

CHURCH TIME CAPSULES SHED LIGHT ON E. ST. LOUIS HISTORY - OLD NEWSPAPERS, NOTES FROM 1887 AND 1904 CAN BE SEEN AT CITY MUSEUM

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When the elegant, castlelike building that once housed East St. Louis' Mount Pisgah Baptist Church was demolished last summer, scavenger Bruce Gerrie wasn't surprised to find a time capsule buried beneath one of its cornerstones.

He didn't expect to find two of them.

The time capsules, one dating from the building's dedication as a Methodist church in 1887 and a second commemorating a 1904 addition, were tucked beneath the white 1904 cornerstone amid the rubble at 1301 Summit Avenue, where the church had stood for 116 years.

Inside, the pastor and parishioners at what was then called the First Methodist Church had tucked copies of newspapers from East St. Louis and around the country along with elegantly handwritten personal histories.

The longest of these, by the Rev. John F. Harmon, is packed with seemingly mundane observations about a new streetcar line and the price of coal (then 11 cents a bushel) to which the passage of nearly a century has attached some significance.

With parishioners from the Mount Pisgah Baptist and Shiloh A.M.E. churches present, the capsules were opened in a gospel-flavored ceremony at the City Museum on Feb. 22. For now, the items are spread among four display cases at Gerrie's St. Louis Architectural Museum, which occupies part of the museum's third floor.

For Pastor Eric O. Rogers of the Mount Pisgah Baptist Church, which occupied the building from 1976 until 1995, the discovery of the time capsules was a revelation.

"We had no idea they were there," Rogers said. "But after they were revealed, we did our own internal investigation and found that there were many parishioners who had ancestors who had attended the Methodist church."

Gerrie, the architectural museum curator, wryly acknowledges that the discovery of the time capsules was a direct result of his failed efforts to save the church building from the wrecking ball.

First built in 1887, the stone-and-brick church acquired its distinctive Medieval-castle flair with an elaborate addition in 1904. Toward the end of its life, the First Methodist Church attracted a mixed crowd of black and white parishioners.

But the church closed its doors sometime in the early 1970s, after most white residents fled East St. Louis. Many of the parishioners who stayed behind joined the Shiloh A.M.E. Church.

In 1976, the Mount Pisgah Baptist Church moved in and occupied the building until part of the roof collapsed in 1995. The Mount Pisgah church moved to a new building around the corner on Pennsylvania Avenue. The city of East St. Louis, which considered the older building an eyesore and a hazard, condemned it in 2001.

Gerrie and City Museum founder Bob Cassilly cried foul, asserting that the building was an unsung architectural treasure. When the wrecking crew arrived over their protests, a company source tipped Gerrie and invited him and Cassilly to pick through the detritus.

Much of the building's old stone has been recast as a castle tower that rises from MonstroCity, the elaborate outdoor playground Cassilly has built outside the City Museum, at 701 North 15th Street.

The time capsule materials, meanwhile, sit under glass upstairs, offering a fascinating peek into East St. Louis history.

Under a column marked "personals," the front page of the Aug. 20 edition of the East St. Louis Herald offers tiny news nuggets that must have made sense to someone at the time. The first discloses that "City Attorney Davis is again at his post." Another reveals that "Chas. Humphrey, 32 years of age, a railroader by occupation, left here yesterday week and has not been heard of since."

The newspapers and copies of Methodist prayer books and newsletters are remarkably well preserved. Part of the tin box that served as the 1887 time capsule had rusted, allowing the elements to destroy some of the items. Perhaps thinking better of it, the curators of the

1904 capsule used a rustproof copper box. Both containers are shaped to resemble Bibles.

The pastor, Rev. Harmon, jotted down several pages of thoughts for posterity, including an exhaustive list of every Methodist church he had helped consecrate. His notes, dated Dec. 11, 1903, are a mix of talk-of-the-town gossip and local historical footnotes.

"The streetcar to Lebanon has just been completed," Harmon writes in elegant cursive. "Coal is now 11 cents a bushel. We pay our janitor \$7 per week. Vernon J. Gooddale, a boy who recently came from New York, is janitor. The stone masons at work on our church receive \$5 per day."

Harmon gives parishioners their say, too, although their musings are less revealing. Most simply list the names of relatives who also attended the church.

"I told the church members that they might each write a short history of himself and put it in this box," Harmon writes. "This explains the appearance of such as shall be so placed."

The items will stay at the City Museum for now, but Gerrie said their fate is not clear. Most likely, they will eventually be turned over to either the Mount Pisgah church or to the Shiloh A.M.E. church, at 815 South 19th Street in East St. Louis.

"We might keep the stones for educational purposes," Gerrie said, "but it would be our plan to put (the capsule materials) into the right hands. I'm not sure who that would be. Maybe the A.M.E. church.

"The way I feel about it is, it's their material and they would have the greatest right to it."

- Caption: PHOTO by JUSTIN KASE CONDER/POST-DISPATCH - A church newsletter was among items found in time capsules after the Mount Pisgah Baptist Church in East St. Louis was razed. The building was dedicated as a Methodist church in 1887.

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