

URBAN STUDIES | LOWER EAST SIDE

## *Emancipated From the Shadows*



Reverend Deacon Edgar Hopper, inside the former slave gallery in St. Augustine's Church.

Eirini Vourloumis for The New York Times

**By Caroline H. Dworin**

April 17, 2009

FROM two tiny rooms high up and far back in St. Augustine's Episcopal Church, with its neo-Georgian archways, straight-backed pews and simple, graceful detail, the legacy of slavery in Manhattan looks down.

The stone church, on Henry Street near Montgomery Street on the Lower East Side, was built for a patrician white congregation. But although it was completed in 1828, a year after slavery was legally abolished in New York State, behind the balcony and on either side of the organ are two cramped rooms, built so that black churchgoers could worship there without being seen by white parishioners.

“These spaces were never talked about,” said the deacon, the Rev. Edgar Hopper, an agile, bald gentleman of 79. “People knew there were instances of them being referred to as slave galleries.”

For decades, these galleries languished in a state of disrepair and were hardly discussed. Children often scrambled up the narrow staircases to play on the bleacherlike seats.

But after a decade-long restoration project led by Mr. Hopper, work on one gallery was completed late last month, and the space will open for tours at the end of this month.

The project began when the Rev. Errol Harvey, Mr. Hopper's supervisor, noticed that census data showed a diminishing

African-American population in the gentrifying Lower East Side. Mr. Harvey suggested looking into the silent heritage of St. Augustine's, which today serves a primarily black congregation, and the task fell to Mr. Hopper.

Not everyone applauded his efforts.

"Many were uncomfortable with the restoration," he said. "Slavery is still a sensitive subject, and not just the guilt associated with owning slaves. There is also a lot of denial associated with being descended from slaves."

To research the subject, Mr. Hopper searched vaults at the diocese, reading archives and vestry minutes from the early 1800s in search of the names of those who may have worshiped in those rooms. Their numbers included Henry and Phoebe Nichols, a couple baptized there in 1829.

With help from the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, a quarter of a million dollars was raised for the project.

The other day, Mr. Hopper led a visitor up a steep, twisting staircase to the space. It is painted beige and lighted with a single bulb. Six crude steps face an opening high above the sanctuary. Because of the angle, worshipers here could not be seen by those below.

Still visible on one wall are faint pencil scrawls made by children. Until the 1930s, the gallery was used as a Sunday school for African-Americans.

Mr. Hopper sat down on a step. “In the summer,” he said, “it’s stifling here. It’s difficult to breathe.”