

EXAMINER BRIDAL EDITION

Once blighted Indiana church gets new life as event venue

MUNCIE, Ind. (AP) — David Jennings cracked the plywood-sealed doorway of the former First Christian Church on East North Street, creating an opening that permitted sunlight, for the first time in nearly a decade, to push back the darkness held within the long-deserted space.

More than a hundred years ago, the sanctuary beyond that stone door frame would have been divided by polished, wooden pews painted in multi-colored light that beamed through the church's hand-crafted stained glass windows. On the weekends, the brick walls would reverberate with chiming wedding bells and worship, sounds that would emanate up the structure's octagonal steeple that served as a landmark for the surrounding Gilbert

Neighborhood since 1903.

But when David Jennings and his two sons, Matthew and Michael Jennings, saw the interior of their newly purchased property for the first time in 2018, that pristine sanctuary only existed in city documents and black and white photographs.

"When we broke in, there was no floor ... we had to actually scale around on a piece of trim to get past the 'no floor zone.'" David said. "What was there was rotten, dilapidated and moldy ... right when you came in the door, there's this dead raccoon that had been there for who knows how long and a waterfall of sludge was falling from the roof."

But, through the filth, David said he saw something in that structure that was fundamentally beautiful.

"We thought about this being torn down ... this building is absolutely gorgeous," Jennings said. "I thought it had to be salvaged somehow ... we had to figure out a way."

His youngest son Michael said the family is motivated to "revitalize" their home city and wants to preserve its culture. Michael said, however, that the fervor needed to complete this "labor of love" had to be sourced by something even greater.

"First of all, we are a Christian family," Michael said. "We aren't saying everything here needs to be 'Christian' ... but it's a shame that a church like this could be abandoned for 20 years; God can still be glorified with this space."

Less than a year after David pried apart the plywood seal, the Jennings

family accomplished something no one else was willing to attempt; they gave miraculous new life to the long-dead church. The First Christian Church, now the North Church Venue, stands as a monument to the family's ingenuity, a space they hope will serve as a lasting, celebrated space for weddings, concerts, parties and other events.

That's great news for Zane Bishop, an administrator for the city's Blight Elimination Program with the Muncie Redevelopment Commission, who said the property sat empty since at least 2007.

"Properties surrounded by vacancy see their values depressed, and vacancy breeds vacancy," Bishop said. "Being the largest and most prestigious of structures in Gilbert, its vacancy certainly had a


negative impact on the neighborhood and surrounding area."

According to research compiled by the Delaware County Historical Society, the site's origins in the Gilbert Neighborhood actually date back to the late 1800s when a congregation of Presbyterians that was meeting for church services at City Hall decided to buy the plot of land at North and Elm Streets.

After 81 years and several changes in denomination — which ended under affiliation with the United Church of Christ — the house of worship's regular attendees had all but died out and the church officially disbanded in 1984. The property was purchased by another would-be preacher in 1985 but, later that year, was abandoned again due to lack of funding.

Articles from The Star Press published at that time indicate First Christian Church sat vacant for 17 years until 2002 when Spirit and Truth Ministries, headed by pastor Beverly Ann Plummer, began meeting at the location. Plummer held ownership of the structure until 2010 when local government officials, by then seeking \$8,600 in unpaid property taxes, couldn't locate her and concluded she had left the city.

In 2014 the building, which at that point had been decimated by years of exposure to the elements and vandalism, was acquired by the Muncie Redevelopment Commission through a transfer from the county.



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Couple celebrates 73rd wedding anniversary with vaccinations

CINCINNATI (AP) — A northern Kentucky couple celebrated their 73rd wedding anniversary by getting their first coronavirus vaccine shot.

Noel "Gene" Record, 93, and Virginia Record, 91, were among the first patients

in Cincinnati to be vaccinated Tuesday under Ohio's Phase 1B, WLWT-TV reported. Initial vaccinations went to health care workers.

The couple traveled from northern Kentucky to University of Cincinnati Health's drive-thru vaccina-

tion site and they will return in three weeks to get the second vaccine dose.

