

Zion's Hill Church looks to past for renovation project

by KEN MASTRO

The Zion's Hill United Methodist Church has provided sanctuary and a place of worship for countless Wiltonians for roughly 160 years perched atop the hill at 470 Danbury Road.

Now, the church is undergoing a significant renovation that pays tribute to the Greek Revival architectural themes that were in vogue at its time of construction while also remaining true to the simplistic nature of colonial New England church designs of the 1840's, and making some practical and cosmetic changes to suit the needs of its congregation.

A new arch lining the church's interior alcove has been added and the walls and ceiling have been painted in a solid, cream color. The rugs on the floors are gone for the time being and the red cushions are no longer lining the rows of pews. Interior shutters reminiscent of those on historic New England buildings have been added inside the church to help monitor the often strong sunlight that eagerly pierces the welcoming bodies of the lofty triple-hung windows along the east side of the church. The light can be especially distracting on Sunday mornings when the church is full of parishioners. Before this, churchgoers only had the protection of curtains to shield them from the light.

Zion's Hill Church has experienced physical changes in the past—it has had rooms added, a new set of oak pews were brought in decades ago and it even has been moved a short distance from an adjacent cemetery to accommodate a foundation and heating system—but there has not been much done to the structure or interior from the late 1950's until now.

Dale Minske is a member of the Zion's Hill congregation and a designer by trade who is overseeing the renovation of the church's interior where the changes are being made.

The impetus to renovate the church came about three years ago as the old plaster that has lined the church through its long history began to crack after 16 decades of facing changing and often brutal New England weather. Churchgoers were



asked to brainstorm what improvements they would like to see at the church and fund-raising campaigns were developed to finance the project.

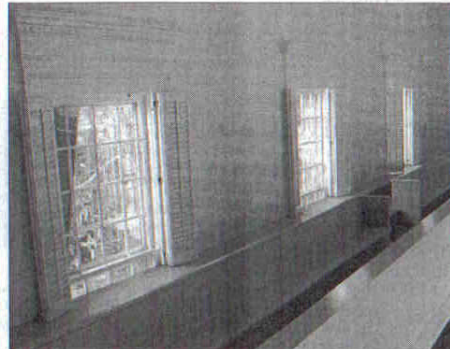
"It's a long-term solution," said Ms. Minske, who spent much time researching and familiarizing herself with the architectural and design preferences common to the 1840's before starting with the project at the beginning of this year. "It could last another 100 years if maintained."

Ms. Minske said Oct. 3 is the target date to finish the renovation. Much painting and the physical work of repairing the plaster and ceiling have already been accomplished. Much of the work is being done by Artech Church Interiors of Danbury, with the added help of church members. In fact, Don Frank added the arch to the alcove.

She said the renovation is to remain consistent with the Greek Revival

architecture that was popular in New England at the time of the church's original construction in the 1840's. The white columns that help lift the balcony from the church floor suggest a classical Mediterranean look with its fresh coating of white paint. The warm, cream-colored walls will soon be matched with the cooling effect of deep blue cushions that will line the pews and blue carpeting that will cover the hardwood floors. The hue will include a touch of autumnal gold to incorporate the natural oak color of the pews. Choosing the paint colors was not a simple choice, said Ms. Minske—it was one of the most actively discussed decisions made by the congregation.

Ms. Minske said blue was a popular color in New England when the church was constructed. In fact, the church's interior wore baby blue paint before being repainted in August.



Shown here are the tops of the windows that line the north side of the church along the church balcony. Each window frame has been painted. The shutters and molding at the top are new. At left is the alcove of the church as pictured from the back row in the church's balcony. The church's interior has already received coats of fresh paint and a new arch molding along the perimeter of the alcove. The renovation is meant to update the church while remaining true to both its Greek Revival architectural and New England colonial past.—Ken Mastro photos

"Blue is not uncommon for the Colonial time period," said Ms. Minske.

The pews may not be original but have lined the inside of the church for years and are a favorite of the congregation. The cushions lining them may soon change, but Ms. Minske said there are no plans to remove the pews.

"The pews will not be changed," she said. "They're one of the best parts of the whole church."

The triple-hung windows consist of three tall panes of glass stacked vertically from near the church's floor up to the rows of pews that line the balcony. They are expected to be quite effective in letting a fair amount of breeze sweep through the sanctuary as it circulates up Zion's Hill and through the structure. But new, efficient fans will be added and needed to replace the previous ones in helping to cool the church's occupants on those stifling and often muggy summer days of August, despite the natu-

ral aid of the wind.

Two medallion designs that protrude as reliefs from the church's high ceilings have been painted white to help catch the eye. They are believed to be an original part of the church and possibly made of plaster. A chandelier with a polished brass look will hang from each medallion in the middle of the church. Light fixtures will be added to the side of the church as well.

Attention was paid to detail, Ms. Minske said in some of the more minute renovations in church. The design on the new molding that tops off the windows matches the pattern of carved wood that runs across the back of the pews. While these details are relatively minute, they help portray a sense of cohesion and importance placed on a fluid visual transition in the relatively simplistic design common to a colonial-aged church.