now makes up the north side of the parcel appears to incorporate foundation walls of the earlier structures located on the site.

The topography of the site prior to construction of the meeting house is unknown, but it must have been fed by a spring. The original deed of land from Samuel Freeman to Reuben Ruby (1826) included "...the full privilege of draining the same." A Portland Fire Department listing of city reservoirs and wells that could be accessed for firefighting includes a listing at #8 Sumner near Mountfort Street. There are also early references to the Abyssinian congregation selling water rights on the Meeting House property. "The subject came up relative to letting the water under the church, when it was agreed to let it for the sum of thirty dollars per annum." [3] The precise location of this spring has not yet been found, yet even in 2005 the area under the floor in the southwest corner of the basement is noticeably wet.

Religious History

When the Abyssinian Church was founded in 1828, Portland was already a diverse community with a variety of Protestant denominations and churches clustered in the downtown and port neighborhoods. The establishment of new congregations and the construction of new meeting houses in Portland, especially in the Federal period (1790-1830), were trends that highlighted the growing diversity and economic strength of the community. The growth of Portland can be traced in the organization of the First Parish Congregational (1721), the Quaker meeting (1743), the Second Parish Congregational (1788), the Methodist Church (1795), the Freewill Baptists (1810), the rebirth of First Parish as Unitarian (1821), the first Roman Catholic services (1822), the Third Parish Congregational (1825), and the Fourth Parish Congregational (Abyssinian, 1827).

The immediate cause of the establishment of the Abyssinian Church was the injurious practice of relegating black members to the upper gallery or rear corners in Portland's mainstream churches. However, the desire to establish a separate congregation with a predominantly black membership

[3] Fourth Congregational (Abyssinian) Church Records, September 16, 1850.

was part of a widespread movement that originated in the urban churches of Philadelphia and New York. Six pioneer churches provided models for the establishment of black congregations in the northeast: of these, however, only a few retain their early buildings of worship. The Free African Society (1787) was a quasi-religious society derived from St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, where black members objected to being forced to worship in the gallery. Similar complaints in other churches led to a General Convention in Philadelphia in April, 1816, and the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church as a separate entity.[4] The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (1796) was another offshoot of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. It was founded by black residents of New York City as a reaction against discrimination and "the denial of religious liberty." The A. M. E. Zion Church, dedicated to "the liberation of the human spirit," became known as the Freedom Church and counted among its members Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglas, and Sojourner Truth. The Zion designation was added to the name in 1848 to distinguish it from other denominations. Again, in New York City the Abyssinian Baptist Church (1808) grew out of the First Baptist Church in that town. It was founded by African American residents and a group of Ethiopian (Abyssinian) merchants who refused to accept segregation in houses of worship.

The African Baptist Church (1805) in Boston was established by Rev. Thomas Paul (a black minister) and twenty members of his congregation who had formerly held services at Faneuil Hall. The African Meeting House on Beacon Hill, built in 1806, is the oldest black church building still standing in the United States. It is a substantial Federal-era structure whose design may have been influenced by Asher Benjamin's plans for other churches in that city. Also in Boston, the May Street Methodist Church (1818) was founded by Rev. Samuel Snowden, a black preacher and outspoken abolitionist, but the church building was lost in 1904.[5] Finally, on Nantucket Island, is the 1827 African Meeting House which served that island's black mariners. The small building, which was recently restored, accommodated church services, a school, and community functions.

In Portland, the separation of the black members from the Second Congregational Church was also a part of a period of religious fervor, which led a number of Protestant sects to challenge the long-established Congregational Church in New England. The Trinitarian/Unitarian controversy of the 1820s also opened the door to diverse new congregations of Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Swedenborgians in Portland and other communities. The Abyssinian Society of Portland was organized by former members of the Second Parish (Congregational). The formal process of separation began with a published protest in the *Eastern Argus* (one of the oldest Portland newspapers) on September 19, 1826:

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[4]A series of edifices associated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia were erected in 1794, 1805, and 1841. The present building was built on the site of the earlier structures in 1889.

[5] This church is now called the Union United Methodist Church.

