

Sevierville's New Salem Church is a Treasure Worth Saving

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.

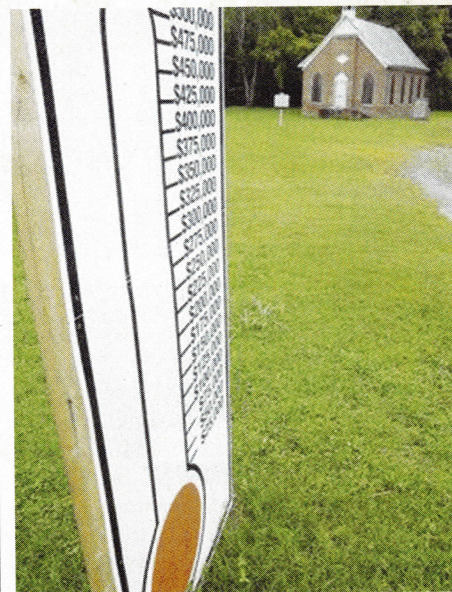
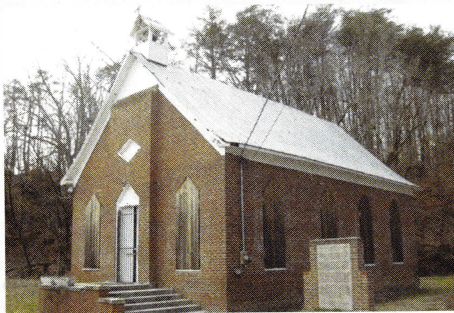
About 20 years after the Civil War ended, Robert S. Henderson donated the land for the church and allowed the use of an adjoining field to build a kiln in which to fire the bricks for the facade. Although the property was in a flood plain, the black community was elated to have a place in which to erect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

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, it 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 would travel throughout the area to entertain religious and civic groups. The money they



raised was used to purchase a piano, hymn books, 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.

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 Tennessee 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 hundreds on the church grounds for a picnic. The New Salem Restoration Task Force, who 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 their 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."

EAST TENNESSEE PRESERVATION ALLIANCE

The East Tennessee Preservation Alliance works to preserve the structures and places with historic or cultural significance in Anderson, Blount, Campbell, Claiborne, Cocke, Grainger, Hamblen, Jefferson, Knox, Loudon, Monroe, Morgan, Roane, Scott, Sevier, and Union counties. ETPA partners with Knox Heritage to serve as the regional arm for preservation activities in these 16 counties.