

The Colebrook Chronicle

COVERING THE TOWNS OF THE UPPER CONNECTICUT RIVER VALLEY

Historic Stark Union Church Votes To Close Its Doors

By Donna Jordan

Faced with over \$100,000 in needed repairs, this week the Pew Owners Association and Trustees of the Stark Union Church voted to close the church, pending any fundraising that could help to re-open the historic building.

A structural support beam about midway in the church is in need of replacement or additional support in order for the church to be considered safe to the public. The need for serious roof repairs came to light within the past 10 days. The church was built in 1853 and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983.

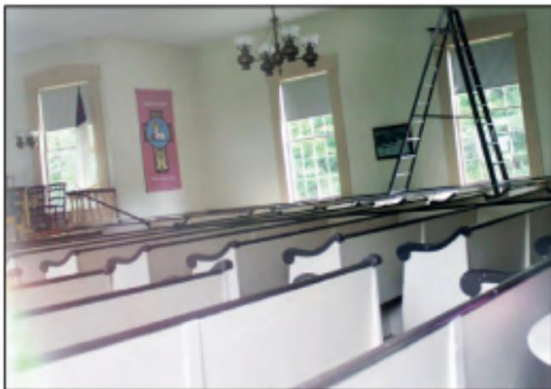
Trustee Wayne Montgomery explained to the **Chronicle**, “We have several trusses in the roof system which support the ceiling of the church and the roof structure itself. They are built with a post and beam type set up. A couple of trusses have some significant damage to them. They have been in place since the 1850s. One of them in particular cracked and needs to be repaired or replaced in the short term.”



The historic Stark Union Church, among one of the most photographed in the country, will remain closed as members endeavor to raise money for needed repairs. Charles Jordan photo.

He said there are five overall trusses, and three need to be repaired or replaced. “The conventional wisdom is that we ought to try to repair them,” rather than replace, he said. “We had a fellow that does restoration work on historic buildings and he gave us his estimate of what to do and it will cost well in excess of \$100,000. We are looking for funds, donations, anything we can do with grants,” said Montgomery. “We are in the middle of trying to generate revenue any way we can.” Montgomery said that the deterioration above the ceiling was noticed, and that the ceiling was sagging a bit. “With that in mind, we tried to find someone to come and take a look who had understanding and knowledge of old buildings and how they are built.

He took a look and told us what was going on. He came to us initially from a recommendation of the N.H. Preservation Alliance.” Montgomery is past president of the Pew Owners Association and is a trustee at the church. He said that the church was open for services and has been in use right up until it was closed on Tuesday night. The Methodist minister, who provides services at several churches in the area, had been holding services there of late. “We don’t expect a catastrophic failure, but don’t want to take that chance,” said Montgomery.



Left photo: The interior of the historic Stark Union Church has been deemed unsafe and in need of structural repairs. Right photo: The iconic double doors at the Stark Church, built in 1853, will remain closed until money is raised for repairs to the building. Charles Jordan photos

“We’re thinking right now that we probably are going to be months away from generating the income to do any fixes; then we have to find a local contractor who is available to put in a support under the beam that is worst affected—if we do that, and then we will have someone take another look at it and if it is deemed to be safe, we will allow people to come have services and gatherings there again.” The building had been open not only to church services but also for graduations from the Stark Elementary school, for weddings and funerals, and other events.

The church is iconic for its location next to the historic Stark covered bridge and is the subject of thousands of photographs taken over the years, especially during the fall foliage season. On Tuesday evening, pew owner Lindy Falconer of Colebrook posted to her Facebook page, “Tonight I had to vote yes on closing the Stark Union Church. If work is not done soon, this beautiful historic church will be gone. This was the hardest vote of my life. This breaks my heart. Please help to save this landmark. Consider making a donation to save this special place.

All total, my guess, it will take about \$200 000 to do all that needs to be done. Immediately, we need approximately \$130,000. Please help save our church. Just thinking about the church structure failing makes me tear up.” Lindy and her husband John Falconer of Colebrook, who are members of the Pew Owners Association, are coordinating fundraising efforts and can be contacted at 603-237-8616 or through email at lindy@linjo.com.

The church website (at starkunionchurch.org) says the church’s history included “Baptists, Adventists, Episcopalians, Methodists and Congregationalists” among the religious sects in Stark’s early history. “Sunday services and prayer meetings were held in the homes or in the schools for there was no church edifice. Not long after the coming of the railroad the citizens of Stark decided to build a church. Solomon Cole, Benjamin Thompson and Andrew Cole were chosen building committee, and business was carried on rapidly. The church was soon completed, and was the finest church for the cost (about \$1,050) ever put up in the country. It was not built by any denomination, and is controlled entirely by the pew owners.

It will seat 250 comfortably, and services have been held regularly most of the time since its erection, principally by Methodists and Free Will Baptists. “To raise the cost of construction, the new pews were numbered and appraised. Andrew Cole was appointed to handle their sale. Printed deed forms listing the pew numbers, the buyer, and the consideration were obtained for the purpose. The pews became the property of the new pew owners, their heirs and assigns.

“The first list of pew numbers and owners still exists among the papers of the late Andrew Cole. It bears the names of many of the old settlers whose names have long passed into history. Cole, Pike, Smith, Hickey and Potter names appear on this list as do those of Alexander Dewey and George Bell for whom Dewey and Bell Hill were named, Asa Stone, whose farm has been occupied by his direct descendants to the present day, and John Massure, whose name as Justice of the Peace appears on the old deeds.

“Preachers of many faiths used the new church. The population increased rapidly and with it church attendance. More space was needed, so an addition was built, making room for the choir and a reed organ. A horse shed was constructed on the river side of the church where horses, wagons and sleds could be protected from rain and snow.”

The iconic image of the quintessential church and neighboring covered bridge were made famous starting in the 1940s when Lancaster photographer Winston Pote sold his images of the church to calendars and magazine covers.