

## **SILVER POINT CHURCH EXPECTED TO BE ADDED TO NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**

**Lindsay McReynolds**  
Herald-Citizen Staff

**SILVER POINT** -- On Wednesday, Silver Point residents saw the culmination of a couple years' worth of work toward the preservation of a building that was a significant part of the childhood of African Americans who lived there -- the West End Church of Christ in Silver Point.

At one of the three meetings it holds each year from the Clover Bottom Mansion on Lebanon Road in Nashville, Tennessee's Review Board for the National Register of Historic Places agreed Wednesday that the church was significant in ethnic heritage education and social history by sending it on to the "Keeper of the Register" in Washington D.C., where it is expected to be formally added to the National Register of Historic Places.

"I'm real excited," Silver Point resident Evelyn Buck said on Wednesday. "This is beginning to come together."

The development of the West End Church of Christ, also known as the Silver Point Christian Institute, in 1909 was instrumental in the lives of African Americans like Buck, who attended the one-room schoolhouse in the 1930s and '40s, when one teacher, Edna Beasley, taught eight grades of students.

The original building on Center Hill Dam Road in Silver Point was designed by architect P.H. Black for the African American community to use as a church and a school, according to the nomination application as prepared by historic preservation specialist Randy Williams of the Upper Cumberland Development District. The development of the church and school met a need for a small number of African Americans living in the Silver Point area.

Henry Clay, Sam Womack and Alexander Campbell served on the board of directors, and G.P. Bowser, a leading African American in the Church of Christ, was the principal, according to the nomination application. In 1913, religion, algebra, English, history and Latin were taught. A second building on the property housed a printing press used to publish the Christian Echo, which continues to operate at the Southwestern Christian College in Terrell, Texas, and is one of the longest running religious publications in America.

"The building is a tangible reminder and legacy of the early 20th Century efforts to provide for the spiritual and educational development of the local African American community, and its influence is still felt to this day," Williams writes in the nomination.

Members of state review board Wednesday agreed, with review board member Jim D. Rhody saying, "This is close to where I grew up. It's very significant in the African American community. Its influence extends to DeKalb County as well as Putnam County."

The church, which was founded by G.P. Bowser, also served as the Putnam County Normal and Industrial Orphanage, and Bowser was instrumental in lifting a restriction that African American children could attend school only four months out of the year.

In recognition of the West End Church of Christ's importance to the African American community, Joyce Ferrell Fuller, a graduate of the school who previously attended church there, initiated the effort to get the church on the National Register of Historic Places, according to Williams, who wrote the nomination and conducted research to get the nomination ready for the state review board on Wednesday.

The review board consists of historians, architects, archaeologists and planners from across the state appointed by the governor to consider nominations to the national register.

Tennessee Tech University history professor Michael Birdwell was appointed to the board a year ago, and was present for Wednesday's approval of the Silver Point church as well as a variety of other nominations from across the state.

In addition to the Silver Point church, nine other properties were approved Wednesday to be included in the National Register of Historic Places including the Beech Grove home in Davidson County, the concrete highway from Cleveland to Charleston in Bradley County, the Dunbar Public School in Loudon County, the A.R. Brown House in Unicoi County, the Robertson Family Farm in Hardeman County, a group of multi-family housing in Memphis and specifically the Knickerbocker Apartments, the Pippin Roller Coaster known as Elvis's favorite roller coaster in Memphis and the expanded boundary of the Southern Railway Industrial Historic District in Memphis.

Birdwell said in addition to the pride of the property owner, other benefits for being on the National Register of Historic Places includes tax breaks for businesses and individuals.

The tax break was a factor in a request for the extension of the Southern Railway Industrial Historic District as the property owner is trying to renovate that property back to its original condition for the purpose of apartments.

Changes made to a building on the national register have to maintain the historic look of the building to continue to be included on the national register, according to Birdwell.

