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Supporters of historic church hope to raise \$500,000 for repairs, restoration

by DEREK HODGES

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Supporters of historic New Salem Baptist Church in Sevierville are hoping to raise \$500,000 to repair and restore the church on Eastgate Road. The donation thermometer is now in the front yard of the church. Photo by Curt Habraken

When she looks at the New Salem Baptist Church, a building constructed in 1886 where the windows are now shuttered by wooden planks and the interior is filled with toxic black mold, Alverrene Bridgforth sees hope and a beautiful monument for the future.

It's going to take it a while to get Sevierville's oldest building, which has sat empty for decades, to that point, but Bridgforth and others who support the effort to give it new life have faith. They've now posted a visual reminder of that faith in the front yard of the Eastgate Road structure.

It was first called New Salem Church to represent the fact it was a union congregation, with any Christian welcome for services.

The Gothic revival-style New Salem was constructed by Isaac Dockery, a free African-American born in Jones



Cove who was a mason and builder. He was commissioned to erect the first church for the black community in the county, largely centered around the banks of Middle Creek in what's now called McMahan Addition.

For generations they would gather there, shooing away flies in the cool shade of the creek bank.

Eventually, though, the congregation would disband and Dockery's handmade bricks, each of which weighed three pounds, no longer echoed stern admonitions or loving homilies.

The church, which shares a brickmaker with local notable buildings like the school board office (Murphy College) and the courthouse, sat empty and mostly neglected. Vandals would occasionally break the aged glass to gain entry to the old sanctuary. Meanwhile, moisture from below the floor, which remains in surprisingly

good condition, seeped up into the space, encouraging the spread of black mold that crept slowly from the floor to the ceiling like ants marching up the walls.

"It's in bad shape," Bridgforth concedes. "It's just been left alone and boarded up for so long. That creek has flooded so many times and it just makes the ground under the church so wet. With it being all sealed up solid, there's just no ventilation and the mold has gone crazy."

There's a note of sadness in her voice as she, a descendant of Dockery, describes the scene. The most recent times she's been to the building, including the recent Dockery family reunion, she's refused to go inside.

"We're going to be able to save it," she asserts. "We would be remiss if we just let it go. I think we should really protect it. God is so good. I know there will be provision for this."

That phrase, "God is so good," peppers Bridgforth's vocabulary when she talks about the vision for the church.

The architect and contractor who have agreed to help with the effort have estimated the needed work — which will include improving drainage on the site to ensure that remains the case — will cost about \$417,000. Those spearheading the effort have now posted a picture of a thermometer in the church's front yard, with lines marking the steps to their goal of \$500,000.

"It's a lot of money and there's a lot to be done, but we believe we can do it," Bridgforth says. "Through grants and donations and fundraising, we can get there."

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Some work has already begun. The electricity is back on and ceiling fans are swirling in the rafters all day and night. They're working to make the conditions a bit less favorable for the mold.

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Bridgforth says she and the supporters have plenty of motivation for their work.

"A big part of the motivation for us is it's a historic site. Isaac Dockery built that church in 1886. It stands as a memorial to the man and the community," she explains. "It's amazing. It's a treasure."

And once it's restored to its former glory, Bridgforth believes it will also be one of the must-see attractions for visitors.

"I think people will be excited to walk around the grounds and know the history of that building," she says. "I just couldn't bare to say, 'There's nothing that I can do.' I had to get involved because this is history that should be preserved.

"It's a treasure worth saving."

For more information on the church or how to contribute to the effort, contact Bridgforth at 919-6557.

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