

# Old North Illuminated Interpretive Plan

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## About the Site

The enduring fame of Old North Church began on the evening of April 18, 1775, when the church sexton Robert Newman and vestryman Capt. John Pulling, Jr. climbed the steeple and held two lanterns aloft as a signal that the British were marching to Lexington and Concord via a route that required crossing the Charles River (later described poetically, if erroneously, as “by sea.”) This fateful event ignited the American Revolution. Old North Church (formally known as Christ Church in the City of Boston) is Boston’s oldest surviving church building and welcomes hundreds of thousands of visitors each year as one of the Freedom Trail’s and Boston National Historical Park’s most visited and iconic historical sites.

Old North Church’s story is known to many visitors because of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem “Paul Revere’s Ride.” This poem, written to sway public opinion in support of the Union cause on the eve of the Civil War, memorializes and mythologizes the actions of Paul Revere on that pivotal evening. Recognizing that Paul Revere didn’t act alone, Old North Illuminated’s on-site and digital interpretation and programming also share the roles of the other individuals that night and the impact that their civic actions had on shaping the future. The site also includes an interpretive space in the historic Clough House. The space is currently occupied by the Printing Office of Edes & Gill which explores the colonial trade of printing, as well as the role of printers in the American Revolution and the juxtaposition of colonial-era liberty and enslavement.

In the almost 250 years since that famous night, and the decades before, Old North has continued to be a witness to history. ONI engages on-site and virtual audiences - from school groups, to families, to lifelong learners from across the globe - in programming and initiatives that advance Old North Illuminated’s vision for more inclusive, equitable, and compassionate communities.

Old North Illuminated (then known as the Old North Foundation) was established in 1991 as a 501(c)(3) secular nonprofit organization independent of the Old North Church congregation. ONI manages all historic site operations and interpretative, educational, and preservation programs. The Old North Church (Christ Church in the City of Boston) remains an active Episcopal church. The congregation and Old North Illuminated partner closely.

Old North Illuminated is a legislative partner to Boston National Historical Park, an association of eight sites that showcase Boston's role in the American Revolution. The sites were collectively designated a national park in 1974. The National Park Service is the largest philanthropic supporter of Old North Illuminated and an invaluable programmatic partner.

Additionally, Old North Church & Historic Site is an anchor site on The Freedom Trail and ONI partners closely with the Freedom Trail Foundation. These relationships, as well as ongoing

collaboration with sister sites across the Park and Trail, are central to ONI's ability to successfully deliver on its mission.

## Glossary

**Artist:** Includes, but not limited to, people who create in various media such as painters, musicians, photographers, dancers, filmmakers, designers, writers, architects, and actors.

**Citizen:** A member of a community; it can include but is not limited to a legal resident of a city, state, or nation.

**Citizenship:** Belonging to a country; behavior in terms of the duties, obligations, and functions of a citizen; belonging to a society or community.

**Revolution:** A radical and pervasive change in society and the social structure, especially one made suddenly and frequently accompanied by violence.

**Paradox:** A statement or proposition that seems self-contradictory or absurd but in reality expresses a possible truth.

## Terminology

**Free Black Congregants:** Old North Church congregants of African descent who were not enslaved, yet not granted full citizenship of either Great Britain (pre-Revolutionary War) or the United States (1789–1868).

**Enslaved Black Congregants:** Old North Church congregants of African descent who were enslaved to white congregants or to white non-congregants and were considered legal property, denying them both personhood and citizenship.

- A note about using the term Black to describe people of African descent: While some today may prefer the term African Americans, we must acknowledge that in their lifetimes (c.1723-1868 in ONC history), Black congregants, men and women of African descent, were not citizens of the United States (or pre-Rev War Great Britain). They were not guaranteed full American citizenship until the ratification of the 14th Amendment in 1868. The term Black has been used to describe those of African descent consistently in census records and allows us to acknowledge the depth and breadth of the African diaspora and all of its members. Contemporarily, the term Black Americans can, and does, include those from across the diaspora – giving space to acknowledge the expanse of cultures therein.

