



CELEBRATING
55 YEARS

nerej

Kaplan Construction completes historic renovation at First Parish in Harvard Sq. in Cambridge

September 19, 2025 - Construction Design & Engineering



Cambridge, MA Kaplan Construction, a WBE general contractor and construction management firm providing comprehensive building programs across Greater Boston, has completed renovations at First Parish, a historic Unitarian Universalist church in Harvard Sq. The renovation project included significant interior and exterior upgrades to the nearly 200-year-old, 33,718 s/f building to address deferred maintenance and water damage, improve safety and accessibility, and restore the building's historic character.

"Kaplan approached this project with great respect for our building's history," said Carol Lewis, director of administration and operations at First Parish in Cambridge. "Their team was communicative and genuinely collaborative throughout the process. Thanks to their craftsmanship and care, First Parish is now safer, more attractive, and better equipped to serve our congregation

and building users.”

Interior work encompassed the sanctuary, vestibule, and minister’s office, totaling 6,900 s/f. In the sanctuary, water-damaged ceilings were demolished and replaced with new drywall, including curved sections crafted to match the original plaster profile. Kaplan replicated intricate molding by hand-carving new pieces to mirror the original design. New insulation, paint, and carpet were installed in the sanctuary, and the existing knob-and-tube wiring was replaced with a modern electrical system. The finishes in the vestibule and minister’s office were also refreshed.

Exterior work included wood siding repairs, slate roof replacement, installation of new flat-seam copper roofing, and belfry roof repairs. Kaplan also restored the historic Massachusetts Ave. entry door, reconstructing ornamental details with glass fiber reinforced board (GFRB) and replacing the window sashes and lites above. On the same elevation, custom tracery arches and quatrefoils were cast in resin using molds replicating the original details. The clock face and numerals were restored with gold leaf paint.

The church’s leaning chimney, compromised by corroded steel beams, proved to be one of the project’s most complex challenges. Temporary shoring was required to stabilize the chimney and roof while Kaplan removed major elements of the structure that had deteriorated beyond repair. Sections of the main steel beam supporting the roof were removed and new steel was welded in its place. Deteriorated wood rafters were replaced with new ones. Crews also repointed and replaced ashlar stonework, installed new flashing at the chimney steeple, and added new doors, handrails, and stair finishes at the Church St. entry.

Given the historic nature of the building, the project required extensive quality control and third-party oversight per the Cambridge Historical Commission. All lead paint removal was performed under full containment and in compliance with safety regulations. Masonry mockups were created and reviewed in partnership with the Cambridge Historical Commission for approval before proceeding. In addition, third-party structural testing was conducted to verify the integrity of critical exterior repairs. In May 2024, the project received a Preservation Award from the CHC, which recognizes property owners who conserve and protect the city’s historic built environment.

“Working in an active neighborhood and historic site like First Parish was challenging and required a deep sensitivity to both preservation and community impact,” said Nathan Peck, president of Kaplan Construction. “We’re proud to have restored this beloved landmark to help sustain its role as a multi-faceted gathering place in Cambridge.”

Serving both its parishioners and the Y2Y homeless youth shelter, First Parish in Cambridge is a vital part of the Harvard Square community. During construction, Kaplan worked closely with church and Y2Y leadership to maintain access for ongoing programs. The sanctuary continues to host Harvard University affinity celebrations and author events in partnership with the Harvard Book Store, while the front parlor provides space for the church’s Tuesday and Wednesday Meals program for individuals living with food insecurity.

The project team members include:

- Owner/Developer: First Parish Church, Unitarian Universalist;
- Owner's Representative: KVA Boston;
- Construction Manager: Kaplan Construction;
- Architect: Torrey Architecture; and
- Structural Engineer: Structures North.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540