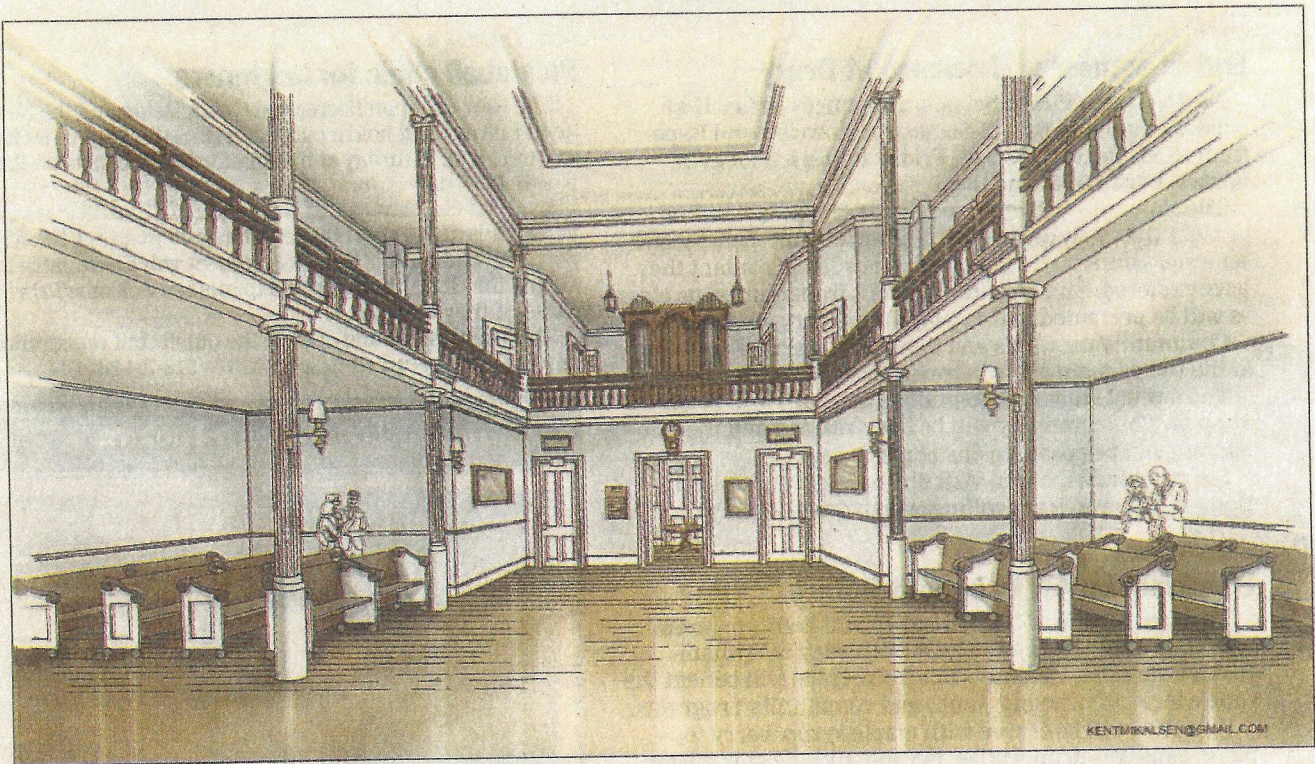
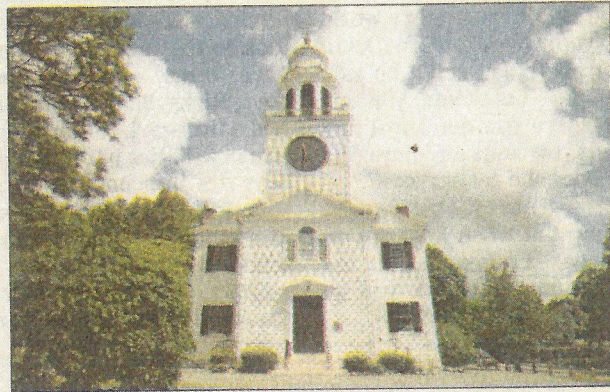


The Berkshire Eagle

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A new future for Lenox's oldest church



Variety of local events eyed for Church on the Hill

By CLARENCE FANTO
The Berkshire Eagle

LENOX — The historic Church on the Hill and Meeting House, an architectural gem and Lenox's oldest church building, is empty and unused most of the week with the exception of its 11 a.m. Sunday service.