Twelve properties were recommended for removal by the state review board on Wednesday. Most of those had been torn down, and one was damaged by fire.

The Silver Point West End Church of Christ will move on from its approval by the state review board on Wednesday to Washington D.C., where the formal announcement of the Silver Point church is expected to be made by the first of November.

The church will hold its 11th annual homecoming reunion Oct. 13-14 at the church featuring speakers from Tennessee, Indiana, Detroit, Michigan and Florida.

Other Putnam sites on the National Register of Historic Places include the Algood Methodist Church, the Arcade in Cookeville, the Broad Street Church of Christ, the Buffalo Valley School, the Burgess Falls Hydroelectric Station, the Cookeville Railroad Depot, the Cowen Farmstead, the Harding Studio and Henderson Hall at Tennessee Tech University.

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## SILVER POINT CHURCH MAKES THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

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Michael Birdwell, a Tennessee Tech University history professor and member of the Tennessee Review Board for the National Register, and Randy Williams, historic preservation planner for the Upper Cumberland Development District, at the West End Church of Christ in Silver Point. Herald-Citizen Photo/Lindsay McReynolds

**SILVER POINT** -- It's official. The West End Church of Christ in Silver Point is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Randy Williams, historic preservation planner with the Upper Cumberland Development District, notified the Herald-Citizen last week that the Silver Point church has now been officially recognized by the Keeper of the National Register of Historic Places.

The Silver Point church was recommended for acceptance into the National Register by the Tennessee Review Board for the National Register of Historic Places back in September, when the state group agreed that the church was significant in ethnic heritage education and social history.

The development of the West End Church of Christ, also known as the Silver Point Christian Institute, in 1909 was instrumental in the lives of African Americans like Silver Point resident Evelyn Buck, who attended the one-room schoolhouse in the 1930s and '40s, when one teacher, Edna Beasley, taught eight grades of students.

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In recognition of the West End Church of Christ's importance to the African American community, Joyce Ferrell Fuller, a graduate of the school who previously attended church there, initiated the effort to get the

church on the National Register, with the assistance of her daughter, Dr. Althea Armstrong.

Other Putnam sites on the National Register of Historic Places include the Algood Methodist Church, the Arcade in Cookeville, the Broad Street Church of Christ, the Buffalo Valley School, the Burgess Falls Hydroelectric Station, the Cookeville Railroad Depot, the Cowen Farmstead, the Harding Studio and Henderson Hall at Tennessee Tech University.

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#### **HISTORIC SILVER POINT CHURCH OF CHRIST**

It was homecoming last Sunday at the West End Silver Point Church of Christ, which last December was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Members of the committee which planned the homecoming celebration are, above, from left, Ethel Sherill, Geraldine Tibbs, Thelma Beasley, Evelyn Buck, Joann Floyd, Virgil Carr, Betty Martin, Lillian Beasley and Mary Myers.

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## A PIECE OF HISTORY

### SILVER POINT CHURCH CELEBRATES 100TH YEAR WITH HOMECOMING IN OCTOBER

Liz Engel  
Herald-Citizen Staff

**SILVER POINT** -- Its pews may creak and its windows may be cracked, but if the walls at the West End Silver Point Church of Christ could talk, they'd certainly have some stories to tell.

As a young girl, Evelyn Buck remembers the church -- located off Highway 141, several miles west of the



Cookeville city limits -- more as a one-room school house, with a single teacher for the 40-plus students in eight grades. She started her education in the 1930s at the age of 4, thanks to older cousins with whom she tagged along. She can still point to old, weathered trees still standing nearby where she would eat hickory nuts with her classmates, right off the ground during recess. A spring that runs behind the property was their only source of running water -- two children were tasked every morning with making the trip there.

(Pictured: Randy Williams, historic preservation planner with the Upper Cumberland Development

District, and Evelyn Buck, a longtime Silver Point resident, stand outside the West End Silver Point Church of Christ. The former church and schoolhouse is celebrating its 100th anniversary in October. Herald-Citizen Photo/Ty Kernea).

