

‘MORE THAN RELIGION’

Renovation sought for historic Gilmanton church

GILMANTON: Town ‘old-timers’ raise funds to save 1842 First Baptist Church

By GEOFF FORESTER and JONATHAN VAN FLEET

Monitor staff

The oversized bell at the First Baptist Church in Gilmanton rings no more.

The bell tower of the Greek Revival church built in 1842 is listing backward toward the center of the structure. Its centuries-old support beams and a critical wind brace have deteriorated to the point that ringing the bell carries its own risk. Despite some “makedo” fixes over the years, the building is no longer structurally sound and is in serious need of repair.

“The last time I rang the bell was this fall and the building shook. So we no longer ring the bell,” said Paula Gilman, a descendant of the very

same Gilman family that founded Gilmanton in 1727. “I’ve been ringing the bell since I was a little kid and now I can’t.”

SEE CHURCH A2



Sue Leclerc (left) and

Paula Gilman take down the Gilmanton First Baptist Church sign for the rest of the winter season Jan. 14. The two women are helping spearhead a drive to get a grant to refurbish the building.

GEOFF FORESTER photos / Monitor staff



Sue Leclerc sits by one of the two wood stoves that can no longer heat the whole First Baptist Church in Gilmanton. Leclerc and Paula Gilman are working together in an effort to preserve the historic landmark.

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CHURCH FROM A1

Gilman is among a small group of dedicated “old-timers” in town who have been working to save the stately white church located on what the locals call “Frisky Hill.” Last year, the group received welcome news – the church was awarded an \$81,600 grant to help maintain the community landmark.

The building will be jacked up, leveled off and new supports will be added in critical places. Some interior work, like restoring some of the old woodstoves and repairing the plaster on the walls needs to be done too, but fixing the actual church structure, including leaky roof, is first and foremost.

“I think people are trying to get back to what a community is, not just coming home and shutting the door and being in your house. I think people are looking to know their neighbors, meet their neighbors, understand their neighbors and help their neighbors. And something that we can do is to offer this as a place for a gathering spot,” Leclerc said.

“This church is part of who we are. It is our heritage,” Gilman said. “We are simply following in the huge footsteps of our parents, grandparents, great-great-grandparents and a host of other Lower Gilmanton families who have lived here and were part of this church for many generations.”

Susan Leclerc’s family moved to town in 1802. She led the charge to document the needs of the church and apply for the grant from the Land and Community Heritage Investment Program.

“I can’t imagine not having it here. I can’t imagine driving up here and looking and not seeing it,” Leclerc said. “It’s like not seeing the Old Man of the Mountain. It’s just one of those things.”

Gilman said she cried when she found out the church was awarded the grant, which is contingent on supporters first raising about \$80,000. They are also trying to raise a little extra in case repair costs run over. So far, the fundraising goal for the restoration fund is about 30% of the way to being met. Those local fundraising efforts are critical before any restoration can actually begin.

The scope of work goes from the ground up, including repairing the granite foundation, shoring up aging chimneys, fixing a leaking roof and stabilizing the bell tower.

“Starting with the foundation, the granite blocks need to be straightened out. They’re shifting because of water runoff and we’re on ledge,” Gilman explained.

That’s just phase one. Phase two will include upgrading the electricity, replacing exterior clapboards and prime and paint.

The effort to preserve the church has been an ongoing labor spanning decades. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1989 and is on the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance’s Seven to Save list. But it wasn’t until the grant that substantial repairs became a reality.

“We’ve been able to maintain the church with a lot of volunteers and worker bees,” Leclerc said. “But we’re to the point now where it’s not worker bees, and it’s not the volunteers that can repair what needs to be fixed in order to stabilize the belfry and ring the bell.”

Despite all the work that needs to be done, the nearly 180-year-old church still holds monthly summer services, a Christmas celebration and other special events.

Once it’s repaired, Gilman and Leclerc would like to see its use expanded.

“We want to have more non-denominational services,” said Leclerc. “Could we use it for meetings for selected groups in town that are looking for a place to meet? Sure, we can use this building for meetings if other boards need to have a spot, since we’re sort of low on locations to have meetings in our town. We’re thinking of doing some more or different kinds of cultural events, having singing groups or musical groups or concerts.”

But all the work restoring the church is about much more than saving a historic structure. It’s about saving the past and rebuilding a small-town community.

“This building is part of Lower Gilmanton and the history of Lower Gilmanton needs to be preserved for the next generation and for people to understand what this community was all about,” she added.

Gilman couldn’t agree more.

“My family has been married here and held funerals here and this is the only church I’ve ever felt at peace,” Gilman said. “And it’s more than religion. It’s community. The members that come here are successive generations of the original settlers.”

This year, LCHIP offered \$3.5 million in total awards to churches, meetinghouses, farms, nature preserves and historical buildings, that will help preserve 3,500 acres from future development and help restore numerous historic buildings around the state.

Sue Leclerc (left) and Paula Gilman are working to get a grant to refurbish the historic First Baptist Church in Gilmanton.

GEOFF FORESTER / Monitor staff

