

Historic Church Surging To New Community Role



St. Martin's Church's exterior and interior are pictured during a tour this week of the historic building. The church has been restored to 1756 condition. *Photos by Cara Dahl*

By CARA DAHL

STAFF WRITER

BERLIN — St. Martin's Church, which has endured for 254 years north of Berlin, is becoming part of the community once again with new opening hours and special events scheduled.

A sturdy brick building along the Route 113 off ramp leading to Route 569, the Episcopal church remained in use for over 200 years, only closing its doors on regular services in

the 1960s. Then the Colonial-era structure was locked and left to nature.

In 1994, with the old brick walls bowing out and overgrown with green vines, a group of locals stepped in and saved the building.

"It was in such a state of disrepair the roof was caved in, birds roosted in here ... the pictures are so sad because the windows were boarded up," said Shemie Beckstead, president of the St. Martin's Church Foundation.

Restoration of St. Martin's Episcopal Church began in the mid-1990s, with the major work completed in 1999.

"I think we got to it just in time," said Beckstead.

Maintenance of the 18th-century building is ongoing, said Foundation board member Sean Rayne, who focuses on the building and grounds.

"When I was a kid, I remember it all being grown up with vines and weeds and things," said Rayne.

Over the last 10 years, the church

has been open for Christmas Eve church services as well as weddings and baptisms.

"We want it used in the community," Beckstead said.

Now the foundation is kicking off regular opening hours during the summer and a speaker series.

The church will be open to visitors every Saturday in June, July and August, from 11 a.m.-1 p.m.

Theresa Bruner, vice president of the foundation, who attended service

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es at St. Martin's Church into her early teens, has set up a volunteer docent program to show visitors through the church.

"Essentially, it's an open house every Saturday," said Rayne.

The new speaker series begins this weekend, with the first event, featuring architectural historian Paul Baker Tourart, on Sunday, June 13, at 4:30 p.m. Tourart will speak on the St. Martin's Church restoration.

On Aug. 29, Michael Olmert will speak on architecture and worship in the Stuart church, followed in September by tales of the Eastern Shore.

The foundation will also hold its first annual St. Martin's Day Cele-

bration weekend Nov. 11-14, with an open house, fundraisers and the Old St. Martin's Day Festival at the church, concluded by an 18th-century church service on Nov. 14.

The simple church building boasts original brick floors, original yellow pine panels in the pews, a barrel vaulted ceiling, a high pulpit modeled on the original and a balcony once used by slaves. There are also three priests buried under the brick floor.

The foundation uses a hand-forged key, a reproduction made by a blacksmith from Williamsburg, to lock the church using the original lock box.

Meticulous vestry records and a

lawsuit over how pews were to be built when the church was constructed have provided strong documentary evidence for the restoration.

"The recordkeeping is unbelievable," said Beckstead. "We were able to find all the original pew families."

The back wall of the balcony is covered in historic graffiti, which the foundation has chosen to leave in place as part of the church's history, chiefly of signed names. The oldest dated signature goes back to 1904.

People arrived for services by foot, carriage and boat via Windmill Creek.

Services were still being held regularly in the church through the 1960s, but gradually services be-

came monthly, then yearly, then stopped altogether as churchgoers moved to more modern, closer structures.

With the restoration complete, the focus now is on maintenance, an at-times difficult prospect in a 254-year-old building with no heat or air conditioning.

Last winter, the extremely wet conditions caused the restored plaster on the eastern interior wall of the church to delaminate and slough off. The foundation will leave the wall alone until research shows how to fix the problem for the long term.

"It's still kind of a work in progress," said Rayne.

Future plans include raising funds for an auxiliary building, allowing for more events at the site.

"We do feel this is such a significant part of the history here," said Beckstead.