



St. Peter Catholic Church celebrates 180 years

By Allison Griffin

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St. Peter Catholic Church, perched high atop hill in downtown Montgomery, has occupied this site at the corner of South Lawrence Street and Adams Avenue for 180 years; the core of the current church dates to the 1850s. But while the church building of St. Peter's is historic, it is not a museum.

Montgomery's oldest Catholic parish remains vibrant and relevant today, its parishioners say. Many of them, past and present — as well as others from the Catholic community — came to St. Peter's on a recent Friday evening for a celebratory mass. A reception afterward offered a chance to appreciate the newly dedicated John Dowe Plaza, which provides a welcoming entrance to this mission church.

Beyond the striking Spanish Colonial-style exterior, punctuated by its commanding square and circular towers, the mem-

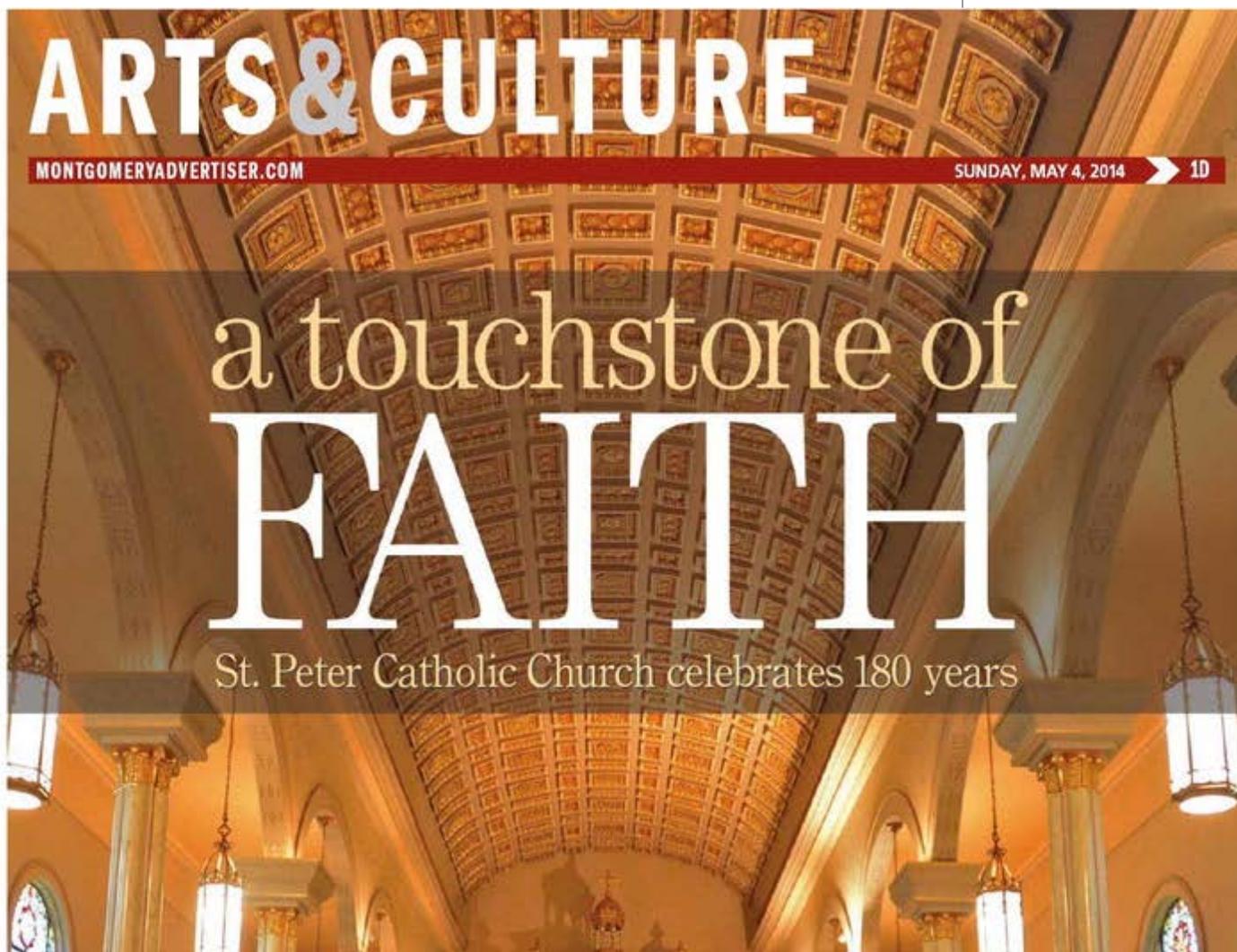
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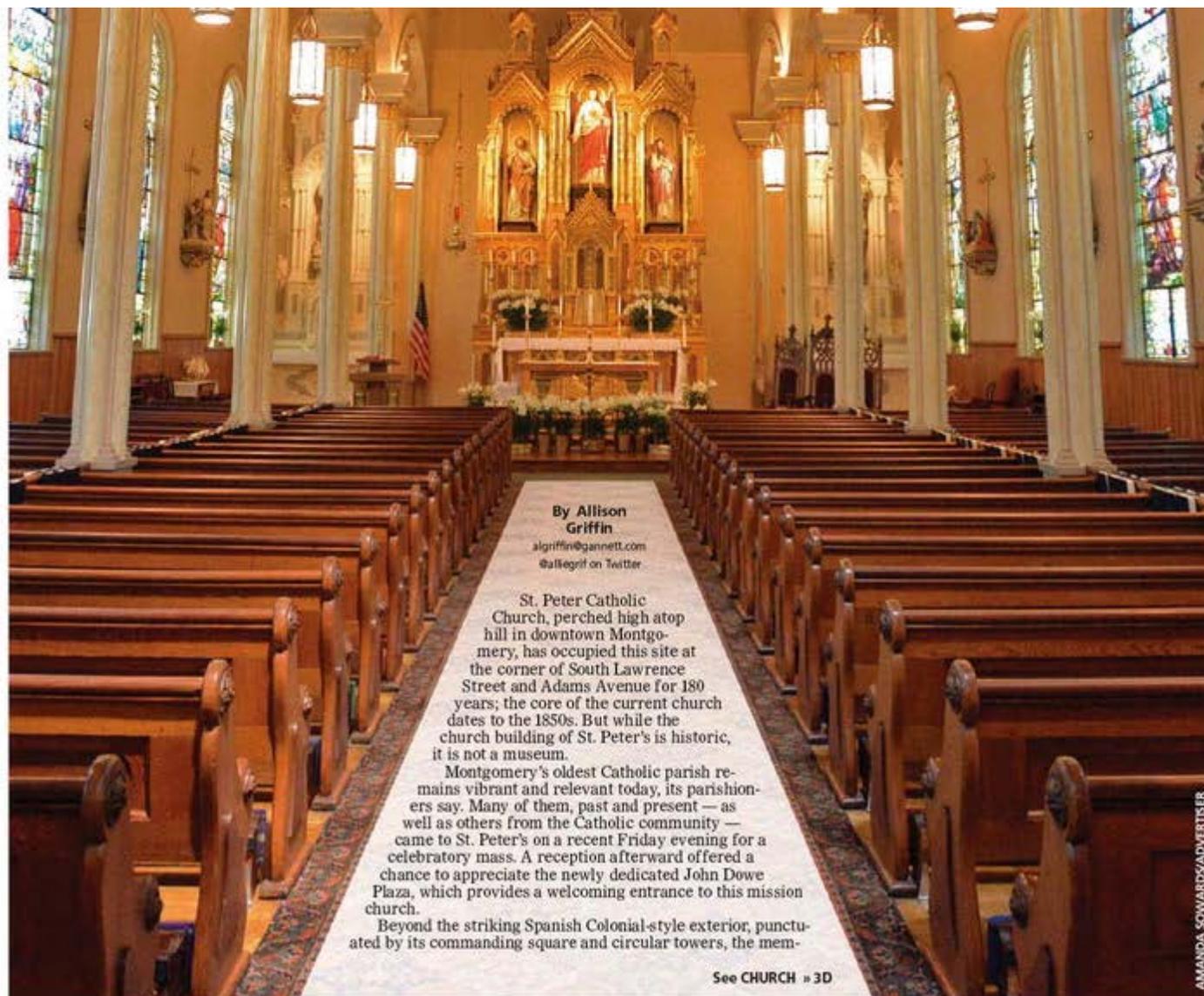
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Church

