



Paula Gilman and Susan Kelley LeClerc adjust the board tracking the amount of money raised for the restoration of the First Baptist Church of Lower Gilmanton. After receiving a grant for \$81,000, the church needs to raise another \$100,000 to complete critical structural repairs to the historic church. (Adam Drapcho/The Laconia Daily Sun photo)



The interior of the First Baptist Church of Lower Gilmanton features pressed tin on both the walls and ceiling, as well as working kerosene lantern and an antique pipe organ. (Adam Drapcho/The Laconia Daily Sun photo)

Gilmanton church gets boost from LCHIP grant

By ADAM DRAPCHO
THE LACONIA DAILY SUN

GILMANTON — Paula Gilman was walking out of the Market Basket in Concord when she got the phone call telling her that a grant application had been approved. She got into her car and cried, knowing that her church, and the church of so many of her ancestors, would be saved.

For years, members of the First Baptist Church in Gilmanton had been using once-a-year work parties to keep their 1842 building maintained. In the summer of 2018, though, water came gushing through the ceiling, and the small team of volunteer laborers knew they were overmatched. An assessment, performed by Bedard Preservation and Restoration, con-

firmed the size of the challenge: not only was the roof leaking around the bell tower, some of the tower's support beams had been compromised. Meanwhile, much of the building's exterior trim was also starting to fail. Bedard's estimate for the work: \$180,000.

It's fair to wonder if the building is worth such an investment. Services are held at the church only seasonally, with a family Christmas celebration being the only cold weather event. But if the town were to lose the church, it would lose a touchstone to its history.

The history of the First Baptist Church of Lower Gilmanton begins in November 1773 — two and a half years prior to the Declaration of Independence. The first meetinghouse,

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The First Baptist Church of Lower Gilmanton was built in 1842, in the Greek Revival Style. (Adam Drapcho/The Laconia Daily Sun photo)

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constructed on land now known as Frisky Hill, was one of the first two churches built in Gilman, itself one of the first places in the Lakes Region to be settled by European colonists. After more than six decades of use, the meetinghouse on Frisky Hill had fallen into disrepair, and the church organization voted to build a new structure at a different location.

The church's new home was raised on land given by church society wardens John Meserve and Antipas Gilman, at 1469 Province Road, so named because, at the time, anyone traveling between Portsmouth and the Province of Quebec, Canada, would have to tread that road as it passed through Gilman.

Antipas Gilman played a critical role in the church's 19th century survival, and Paula Gilman — his great-times-sev-

en-granddaughter — is part of the 21st century effort to protect the building and its history.

Gilman was joined by Sue Kelley Leclerc — another multi-generational resident of Gilman — and newcomer Lucinda Williams. The three women were able to capitalize on the notoriety of being named one of 2019's "Seven to Save," a list compiled by the N.H. Preservation Alliance, by securing a grant from the Land Community Heritage Investment Program, commonly referred to as LCHIP.

The LCHIP grant — the one that brought Gilman to tears in the supermarket parking lot — was for \$81,600. It's short of the total needed, and it comes with some strings attached, as the church will need to raise an equivalent amount of matching money. But Gilman, Leclerc and Williams see the grant as even more valuable than its dollar total. LCHIP grants are highly compet-

itive and require a rigorous application process, so receiving an award is a ringing endorsement for the legitimacy of the project.

The church's significance is clear to those invested in the history of this small town. To raise another \$100,000, though, they will need to make that case to people who aren't as familiar with the structure and its role in the community. The blessing of the Preservation Alliance, and now LCHIP, will help make that argument.

"There was no way this community of this size," could raise nearly \$200,000 on its own, Williams said. "We have to cast the net wider, to remind people that this is a landmark."

Kelley Leclerc's family arrived in Gilman in 1802, and she feels her forebears looking over her shoulder as she works to raise the matching funds. "You have high standards," she said.



Susan Kelley LeClerc shows the part of the First Baptist Church of Lower Gilman where water would fall through the ceiling, leaving puddles on the pews and on the floors, before temporary repairs were made in 2018. More permanent repairs are needed, and there is structural repair also necessary. (Adam Drapcho/The Laconia Daily Sun photo)

Donations, which are tax-deductible, can be sent to the Gilman Historical Society — indi-

cate First Baptist Church on the memo line — and mailed to PO Box 236, Gilman, NH 03237.

"We were losing this church," Kelley Leclerc said. "We can't do it alone."

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