## Vision

Our vision describes the world in which we want to live.

Old North Illuminated envisions a future in which everyone will see their stories, struggles, and hopes reflected in places of prominence and our shared American history.

## Mission

Our mission statement describes how Old North Illuminated is going to contribute to creating that world in which that vision is realized.

Old North Illuminated inspires active **citizenship** and courageous, compassionate leadership by interpreting and preserving the Old North Church & Historic Site.

## Core Beliefs

Our core beliefs articulate the beliefs on which our programmatic work, operations, and partnerships are based and conducted.

Old North Illuminated believes that:

- Bravery, patriotism, and active citizenship come in many forms. These acts can inspire both large-scale and local change.
- Education and respectful dialogue are key to building a more perfect union that reflects the promise of liberty and justice for all.
- Becoming an anti-racist organization will require active engagement with the legacy of slavery at Old North Church and the ongoing burdens of slavery and racism in our country.
- By preserving and sharing history, space, and stories, we shape our future.

## About Old North's history of slavery and enslaved people

ONI honors the role that Old North Church and its people played in launching the American Revolution within the broader context of the church's 299-year history. Old North Church, as an institution, was founded by and for a community with great privilege compared to the macrocosm of colonial Boston. This privilege determined who had access to leadership roles in the church, and in turn what information was recorded and whose stories were preserved.

Old North, like any institution dating to the 18th-century, has complicated connections to enslavement, which include the truth that individual white congregants and donors enslaved Black people and accumulated wealth by usurping the profits generated by enslaved laborers, which they used to make philanthropic contributions to the church. ONI believes that it is important to present a

truthful and well-rounded narrative of our past, to help us understand our present and build our future.

As an organization whose mission is focused on interpretation and preservation of a historic site, ONI's purview is research and education. The primary objective is to tell a truthful and comprehensive story of Old North Church's history. Through various interpretive media, ONI acknowledges that there are painful as well as inspirational legacies woven into Old North Church's story. ONI encourages visitors to see that institutions, like individuals, strive to evolve and only by facing the truths of their pasts—good and bad—can true progress occur. The congregation (parish) of Christ Church - known as Old North - are the spiritual descendants of the colonial congregation and are on their own journey of education and contemplation.

## Part 1 - The Foundation for Planning

### Interpretive Themes and Essential Questions

Interpretive themes are an organizational tool that provide a conceptual framework for visitor experience planning and programming. Themes are derived from and capture the essence of the organization's purpose, significance, resources, and values.

Themes can help explain why the site's story is relevant to people who may be unconnected to an event, time, or place. They go beyond simple descriptions or recitations of fact; they reflect the context and effects of events or processes. In this way, interpretive themes foster opportunities for visitors to experience and consider the meanings, concepts, and values represented by site resources. Themes are important as a framework to help guide and focus the development of the visitor experience, services, and programming.

ONI staff elected to include essential questions (EQs) as part of the site's theme statements. Essential questions help to frame the "big ideas" of history, taking the theme statement and telescoping it out to help visitors construct their own understanding of the past, connect the past to the present, and challenge them to examine their own beliefs. EQs have more than one answer (they are not looking for "facts") and they reveal history as a developing relative narrative rather than a fixed story. Essential questions prompt visitors to find their own relevance in the historic content and to make personal connections to the past.

Each theme/EQ is followed by a contextual paragraph that explains how the theme and EQ fit with ONC's historical narrative. ONI staff members have also suggested interpretive subtopics for each theme.