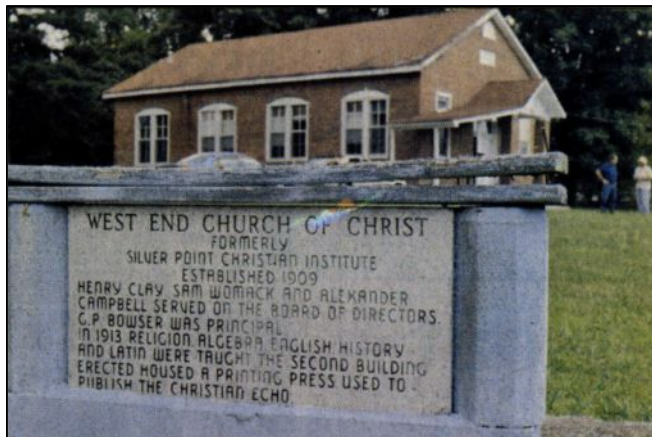
"We didn't care because we'd play along the way," she says. At one time, there was a college located here -- Southwestern Christian College, which has since moved to Texas. Any remnants of its campus are long gone, and the church is still the only building that remains.

It's no longer active but still serves as a meeting place for community events, funerals and the like. On Oct. 10-11, the 13th annual homecoming reunion will be held on the grounds -- a milestone event this year as the church will be celebrating its 100th anniversary. The homecoming has also become a tradition in its own right. People come from as far away as Texas, California and Michigan to revisit the church, dedicate

the cemetery and socialize with family and friends.

"This is always the main event," Buck said. "We'll have about 150 come, even though every year we lose a few. I usually have a house full of people and we just have a good time."

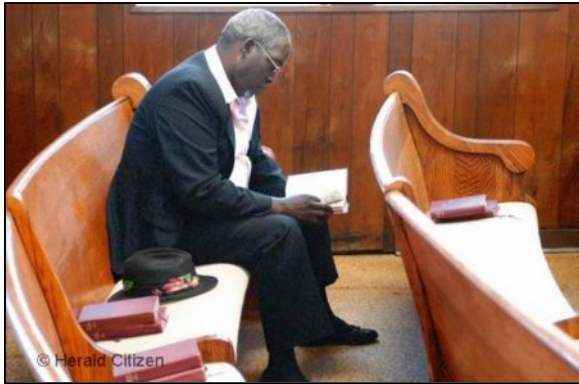
(Pictured: The West End Silver Point Church of Christ, established in 1909, will be celebrating its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. In the background are Randy Williams, a historic preservation planner with the Upper Cumberland Development



District, and Evelyn Buck, who attended school in the same building as a girl). West End Church of Christ formerly Silver Point Christian Institute, Established 1909. Henry Clay, Sam Womack and Alexander Campbell served on the Board of Directors. G. P. Bowser was Principal. In 1913 Religion, Algebra, English history and Latin were taught. The second building erected housed a printing press used to publish 'The Christian Echo'.

## STANDING TALL

The original West End Silver Point Church of Christ was built in 1909, and in 1915, the current brick church building was constructed, replacing the original frame structure. Inside, a central aisle leads to the snow-white pulpit, which is flanked by hard, wooden pews.



The birth of the church began with the Rev. G.P. Bowser, who had been invited from Nashville to deliver a sermon to the African-American congregation of Laurel Hill Church of Christ. Bowser was recruited by Sam Womack and Alexander Campbell, two of the most noted African-American ministers in Middle Tennessee, to establish a church at Silver Point -- Bowser agreed, provided he was also allowed to establish a school for the African-American children in the

area. The Laurel Hill congregation was relocated to the place where the West End Church of Christ now stands.