Meanwhile, the town needs affordable and accessible spaces for meetings and events, so the leaders of the congregation are aiming to repurpose the space to host a variety of educational, cultural, non-

profit, and community events and gatherings. The goal now is to restore the 1805 building to its original purpose as a more general, multi-use meeting house, said the Rev. Elizabeth Goodman. The congregation itself was organized in 1769.

"It's not an 'if you build it, they will come' situation," she said. "People are ready to use it, so we have to get it ready."

A nonprofit will be formed for purposes of fundraising and programming for the meetinghouse, which will remain under church ownership.

The Church on the Hill in Lenox, top, the town's oldest church building, is completing tower and steeple repairs while launching fundraising for a \$1 million interior renovation, shown in the rendering above, for use as a community center.

TOP: STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN
THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE
ABOVE: ROBERT HARRISON
BERKSHIRE DESIGN AND
BRADLEY ARCHITECTS

Church

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Architect Jim Hundt of Foresight Architects in Schenectady, N.Y., a specialist in sacred space and historic restoration, found that "the building is in really good condition and very true to its history," according to Goodman.

"With some major and less major alterations, it's poised to be used more than an hour a week. Every time I come up here to sit in this beautiful space and open up the doors, people stop in, saying they've never seen the doors open, and they've wanted to see what it looks like inside," Goodman told The Eagle at the church on Monday.

Many visitors to the town-owned cemetery adjoining the church at 169 Main St. are keen to peek into the building, the congregation's treasurer David Dyer pointed out.

Affordable venues in Lenox are in short supply, Planning Committee member Peter Metz said. The Lenox Community Center is unable to fulfill all of its requests for space, he said.

Metz noted that the Church on the Hill has "superb acoustics."

"So the idea of making this space a community resource as it was when it was first built reflects the historic legacy as well as the current need," he said.

A quiet capital campaign that will soon go public is raising money through donations, grants and town support for an interior renovation that is estimated to run \$1 million. So far, \$150,000 is in the till, with a six-figure gift expected, according to Dyer.

"One gift can make a huge difference, so maybe by next spring we could even meet our goal," Dyer said. If not, the project still could be completed in phases.

While describing the renovation as a community effort on behalf of Lenox, Metz said



CLARENCE FANTO — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

At the 1805 Church on the Hill in Lenox, members Peter Metz, left, and Davis Dyer are spearheading a renovation plan to revamp the interior for use as a community gathering place. Currently, the church is empty except for the 11 a.m. Sunday service, which would continue, led by the Rev. Elizabeth Goodman.

"the impact and meaning of this is larger."

"The linkage with the cemetery is significant, it's its own treasure," he continued. "There may not be many, if any, unadulterated meeting-houses left to restore to the original design concept."

The Massachusetts Historical Commission would have oversight of details of the project, but has indicated that the overall concept is acceptable.

"We have no interest in departing from our history, which is part of this building's value," Goodman said. "To make it useful is not at odds with that, but it has to be carefully considered."

She pointed to "terrific enthusiasm" voiced for the project by prospective donors "because people recognize the value of the building and the potential greater value if they have access and use for it."

As she put it, "People need beauty and transcen-

dence in their lives. To have a beautiful place where you can have your book club or your family reunion makes a great social gathering even better in a place that's been stewarded with care through centuries."

A separate, \$200,000 project, supported by a \$76,000 grant from the town through the Community Preservation Committee, will fund two months of church tower and steeple repairs late this summer, said Dyer. The clock and chimes, no longer silent and ringing out hourly from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., have been restored.

Inside the church, many of the pews installed in 1866 would be removed, and others would be placed on moveable rollers and reconfigured for Sunday services, Dyer explained. Other priorities include ADA accessibility, code-compliant railings to reopen the structurally sound balcony, a refinished main floor, installation of a

brighter lighting system, a needed new heating system, insulated storm windows and a kitchenette.

Floor seating can accommodate 220 people, while a usable balcony would provide about 100 more seats.

The construction project, to be overseen by Robert E. Harrison of Berkshire Design and Bradley Architects in Pittsfield, would take about a year. Weekly services could be relocated as needed to the Church on the Hill chapel and offices, down the hill at 55 Main St.

Typically, about 30 to 35 people attend the Church on the Hill's Sunday service, with ages ranging from toddler to 93. Overall church membership is stable at around 60, while weekly attendance is on the upswing, said Metz.

"This is not a congregation that's folding its tent," Dyer stressed. "It's small, but quite vital and active."