<b>Topic</b>	Active Citizens
<b>Essential Question</b>	What does it mean to be an active <b>citizen</b> ?
<b>Theme Statement</b>	Active citizens are empowered individuals who build and sustain a just and equitable society.
<b>Contextual Paragraphs</b>	<p>For 300 years, Old North Church has borne witness to local and national events of great import - both civic and religious.</p> <p>The role that key members of Old North Church's congregation played in the American Revolution cast an inspirational mold for active citizens during other periods of division in American history. Active citizens throughout our history helped shape their communities and provided examples for us today as to how individuals can effect change through action and civic engagement.</p>

	<p>Active citizenship at Old North is not limited to the Revolutionary era. Rectors, like the Rev. Asa Eaton, led the church through tumultuous times working to preserve the building and grow the congregation. In the early 20th century, Bishop William Lawrence spearheaded the 1912 restoration of the church which reinstalled the box pews. This effort to restore the church to its Revolutionary-era appearance reveals an awareness of Old North’s status as a revolutionary icon and potential to inspire others.</p> <p>Women, too, have played roles as active citizens in Old North’s history. Organizations, such as the Fragment Society and Women’s Guild, have aided struggling congregants and neighbors, and created gathering spaces for the community and visitors.</p> <p>Moving beyond the Revere and lantern story, other examples of civic engagement include political participation and protest, making informed economic decisions, using words to encourage action, and investing time and resources in the institutions one cares about (such as the construction and furnishing of Old North Church itself).</p>
<p><b>Sub-topics</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Community</li> <li>● Advocacy</li> <li>● Rising above obstacles</li> <li>● Hard work and perseverance</li> <li>● Our nation’s struggles through periods of great division</li> <li>● Religion’s role in informing people’s civic actions</li> <li>● Freedom and unfreedom</li> <li>● Citizenship and barriers to citizenship</li> <li>● Abolitionists as active citizens and the complicated role of enslaved people, formerly enslaved people, and free people of color who were abolitionists but did not have full state or federal citizenship.</li> <li>● Informed participation in the democratic process</li> <li>● Active citizen without of legal citizenship</li> <li>● Role of gender in civic action</li> <li>● Role of religion in civic action</li> <li>● Courageous and compassionate leadership</li> <li>● Patriotism</li> </ul>

<p><b>Topic</b></p>	<p>American Identity</p>
<p><b>Essential Question</b></p>	<p>How do the perspectives of different individuals or groups change what we think about the American Identity?</p>
<p><b>Theme Statement</b></p>	<p>The American identity is as unfinished as the American experiment, constantly shifting, depending on who defines it and whose voices are centered in the discussion.</p>



## Contextual Paragraphs

From the nation's founding, the people of the United States have consciously worked to construct a common identity based on values found in historical examples such as the Greek and Roman republics, in the works of philosophers like Locke, in dominant-culture theory, or in archetypes inspired by the country's terrain and expansiveness. Religion, gender, ethnicity, and nationality have played a role - to varying degrees over time - in the scramble to identify who does and does not "belong."

However, not all voices have been heard in the ongoing formation of this American identity. The political power of wealthy, white, upper class, Protestant men planted the seed of American Identity during the Revolutionary War. Slowly, power expanded to include white men of other classes and backgrounds, but not until the ratification of the 14th amendment in 1868 did this political power begin to extend officially beyond white men. All the while, marginalized groups - women, free and enslaved Black people, Indigenous people, and immigrants - kept fighting for recognition and agency. People's perception of how religion fits in the American identity continues to evolve. The desire to freely practice one's faith is at the heart of America's founding but acknowledgment of the right of others to freely practice their faiths has been slow at times and caused community divisions.

Along the way, the molding of the American identity was inspired by artists, such as Longfellow, who looked to the literature of other countries and then sought to create stories and legends of American heroes facing American challenges. Citizens of other nations have also formed their own opinions of what makes an American "American." Throughout the 20th century, and into the 21st, what it means to be "American" continues to evolve - shaped by internal and external forces - as we collectively come to terms with the promises set forth in the country's founding documents and reconcile them with the diverse group of people that are citizens of the United States.

