

PRESERVING HISTORY

Freed slaves' church on road to restoration

Landowners raising funds to make Glendale Chapel whole.

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ROME — Some nights, Annie Shields and Pat York walk to the old church. They pass the stables, cross the narrow creek and move into the woods' rustling canopy. And there it is, dark against the stars.

The two pass through the opening where a door once stood. There, in the lightless sanctuary, they listen. For what? The souls of long-ago churchgoers, who don't want to leave the old building they built with saw and ax? The voices of school children who bent over books decades ago?

So far, they've heard nothing. But that doesn't mean Glendale Chapel is dead, or that it lacks a soul. One day, God and donors willing, that dormant old Methodist church will come to life again.

The two, who live on a horse farm in Floyd County, are embarked on a project that calls for equal amounts of devotion and dollars. They are raising money to restore the church, a one-room building erected by freed slaves more than 100 years ago. Working with them are descendants of two former slaves who raised up a place to worship the Al mighty.

The projected cost to level the foundation, shore up old flooring and replace windows and doors: nearly \$40,000. Shields, a retired English teacher, and York, retired from the Methodist ministry, have raised \$25,000.

Since they bought the church on a tract adjacent to their farm two years ago, the two have felt compelled to restore the building.

"We're old ladies," said Shields, 70, "but we still can do things."

"It just spoke to both of us," added York, 75. "It seems that God put us here at just the right moment, before it was about to fall down."

They have people praying for their success.

Enriching environment

Annie Johnson, Jennie Johnson Jones and Alva Battey sat under a cluster of slender hardwoods and nodded their approval.

Two workers entered the church — their church

— with hammers and pry bars to pull up some rotted floor boards. Their great-grandparents, Green and Rachel Johnson, founded Glendale Chapel.

It's not far from Heath Creek, which rolls between Lavender and Simms mountains 90 miles northwest of Atlanta. Services began in 1879 and continued until the mid-1960s, when the chapel's dwindling congregation merged with a larger church body in Rome.

The church also doubled as a school for black children, forbidden to learn with white kids in the Jim Crow South. The three sisters studied there in the early 1940s. With them were other siblings, as well as cousins and other African-American youngsters who lived nearby.

"I remember there was a pot-bellied stove in there," said Battey, 81, of Rome. She also remembered worshipping in the chapel, where wiggling was not an option.

"You'd better not move," she said, "or your mother would grab your skin and twist it."

The chapel, said Jones, 78, provided a rich environment for a curious child.

"I think I got a very good education there," said Jones, an Atlanta resident who finished high school in Rome and went on to get a master's degree in education.

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Now, the sisters say, the building should be preserved, a wood-and-stone reminder of a time when mules clopped along dusty dirt roads and classes didn't start until the cotton harvest was finished.

"This was my foundation," said Jones. "Wherever I went, whatever I did, it all started here."

Hope on the way

The building is a study in sturdy construction. Built of trees felled nearby, it remains surprisingly intact. The roof has one small leak. The floor joists, hewn from the trunks of white oaks, show where long-ago craftsmen sheared away bark with an ax. Ancient nails, bent and rusty, remain firmly embedded in pine walls.

"Having an old church is a bit like having a child," said Shields. "You worry about it."

And not without reason. Old churches, like other aged structures, can be prey to time and neglect.

The church is one of about 100 rural houses of worship compiled by Historic Rural Churches of Georgia.

The volunteer organization is making an inventory of country churches across the state, hoping to raise money to preserve those in peril.

"We're all about the preservation of old, historic churches," said Sonny Seals, an Atlanta businessman who started the nonprofit two years ago. "Glendale Chapel certainly qualifies."

Glendale Chapel was a house of worship for more than 80 years until it merged with the Metropolitan Church of Rome in the mid-1960s. It remained in use for occasional funerals and homecomings for another two decades. The last known church gathering took place in 1988.

After that, it was shut — with predictable results. Oil lanterns that adorned the walls vanished. So did a brass bell in the roof cupola. At some period, migrant workers turned the church into a temporary bunk house. York and Shields suspect they may have burned some wood from the walls to keep warm.

The building can be saved, said Jeff Brooks, a Rome builder. He visited the church and recommended leveling the structure's floor, replacing some floor joists, adding more stone supports underneath and shoring up the church's sagging western wall. It also needs windows, a door and replacement pews.

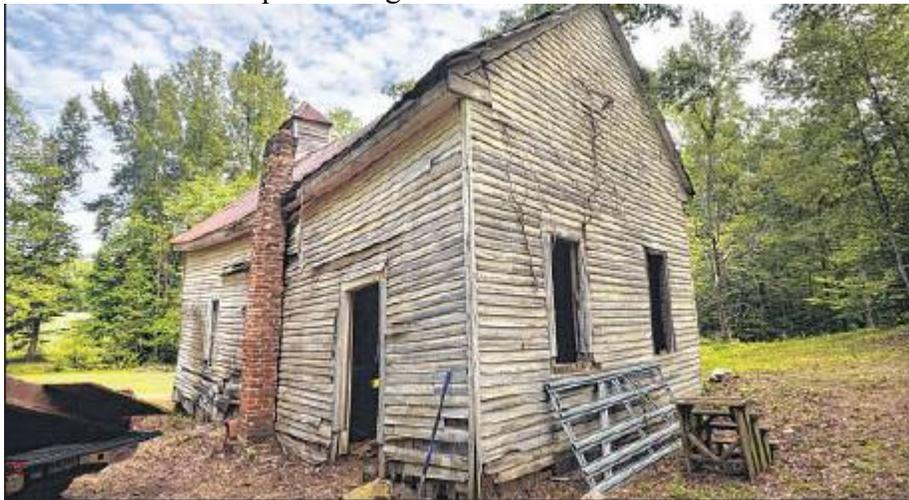
"For its time, it was built pretty well," said Brooks, who's restored log cabins and other aged structures in northwest Georgia. "It hasn't had a whole lot of love lately."

The new owners plan to rectify that. They've created a Glendale Chapel Facebook page showcasing a building where generations of Floyd County residents worshipped and learned. It is, they believe, their responsibility

— their privilege, too. "We're a preacher and a teacher," said Shields. "We don't have buckets of money." But like those long-ago believers, they have faith, in great supply. Glendale Chapel, they believe, will be whole again. And maybe, then, the two will hear voices in the sanctuary. Happy voices.



The Johnson sisters, (from left) Annie M. Johnson, Jennie Johnson Jones and Alva J. Battey, are the great-granddaughters of the founders of Glendale Chapel. The people who own the land where the church is located are working with descendants of those long-ago worshipers to make this house of worship whole again. HYOSUB SHIN PHOTOS / HSHIN@AJC.COM



Glendale Chapel has stood for more than a century in a wooded tract near Adairsville, slowly returning to the soil from which it sprang.

ABOUT THE CHAPEL

For more information about Glendale Chapel, visit its Facebook site: www.facebook.com/GlendaleChapel.