

Jean Streeter's Interview with the Rev. Robert W. Tabscott,  
Minister of Des Peres Presbyterian Church

*The prime mover in restoring the Old Des Peres Presbyterian Church was the Rev. Robert W. Tabscott, minister of Des Peres since June, 1970. Not only was he responsible for the successful restoration effort in 1974 to 1976, but he has continued to lead the congregation in developing plans for the old stone church's future. I felt he was the person who could best answer questions I wanted to raise concerning what took place in the early 1970's. It was a good choice, I think. The interview went as follows:*

Jean: When you came to Des Peres, the Old Stone Church was vacant and not used by the congregation. There was even talk of selling it. When did you first become aware of its potential value?

Robert: The first time I saw the old stone meeting house, I knew that it was a place of tremendous importance. Little did I know how tremendous. I was struck initially by its simple charm and beauty. I was surprised when people told me it was not used. Prior to my coming, serious efforts had been made to sell it as a house. The only thing that saved it was an ordinance in Frontenac that said housing had to meet certain standards and codes, such as running water and plumbing, etc. The church has none ... Also the church could not be separated from the cemetery ... another code. Efforts were underway when I came to bend that rule with the Frontenac City Council so it could be sold. The congregation was asking \$12,500 for the old church. When I learned this, I said I would buy it because I thought the building was worth a great deal historically

Jean: What was your original dream for the old church?

Robert: To give it life again, because it was threatened by progress, neglect and abuse. You could not go over there and not be struck by its power, its origin – a last piece of evidence of a generation that was forgotten. The first thing I did when I came was to try and locate the historical records. Legend had it that the church had been a point on the underground railroad and that Elijah Lovejoy had been the preacher at Des Peres. But there were no historical records at the church or the Presbytery in St. Louis that would verify Lovejoy's presence at the old stone meeting house.

Jean: Who told you about Lovejoy and the underground railroad?

Robert: Old timers!

Jean: Were they members of the church?

Robert: No – it was an old minister (in his eighties) in the Presbyterian retirement home in Farmington, Missouri, who told me that Lovejoy preached here and that there was activity of the underground railroad in association with the church. That excited me no end, but legend and historical accuracy are two different realities. I decided to pursue the search for Lovejoy's years as a Presbyterian minister in St. Louis, and particularly his work at the Old Des Peres Church.

Jean: Did you discover any proof about the underground railroad?

Robert: I can't prove it, or disprove it, but I decided not to focus on that. I think the legend of the underground followed the legacy of Lovejoy – it would be easy to conclude such a thing. Seemed to me the place to begin was with Lovejoy, since no local records and even Lovejoy's best biographers ... Paul Simon, *Lovejoy, A Martyr for Freedom*, John Gill, *Time Without Turning*, and Merton Dillon, *Lovejoy, Martyr for a Free Press* ... not one investigated in depth Lovejoy's work as a clergyman.

My first breakthrough came when searching records of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church for the years, 1834-1836. I discovered under Ministerial Relations that Elijah Parish Lovejoy had been certified as the minister of Des Peres in March, 1834. Not long after this I did a radio program in St. Louis on the "Life and Times of Lovejoy," and three days later received a letter and a phone call – the letter from Mr. Ward Parker telling me that he collected correspondence and other historical data of St. Louis, and had in his possession a letter signed by Elijah Parish Lovejoy. The phone call came from Mr. Burton Bernard, a lawyer in Alton, Illinois. He, too, described himself as a local historian. Said he would send copies of three letters signed by Elijah Parish Lovejoy. One of the letters Mr. Bernard gave me describes the Rev. Lovejoy's work at the old stone meeting house. It was addressed to the American Home Missionary Society whose records I later learned were at Dillard University at New Orleans. I received further documentation from Dillard University of Lovejoy's life and times in St. Louis and at the old stone meeting house. Having proved that the famous abolitionist/preacher had spent two years preaching to people in St. Louis County, I was prepared to promote that newsworthy information to set about to restore and preserve the site, not only for the local community, but as an historical place deserving of protection and support.

