

p.m. in the E.G. Fisher
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From the Daily Post Athenian 11/1/13

Preserving church's past with eyes to the future

GREG MOSES
Community Life Editor

Much of the Athens area's black history can be found under the stately towers and through the impressive stained-glass windows of First United Presbyterian Church. But, having celebrated more than 120 birthdays, without some help, the building may become an object of history, itself.

For this reason, the building was recently placed on the Tennessee Preservation Trust's 2013 Ten in Tennessee Endangered Properties List.

SEE HISTORY, C2

Stink bug off!

I can't stand these doggone stink bugs that have infested the area. They're not getting along well with the fleas and ticks and amoeba-like bacteria that have already taken up residence on my body and in my clothes.

Have you seen the swarms of these little stinkers? Of late, they've been hanging around by the billions at my office door, waiting for me like I'm the dadgum Mayflower chartered to carry them to the New World (i.e., sometimes my desk and sometimes the men's room, both of which are more Third World than New World, in my opin-



SO IT GOES

History

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"Being on this list puts an emphasis on the urgency of the need and will help in securing funding for renovations to the structure," said Amy Blackburn, who in her capacity as executive director of the McMinn Living Heritage Museum helped write the proposal to include the building on the list. "The Niota Depot was placed on the list in 2009, and as a result, the depot was awarded a grant for nearly \$160,000 from the Tennessee Department of Transportation due to its heritage as a transportation hub."

First United Presbyterian Church, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2008, joins on the 2013 Ten in Tennessee list such structures as the Cordell Hull Building in Nashville and the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Sevier County, as well as the Delta Queen riverboat in Chattanooga.

"We're in great company," Blackburn said.

Blackburn worked with Zelma McClure, Harriel Blair, and Jim Cucciarre of Jim Bob Contracting in Athens on the project, with Cucciarre inspecting the church's structure and reporting the steeple and bell tower being primary areas in need of work.

"Those are in great need of structural support to keep them standing," Blackburn said. "A lot of people don't realize how endangered this building is. It's a strong part of our history, so we want to do whatever is possible to preserve it."

Letters of support for the project were written by the City of Athens, McMinn County Government, the Athens Downtown Business Association, and Mars Hill Presbyterian Church.

Blackburn said the longterm plans for the church are to upgrade the structure and then find opportunities to open the doors for outreach efforts and community service.

"The local NAACP branch and

Boy Scouts have used the space for meetings, and we'd like to find ways of opening it for more people," Blackburn said.

The space will also host the church's annual banquet, which will be open to the public on Saturday, Nov. 16, at 6:30 p.m.

McClure, an elder of the church who has attended First United Presbyterian for more than 60 years, said the congregation formed the church originally in an old dance hall on the present North Jackson Street site, across from the Tennessee Wesleyan College baseball complex.

Rev. J. L. Cook, the church's founder, got his start as a child selling tea cakes, which his mother made, in the dance hall. As a young adult minister, he founded the church in that very dance hall — which is now First United Presbyterian's basement — in 1889.

"Cook was a forceful and eloquent young speaker," McClure said, "and he attracted younger people to the church."

Three years later, in 1892, the church was built. Designed in the early Gothic Revival style, the church building still maintains many of its original features, most of which have remained untouched and unaltered in the last century. The sunlight still illuminates the sanctuary with orange and yellow hues through the original stained-glass windows. Church members and visitors alike are still greeted by the same two towers at the entry and sit in the same wooden seats as churchgoers did generations earlier.

Furnishings for the church were sent from Pennsylvania, McClure said, including the ornate rows of seating for the congregation which were taken from an old opera house.

"We love our seats, but they're not the most comfortable," McClure said, and added with a laugh, "You can't go to sleep in them."

The church played a major role in the area's educational history as the sponsor of Athens' first black school, the Athens Academy, of which Cook served as principal in addition to his duties as pastor.

The academy burned in 1925 and classes were held for a time in the church. During that time, McClure said a black delegation approached city and county leaders about the possibility of building a black school.

"They agreed, but the school would only go through the 9th grade," McClure said, "and they wanted an educator as principal, and W. E. Nash was selected."

Nash, an influential leader in the Athens area, was also an elder of First United Presbyterian Church for more than 65 years.

Several well-known area ministers were pastors of First United Presbyterian. Following Cook's move to North Carolina, Rev. C.H. Wilson was pastor for 50 years, followed by Rev. Charlie Johnson, who served from 1966 to 1982.

After Johnson retired, McClure said the church went through several phases to find a minister. For a time, the congregation became a "mission church," and seminary students from Atlanta, Ga., would come up to Athens on Sundays to preach.

Following that, the church used retired ministers and then started a lay minister certification program to use laypeople as ministers.

The church, as is part of the Presbyterian tradition, maintains a group of leaders called a "session," and that group is moderated by Rev. Les Rust of Mars Hill Presbyterian Church just down Jackson Street.

The small congregation of First United Presbyterian Church still gathers in the sanctuary each Sunday, and McClure said new members and visitors are always welcome.

"The hinges of our doors swing on hospitality," she said.

Donations to help with the church's preservation can be sent to First United Presbyterian Church, 321 N. Jackson St., Athens, TN 37303.

"The Lord has given us this church for all of these years," McClure said. "As long as things stay the way they are, we'll still be here."

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United Way

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"Everything's good,"

with our campaign — it's

Tri-County Center, Coordinated Charities, Englewood Goodwill Workers, Hiwassee Mental Health Center, Boy Scouts (Great Smoky Mountain Council), Girl Scouts of the

United Way has also awarded grants to support the work of the McMinn and Meigs Imagination Libraries, Meigs Senior Center, CASA (Court Appointed