Like the American identity, Old North Church's identity is complex and has evolved. In its early decades, Old North's congregation struggled to establish its Anglican identity in Puritan Boston, even though, from its founding Old North's congregants were some of the wealthiest people in Boston and its system of box pew renting added to this sense of exclusiveness. At the same time missionary work has been a crucial aspect of Old North's identity even if at times it was misguided. The church itself was a colonial mission of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to Foreign Parts, making it part of a larger, imperial-wide missionary network that sought to catechize enslaved Africans across the British Empire. Old North strove to recruit new members to the Anglican faith including the Black community, though they were not treated as equal members. Other efforts over the centuries, such as hosting the 1833 visit of Rev. William Levington of the St. James First African Episcopal Church in Baltimore; the 19th-century Sunday School for neighborhood children; the Fragment Society, which endeavored to clothe poor neighborhood children so that they could attend church and Sunday school; and the construction of the early 20th-century Waldensian chapel for Italian Protestants are examples of

	ways Old North aided those beyond their congregation. This demonstrates an awareness that Old North was part of a larger dynamic community, and a desire to serve that community.
<b>Sub-topics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Citizenship</li> <li>● Marginalized people and communities</li> <li>● Freedom and slavery</li> <li>● Immigration</li> <li>● Our nation’s struggles through periods of great division</li> <li>● Evolving democracy</li> <li>● Citizenship by virtue of birth parents or birthplace vs naturalized citizenship</li> <li>● Religious freedom as a core value of American identity</li> <li>● National identity - by birth (“blood”) or by choice (a social/democratic compact)</li> <li>● Evolution of the American identity as defined by tangible culture vs intangible values</li> <li>● Belonging, diversity, and inclusion</li> </ul>

<b>Topic</b>	Revolutionary <b>Paradox</b>
<b>Essential Question</b>	What are the enduring implications for societies given that laws, policies, systems, and customs are often born from inequitable revolutions?
<b>Theme Statement</b>	<b>Revolutions</b> are paradoxical - conferring freedom, courage, and glorified sacrifice on some, with oppression, exploitation, and exclusion for others.
<b>Contextual Paragraphs</b>	<p>Freedom, bondage, and inequity exist side by side in the three hundred years of Old North’s story. In particular, the church’s Revolutionary-era history was a time when it earned its status as a physical symbol of liberty, yet the very building cannot be separated from some congregants’ actions to deny freedom to people of African descent. In short, Old North Church represents a paradox.</p> <p>The early congregants strove to create a faith community that would bring salvation and support to its members. They contributed time, money, and skill to the building and management of the church. This truth cannot be separated from another: many of these congregation members were able to give and do these things because they benefited from the institution of slavery. Many of the early congregants enslaved Black people in their homes, farms, and/or businesses. The famous steeple was financed in part by the sale of logwood, a product dependent on enslaved labor. Several financial contributors to the bells derived their wealth from the business of slavery. Enslaved people sat in the gallery during Sunday service peering down at their enslavers. Non-enslaving New Englanders were complicit too as they profited from provisioning the Caribbean plantations that exploited enslaved labor; captained the ships that brought enslaved people to the colonies/states; and, later, owned industries that benefited from commodities produced by enslaved labor.</p>