"We want to get back to normal as soon as possible," Gene Record said. "I'm a square dance caller, and we have not been able to get together since March.

We're looking forward to people getting vaccinated and getting back to normal, where we can once again square dance and have fun again."

UC Health is one of more than 750 locations in Ohio to administer vaccines.



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Ornate Indiana mansion to become venue for weddings

FORT WAYNE, Ind. (AP) — An ornate northeastern Indiana mansion that housed a funeral home for nearly a century is getting a new, more festive life as a venue for weddings, anniversaries and other occasions.

The roughly 125-year-old Fort Wayne mansion had long been served as the home of the Klaehn, Fahl & Melton Funeral Home, but the 15,000-square-foot building was sold last

month to RGS Real Estate.

Belle Castle Enterprise plans to renovate the property for use as an event center for weddings, bridal parties, birthdays, anniversaries and corporate events, representative Carlene Gray told The Journal Gazette.

"No funerals," she said, laughing.

The building was built about 1893 by Robert Clarke Bell, a late 19th- and early 20th-century attorney and Democratic state senator, for himself and his wife, Clara.

Built in the Richardsonian Romanesque-style, it is ornate inside and out. Its interior features parquet floors, carved wood trim and a tile fireplace, and its exterior includes elaborate gargoyles and decorative arches.

The building is historic for its architecture, its first owner and events that it once hosted, including visits by William Jennings Bryan, who unsuccessfully ran for president as a Democrat in 1896, 1900 and 1908.

Bryan, who was one of Bell's friends, was reported to have given speeches from the home's front porch, said Connie Haas Zuber, executive director of ARCH, a Fort Wayne non-profit historic preservation organization.

"It is a very significant house. It was widely regarded as, if not the finest, one of the finest homes in Fort Wayne," she said.

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EXAMINER BRIDAL EDITION

Weddings rock at iconic Muscle Shoals recording studio

BY MATT WAKE
AL.COM UNDEFINED

SHEFFIELD, Ala. (AP) — Wild horses couldn't keep them away ... from getting married at the actual place where The Rolling Stones recorded the song "Wild Horses."

Since September, four marriages have been held inside Muscle Shoals Sound, the funky little studio known for recording classic hits by stars like The Stones and many others. Three more weddings have been booked there for later in 2021 so far.

For couples, getting married at Muscle Shoals Sound is a way to give their special day a unique and musical twist. For the studio, it's a new revenue stream, crucial during the ongoing pandemic.

John Weimer and Stefanie Adkins were the first couple to get married inside the studio, which has the iconic address of 3614 Jackson Hwy. in Sheffield. Weimer and Adkins are Athens residents who both work on Huntsville's Redstone Arsenal. Last year, they happened to see a Facebook post Muscle Shoals Sound was now available as a wedding venue. Before then, they'd planned to get married at the local courthouse.

"We just thought that would be so different and fun," Stefanie tells me. "It's just a really fun space that came with so much personality, I didn't even need to decorate. Everyone that came has been raving about it."

Cookeville, Tenn.'s Allie and Greg Ledford were the second couple to have their wedding at Muscle Shoals Sound. Visiting the studio had been on Allie's late father's bucket-list, but alas he never made it there. After Allie and Greg began dating about two years ago, Greg got her to watch the 2013 documentary film "Muscle Shoals," about the Shoals area's rich studio legacy. She then realized she had to visit Muscle Shoals Sound someday.

"When COVID hit we decided we wanted to do something very intimate and special, just the two of us," Allie says. "And I think Greg said something off-handedly about, 'Hey, let's see if we can get married inside Muscle Shoals Sound Studio.' I googled it and saw that they could do it for us, and we got very excited about the prospect."

Muscle Shoals Sound's business model relies heavily on studio tours and merch sessions. Recording sessions, which began again in 2018 after renovations, and fundraisers also provide funding.

Since reopening for tours in 2016, the studio had been welcoming an average of 14,000 visitors per year. In 2020, that number took a nosedive, like most other tourism ventures. Particularly since the pan-

demic has significantly impacted international travel and around 30 percent of Muscle Shoals Sound visitors are from other countries.

