

The Berlin Sun

Stark Union Church in desperate need of repair

By Barbara Tetreault

STARK — The village of Stark, with its white covered bridge over the Ammonoosuc River and the adjacent Stark Union Church, is one of the most photographed scenes in New England. But the church faces major structural issues that need immediate attention if the building is to survive.



Three trusses in the Stark Union Church need repair. This interior picture shows the ceiling cracking where the center roof truss is failing. (COURTESY PHOTO)

For many, the Stark scene is a New Hampshire icon known throughout the country. One local official said losing the church would be a loss second only to that suffered when the Old Man rock formation fell in Franconia Notch.

Built in 1853, the church, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, needs an estimated \$200,000 in work to ensure its survival. Some believe close to \$100,000 must be spent immediately if the building is to survive the winter.

A GoFundMe page has been set up to raise money, and close to \$20,000 has been raised in three weeks. On Tuesday, state Sen. Erin Hennessey (R-Littleton) and N.H. Division of Historical Resources Director Benjamin Wilson met with church members to discuss possible funding options and the time frame for the needed work.



*Historic Stark Union Church is facing major structural issues that require immediate attention.
(BARBARA TETREAUULT PHOTO)*

The church is owned by the individual pew holders, organized as the Pew Owners' Association of the Stark Union Church.

Town moderator and pew holder William Joyce explained that when the church was built, there were not enough members of any denomination in Stark to support a church. So the various religious organizations decided to build a "union" church that all faiths could share.

To raise money, the 48 pews were sold, and over the years, the individual deeds have been sold or handed down. Pew holders pay annual dues to support the church, but local organizations have worked hard to help raise money for the upkeep of the church. The building

is also rented out for church-related functions.

Up until the pandemic, church services were held regularly every Sunday at the church, and they recently resumed. At services on Sept. 5, church-goers noticed the ceiling appeared to be sagging. An investigation discovered the problem is with the trusses in the roof that support that church. The Pew Owners Association held an emergency meeting Sept. 7 and voted unanimously to close the church until it can be fixed.

Joyce explains that the church was built much like a barn with five trusses. He said the center truss, which also holds up the chimney, is in the worst shape and needs immediate attention. Joyce said if the center truss completely fails, it would probably be the end of the building.

He said the trusses on either side of the center one also need repair or replacing. He explained that they all date back to when the church was built and the wood is getting brittle. That work is expected to cost in the neighborhood of \$100,000.

Joyce said they are hoping to find someone who can help them do a temporary fix until the money can be raised to do the needed work. Replacing or repairing the trusses will require going through the roof in three places and pew holder Lindy Falconer of Colebrook said that will likely require replacing the roof and ceiling. "Fixing that one problem is going to create more problems," she said, noting that the total estimate is about \$200,000.

Falconer set up a fundraising page for the Pew Association, and donations have come up as word has spread about the church. Falconer and her husband, John, were married in the church 45 years ago, and she said losing the church would be like a death in the family.

The church's listing on the National Register of Historic Places describes it as a "fine example of a rural interpretation of the architectural styles which existed in the 1850's ... Embellishment is limited to the church exterior; the simple utilitarian interior was designed to house the demands and tastes of the various denominations that would use the building. The church has undergone few alterations and remains today an excellent index to the tastes and skills of a rural New Hampshire town."

In the 1980s, the foundation was rebuilt, and about 20 years ago a new roof was installed. Some of the work was funded by donations from the Stark Improvement Fund, the Tillotson Fund and John Kauffmann.