

PAPER TRAILS: Storm-hit old church left a mark

by [Sean Clancy](#) | April 19, 2020 at 10:07 a.m. | *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*

It's been a week since a line of powerful storms ripped across parts of the state with heavy rains and fierce, straight-line winds.

Some places are still recovering from the Easter Sunday tumult, which killed a Redfield man and left dozens of buildings damaged. Fewer than 10,000 homes and businesses remained without power Saturday, according to Entergy Arkansas, which started with more than 128,000 customers without service.

And did you see Staton Breidenthal's photos in Tuesday's edition of the damage that the storm inflicted on Centennial Baptist Church in Helena-West Helena?

Daaaaannng.

Helena-West Helena Mayor Kevin Smith said the historic church looked "like a bombed-out World War II ruin," in the story that accompanied those photos. The building, which has stood at the corner of York and Columbia streets since 1905, is an important part of Arkansas history.

It was the home church of the Rev. Elias Camp Morris, founder of the National Baptist Convention. Morris was pastor of an earlier church on the site in 1879 and served at Centennial Baptist until his death in 1922, according to the *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*.

Despite its significance, the Gothic Revival church was in a vulnerable state long before the storm. The last service there was held in 1998, according to the encyclopedia, and though it has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1987 and was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2003 - one of only 16 NHLs in Arkansas -- it has been slowly crumbling.

It was placed on Preserve Arkansas' list of Most Endangered Places in 2006 and again in 2018.

"I'm hopeful that something will be done to honor the legacy of Reverend Morris and interpret the history of that place," said Preserve Arkansas Executive Director Rachel Patton.

The nonprofit Centennial Church Foundation, which was trying to secure money to work on the building, had commissioned a study that was due last week for a plan to shore up the church. It now needs much more than shoring up.

"We're getting a structural engineer to inspect what is left," said foundation treasurer David Solomon. The group also is working to secure architectural features and artifacts from the site, including the church's 1908 organ, he said. There have been thoughts of restoring the church completely, or perhaps adapting it as a memorial or museum, but Solomon says the foundation members haven't met since the storm to discuss the future.

Whatever happens, the site and its history shouldn't be lost, he says.

"Not only was the church itself incredible, but the fact that out of it, from this little town in this little state, came Reverend Morris and the National Baptist Convention. It's pretty amazing stuff."

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SundayMonday on 04/19/2020