

McGaha Chapel – Structure & Restoration

The McGaha Chapel, formerly the “Little River Methodist-Episcopal Church, rests on a little wooded knoll facing the Old Johnstone Turnpike. It is just off Halley Cove Road, which is off US276 across from Sherwood Forest Golf Course in Cedar Mountain. Except for the entrance off US276, Halley Cove Road follows the old Turnpike.

The Chapel is a one room building 24 feet 3 inches X 34 feet 3 inches. The main girder support beams (chestnut) rest on stacked rock pillars at corners plus three on each side. It has a front-gable roof and boxed eaves. The exterior is lap siding. There are three two sash windows on each side and two in the rear. Entrance is from the front through double doors. The interior is smooth board horizontal siding. The ceiling is also board, running lengthwise of the building, as is the floor.

The design of the building is typical of the time and resembles several school buildings that existed around the county during that era, except for one feature unique to the Chapel. Above the doors and windows is a triangle shaped arch. This is replicated inside.

In the early 2000s, the owner of the McGaha Chapel, First United Methodist Church, became concerned about the condition of the building. There was extensive wood rot on the exterior, the roof was leaking and the main ceiling truss beam was found to contain extensive water and insect damage. The supports for this beam were also questionable. Several members of the church that lived in the area of the Chapel got together, gathered in friends, and formed the “Friends of the Chapel.” The goal set by that group was to restore the Chapel to its original form.

By 2007, the Friends had raised the funds necessary to remove the chimney and completely restore the exterior of the building, including a new roof. Electrical power was also removed. In the meantime, First United approached the Transylvania County Historical Society about taking over ownership of the Chapel. The Society agreed and a deed of transfer was registered in December, 2007.

The Society’s first priority was to address the problems with the ceiling truss beam, which is 16 X 18 inches and 34 feet long. A professional engineer had already studied the problem and recommended the design and method of the installation of massive iron brackets to shore up the beam. He had also recommended that the water and insect damage be filled with a special epoxy formulated for that purpose.

There was great concern about getting a strip of ceiling boards down wide enough to complete the work on the beam because there was extensive water and insect damage to some of them also. A master carpenter managed to remove enough of the boards to expose the beam, only breaking several of them. The breaks were such that the boards could be glued back together and strengthened from above. The work was completed and the ceiling re-installed. There is currently no evidence from below that this work was ever done.

As part of the above work, the concrete block steps and iron pipe handrail were removed and replaced with steps made from donated locust lumber. Handrails were added for safety. The chimney flue hole in the interior wall was repaired, as was the light switch hole. All this work was completed in 2009 by Scott Moser Construction.

The next area of concern became window sills and sashes. Six of the eight sills needed to be replaced and there were problems with most of the sashes. Hearthstone Restoration, a company that has done extensive work for the Society at the Allison-Deaver House, was chosen to tackle this issue. The Chapel now sports new window sills, sashes and interior spools. The sashes were fabricated “old style.” There were only eighteen old hand pressed glass panes in the old windows. These were installed in the top sashes of the two windows behind the pulpit, so the “congregation” can see them. This work was completed in 2011.

Since the Chapel interior had been painted sometime in the past, a project was undertaken to match the colors in order to “spruce” the interior. Matching the colors proved to be somewhat difficult, but was done and painting was completed in 2014.

Funds spent by the Friends and the Society thus far in restoration efforts amounts to just under \$54,000.00.