...Our numbers amount to about six hundred. Provision for the accommodation of a very few of our people is made in several houses of public worship; but while the provision is totally inadequate to our wants, the privilege granted us is associated with such circumstances, as are calculated to repel rather than to invite our attendance. Nay, pardon our misapprehensions if they be such, we have sometime though our attendance was not desired. The undersigned are persuaded that nothing would so much contribute to improve the character and raise the tone of moral feeling among their people, as the erection for their use of a suitable house for public worship, and the regular ministration of the gospel....

In February, 1828, twenty-two black residents took steps to formally organize the Abyssinian Religious Society as an all-black congregation. By July 2, they had incorporated the society, appointed trustees, and moved to build a new meeting house of their own. By April of 1830, the meeting house had been raised on Newbury Street (then known as Sumner Street). A committee to oversee the finishing of the interior was appointed later the following year (1831) and consisted of Richard Dickson, Charles Green, Ephraim Small, and Titus Skillings. The founding members officially requested dismissal from the Second Parish (Congregational) and set about to adopt the same Covenant and Articles of Faith held by the parent church. Whereas previous separations in Portland's congregational societies had been based on doctrinal differences or geographical distance, the establishment of the Fourth Parish (Abyssinian) was based primarily on race. While in many northern urban areas, in the years prior to the Civil War, African Americans either formed separate denominations, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, or formed congregations within the more evangelical Methodist or Baptist denominations, the Abyssinian Meeting House continued to be affiliated with the main line protestant Congregational (Calvinist) church throughout its history.

In the early years, the Meeting House was owned by the Abyssinian Religious Society and made available for use by the Fourth Parish (Congregational). The distinction between the religious society (an incorporated body that owned the buidling) and the church membership (congregation) was characteristic of New England Congregational churches, even though in practice the two groups were virtually identical. With the Abyssinian Meeting House, the distinction became irrelevant in 1840 when the Society formally sold the meeting house to the Parish, who then assumed all responsibility for maintenance and repair.

Architectural precedents:

The builder of the Abyssinian Meeting House is unknown, but in its original configuration, the Abyssinian Meeting House of 1828 closely conformed to the vernacular tradition of the meeting house as a rectangular structure with a simple gabled roof line. The design may also have been influenced by the 1825 Market House at Market Square (now Monument Square) in Portland, a well-known public building that later became Portland's first City Hall.

The Market House, built by John Kimball, Jr., in 1825, was a three-story rectangular wood-frame

building with a fully exposed basement level, a single ridge gabled roof line and a prominent bell tower. Like the Abyssinian Meeting House erected three years later, the Market House featured a symmetrical three-bay facade on the gable end with a center entry at the basement level and a closed triangular pediment with a semi-elliptical fanlight in the gable. The long sides of the basement level formed a series of market stalls. Large multi-pane windows in the front and sidewalls lighted the unobstructed main hall, which was used for militia drills and public events.

Great Fire of 1866.

The Great Fire of July 4-5, 1866, was a pivotal event in the history of Portland and resulted in the loss of many of the city's early public buildings. The conflagration was started by boys throwing firecrackers against the wall of a wooden building in the port district. The fire spread quickly and by the time it was extinguished had destroyed some 1,500 buildings (one third of the city) and left 12,000 people homeless. Miraculously, not a single life was lost.

As a result of the fire, Portland lost all the banks in the city, all the insurance and law offices, all the dry goods, shoe, and jewelry stores, eight hotels and at least one hundred manufacturing establishments. The list of public buildings destroyed by the fire included the City Hall, five school houses, the old State House, the Custom House, the City Market, the Portland Athenaeum (library), the Natural History Society (museum), and at least eight churches (including Second and Third Parish Congregational, First Baptist, and First Universalist).

The Abyssinian Meeting House was one of the few buildings saved, largely through the efforts of William Wilberforce Ruby (1834-1906), a black fireman and son of Reuben Ruby, . He reportedly protected the building by draping the roof in wet blankets. Although most of downtown Portland was eventually rebuilt, the Abyssinian Meeting House is a rare survival even in its modified and deteriorated state.

