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 cultural heritage. Over 20 rural African-American churches in Tennessee's State Historical 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 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 worshipped there, the old building has weathered many storms. For generations, sounds of haunting spirituals flowed from open windows as "Amens" echoed in unison from the pews.

About 20 years after the Civil War ended, Robert St. 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 establish their own church.

Built in 1886, the Gothic Revival-style church was one of many brick buildings to be constructed by the esteemed brick makers 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 Witt McMahman, his son-in-law, who also became an accomplished brick mason. Dockery and McMahman 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 beliefs, the church was completed with the assistance of the entire African-American community. The small but well-decorated church exhibits several noteworthy features, including a central entry bay that originally supported a frame tower. The walls and doors 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 1900 when black ministers from surrounding counties began ministering to 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 this church with my parents. In addition to regular church services, there were special celebrations, the black and whites, and dinners on the church grounds. The simple organ 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 slipped 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 1975 and gathers by the 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 Alverene Bridgeforth, chairman of the restoration committee, "with proper planning. 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 McMahman is special projects facilitator for the Sevierville Chamber of Commerce and serves as Sevier County historical consultant. The Upland Chronicles series celebrates the heritage and past of Sevier County.