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# South Newbury Union Chapel honored: Was key to women's suffrage movement

Published: Thursday, October 11, 2012, 7:17 AM Updated: Thursday, October 11, 2012, 7:20 AM



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**NEWBURY** - Tucked away in the bucolic, semi-rural landscape of Geauga County is a monument to free speech and the right to vote for women.

The South Newbury Union Chapel, 15829 Ravenna Road, was recently placed on the National Register of Historic Places by the U.S. Department of the Interior.



JOAN COOPER RUSEK/SUN NEWS

The South Newbury Union Chapel was built between 1858-1859 as a bastion of free speech by outraged citizens after the church across the street refused to allow future President James A. Garfield to speak there. Efforts are being made to preserve the building and hold public functions there again.

It's easy to blink and drive past it on the bustling road, also known as state Route 44, but you should stop a spell to breathe in the air of freedom and read the markers.

It also adjoins a public park with muskrat, beaver and a brown bat condominium built as an Eagle Scout project, a short walk behind the building.

As monuments go, the South Newbury Union Chapel is modest. The one-room wooden structure measures just 24 feet by 36 feet, but the plain white building packed quite a wallop in its day.

It was built between 1858-1859 by outraged citizens after members of the Congregational Church across the street refused to allow future President James A. Garfield to speak, fearing his topic would be controversial.

At the time the area was a vibrant settlement with a grist mill, tannery,

tavern wagon and blacksmith shops, a post office and other shops. The population was described as liberal.

Garfield was a teacher at the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute, now known as Hiram College. In retaliation for the church's snub, Anson Matthews, a store owner and the man who had invited Garfield to speak at the church, donated a one-acre plot of his land across the street for the Union

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Chapel. Today, both of the buildings continue to face each other.



Basking in the moment. Trustees of the South Newbury Union Chapel attach the historic building's newest designation: The U.S. Department of Interior's National Register of Historic Places. The trustees include Mike Faith, left, Sandra Woolf and Beverly Ash, wielding the screwdriver.

The Union Chapel's premise was for a "public hall or meeting house for literary, scientific, moral and religious purposes and lectures on all useful subjects," according to its deed. It was to be open and free and not to be used to the exclusion of anyone.

Numerous important social reform movements were launched from within its walls.

Nine women became Ohio's first female voters there in 1871, although women were not granted the right to vote in the U.S. until 1920.

Their ballots were "lost" en route to the board of elections that year, but the effort was not lost. The women returned to legally vote on local issues in 1872.

That time, the men employed boys to smoke smelly tobacco pipes to dissuade the suffragettes. However the ploy backfired when the boys became too ill from the tobacco to eat their dinner and the women denied the men marital privileges, according to historical accounts.

A two-day mass convention on human equality was held in the chapel and on the grounds in April 1873. One year later, the Newbury Woman's Suffrage Political Club was founded there. It is believed to be the country's second-oldest suffrage club.

Suffragette leaders Susan B. Anthony and Harriet Taylor Upton spoke there in 1878-1879 on their lecture tours.

"Amazing," Mike Faith said. "These powerful women, the rock stars of their generation, took detours in their lecture schedule of cities including Erie, Buffalo, Cleveland and Pittsburgh to visit this tiny little chapel in rural Geauga County."

Faith is one of three trustees of the chapel. Beverly Ash, another trustee, lives across the street, adjacent to the chapel. Sandra Woolf of Auburn is the third trustee. Woolf is a retired naturalist from Geauga Park District, but continues to volunteer her time.

"There is no better way to honor what those brave ladies did than to work to preserve this little historical building," Faith said.

Bill Ginn of Chester is recognized by the trustees for his contributions to the preservation of the chapel.

The Women's Temperance Society was founded there in 1875.

On July 4, 1876, the Women's Political Suffrage club planted the Centennial Oak tree on a spot across the road, on private property. It was a symbolic move to plant the roots of the suffrage movement. That tree continues to grow today.

Another group that used the chapel in 1870 was the Northern Ohio Health and Dress Reform group, consisting of local women who believed corsets, bustles and sweeping skirts were unhealthy and unnatural.

It continued to be a vibrant center with a small lending library, a singing school and a one-room school house. It hosted quilting bees, ice cream socials, band concerts, plays, debates, festivals and reunions.

Why is this simple wood building important?

"The struggle for the right to vote is not over," Ginn said. "It's an ongoing struggle. There will always be some people in power who hope to frustrate and prevent others from voting."

He said the battle lines do not stop there, but include emancipation, private property rights and other freedoms on which the U.S. is built.

"It's important to preserve this symbol and keep the memories of the past alive to have a good and free future for our sons and daughters," he said.

The trustees of the chapel and the Geauga Park District, which owns the adjacent park land, hope to hold more public events at the chapel and open it up for the public to view.

Like any aging structure, it needs work and donations of money, materials and labor.

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