West End is today considered one of the oldest African-American churches in the region. "School and church were the focal points of the black community," said Randy Williams, a historical preservation planner for the Upper Cumberland Development District. Williams worked to get the building placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2007. Its historical and cultural significance to the African-American community in the Upper Cumberland "is without parallel," he wrote in the application form.

"The Upper Cumberland was not a labor-intensive area compared to areas like Murfreesboro and Nashville, so there wasn't a large slave population here," Williams said. "But the region was a slave-holding area, and an African-American population was established on the eastern Highland Rim. So the local population of African-Americans, most that are here today are descendants of the original slaves."

(Pictured: David Gordon reads the Bible during a recent homecoming celebration at the West End Silver Point Church of Christ. Herald-Citizen Photo/Ty Kernea.

But even with all its history, the church is showing its age. The floor was recently replaced, but the outside brick is worn. Williams is working on a small grant that would repair some of the broken windows.

"It's just cosmetic things and things like that," he said. "It'd be nice to restore it to its original condition, but I don't know if that would be possible or not."

## STILL A FOCAL POINT

In many regards, the church was instrumental in the lives of many African-Americans -- part of the reason, Buck said, members still gather each year to remember its past. For years, the church thrived, but slowly its impact on the community faded and the congregation eventually moved elsewhere. Family members moved away.

After graduating from the eighth grade, Buck moved to Cookeville to attend high school at Darwin. She then married and moved to Nashville to raise a family. But in 1979, she came back home, not far from where she grew up. In the winter time, you can see the church from her house.

"For me, this has always been home," Buck said. "There's a lot of sentiment for it. That's why we do this. To try to keep this old building going."

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## SILVER POINT CHURCH FULL OF MEMORIES FOR AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY



A view from the cemetery at the historic Silver Point West End Church of Christ, which has been a focal point of the African-American community since 1909. Amy Davis | Herald-Citizen



Admiring the new windows at the historic Silver Point West End Church of Christ as they go into place on Aug. 1 are, from left, installer Chris Keenan of the MCR Group in Nashville; Dawn Kupferer of Kwill Consultants; Evelyn Buck, a student in the 1930s when the church was also a school; Putnam County Executive Kim Blaylock; and Randy Williams of Kwill Consultants, who wrote the Tennessee Historical Commission preservation grant that made the new windows possible. Amy Davis | Herald-Citizen

**SILVER POINT** — On gusty days, a chill would creep in.

Seep right through the cracks of the rattling old windows. Cling to the curved oak pews and wellworn hymnals. Settle on the brown paneling walls and white pulpit.

But not anymore.

Not since early August, when new windows were installed in the little church building that sits off Center Hill Dam Road in rural Silver Point — a quaint, reddish-brick structure that is brimming in history and rich with echoes of the ebony-skinned children who once attended school there, as well as the older folk who worshipped there.

“It was just the focal point of the community,” former student Evelyn Buck, now in her 80s, said of those long ago days at Silver Point West End Church of Christ. “It’s where all the black people went. Most everybody was Church of Christ, so this was the gathering place.”

Even now — while no longer an active place of worship — the building calls to its people. Beacons them back every October for a homecoming reunion.

And still they come.

And celebrate.

Recollect the days they spent forming special bonds within their small, close-knit community of African-American neighbors, schoolmates and church family in the folk vernacular building that dates back to 1915.

“This building was built by the local community,” said Randy Williams of Qwill Consultants, who rallied in 2007 to get the church listed on the National Register of Historic Places and also wrote the Tennessee Historical Commission preservation grant that made its new windows possible.

And Buck’s family goes back to the church’s beginning.

“My dad had a part in it,” she said. “They brought the bricks up (from Nashville) as far as Buffalo Valley, and he took mules and a wagon and went and hauled them up here.”

Williams added, “The train couldn’t get up the grade (with the bricks), so they would unload them.”

But the building didn’t start out as a church.

