Hall remodeling signals end of True Friends group

By Marcelle Bienvenu

For close to a hundred years it has stood proudly on the corner of Main and Honore Streets in St. Lafayette. Up until January of this year, it served as the meeting place for the Association of the True Friends, a black community organization which was founded on August 12, 1876.

Built in 1882

The building, erected in 1882, was built with monies raised by the brotherhood fraternity and cost them $2,390.90. It was a grand building, stately and equipped with a kitchen. The True Friends insignia was the focal point of the high pitched roof and the large paneled doors seemed to demand respect by those who passed it.

The brotherhood was a close knit group founded to “enable, without distinction, all those who shall have become members by means of monthly saving-share, to receive gratuitous assistance in case of sickness and distress…” Members had to be nominated for membership and were carefully screened, then had to be accepted by total assent. Meetings were held regularly and fines heavily laid on those who missed meetings and funerals. Business could only be conducted when a full quorum was present and many times, members waited in the hall while brothers were rounded up to meet that quorum.

It was a true fraternity in that its articles of incorporation firmly stated that “every member should observe towards each other the most perfect politeness…”

And while the organization served its community in times of sadness, it had its share of balls and anniversary celebrations. They dined simply, but well, often making gumbos and cakes. Back in 1886, chickens were only 35c and geese were 75c. Oysters went for a penny a piece and coffee was 25c a pound.

Between 1938 and 1941, the hall served as a theater for the black community and it could be rented for private events for a mere $9.

And so for over a hundred years the True Friends served its people well, but sadly, earlier this year the organization disbanded. Joseph Neveu, its president since 1944, closed the books, brought them to his home for safekeeping and locked the doors.

But the building has been sold to Georgeanna Jones who is remodeling it for use as a bingo and dance hall.

Progress marches on.
Changing landmark

One of St. Martinville's older landmarks, the True Friends hall at the corner of Main and Honore Streets, is undergoing a complete change, with the addition of front and side wings and replacement of the distinctive roof that featured the True Friends emblem centered on the attic vent. The old building was constructed by the True Friends Social and Civic Club back in 1882 at a cost of $2,400. The black fraternal organization disbanded earlier this year. (Staff Photo)