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In 'This Place Matters' campaign, Worcester students have preservation on their minds



Nativity School fifth-graders, from left, Malcolm Nelson, Jadyne Darkwa, Denzel Martinez and Rusty Agyemang explain their poster Thursday, aimed at saving Notre Dame Des Canadiens Church in Worcester's Salem Square. T&G Staff/Rick Cinclair

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WORCESTER - An orphanage, an expanded library, a video arcade - students at Nativity School of Worcester had several suggestions for Notre Dame des Canadiens Church, the first stop on their visit to three properties in Worcester to show that "This Place Matters."

“All these buildings have in common is they brought peace to people,” said Silas Summers, 10, a fifth-grader at Nativity School.

Fifth-graders at the Nativity School joined Preservation Worcester volunteers Thursday afternoon to hold signs outside Notre Dame des Canadiens, Quinsigamond Village Firehouse, and Stearns Tavern as part of the “This Place Matters” campaign to preserve historic buildings. Each of the three buildings is, or has been, at risk of destruction, either from a wrecking ball or neglect.

Preservation Worcester was given Stearns Tavern, which dates to 1812, and plans to move the building to the site of the former Coes Knife Factory on Coes Pond. The building will house programs and a cafe for the Seven Hills Foundation, will be maintained by the city, and will be adjacent to a new multi-generational, universally accessible playground.

A developer bought the firehouse with plans for renovation, but the property is now back on the market.

The developers of CitySquare have plans to raze Notre Dame des Canadiens and have filed a waiver to the demolition delay ordinance. The Historical Commission has asked developers to provide documentation of their efforts to re-purpose the building, and will next discuss the application in June.

“We wanted to show the good, the bad, and the ugly,” said Preservation Worcester Executive Director Deborah Packard.

The students researched the history of each of the three buildings and drew posters illustrating why they thought the building should be saved.

“If they break down the building and the architecture of this church is so beautiful and they could never make it again,” said Malcolm Nelson, 11, speaking of Notre Dame des Canadiens.

Damaso Vasquez, 58, came over and held up a sign because he said he had been helped by a decade of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings held in the church.

“It helped a lot of people,” Mr. Vasquez said.

The Stearns Tavern group liked that the building hosted George Washington and was so old that it was from a time “when people rode horses around.”

Ms. Packard said this was the first time that her organization had done a “This Place Matters” event, a program run by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. She said she hopes to grow the event each May as a celebration of Preservation Month.

“It’s fun to have the kids involved because that’s really what it’s all about,” Ms. Packard said. “Saving buildings for future generations.”