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Silversmith's house in Ste. Genevieve, built more than 200 years ago, saved by church next door

By Valerie Schremp Hahn St. Louis Post-Dispatch Sep 10, 2019

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The Antoinette Oneille house, built in Ste. Genevieve around 1818, will reopen on Sept. 14. It will be used to house a food pantry, classrooms and a youth area for First Presbyterian Church, which spearheaded the restoration. photo courtesy of Becky Millinger

A Ste. Genevieve home that a French Canadian silversmith lived in 200 years ago will get a new life as a church food pantry, youth hangout and meeting space.

The Antoine Oneille house, significant for its location in the heart of the town's historic district, was preserved by the First Presbyterian Church next door. They're hosting a grand opening Saturday.

"It's been a long journey," said Becky Millinger, chairwoman of a church task force for restoring the building. In addition to private donations, the church got a \$100,000 grant from the Jeffris Family Foundation Ltd. of Wisconsin. The church raised \$200,000 to get the grant.

The church held rummage sales, sold jewelry and ornaments inspired by Oneille's work, and let people sign cedar shingles in exchange for a donation. Those shingles now cover the roof, with messages of "You've got this" and "I (heart) Antoine Oneille!" hidden from view.

The one-and-a-half-story wood-framed home, built in an Anglo-American style, had always served as a private home. It had endured at least two floods, a fire and termites before the church bought it in 2006.

The building made headlines a few years later when a town preservationist, Tim Conley, accused the church of letting it deteriorate so they could knock it down for parking. Church leaders vehemently denied it and asked for patience and time to restore it.

And they did. The basement will be used for storage for the food pantry, said Millinger, and the first floor has the food pantry, a kitchen, bathroom and two large classroom spaces. A restored original stone fireplace opens into the space. The firebox had been sealed with concrete at one point, and when they removed it, they found a partially burned newspaper from 1913.

The upstairs half-story is one big room and will have sofas and a craft area for youth to use for sleepovers, which they often do at the church, said Millinger.

And while the house won't be open as a museum, they will open it to the public a couple of times a year and have a small historic display about Oneille.

"It's the only house in town that has survived of an artisan or craftsman of his level," she said.

Oneille was one of the top silversmiths in the country in his time, and several of his pieces of silver are on display in museums and galleries in the United States.

Not much is known about him, but he was born in Quebec in 1769, married in Detroit, lived in Vincennes, Indiana, and moved to Ste. Genevieve around 1817, probably because he had business connections to Pierre Menard, a fur trader and politician in nearby Kaskaskia.

Nobody's sure where he learned silversmithing, but he made pieces for people like William Henry Harrison, then-governor of the Indiana Territory.

His wife died in 1820, and he and his five children lived in the house until he died in 1825. He's buried in an unmarked grave in the Ste. Genevieve Memorial Cemetery.

It's not likely Oneille forged pieces inside the house, but he probably did outside, Millinger said.

"He melted down silver coins, and he pounded them out with a hammer," she said. Some things he made in a cast, but most he hammered into shape, she said. You can still see hammer marks in some of the spoons.

There are several of his pieces in town, including a set of four spoons that will be given to the church, and a couple of tumblers and a baptismal font. One of the tumblers is on display at the Ste. Genevieve Museum.

Oneille used his maker's mark of "AO" on his pieces, and the mark figures prominently on a new sign next to the front door. The sign was designed and crafted by a present-day Ste. Genevieve silversmith, Jill Kenick.

“Antoine Oneille,” the sign says. “The Silversmith’s House. Circa 1818.”

Conley, the preservationist who had criticized the church, plans to be at the open house.

“I’m elated with what they’ve done,” he said. “And it’s hard for a little church like that to swing it, but they did it remarkably well. And it’ll be a credit to the neighborhood forever now.”

The grand opening and ribbon cutting for the house will be held Saturday from 10 a.m. to noon. The house is at 150 South Main Street. For more information and pictures of the house’s renovation, visit [facebook.com/AntoineOneille](https://www.facebook.com/AntoineOneille)



Restoration planned for Bequette-Ribault House in Ste. Genevieve

Church, preservationist fight over historic house Ste. Genevieve church is accused of 'demolition by neglect' of 200-year-old Antoine O'Neill House

Valerie Schremp Hahn

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