

Restoration project bolsters historic Texas church_51903

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THE RESTORED walls of Anderson Baptist Church.

Restoration project bolsters historic Texas church

By Mark Wingfield

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ANDERSON-If the walls of Anderson Baptist Church could talk, they would tell stories of early Texas Baptist history.

Current renovations to the historic church won't bring the walls to life but will preserve the life of the structure, built in 1855.

The stone meeting house of Anderson Baptist Church is believed to be the oldest church building in Texas still occupied by a congregation.

The church also was the birthplace of the Baptist General Convention of Texas in 1848, although that was before the current building was erected and before the BGCT was called the BGCT.

Further, the first Baptist newspaper in Texas was published at the church in 1855. The Texas Baptist, a predecessor to the Baptist Standard, was published by George Baines, pastor of Anderson Baptist Church and grandfather of Lyndon Baines Johnson.

Anderson Baptist Church also birthed the first woman's missionary organization in the state, the Female Missionary Society in the interest of Indian missions, in 1858.

This spring, the church has undertaken a major renovation of the structure, replacing the mortar that holds together the stone walls on the exterior and installing new windows.

Next in line is a renovation of the church bell tower and renovation of the fascia boards all around the roofline. The bell in the tower still is used weekly to signal the start of worship.

Estimated cost of the bell tower renovation is \$20,000, an expense the church is seeking assistance with from former members and others interested in preserving Texas Baptist history.

The church will celebrate completion of the rebuilding of its walls June 22 in a service fashioned after the Old Testament account of Nehemiah rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem.

Anderson Baptist Church is the birthplace of Texas Baptist cooperation. In 1848, representatives of 23 Texas Baptist churches met there to form the Baptist State Convention.



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The church's first pastor was Z.N. Morrell, a legendary pioneer preacher who had come to Texas from Tennessee.

The church's beginnings predate the founding of Baylor University and the founding of the Southern Baptist Convention. From monthly preaching meetings in a log schoolhouse with a dirt floor, a church was established with seven members in 1844.

The current rock building was constructed with stones dug out of the surrounding hills by slave labor.

Although important in Texas history, the Anderson church never has been large, according to a published history of the congregation. That may be due to the constantly shifting population in the area and the fact that the church from its early days helped start other churches.

“The fact that the Negroes separated from Anderson Baptist Church in 1867 to form their own church probably accounts for the decline in membership from 153 in 1876 to 69 in 1880,” the history recounts. “There were 100 members in 1953. There were approximately 18 members in 1994.”

At one point, the church nearly died out, reported Dwain Steinkuehler, current pastor. Then in 1997, Jim Adams came over from First Baptist Church of Navasota to work with five widows who were keeping the Anderson church alive. Together, they grew the church to about 50 members.

Some of those members have since died, but others have come in, and the membership continues to hold at about 50, Steinkuehler said.

Despite its small size, the congregation has given about \$10,000 toward the renovation project while meeting its ongoing expenses.

Steinkuehler may be addressed at Box 784, Anderson 77830. The church's phone number is (936) 873-3363.

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