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They're Saving Grace

Preservationists Start Digging at Historic Church

By Ellen Crosby
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For nearly 50 years, Grace Methodist Episcopal Church has been abandoned and forgotten on a quiet lane in Lincoln. Last week, members of the Lincoln Preservation Foundation and volunteer archaeologists began excavating the property, the first phase in the group's plan to restore the building and preserve its history before it is lost for good.

The clues to the story of one of Loudoun's oldest black churches aren't only at the excavation site. Carol Morris Dukes, the foundation's president, said the group is also trying to document memories of those who worshipped there.

"The building is nearly intact," she said. "The history is not."

Dukes has begun visiting the few remaining members of the congregation, now in their seventies and eighties, accompanied by Andrea Gaines, the foundation's public affairs director, and Reginald Sims, a church trustee. Armed with a video camera, tape recorder and a book of photographs, the three hope to rekindle faded or elusive memories.

Their recorded sessions are the only firsthand accounts of the church's history. They are also, Duke lamented, all of its history. "There's nothing written down, nothing documented," she said.


The church, a simple yet elegant two-story fieldstone building, is tucked away on a wooded lot next to a cemetery that its successor church shares with Mount Olive Baptist Church.

Built in 1885 by emancipated slaves and their Quaker neighbors, the church had a vocational school in the basement where the Quakers taught classes in sewing, cooking and shoemaking to the black congregation. Over the years, attendance dwindled, until the building was abandoned in 1951, when the congregation relocated to a new church in Purcellville.

There were numerous attempts to buy the property before the foundation partnered with Grace Methodist Episcopal Church's board of trustees, which owns the building. Dukes, who said she was "worried about losing everything to growth," said that when restoration is complete, the vocational school will become a museum of local African American history, and the church will be available for community activities or private events.


Excavation began Tuesday under the supervision of archaeologist Bob Shuey of Purcellville. Shuey, who is working on a master's degree in archaeology from the College of William and Mary after retiring as a researcher at the Library of Congress, has sought considerable professional guidance for the project.

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The group's primary adviser is David Clark, an archaeologist at Catholic University who also teaches historic preservation at the Loudoun campus of Northern Virginia Community College. Shuey also contacted the Northern Virginia Chapter of the Archeological Society of Virginia, whose members plan to help, and the regional office of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

The foundation plans to spend one or two months excavating the church basement and then survey the grounds around the church, a task that could last until summer. Much depends on what the excavators find.

While taking up the wooden floor in the basement, Shuey has found items that probably belonged to the vocational school -- a cobbler's mold, part of a scale, shards of bottles and crockery and what he describes as "tons of hinges," probably from an outbuilding.

Not everything he found was that old. During the 1970s and 1980s, a local man lived in the basement and, according to some accounts, either rented out part of the building or took in unpaid boarders. His tenancy is a touchy subject that foundation members prefer not to dwell on, as he is said to have killed a man in the church and served time in prison for the crime.

When excavation is finished, David Logan, owner of Vintage Renovation & Construction, is to begin restoration work. Logan, who can practically see the church from his home, specializes in complicated historical restorations. This won't be one of them.

"It's a time capsule," he said. "It hasn't been altered since it was built, so we have a perfect template for restoration. It's unique to get something 120 years old, quite rare, in fact, and find it almost intact. All the answers are here."

Had it not been for a leaking roof, Logan said, the church's heart-of-pine interior would have remained nearly pristine. There is a large hole in the ceiling above the choir stall and several jagged holes in the tongue-and-groove floor where the wood has rotted. Only one of the six large double-hung windows and its shutters is intact, minus the glass.

The building is empty because the original pews, podium and altar chairs were moved to the Grace Annex United Methodist Church in Purcellville.

Although volunteers will do much of the work, the foundation estimated that the project will cost about \$250,000. It has raised \$10,000 from performances of Leesburg writer Meredith Bean McMath's play "All for the Union in Confederate Virginia!" The foundation's Web site, www.lincolnpreservation.org, actively solicits donations, and more fundraisers are planned.

Raising money has been integral to the church's history. Peggy Drummond, a congregation member living in Purcellville, recalled annual "Tom Thumb wedding ceremonies" as one of several events that brought in money for the building's upkeep.

"Little children were dressed up as the bride, groom, preacher, flower girls and all the attendants," she said. "It was a real little wedding. Everyone in the community paid money to come watch."

Drummond was delighted to learn that Logan recently climbed into the cupola and rang the bell. "My grandfather rang that bell," she said. "It had a beautiful tone, rich and commanding."

Logan agreed. He was so captivated by the bell's sound -- and happened to be alone at the site at the

time -- that he called Dukes and rang it again so she could hear it through his cell phone.

Though the seed money may soon run out, the foundation remains passionate about the project, which received a major boost when the Preservation Alliance of Virginia identified the village of Lincoln as one of the 10 most endangered places in Virginia in 2002.

Standing outside the church, next to a large, recently arrived dumpster, Dukes, Gaines, Shuey, Sims and Logan are contemplative, pondering the work ahead to save the little building.

"Look at it," Sims said. "It's beautiful. It looks like it's always been there, like it grew out of the land. It belongs right where it sits."

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