**Its first mission was an educational one, having been established in 1909 as the Putnam County Normal and Industrial Orphanage at Silver Point through the efforts of Church of Christ evangelists George Bowser and Marshall Keeble.** Bowser, after having delivered a sermon earlier that year in Nashville to the African-American congregation of Laurel Hill Church of Christ, had been asked by fellow ministers Sam Womack and Alexander Campbell to start a church in Silver Point.

And Bowser agreed — so long as he could also establish a mission school, too.

“There was a whole school campus on this property,” Williams said.

Dormitories, too. A nationally distributed newsletter, *The Christian Echo*, was also published on site.

**In 1913, the school became known as Silver Point Christian Institute for grades 1-8, providing much-needed educational opportunities for the Upper Cumberland’s small African-American population.**

**By 1915, the current brick building had been constructed, which additionally began serving as the Silver Point West End Church of Christ.** Bowser resigned as the school’s principal three years later due a lack of steady financial support for the school; however, classes continued in the church until 1959, when students were bused to Putnam County’s public schools.

Buck, who was born in 1931, had begun her school days there at age 4, going along with older cousins. Her memories of the one-room schoolhouse — where one teacher taught all eight grades — are as warm as the wood stove that once heated it.

“It was good,” she said. “That’s all I ever knew!”

She delights in thinking back to her days of romping the grounds with schoolmates, chewing “rabbit tobacco” and collecting drinking water from the nearby spring.

“That was really fun!” she said of those daily water runs. “Oh, we’d play along and then run back up because the teacher would know if we played. But we’d get our play in and then, boy, you’d just run real hard to get back.”

Playing ball and throwing horseshoes were some other fun pastimes.

“We didn’t have to have P.E. — we made our own P.E.,” she said.



And back then, the church building had two doors in the back — one for boys and another for girls.

“On the outside, you can see where they’re boarded up,” Buck said. “And I was thinking the other day while walking around the building that it was just so funny that the girls had to go out one door and the boys had to go out the other door. There was only a divider between the doors, and I thought, ‘What sense did that make?’ But we did it. Our teacher told us to do it!”

While segregation was the norm in those days, Buck said the blacks in Silver Point didn’t experience the same racial problems prevalent elsewhere in the South.

“We didn’t have the problems and tension and all that stuff,” she said. “We would work together. This has just always been a good place to live.”

Williams added, “That’s one thing that’s always interested me about this from a cultural perspective. Miss Buck and I have talked about it a lot... the blacks and whites around Silver Point got along for the most part.”

He pointed out that the Upper Cumberland — although once a slave-holding area — had not been as labor-intensive as other parts of the state.

“So you didn’t have large numbers of African-Americans here like you would in some other areas like the Nashville basin,” he said. “The community has always been tight-knit in the Upper Cumberland.”

After graduating from the eighth grade in Silver Point, Buck went on to Darwin School in Cookeville, which served the area’s black high school students. She later moved to Nashville for 30 years but returned in 1979 — just as others with fond memories of Silver Point West End Church of Christ return.

Even if it’s just for a day.

“People really have interest in it and keep coming back,” Buck said, thinking of the church’s annual homecoming in October that typically draws in more than 100 since the building closed for regular church services in 1996.

“It’s just a big reunion, and people come from everywhere — people that used to live here or have relatives here. And I think it’ll be like that when the older ones are gone. We have a lot of young people who come.”

And this year, they’ll have new windows to admire — a project that took five years to come to fruition.

“We were turned down for the grant the first time,” Williams said. “I wrote it again and told the guys at the Historical Commission that, basically, they were going to have to give us some money because we weren’t going to go away.”

And so they did — a 60/40 match for the \$13,000 project.

“The building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, so we’re trying to do all the work in keeping with the historical period,” Williams said.

Now, their sights are set on the roof — and getting the funds to fix it as well.

Which suits Buck just fine.

“I’m just hoping to keep it going,” she said.

It’s a community thing.

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