

Saving a school's historic legacy

St. Peter Claver parishioners transforming site into museum

By JESSE YEATMAN

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Claudette Bennett, archivist for the St. Peter Claver School museum, stands with Steve Hawkins in the newly renovated choir room of the old school in St. Inigoes. A church committee is working to transform the former Catholic school for black students into a museum. - Credit: Staff photo by REID SILVERMAN

Former school students and others associated with the deep-rooted St. Peter Claver School are transforming the St. Inigoes building into a museum to preserve the institution's place in St. Mary's County history.

Claudette Bennett, the museum's archivist, said a committee from St. Peter Claver Catholic Church has been working on the project for several years. They intend to put up a detailed timeline of events related to the school, which primarily served African-Americans. There will be enlarged copies of old photographs and other artifacts in display cases once the museum is complete.

Among the photos is a portrait of Sister Mary Paul Lee, who taught in the 1960s at nearby Cardinal Gibbons Institute, a Catholic high school for black students. The photo is of Lee speaking at a memorial dedication to the school in 1990.

Sister Mary Paul Lee "challenged us to preserve our history. She said, 'How do you know where you're going if you don't know where you've come from,'" Bennett said.

Bennett said they have already collected boxes of artifacts, including items that were found in the school and others donated by former students and their families.

A 14-member museum committee, which includes eight alumni, was formed to oversee the transformation of the old school.

"We've got a lot of artifacts we still have to put out," said Steve Hawkins, who has taken a lead role in establishing the museum. The group also welcomes donations of old yearbooks or other school-related items.

Some money already donated went toward rehabbing walls, ceilings and floors in the building along with adding handicap access to the main floor of the school. Hawkins said he thinks that it will take about \$80,000 more to finish up the museum by next fall to open it to the public.

The downstairs of the former St. Peter Claver School, which was renamed McKenna Hall, has functioned as a social hall for the nearby church for decades.

The upstairs floor was largely unused until several years ago, when Hawkins and others took up the idea of preserving the history of the school house through the creation of a museum. The upstairs consists of four large rooms — each housed two classes allowing the school to serve first through eighth grades.

The group has rehabbed one room to house the school's archives, which

range from grades and other information about former students to financial records, reports and other documents. Another room will be set up like a former classroom with old desks, a chalkboard and other classroom materials. A third room will be the actual museum with artifacts on display while the fourth room has been turned into a choir room, complete with risers and small, individual practice rooms.

The group hopes the museum will eventually host school tours for students to learn about local black history. Hawkins and Bennett said they are pursuing a partnership with the Smithsonian's new Black History Museum. Bennett said she has spoken with the museum's director and hopes to find some affiliation to share artifacts and information.

Steeped in history

"History is what it's all about down here," Hawkins said.

The first Catholic school for African-Americans in St. Mary's County was the Saint Inigoes Colored Parochial School held at St. Jerome's Hall starting in 1887; it was gone several years later. St. Peter Claver Elementary School, the county's second such school, was founded in 1916. The school burned in 1928, and was rebuilt a year later and operated until 1965; grades seven and eight remained in the building for two additional years.

Nuns from the Oblate Sisters of Providence in Baltimore operated St. Peter Claver School, while nuns from New England ran nearby St. Michael's School in Ridge, which was populated by mostly, if not all, white Catholic students.

Although St. Peter Claver Church was never sanctioned as being for blacks or whites, a distinction quickly and clearly developed.

"Such a separation had never been sanctioned by any archbishop. It was a mistaken impression that had grown out of the activity of some uncharitable people, the inactivity of good people, and the inherited sore on a society

recognizing persons as chattels. Separate schools later grew out of the churches," the Rev. Francis Walsh wrote in his book, "Resurrection: the Story of the Saint Inigoes Mission 1634-1994." Walsh was the priest at St. Peter Claver from 1977 through 1986 and was active in trying to desegregate the Catholic churches in southern St. Mary's.

"Once the legal structures supporting segregation were done away with, it became evident that there were other structures maintaining the system. They were buried deeply in the psyches of blacks and whites. Racism was built on a deep superiority complex among whites and a deep inferiority complex among blacks. The recovery of our baptismal identity will not be complete until race no longer needs to be the fundamental for our emotional or social security," Walsh wrote in the book.

The relationship between the two Catholic churches and their associated schools has been exemplary for others, including Katharine Drexel, who included some of the information in her own writings. She was canonized in 2000, becoming the second American elevated to sainthood by the Catholic church. Some of Drexel's correspondence is housed at the St. Peter Claver archive room.

Hawkins praised the help of Ernest Hall, who has done most of the interior work. "He's actually the one who saved this building," Hawkins said. Like Cardinal Gibbons Institute across the road, St. Peter Claver School was at one point destined for demolition. Unfortunately, the high school building could not be saved, Hawkins said, but Hall and other stepped in to allow the elementary school to survive.

Hawkins said he and others intend to save St. Peter Claver School from the same fate and preserve its history for generations to come.

jyeatman@somdnews.com