	<p>As a faith community, colonial-era congregants willingly used Biblical scripture to deny African and African-descended people citizenship and human rights. It took centuries for full membership and equity to come to the church community. The congregation welcomed Rev. William Levington, a Black minister from St. James First African Episcopal Church in Baltimore, to speak at the church in 1833, and yet Black members of the audience still sat in segregated seating at that time.</p> <p>As we look toward the late 19th century, we see a period of transformation in the North End with waves of different immigrant communities finding home and work in the buildings and spaces that surround Old North Church. Were they seen as neighbors or as a threat? Here, we can think about the efforts of the Old North clergy and congregation to build a chapel for the Italian Protestants in the North End and the work of the Women’s Guild, which would suggest that the congregation was supportive of fellow Protestants at least.</p> <p>As Old North Church increasingly embraced its role as an icon of liberty, did it strive to share freedom and equity with others? At this time, we have more questions than answers.</p>
<b>Sub-topics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Citizenship</li> <li>● Marginalized people and communities</li> <li>● Complicated relationship between congregants/the church and immigrant communities</li> <li>● Freedom and slavery</li> <li>● The role of the press in times of revolution</li> <li>● Links between enslavement, abolition, and Christianity</li> <li>● Balance/imbalance of power</li> <li>● Revolutions as war</li> <li>● Revolutions as movements for change</li> <li>● What and who is a revolutionary</li> <li>● Are all revolutions fought for positive change in pursuit of the common good?</li> </ul>

<b>Topic</b>	Writers and <b>Artists</b> as Active Citizens
<b>Essential Question</b>	How does art activate social change?
<b>Theme Statement</b>	Writers and artists have the power to use their media as a call to action and to promote social change.
<b>Contextual Paragraphs</b>	Art and the written/spoken word have always been a part of Old North’s story - from the religious artwork displayed throughout the building to the weekly sermons delivered by the rectors. Most famously, Old North Church’s role in a small but historically significant act inspired a mid-19th-century poem that cemented the

	<p>church's place in the American zeitgeist. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's critically significant work transformed a relatively obscure act into an enduring and treasured myth.</p> <p>Longfellow was a preeminent 19th-century American poet whose extraordinary celebrity and popular appeal often surprises modern audiences. "Paul Revere's Ride" can be seen as an example of literature intended to inspire change written by a poet who consciously used his art as a call to action. Longfellow's poems were read, memorized, and recited. Longfellow believed that words and literature have the power to move people to act. "Paul Revere's Ride" was seen as a rallying cry to stir his readers' patriotism and enjoin them to curb threats to national unity. Longfellow's Revere becomes, in effect, a model for the citizen-hero who sounds the alarm when the community is at risk.</p> <p>Longfellow remains the most famous example of an artist-citizen connected to Old North Church, but he is not the only example. Painter John Gibbs was responsible for most, if not all, of the decorative paint treatments that adorned Old North from its early years. While his work might not seem "activist" in the traditional sense, it did announce Old North, visually, as something different from the majority Puritan worship spaces that populated colonial Boston. A similar argument could be made for the organists whose music was an essential part of Anglican worship.</p> <p>Paul Revere, whose active citizenship forever links him to Old North, was also an artist whose work reflected his political beliefs and urged his fellow citizens to share them. If we look at his engraving of the Boston Massacre (based on Henry Pelham's drawing), for example, we see an unforgiving line of soldiers firing at a mass of unarmed civilians, some of whom have their backs to the soldiers or appear to be crawling away.</p> <p>In the 19th century, Rector William Croswell pursued an avocation as poet in addition to his dedicated service to the congregation. Croswell's poetry encompassed personal topics as well as reflections on events that had a broader significance. Another 19th-century congregation member, Lynde Walters, Jr., was the editor of the Boston Evening Transcript, a "penny-press" publication that brought news, both sensational and cultural, to the masses.</p> <p>As we move into the 20th and 21st centuries, we see Old North increasingly used as a forum for public addresses (the Third Lantern award keynote, the speaker series) in which contemporary issues are placed in the context of history to challenge listeners to become active citizens.</p>
<p><b>Sub-topics</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Privilege, access, opportunity, and celebrity</li> <li>● The role and power of the media to elevate artists, writers, and celebrities as change makers</li> <li>● Public history + the arts = imagination, reflection, conversation, animation.</li> <li>● Art as a challenge to religious norms</li> </ul>

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|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Dynamics and circumstances surrounding art--what makes something a powerful cultural moment?</li><li>● Determining what writers'/artists' voices you choose to listen to</li><li>● How artists and writers have used their medium to have conversation around religion</li></ul> |
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