

PRESS RELEASE

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First Lady To Visit Historic North Dakota Church

A little North Dakota church is preparing for a very well-known visitor this week. First Lady Laura Bush will be in North Dakota on Thursday, October 2, 2008 at the Sims Scandinavian Lutheran Church and Parsonage. She will participate in a small group tour, hear about the community and building history, its restoration, and the ghost stories of the Gray Lady ghost who inhabits the building. After the tour, the small group will enjoy a church-basement potluck dinner (lunch) North Dakota-style. This event is open to the press and local guests by invitation only.

Mrs. Bush is the Honorary Chair of the Save America's Treasures Program which funded a portion of the Prairie Churches of North Dakota project. The historic Sims Church restoration was a demonstration project for Preservation North Dakota, the state's only private organization for historic preservation.

The Sims Church was built in 1884 as a combination church and parsonage, with the upper level dedicated to church activities while the lower level functioned as living quarters. A new church building was completed in 1898, and the original building was used as a parsonage until 1943. The Sims Parsonage received a Prairie Churches™ of North Dakota Grassroots Grant Award of \$5,000 from Preservation North Dakota (PND) in 2004. The Sims Parsonage became one of PND's demonstration projects and received funding and physical assistance for a complete exterior and interior restoration. The restoration was completed in 2006 and the building is currently a museum for the Sims Historical Society.

Joel and Donna Johnson of rural Almont, ND have been involved with the project from the very beginning. When Joel was looking for funding, he was referred to Preservation North Dakota, applied for and received grant funds and physical help from the organization. The Johnsons also assisted in getting matching funds from the church and lining up many local volunteers to help with the project. When asked why they became involved, Donna explained that she found it very meaningful work. Pioneers sacrificed a great deal in 1884 to build this church; it was clearly important to them. They reused materials from other buildings in the area and built a place for the community to use. And now, fifth-generation descendents of those pioneers attend services at the church because it has been restored. Donna is excited about Mrs. Bush's visit - "It is unbelievable that the First Lady would select this [the First Sims Church] as one of her projects to visit on this trip."

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(First Lady cont.)

Save America's Treasures is a national program designed to protect important American cultural treasures. The organization is a partnership between the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the National Park Service, the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, and the country's federal cultural agencies.

Preservation North Dakota (PND) is a privately funded non-profit organization that promotes historic preservation. In 1998, PND spear-headed the largest project in the organization's history, the Prairie Churches™ of North Dakota Project. PND received \$100,000 from Save America's Treasures for the Prairie Churches™ Project. Using funds from Save America's Treasures, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, J M Kaplan Foundation, PND instituted the Prairie Churches™ Grassroots Grant Award program to support local preservation groups throughout the state. PND also designates demonstration projects, such as the Historic Sims Church, which receive physical and technical assistance.

"The Prairie Churches™ Project in North Dakota has been a tremendous success," says Dale Bentley, Executive Director of Preservation North Dakota. "We receive more requests than we can answer, and have Prairie Church projects all across the state. We take enormous pride in this project and hope to be able to continue our work in the future. As a private, non-profit organization, we rely on financial support from individuals to advance our mission – Preserving Prairie Places. We are so pleased to welcome First Lady Laura Bush to North Dakota and are thankful for the recognition."

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