Judy Hood, wife of iconic Swampers session musician/Muscle Shoals Sound co-founder David Hood, had been doing "Swampette" tours of local music landmarks for seven years. The tours were a response to the increase in Shoals music tourism after the documentary sparked interest. For the last couple years, she and Muscle Shoals Sound executive director Debbie Wilson had been discussing "Swampette weddings" as a possible concept.

Around summer 2019, Alabama law changed, from requiring a person to be ordained to marry a couple to just a notarized contract needed. This freed Muscle Shoals Sound to move ahead with the idea.

"We're just trying to be creative because we don't want to lose our mojo," Hood says. "Before the pandemic we were incredibly

busy at the studio. We've managed to keep tours going on a limited level, but like everything else we've had to make adjustments."

Hood makes it a point to note, "I am not, by any stretch of the imagination, a bona fide religious leader." When she officiates weddings at Muscle Shoals Sound, Hood dons a black robe decorated with silver moons and stars. The satirical inspiration being the studio - housed in a humble cinderblock building formerly a coffin factory - is, as Hood puts it, "a magical place."

The pricing to get married at Muscle Shoals Sound, which still looks like the 1970s inside, depends on the details. Number of guests. If there's catering. Duration of the ceremony. That kind of stuff. The base price for the studio rental/Swampette marriage ceremony is \$400.

Some couples have booked the venue with just a week out, others a year in advance. It all comes down to if the studio and Hood are available for the requested

date. The weddings take place in the studio's main room, which is about the size of a large two-car garage.

Before a wedding takes place at Muscle Shoals Sound, the studio's assistant director Aja Hyde meets with that couple to plan the event and finalize details. For the Weimer/Adkins wedding, Hyde set-up a Zoom video meeting so family unable to attend the ceremony could watch online.

Hood works with couples in advance to personalize their vows. For the Ledford wedding, that included working in some traditional Celtic verbiage. Allie Ledford says, "First thing Judy asked us was whether we wanted something traditional or more fun. When we told her that we wanted fun she paused and said, 'Oh, I can do fun.' It was fantastic."

Vows can also reflect the site's history. As when Hood said during the Weimer/Adkins wedding, "Beautiful things happen in this room and today one more beautiful thing is

about to happen."

Telling Muscle Shoals Sound's story is Hood's passion, on her tours and, now, weddings. Enduring songs like Paul Simon's "Kodachrome" and The Staple Singers' "I'll Take You There" were cut in the studio. "I can't imagine a more soulful place to begin a marriage," Hood says.

Hood's own wedding was unique. Thirty three years ago, she and David Hood were married on April Fool's Day in a ceremony performed by Atlantic Records record producer Jerry Wexler, a Swampers mentor, on a paddleboat in Sarasota, Florida.

For the Weimer/Adkins wedding at Muscle Shoals Sound, the bridesmaids wore pandemic masks printed with "Rock on, John and Stefanie." Guests wore concert T-shirts and jeans. During the ceremony, Stefanie walked out to The Stones ballad "Wild Horses," cut during 1969 Muscle Shoals Sound sessions, played by cousin Ben Short on the studio's grand piano.

John Weimer says, "With everything that has been created in that building and between those walls, it really gave an amazing energy to the ceremony. When you think about it, back in the day it was a bunch of kids creating music that has continued to touch people and enrich lives for decades."

The couple's wedding music also include "I'd Rather Go Blind," the Etta James soulballad cut at nearby FAME Studios back in the '60s.

Like a legendary recording studio, couples have backstory too. John and Stefanie first met about nine years ago in Maryland, where they were first neighbors, then friends and then more than friends. On one of their first dates, John took Stefanie for a ride on his scooter. Allie, who works in customer service, and Greg, a barbershop owner, initially got together through one of those friend-of-a-friend scenarios. For their first date, they went to the movies to see "Bohemian Rhapsody," the biopic about Queen frontman Freddie Mercury.

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