Social History

The members of the Abyssinian Congregational Church represented a small but significant portion of Portland's black population throughout the nineteenth century. To a large extent, the Abyssinian membership adopted the standards and aspirations of society at large in Portland. In religion, education, and social interaction, the Abyssinian leadership demonstrated that blacks were intelligent, hard-working, respectable citizens deserving of equal rights and opportunities. The early membership lists that survive from the Abyssinian Church indicate that the membership tended toward the 'better' class of black residents representing independent businessmen, skilled and semi-skilled artisans, tradesmen, and service providers. In addition, the 1850 Federal census designates many of the individuals who were associated with the church as 'mulatto' rather than 'black'. However, the diverse membership also included barbers and hairdressers, hack drivers, traders, and a church sexton. They were the black residents who were most likely to have daily contact with their

white neighbors and, therefore, felt the injustice of segregation at church more keenly. A number of the individuals were listed simply as mariners, which may include sailors as well as dock workers.

The surviving records of the Abyssinian Meeting House indicate frequent dismissals of members due to inappropriate behavior or differences in belief throughout the nineteenth century. The original published complaint of 1826 included "some apology for the vice and degradation with which our people are charged." Twenty years later, the Fourth Parish records of 1848 explicitly condemned attendance at dances, theaters, and circuses by members of the Abyssinian congregation.

By the end of the nineteenth century, membership at the Meeting House had declined as the number of religious institutions in Portland increased and the black population became smaller and more dispersed. The wreck of the steamship *Portland* in November, 1898, resulted in the loss of nineteen adult male members of the Congregation (including two trustees) who worked on the ship. From that point on, the level of activity at the church was minimal although the congregation as a formal entity survived until 1916.

From 1828 to 1916, the Abyssinian Meeting House was the primary public building for Portland's black population. Programs and services at the meeting house helped address the social, political, and religious needs of African American residents and provided important leverage in the greater Portland community.

Education

The City of Portland, working with the leaders of the Abyssinian Church, conducted a segregated public school for black children at the Abyssinian Meeting House from 1846 to 1857. Amos N. Freeman, pastor of the Abyssinian Church, served as the principal at an annual salary of $400 (1850) and Caroline R. Ellis served as assistant at a salary of $100. The student population apparently peaked at about fifty. For the 1856-57 school year, the Portland School Committee appropriated $650 for the segregated school at the Abyssinian Meeting House, but the school subsequently closed due to a dearth of students. From that point on the children of black resident attended regular city schools. The last faculty of the Abyssinian school were Peter R. Hall, principal, and Phebe J. Lord, assistant (1856-57). By 1875, the nineteen schools in the Portland school system counted 10,134 students including 61 colored children.

Community

Church suppers and entertainments were offered periodically at the meeting house during the period of active use. The earliest documented social event was the "Fair & Levee" of 1859, sponsored by the members of the Ladies' Sewing Circle to raise money for gaslights in the church. A choral concert by six male and female vocalists on January 3, 1870, was favorably noted by the local newspaper. An unspecified "Entertainment" on April 2, 1890, helped raise a net profit of $43.62 to

support the church. A "Variety Supper" on April 9, 1913, raised $100 and a "Salad Supper and Concert" on May 2, 1913, raised an unspecified amount.

In addition to church-sponsored events, the vestry (lower level) of the meeting house was rented out for community use. Church records from 1853 include the receipt of rent for evening use of the vestry by an unnamed group. The YMCA held prayer meetings in the vestry the same year (1853) and the Pocahontas Lodge (a fraternal organization associated with Freemasonry) held a meeting there in 1871.

Abolition Activities

The Fourth Congregational (Abyssinian) Church, as Portland's leading black institution in the nineteenth century, was inevitably drawn into debate on anti-slavery activity and the development of the Underground Railroad. The activities of the church leaders and invited speakers reveal the rapid and contentious evolution of the anti-slavery movement in Portland and its relation to the national movement.

A pivotal event in the development of anti-slavery sentiment in Portland was a visit by William Lloyd Garrison on the first leg of a lecture tour from Portland to Bangor in 1832. Arriving in Portland on September 24, 1832, Garrison stayed at the home of Nathan Winslow, a Quaker merchant. The Quaker Meeting House where Garrison first spoke could not accommodate the full crowd and he subsequently addressed the black population directly from the pulpit of the Abyssinian Meeting House.

