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# Saving Vermont's history one grant at a time

## Montgomery community works to keep Pratt Hall erect

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Caitlin Corkins of the Vermont Division of Historic Preservation talks with Montgomery Historical Society Chairman Scott about the preservation grant for Pratt Hall in Montgomery. / LYNN MONTY/Free Press

Written by **Lynn Monty**  
Free Press Staff Writer

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**MONTGOMERY** — Since the late 1800s the soulful tale of Simeon and Anna has stood tall, filled with light, at Pratt Hall in Montgomery.

This stained-glass revelation tells an ancient tale through textured, multi-hued glass, and it's not just this one little known biblical story seen through the sunbeams, there are more, each one more beautiful than the last — each pulsating with exquisite, priceless historical significance.

A peppermint-clad evergreen tree sat forlorn beneath these windows, lovingly adorned for a community singalong that never happened over the holiday weekend, canceled because of an ice storm.

Beside the stunning-glass depiction of Simeon and Anna rests a less obvious

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Pratt Hall in Montgomery on Jan. 21. / LYNN MONTY/Free Press

naturally illuminated message. “I call it a flow chart for the Holy Trinity,” smiled Scott Perry, Montgomery Historical Society chairman. “In the center is God. It’s a flow chart that walks you through a decision tree.”

Turns out, these massive, precious panes are in dire straits. Their home on the west wall of Pratt Hall is sinking.

Montgomery Historical Society has one major artifact, and it’s a big one. Pratt Hall’s bell tower has already been repaired. To this day, its varied uses make it valuable to the community that has grown up knowing the stories in the windows regardless of their religious predilection.

“When I come down into town and see Pratt Hall, I know I’m home again,” Perry said.

Caitlin Corkins of Barre works for the Vermont Division of Historic Preservation. She met with Perry at Pratt Hall to discuss the urgent structural repairs that need to happen posthaste.

Pratt Hall is one of 17 structures to benefit from a State Historic Preservation Grant this year.

Timber framed Pratt Hall, much like Vermont’s signature covered bridges, will receive \$20,000 toward their West Wall Capital Campaign goal of \$150,000.

Make shift fixes won’t foot the bill, and timber framing is not something an average contractor has experience with, Perry said.

The Vermont Division for Historic Preservation and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation recently awarded matching grants totaling \$257,404 to help restore and maintain Vermont’s historic buildings.

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Pratt Hall was chosen because they were prepared, Corkins said. It's not just about severity of need, applicants need to prove they are capable of taking on the scope of work. "They knew what had to be done, and gave an accurate sense of what it would cost," she said. "Forethought and organization gives us confidence they will see the project through successfully."

Of the 50 applications submitted, approved grant projects range from roof replacements and steeple work, to structural and frame repairs, window restoration, and foundation and drainage improvements.

"This is a competitive grant program and as we do every year, we received many excellent applications for the preservation of architecturally and historically significant buildings that are essential to Vermont's sense of place," said Laura Trieschmann, Vermont State Historic Preservation Officer. "Vermont is fortunate to have so many people committed to preserving our landmark buildings for future generations."

The state-funded Historic Preservation Grant Program started in 1986 and awards matching grants for building improvement projects that promote Vermont's architectural and historical heritage. Since its inception, the program has granted nearly \$4 million toward the preservation of more than 500 historic buildings.

"Vermont's architectural heritage is important not only to understanding our past, but to the current and future economic vitality of our state," said Noelle MacKay, commissioner of the Agency of Commerce and Community Development. "Protecting and maintaining these historic buildings ensures that we honor our past as we look to the future. The efforts of this year's grant recipients to preserve important civic community buildings demonstrates their commitment to a vibrant Vermont economy."

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Perry said Pratt Hall was built as an Episcopalian church in 1835 and for the past 40 years has been painstakingly restored and repaired. The west wall will be the last of the major fixes.

"Montgomery is a small community that has done an amazing job taking care of this building," Caitlin Corkins said. "Everything is sagging on the west wall. The clapboards are wavy. This is a bad sign. It's putting stress on the windows."

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Back in 1835, Pratt Hall was called Union Church, and in 1897 was re-consecrated as St. Bartholomew's Church.

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In 1972, after 14 years of neglect, the church was condemned. It was saved from demolition by the formation of the Montgomery Historical Society. The society purchased the community landmark for \$1 from the Episcopal Diocese.

"A small group of dedicated residents were committed to this place," Perry said. "A lot of time, effort and [money](#) has gone into making and keeping this a beautiful building."

The reason being, people in town were and still are emotionally connected to the building. "Some of the old timers talk about doing chores by the toll of the bell. They knew when it was time to milk," Perry said. "When I was a boy I remember swimming in the local swimming holes. We knew when to go in for lunch, and when it struck one, that was an hour we had been out of the water, so we could go back in."

Corkins said it's the buildings in a town that make it a special and unique place, and many churches across the nation are being re-purposed. "Vermont is one of the least formally religious states in terms of the number of people who are members," she said. "Yet we have the most per capita number of church buildings."

What Corkins is finding is if a church doesn't find a new purpose, it won't survive. For the past 25 years Pratt Hall has been home to the town's historical society by housing a number of artifacts, used for a [popular](#) concert series, weddings, memorial services, guest speakers, art shows, and a number of community socials, but no religious services.



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