

# A forgotten gem of Sevier

## Church builder's descendants behind restoration effort

By John Shearer  
Special to the News Sentinel

SEVIERVILLE — Located on Eastgate Road near downtown Sevierville is the historic, red brick New Salem Baptist Church.

With its postcard location on a low grassy lot by a bend of Middle Creek, the structure appears frozen in time and contrasts sharply to the constantly changing Highway 411 a short distance away.

The 1886 building — which is the oldest surviving structure in Sevierville — may soon change as well, but only cosmetically. After years of slow deterioration after being closed and boarded up, the building could soon be renovated.

Descendants of church builder and successful black brick mason Isaac Dockery of Sevierville and others have been mobilizing recently to try to restore the building and turn it into a community center or historic destination open to the public.

With support from the nonprofit East Tennessee Preservation Alliance, which placed the building on its list of endangered properties, the New Salem Renovation Task Force is looking at applying for grants. It also is planning some fundraising efforts, starting with a supper and silent auction today at the nearby Sevierville Middle School.

"The church got in such poor condition as far as upkeep," said task force member Alverrene Bridgeforth of Knoxville, who married a Dockery descendant. "The amount of money got beyond what the family members could provide."

Through the help of the East Tennessee Community Design Center and the volunteer architectural services of David Hutchins of Knoxville, the group has received one estimate of slightly more than \$400,000 for some extensive renovation work.

This would include fixing a large vertical crack on one outside corner, removing the serious mold damage inside, constructing a new roof, restoring or replacing the small belfry, and putting in a new rest room and ventilation system.

The fact that the building sits in a floodplain also needs to be addressed, and raising or moving the church has been suggested.

The building was constructed on land donated by a local family and was initially a Union church open to all denominations. In 1897, it became New Bethel Baptist Church.

Church builder Dockery, who also produced the bricks for the 1896 Sevier County Courthouse, was



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL PATRICK/NEWS SENTINEL

The New Salem Baptist Church — which is the oldest structure in Sevierville — could soon be restored and turned into a community center or historic destination. Built by brick mason Isaac Dockery, who also produced the bricks for the Sevier County Courthouse, the 1886 building is on the National Register of Historic Places.



Shedenna Dockery, left, and Alverrene Bridgeforth are hoping to refurbish New Salem Baptist Church in Sevierville. The New Salem Renovation Task Force is sponsoring the Southern Comfort Food Fest and Silent Auction today at 4 and 7 p.m. at Sevierville Middle School to raise funds for the effort.

Bridgeforth believes the group could receive half or more of the funding through grants but would have to raise at least 40 percent of the money in other ways.

But to many, that would be worth the effort.

"It's family. It's history," said Shedenna Dockery, who says she has been inspired studying the life of her great-great-grandfather Isaac Dockery. "This is going to stay here. We will fight with our last breath."

The building, which is owned by the church's trustees and is on the National Register of Historic Places, has architectural as well as historical and family significance.

"The New Salem Baptist Church is one of East Tennessee's forgotten gems," said Ethiel Garlington, preservation field services director for Knox Heritage. "Not only is it a tangible link to the fascinating legacy of our region's African-American brick masons, but it is also a landmark in Sevier County."

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Church builder Dockery, who also produced the bricks for the 1896 Sevier County Courthouse, was

one of the early church leaders. A man who built a positive legacy as well as buildings, Dockery also was remembered for being dragged through the streets of Sevierville by Confederate soldiers during the Civil War for failing to reveal the location of a Union officer who was the grandson of his employer.

Dockery, a free man all his life, went on to become a highly respected brick ma-

### SOUTHERN COMFORT FOOD FEST AND SILENT AUCTION

**What:** Benefit meal for the nonprofit New Salem Renovation Task Force, which is trying to preserve and restore the New Salem Baptist Church building; servings of barbecue brisket, glazed ham, macaroni and cheese, red potatoes, greens, green beans, coleslaw, sweet potato casserole, roll or cornbread, dessert and beverage

**When:** Today, with seatings at 4 and 7 p.m.

**Where:** Sevierville Middle School, 520 High St.

**Cost:** Suggested donation of \$25 for adults and \$10 for children; contributions may also be sent to the New Salem Fund, P.O. Box 53134, Knoxville, TN 37950

**For more information:** Alverrene Bridgeforth, 865-919-6557, or Shedenna Dockery, 423-248-8916

son by the time of his death in 1910.

The church continued to operate until the 1950s, and the building was later leased to other congregations. It has not been used regularly for a number of years, but Dockery descendants numbering in the hundreds still hold a family reunion in early August on the church grounds.

"We need to hold on to our old buildings and restore them," Bridgeforth said.