Garrison's exposition of the horrors of slavery and the need for immediate action inspired Samuel Fessenden (b. 1784), a Portland lawyer and militia general, to spearhead local abolitionist activities. Under Fessenden's leadership, the Portland Antislavery Society was founded in March 1833 with a Ladies Auxiliary established the following year. In June and July of 1833, Fessenden argued for immediate emancipation in a series of public debates with colonizationists in Portland. A statewide convention held in Augusta in October 1834 led to the establishment of the Maine Antislavery Society. Noted Scottish abolitionist George Thompson addressed the convention and subsequently embarked on a speaking tour of the state, which included a stop in Portland. In a letter to William Lloyd Garrison dated October 12, 1834, Thompson mentioned "Addressing a congregation of colored persons in the Abyssinian" in Portland.

The Portland Union Antislavery Society, founded June 1, 1842, was one of several grassroots movements advocating the abolition of slavery in the South. The founding meeting was held at the Abyssinian Meeting House and chaired by Rev. Samuel C. Fessenden (son of Samuel Fessenden). The society is particularly significant because the founding officers included several leaders of the Abyssinian congregation - Christopher C. Manuel (President), and Blackstone Driver (Treasurer).

In conjunction with the first lyceum event, the members of the Abyssinian Society and other black

residents from Maine and New Hampshire met on September 6, 1849, to consider a public stance and united action on anti-slavery issues. Lewis G. Clark (1812-1897), a runaway slave from Kentucky, provided a first-hand account of the horrors of slavery in a speech at the Abyssinian Meeting House and also during that meeting the noted Abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass (1817-1895) also spoke from the pulpit. On July 7, 1853, the Rev. D. Green, pastor of the Abyssinian Church, gave a first-hand account at the church of his own escape from slavery. Speakers in other venues included William Wells Brown, an escaped slave from Kentucky who spoke at the Portland City Hall on July 15, 1855.

Because of its easy access by rail and sea, Portland developed as one of the northernmost hubs of the Underground Railroad system. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 allowed slave owners, agents, and bounty hunters to track down escaped slaves in the north and return them to slavery. Black and white activists in Portland provided safe houses and refuge for slaves and helped organize escape routes to England and Canada. The leaders and members of the Abyssinian Church actively participated in concealing, supplying, and transporting runaway slaves.[6]

While most of the Underground Railroad activity in and around Portland was led by local Quakers and white anti-slavery activists, the ministers and membership of the Abyssinian Meeting House played an active role. Biographies, memoirs and slave narratives call particular attention to the roles of Rev. Amos Freeman (minister at Abyssinian when the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 was passed), Charles Eastman (a leading layperson who joined the Abyssinian in 1855), Dr. Addison Parsons (a white teacher at the Abyssinian "colored school" in the mid-1850s), and Rev. Amos Beman (minister at Abyssinian in the years leading up to the Civil War). The only known reference to the use of the Abyssinian Meeting House itself as a place to hide fugitive slaves is in the unpublished memoirs of a descendent of Rev. Freeman.

Criterion D: Information Potential

The present nomination concerns both the extant building, known as the Abyssinian Meeting House, and the undisturbed historic archaeological site surrounding the building. Both have the potential to yield information important to the understanding of the African American experience in Maine in the 19th century.

Although the Meeting House underwent a thorough remodeling in the early 20th century, extensive testing has determined that this structure still retains information pertinent to the study of Portland's black community. Although some documentary records survive (most importantly, the church's official records from 1830-32, 1835-1913), these are useful for understanding the social

[6]Detailed period sources with direct relevance to Portland include Still, The Underground Railroad (1872) and Willey, History of the Antislavery Cause in State and Nation (1886).

history of the organization, including administration, membership and finances, rather than the ritualistic, spatial and aesthetic values of the community. To date, the building has yielded some information about the organization of the religious facility, (such as the location of the pews and gallery), but the location and arrangement of the dias and altar has not yet been revealed. Similarly, some of the interior finishes have been discovered (grain painting on doors, paint on interior plaster and trim, paint on exterior clapboards and brick), as has the presence of a cove ceiling in the auditorium. The Church's use of the foundation level as a vestry, kitchen and school is known from documentary sources, and through continued, careful evaluation of the structure the spatial arrangement and detailing of these rooms, (along with associated artifacts) may be discovered.

