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NEWS: Local/Regional

Restoring the mission

By Ryan Bentley News-Review staff writer
 Friday, June 10, 2005 12:40 PM EDT

The 146-year-old St. Francis Solanus Indian Mission along Petoskey's waterfront has a longer history than the city itself.

And some local Catholics see a need to ensure that this history can continue to unfold.

In recent years, the wooden building in the 400 block of West Lake Street, which St. Francis Xavier Church currently oversees, has been showing visible signs of decay.

Cracks have appeared in the foundation and interior plaster. Roof shingles, windows and exterior siding have been showing their age as well.

More than a century after the building ceased to be the primary church home for local Native Americans and early white settlers, it continued hosting Mass on special occasions. But in 2004, St. Francis Xavier's pastor, the Rev. Dennis Stilwell, said the building's condition prompted parish officials to suspend this practice.

Stilwell would like to keep further deterioration of the structure from happening on his watch, and he's found numerous others interested in reversing the decay.

"We believe that the restoration of this St. Francis Solanus church is not simply in the interest of Catholic Church, but of Petoskey," he said. "It's part of the history of Petoskey."

In early 2005, a



The Rev. Dennis Stilwell (left), pastor at St. Francis Xavier Church, and Pellston resident Marie Boda are pictured in front of the St. Francis Solanus Indian Mission in the 400 block of West Lake Street. Stilwell and Boda are part of a committee making plans to restore the historic mission building.

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committee Stilwell had recruited from his parish and several others nearby began work toward organizing such a building project.

"They're highly motivated," Stilwell said. "I didn't have to beg anyone to do anything."

One of the early tasks which the group set out to do was to gather historical data pertaining to the building.

The early days

A state registry of historic sites identifies the Solanus mission as the oldest public building in northern Lower Michigan.

It was constructed in 1859 by Jean Baptiste Trotochaud, a carpenter living nearby. Bishop Frederic Baraga of Sault Ste. Marie/Marquette - who had established Catholic missionary efforts among the Native Americans of the Little Traverse Bay area during the previous several decades - had sought Trotochaud's services.

The mission was the third building to be constructed for Catholic worship around the Native American village at the mouth of the Bear River, where Petoskey would later be established.

Missionary priests, who had many churches to serve across a wide swath of Michigan in the mid-19th century, would visit the waterfront mission four or so times a year for the recitation of Mass.

By the late 1870s, a growing number of white families settling in the region sought a parish of their own. St. Francis Xavier, which saw its first church building constructed in 1879, would fill this purpose.

The waterfront mission was abandoned for several years. In the mid 1880s, Pius Nierman, a priest at St. Francis Xavier, had it restored. Nierman also had the previously unnamed mission dedicated in honor of St. Francis Solanus, a missionary priest.

As the 19th century drew to a close, many Native Americans had dispersed the area or found other places to worship. The Solanus mission was again abandoned until 1931, when missionary priest Aubert Keuter arranged additional building updates.

Since then, yearly celebrations of Mass have taken place at the mission around July 13, the feast day of St. Francis Solanus. In recent years at least, Native American cultural elements like a drum ceremony and the Blessing of the Four Winds have been tied in.

Some updates were made to the mission building around the time of its centennial anniversary in 1959, with some local Boy Scouts tending to maintenance needs there in the years since.

The building remains without electricity or plumbing. Inside, it's

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furnished with plain wooden benches, a wood altar, an old confessional and the stations of the cross. Stilwell said many of the furnishings appear to have been part of the mission since the 19th century.

The property includes a graveyard, from which burial markers were removed years ago. Restoration committee members continue to seek details about the identities of those buried there.

By getting involved with the restoration work, St. Francis Xavier parishioner and Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians member Jane Martell said she hopes to help ensure that the cemetery is preserved.

"There are our ancestors buried there," she said. "It's sacred ground."

Making plans

Attending Mass at the mission each summer has been an enjoyable tradition for some of the dozen or so people involved with the restoration committee.

"As a young boy, I was fascinated," St. Francis Xavier member Joe Hoffman Jr. said. "I always volunteered to be altar boy for the services down there."

Hoffman said memories like these, along with his love for history, prompted him to get involved with the restoration drive.

Marie Boda, a Pellston resident and member of the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians, also has looked forward to the yearly celebration of Mass. During last year's service, she noticed that the stair railing leading into the building had become unsteady.

Not long after, she volunteered to be part of any preservation efforts that might be organized for the building.

"I said, 'That's not just a church down there, that's an historic place,'" said Boda, who attends St. Clement Catholic Church in Pellston.

Stilwell set up an account to build funds for the restoration project at St. Francis X Federal Credit Union. To date, at least \$4,000 has been raised, with contributions coming from all restoration committee members and some other members at St. Francis Xavier.

Using some of these funds, the committee enlisted Petoskey architect Rick Neumann to undertake a study of the mission building and make recommendations for a professional restoration.

"I love old buildings," Neumann said. "The history of the community, I think, is really important to preserve."

"I don't think anything speaks better to people than old buildings in representing the past."

Neumann is preparing to present the committee with some recommendations for the building project this month.

"The study will tell us exactly what we need to do step by step, as well as the approximate project cost," Stilwell said.

Neumann, who's worked in architecture for more than 30 years, believes that the mission's foundation - which has numerous cracks, loose stones and deteriorating mortar joints - should receive high priority as part of a restoration project, as should the cracking ceiling and wall plaster inside.

He added that he'd like to see as many of the original building elements kept intact as possible through restoration work.

"It isn't Independence Hall or something like that, but for our area it's a very significant structure," Neumann said. "We want to preserve as much of the fabric as we can."

Neumann said he still needs to assemble some cost projections for the work.

Moving forward

Once those projections become available, Stilwell said the restoration committee will launch a higher-profile effort to raise funds for the work.

Along with local Catholic parishioners, St. Francis Xavier's pastor expects the general public will be invited to contribute, and that grant funding will be sought to help with restoration expenses.

"We don't want to delay this," Stilwell said. "We want to work on it as fast as possible.

"As soon as we get enough money to start (restoration work), we're going to start."

The committee continues to seek historical data about the Solanus mission property, including details related to the cemetery on site. Members hope to assemble a book with history and photos of the mission.

Once restoration is complete, Stilwell hopes the mission can serve as a stop along local historical tours, in addition to hosting more church services on special occasions.

Candace Fitzsimons, executive director of the Little Traverse Historical Society, said she welcomes the restoration committee to use her organization's archives in their research, and that she senses

opportunities for the historical society to help showcase a restored mission for area residents and visitors in tours.

"It's a landmark," she said. "People come in and ask about it all the time. It's important that concerned people are making the effort to restore it."

Assistance welcomed

The committee pursuing a restoration of St. Francis Solanus Indian Mission seeks input from people who have historical knowledge or documents concerning the 19th century church. Funds are also being gathered to help cover restoration costs. To learn more, call the St. Francis Xavier Church office at 347-4133.

Monetary donations to the project can be made at any St. Francis X Federal Credit Union branch or at the parish office on Howard Street. Checks can be made payable to St. Francis Solanus Indian Mission Restoration.

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