



MEREDITH L. KAISER/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Gerard Cooper, an employee of St. George's Episcopal Church on North Ferry Street in Schenectady's Stockade section, moves bricks that were picked up from the sidewalk in front of the church and stacks them in back of the church on Thursday.

SCHENECTADY

Old bricks saved from trash heap

Sidewalk restoration prompts volunteer effort at Stockade church

BY KATHLEEN MOORE
Gazette Reporter

The city's latest example of extreme historic preservation had a crowd of Stockaders digging up sidewalk bricks this week.

The goal is to get the bricks out of the ground before city crews come by to redo the sidewalks by St. George's Episcopal Church. The work will be done in conjunction with the repaving of North Ferry Street.

The church had hoped to reuse its original bricks to frame the new sidewalk, but the century-old clay was in such bad shape that the elders agreed to buy new ones.

"Some of them are crumbling and some of them are different sizes," said David Kennison, who heads the vestry, the church's board of elders. "So when you try to re-lay them in any pattern, there's no pattern you can do."

But history-minded residents, like the ones who worship in the city's oldest church, couldn't stomach just throwing the bricks

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GERARD COOPER
St. George's Episcopal Church

out, even if they are falling apart. Word passed quickly that the bricks were in need of rescue.

Residents immediately offered to use them for their own projects. A group of parishioners proposed moving many bricks to the church's gardens, which are also in need of restoration. Church officials gave the project a green light on Wednesday and the digging began.

Less than 24 hours later, church worker

Gerard Cooper was a bit taken aback by the waist-high pile of bricks that greeted him just inside the church fence. He had to move them to pallets set up behind the church.

"The church ladies are going to be making a garden," he said as he piled bricks in a wagon that soon proved to be too small for the job. "But they don't need all of these, that's for sure!"

Nevertheless, residents were dedicated. They came back Thursday to dig up another half-block.

They carefully pried even the thinnest bricks out of the ground, setting aside only the ones that had long ago snapped in half. Cooper shook his head in amazement as he took in the scene: more than 1,000 bricks piled painstakingly on his left, and a much smaller pile of broken remnants on his right.

"If it's possible, they would've saved them

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Bricks

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all," he said.

He tossed the newer bricks into a wheelbarrow somewhat indifferently, but carefully separated the oldest ones, which he figured would be the most desired. Some of those were half the thickness of a typical brick, and Kennison believes they were made in 1900.

A LOAD TO GO

Although residents have tried their best, Kennison has estimated that there are nearly 5,000 bricks left to save.

There isn't much time — workers have already cut down trees in preparation for the removal of the entire sidewalk. Then the city will replace the bricks on the street side of the sidewalk for free, but the church must pay for the bricks on its side of the new concrete. The cost has been estimated at \$2,000.

That's petty cash for a congregation truly dedicated to historic preservation. The parishioners have approved a \$200,000 restoration of their sanctuary, built in 1759, and are happily worshipping in the parish hall while workers refinish the sanctuary floors and repaint the vaulted ceiling, sacristies and Colonial-style pews.

Much of the work was financed by a bequest from the Rev. Darwin Kirby, who was rector from 1947 to 1987.

Another bequest, from Fred Krings in memory of his wife Virginia, has provided the \$25,000 needed to replace the deteriorating wrought iron fence around the church. The work on the 120-year-old fence started in 2006 and will be done by the end of the year, Kennison said.



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Gerard Cooper collects bricks that made up the sidewalk by St. George's Episcopal Church in Schenectady on Thursday.

"The fence project is behind schedule," he said. "Half of it is not done. But Rob Slavson of Frontier Iron is doing a wonderful job. The quality of his work is superb."

The gardens will be the last major project.

"We are also restoring the gardens — they've fallen into disrepair," Kennison said.

Once that's done, parishioners will be able to see the church and its grounds as it looked more than a hundred years ago.

"It's very, very exciting," Kennison said. "The spirit of the parish is high. The entire parish has pulled together on every one of these projects."

This is far from the first elaborate

restoration project at the church. In 1952, parishioners hired an architectural firm to help them highlight the historic nature of the church through painstaking restoration work.

Although everything was restored, not every facet of the church is original.

The arch of a bricked-up doorway can still be seen from the walkway on the south side of the church, where Presbyterians were once allowed to enter the building to hold services after the Anglicans had finished theirs. That door was later bricked up when the two congregations disagreed and the Presbyterians left to form their own church. It has never been reopened.

The most noticeable alteration at the church is the steeple, which replaced a bell that used to hang within the chapel. But the steeple was restored with everything else in 1952.

Even with the changes, the church has been described by historians as one of the finest examples of 18th century Colonial architecture still standing in the Mohawk Valley. It is also the oldest Anglican church in the valley, and held its first services five years after the 1690 massacre that destroyed much of the Stockade.

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