The rarity of this resource belies its importance. As noted above, this is one of the few frame public buildings from the early 19th century to survive the 1866 Portland fire. As such, the structure conveys important information about local timber-frame construction practices in the city. More importantly, however, only two older, African American meeting houses are known to survive in the northeast, the African Meeting House in Boston (1806), and the small, vernacular, African Meeting House on Nantucket (1827), both initially Baptist houses of worship. Differing greatly from the 'established' Calvinistic tradition in New England, according to historians Sammons and Cunningham, "the Methodist and Baptist denominations - viewed by the legally established churches as illegitimate or as outcasts - conveyed their message in a style that appealed to the hearer's heart through vigorous preaching and a call for personal commitment."[7] In contrast, the Abyssinian Society did not represent a doctrinal distancing from the prevailing and traditional white religious tradition in Portland, but a continuation of it, albeit in a racially separate group. As research continues it is expected that information will be exposed to help understand how the members of this congregation expressed their religious beliefs in the years before the Civil War, and how this changed after that conflict was over. In addition, as the spatial orientation of the auditorium is further discovered, it may be possible to focus analysis on divisions and differences within the church, based on gender, class and age. Inasmuch as this is the only firmly established, pre-Civil war, African-American house of worship in the state, it holds a unique position in the history of Maine.

In addition to potentially answering questions about the religious practices of Portland's black population, there are numerous questions that remain to be answered regarding how the Meeting House functioned in the community as a school and community center. The documentary reference to selling water rights from the spring on the property leads to questions about how this resource was valued and utilized by the neighborhood. Similarly, references to the participation of some of the church's members in abolitionist activities offers tantalizing hints that the Abyssinian, as both a meeting place and the arbiter of the black Portland's moral, religious, and political compass, may have been at the center of the local Underground Railroad activities. Further study of the property may yet reveal this important dimension of its history.

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[7]Sammons and Cunningham, p. 145.

While much of the Meeting House's period fabric has been lost, (or in some cases, reused) there is considerable potential that archaeological testing under the foundation will yield cultural artifacts pertinent to the understanding of the community. In June 2005, phase one archaeological testing was undertaken on the grounds surrounding the Abyssinian. Two trenches in the front of the building revealed the original corner entrances, remnants of entrance steps and original foundations. Artifacts associated with the Meeting House period, including slate pencil fragments, clay marbles, and porcelain doll fragments were found in front of the building. In the rear of the structure two of the stone foundations and a builders' trench associated with the back houses have been located. The work to date has also determined that the localized strata exhibits a high degree of integrity, which is promising for future excavations.

The ultimate goal of the owners of the Abyssinian is to restore and preserve the building and grounds as a means of promoting the cultural heritage of African-Americans in Maine. There is widespread recognition that the key to fully understanding this heritage is to carefully study the building and the site, and to extract as much information as possible from the existing above ground and below ground resources. Much as it functioned historically at the center of the city's Black community, the continued study of this property today is central to developing a more comprehensive understanding of the lives of Maine's nineteenth-century black community.

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VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The nominated property is described by the City of Portland, Maine tax assessors' map 20 lot B-5-6.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The above described boundaries represent all the land that was historically associated with the Abynssinian Meeting House (lot B-6), and the adjacent building lot (B-5), which contained the minister's dwelling house in the mid-nineteenth century.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

PHOTOGRAPHS

Photograph 1 of 6
Christi A. Mitchell
Maine Historic Preservation Commission
6 November 2005
South facade; facing north.

Photograph 2 of 6
Christi A. Mitchell
Maine Historic Preservation Commission
6 November 2005
South and west elevations; facing northeast.

Photograph 3 of 6
Christi A. Mitchell
Maine Historic Preservation Commission
6 November 2005
Eastern half of raised basement, south elevation; showing brick headers marking location of original southeast entry.

Photograph 4 of 6
Christi A. Mitchell
Maine Historic Preservation Commission
13 May 2005
Interior, auditorium level (second floor), facing west. Framing for original window is covered by plywood sheet.

Photograph 5 of 6
Christi A. Mitchell
Maine Historic Preservation Commission
13 May 2005
Interior, auditorium level (second floor), facing west. Original floor displaying scars marking the location of original pews and aisle. (These are the horizontal divots running from left to right. The most visible set are located just below the center line of the photograph.)

Photograph 6 of 6
Christi A. Mitchell
Maine Historic Preservation Commission
13 May 2005
Attic framing, facing southwest.