

A Towering Project

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BEVERLY -- The tower and steeple of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church have survived 154 years of weather, birds, and even a lightning strike in 1983.

But they have been on the brink of succumbing to the holes and cracks that have developed over time.

The tall steeple on Warren Street that once served as a towering landmark for sailors on the Delaware River is dotted with holes where birds nested, while cracks allow water to seep down the walls into the church.

After seven years of fundraising and grant applications, the Rev. Robert Legnani said the largest and most necessary portion of the renovations is finally moving forward.

On Monday, workers from Brayco Brothers in Cream Ridge removed the 600-pound bronze bell housed in the crumbling tower, using a support structure to lower it three stories.

A metal cross perched on the steeple's peak also was removed to allow for the replacement of portions of the mostly wooden structure with steel support beams.

"St. Stephen's got a grant from the New Jersey Historic Trust back in February for the preservation of its tower and steeple," Legnani said. "We're in the process now of actually doing the construction work."

The parish was founded on Church Street in 1937, when Beverly was part of Willingboro. The church on Warren Street was built in 1855 and the adjacent parish hall in 1897.

The bell, which residents rang 2,000 times just after midnight on Jan. 1, 2000, has been housed in the steeple since the church was built, but the cross may have been added later, Legnani said.

"The bell has never been taken down. If we look at some photographs [from] about 1900, it's questionable if there's a cross there or another design, possibly a weather vane," Legnani said.

Workers will reinforce the tower and steeple with a steel infrastructure and recoat the steeple with slate. The interior masonry will be repointed and the tower's stained-glass windows will be repaired. The tower shingles never been have replaced, Legnani said, and a new ladder will be added.

St. Stephen's, which is listed on the state and national registries of historic places, has received three grants since 2002 totaling almost \$112,000 for smaller restoration projects and studies to determine what repairs the tower needed.

"Over the years, the congregation has done its best to keep up the buildings, but some projects, such as [repairing] water damage in the steeple and tower, are just too expensive," Legnani said.

In May 2004, the church authorized a study to determine the most pressing needs of the buildings and grounds. The steeple was found to be in the worst shape.

In February, the New Jersey Historic Trust awarded the church a \$289,945 grant that will partially fund the tower and steeple renovations. The remaining amount of the nearly \$500,000 project has been raised by the 200-family congregation, Legnani said.

However, the church still needs more work.

A multistage restoration outline was developed in 2006 and includes rebuilding the porch and repairing stained-glass windows.

St. Stephen's grant was one of 60 projects funded by \$15.5 million from the New Jersey Historic Trust, which was ratified on March 11 by the Garden State Preservation Trust and later approved by the Legislature.

Other local sites recommended for awards were the Burlington County Historical Society in Burlington City (\$50,000), the 167-year-old Main Street Friends Meetinghouse in Medford (\$149,942), the Kinkora Works in the Roebling section of Florence (\$50,000) and the Bishop-Irick Farmstead in Southampton (\$9,092), which was built in 1753 and is home to the Pinelands Preservation Alliance.

The New Jersey Historic Trust, an affiliate of the Department of Community Affairs, is responsible for administering grants from the Garden State Preservation Trust Fund, which promotes and funds historical preservation and encourages joint efforts by the public and private sectors.

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