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bers here say that its heart is what makes it special, and what assures its future.

"We call it the touchstone of faith, the mother church of Catholicism in central Alabama," said Gage LeQuire, the chairwoman of the 180th anniversary celebration and a member at St. Peter's since 1987. LeQuire also noted its importance to downtown Montgomery. "To me, that's an important aspect to have in your downtown areas — to keep churches alive and doing well, especially when you're trying to grow your downtown area, which Montgomery is."

'One community'

Visitors on this recent Friday greeted each other as family, with many former members and former priests returning for the celebration.

"People have a homecoming feeling when they come to this church," said the Rev.

Augusty Puthanpura, St.

Peter's pastor since 2012. He oversaw the recent exterior changes to the church,

including the addition of the plaza, as well as the renovation of the vestibule and the opening of the main doors, which had remained closed for decades.

The church's visually stunning large aisle windows, filled with stained and painted glass, date to 1922 and are being highlighted as part of the 180th celebration, LeQuire said. The 14 windows were created by the Emil Frei Co. of St.

Louis; a member of the Frei family came to St.

Peter's recently to reveal some of the artistic elements of the windows.

Beyond their aesthetic beauty, each window is a Bible lesson, and the plan is to have presentations, open to the public, to allow the windows to be more widely appreciated.

St. Peter's style of worship blends well with its history. "If you love the traditions of the faith, it appeals to you," LeQuire said. "I think that's really where we fit in. We find that even though people live out east, they still drive downtown because they want that traditional Catholic church." Two of its daughter churches — St. Bede and Our Lady Queen of Mercy — followed the exodus of residents out of downtown and into the eastern and southern parts of Montgomery beginning in the 1960s.

Though those congregations have grown, St.

Peter's remains the anchor of the Catholic community, said Chris Vaughan, a member for 25 years. "The heart continues to be here," she said.

But Vaughan noted that there were members of other parishes at St.

Peter's that night.

"The Catholic community as a whole, yes, we have parishes, but we're one community."

St. Peter's Catholic Church is celebrating 180 years.

The Rev. Augusty Puthanpura talks about changes at St. Peter's Catholic Church. AMANDA SOWARDS/ADVERTISER

