

Upland Chronicles

New Salem Church is a treasure worth saving

For African-Americans, few places associated with community history and identity are more important than churches. These structures, particularly those in small towns and rural areas, are valuable places to study and document culture and heritage. Over 20 rural African-American churches in Tennessee have achieved the distinction of being listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the nation's honor roll of buildings worthy of preservation. One of those landmarks is located in Sevierville.

Located in a bend of Middle Creek along East Gate Road, the humble, picturesque New Salem Church is Sevierville's oldest surviving public building and the only historic African-American church in the county. Like the congregations who worshiped there, the old building has weathered many storms. For generations, sounds of haunting spirituals flowed from the open windows as "Amen" echoed in unison from the pews.

About 20 years after the Civil War ended, Robert S. Henderson donated the land for the church and allowed the use of an adjoining field to build a kiln in which to fire the bricks for the facade. Although the property was in a flood plain, the black community was elated to have a place in which to erect their own church.

Built in 1886, the Gothic Revival-style church was the first of many brick buildings to be constructed by the talented brick masons of Sevier County. This group was led by Isaac Dockery, who had been making bricks and building brick buildings for several years. Dockery taught the trade to Paris Witt McMahan, his son-in-law, who also became an accomplished brick mason. Dockery and McMahan were accompanied by an extremely talented African-American carpenter named Lewis Buckner, who also made cabinets and furniture.

Isaac Dockery made bricks for many buildings in Sevierville, including the Italianate-style Murphy College, which was completed in 1891; the Italianate-style Masonic Lodge built in 1893; and the Beaux Arts classical-style Sevier County Courthouse, completed in 1896.

Originally built as a Union Church for people of all races and of all be-



Carroll McMahan

liefs, the church was completed with the assistance of the entire African-American community. The small but well-detailed church exhibits triangular-arched windows, and the main entrance is a projecting central entry bay that originally supported a frame tower. The bricks used in the building are said to weigh around three pounds each.

The building was operated as a Union Church until 1897, when it was renamed New Salem Baptist Church. During the early years of the church, some of the members formed a singing group to raise money. These singers traveled throughout the area to entertain religious and civic groups. The money they raised was used to purchase a piano, hymnbooks and Sunday school literature.

When the church was built, the black community did not have an ordained clergy living near the church. The first ministers to preach to the little congregation were Caucasian circuit riders. It was around 1920 when black ministers from surrounding counties began ministering the flock. Since they had their own churches, the visiting ministers could only commit to preaching one Sunday afternoon per month.

In a booklet titled "The History of New Salem Baptist Church," the author Martha Burden Bowden remembered, "As a child, I attended the church with my parents. In addition to regular church services, there were special celebrations and dinners on the church grounds. The simple or-

der of the service did not prepare me for the spectacular church services which I attended when I went away to school. The order of service at New Salem was very simple. The ringing of the church bell was a call to service, with prayer, congregational singing, and preaching a sermon."

The church served the black community until the 1950s, when the last services were held by the descendants of the original congregation. Since that time, the church has been used by other congregations, and the historic integrity has slowly chipped away.

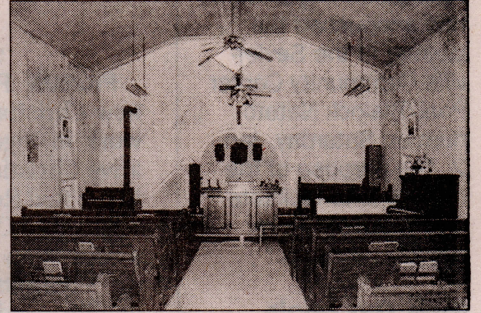
The original bell tower and pulpit furniture have been removed, and the overall interior has been altered significantly. Even with these changes, the church was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2003, and a state historical marker was placed on the grounds in 2006. The building suffers from lack of maintenance and ventilation issues, which are compromising the structure.

In 2010 the East Tennessee Preservation Alliance placed the building on the list of East Tennessee's most endangered treasures.

The Dockery family has had its reunion in Sevierville every summer since 1972 and gathers by the



New Salem Baptist Church was built in 1886 for people of all races and beliefs.



The interior of New Salem Church has been altered significantly over the years.

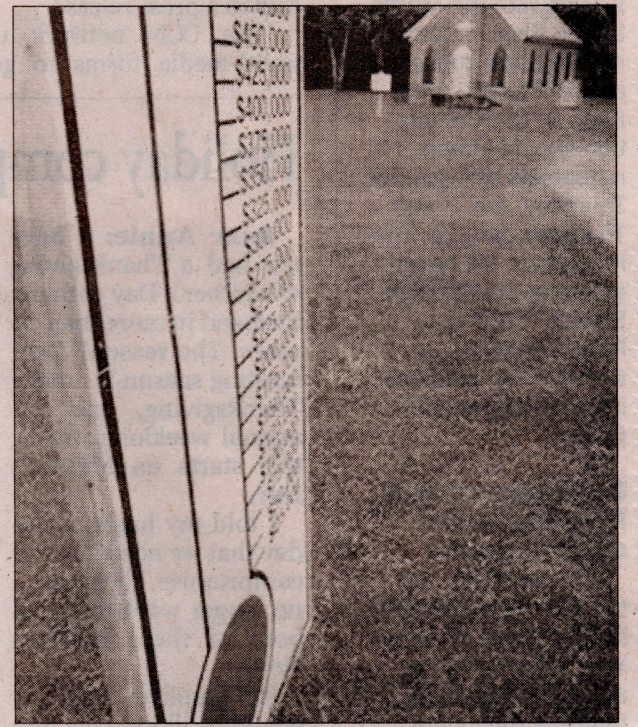
hundreds on the church grounds for a picnic. The New Salem Restoration Task Force, which is spearheading the effort to preserve the historic structure, has posted a thermometer in the church's front yard, with lines marking the steps to its goal of \$500,000.

The East Tennessee Community Design Center has prepared a design of what a restoration might involve.

"We are going to be able to save it," says Alverrene Bridgeforth, chairman of the restoration committee. "We would be remiss if we just let it go. I think we should really protect it. God is good. I know there will be provision for this."

Carroll McMahan is special projects facilitator for the Sevierville Chamber of Commerce and serves as Sevier County historian.

The Upland Chronicles series celebrates the heritage and past of Sevier



A thermometer posted in the yard of New Salem Church marks the steps toward the goal of \$500,000.

County. If you have suggestions for future topics, would like to submit a column or have comments, contact Carroll

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