Jean: Can you explain the congregation's lack of appreciation for the old church building before you came?

Robert: Being a history major in college and seminary, I was not surprised that little care had been given to preserving historical material – or that the historical site held any importance in the congregation's view of themselves and their work for the future. People are not that interested in history.

Jean: Was it difficult to persuade the congregation to restore and preserve the old stone meeting house?

Robert: It was not as difficult as you might think. The bicentennial provided a marvelous opportunity to take advantage of the sentimentality prevalent in the country. When they discovered they had such a tie with the origin of the past, they were delighted. And I suggested we had fifteen months to make arrangements for celebrating that event. With extra effort and sacrifice, we could restore the old church, which was in pretty bad shape, and re-dedicate it July 4, 1976. We had an excellent chairwoman of the Restoration Committee who was enthused about it – we didn't have to motivate her – who relieved me of a lot of the responsibility. It's not hard to get on to the National Register of

Historic places if you've done good research. The material was there, but tucked away, in different parts of the country.

Jean: Where did you learn about the National Register?

Robert: My first church was built in 1746 in Virginia – I have been aware of historical preservation for a long time.

Jean: Were the people doing the restoration work on the old church skilled in what they were doing? By that I mean, were they aware of the difference between actual restoration and just “fixing up” an old building? Who did they consult?

Robert: Fortunately, when the idea was presented, a significant number of people were willing to commit time and effort. We worked with an historic architect, the Missouri Historical Society, and Landmarks (both city and county groups) to orient ourselves as to how to proceed. We contacted the state and met with representatives in pursuit of writing applications to have the church declared a national historic site. We conferred with other groups in the city and county who had followed similar efforts. In a little less than three months, we had sufficient historical documentation, architectural surveys and other pertinent information, which verified that we had a legitimate request. The committee then moved to find money to proceed with restoration.

Jean: Do you recall any significant problems you had during the restoration?

Robert: The chief problem was impatience – trying to get them to follow historical accuracy. Meetings with the architect and organizations reinforced the importance of restoring it to what it actually was.

Jean: Did you have any opposition from members of the congregation?

Robert: Of course – but the real boom was the coming of the bicentennial. That was a special time – a field day for historians, if you did it right, and we did it right. We had fund raisers, television coverage – we kept working on the emotions, the history, and the timing, because I wanted to consummate it all on July 4, 1976, and I did. I had sermons and articles in newsletters and bulletins; there were articles in the newspapers and coverage on television about the significance of this old stone meeting house. It was not unlikely for a congregant to hear about Lovejoy and the old stone meeting house in the sermon, and then run into it again on prime time television.

Jean: Are you pleased with the results?

Robert: One of the highlights of my career! I think we have provided a service to the community and people are privately proud of the old meeting house on Geyer Road. Members of the congregation have a better sense of their past and deeper appreciation of their church's importance as a vital institution in the history of the area. After all, it is one of the oldest protestant meeting houses west of the Mississippi River.

Jean: What are your plans for the future?

Robert: Encase it in glass! No ... but sometimes I feel that way. We plan to utilize the site as a recognizable historic landmark with a complementary array of historical markers and artifacts that illuminate the importance of those early years on the frontier, and especially to promote the importance of Lovejoy as a preacher, newspaper man, who understood, when most did not, the uniqueness of the United States Constitution. My dream is to bring together the two sides

of Lovejoy's life on this spot, by erecting a frame which would house a replica of Lovejoy's printing press, thus symbolizing on this spot his strong passion for a free press and an enlightened clergy. And I would like to promote this as a St. Louis attraction so our children could see a little into the origins of two institutions that helped build this country – the traveling preacher and the fearless newspaper man. In the story of Lovejoy, we have both.

Jean: How will you sustain an interest in continuing the work that needs to be done?

Robert: My greatest fear ... historical curiosity and interest demands a champion – a promoter – a person who won't let people forget. That is the weakness in my work. I don't have a sub-structure of people committed as I am. I set up the Lovejoy Society which has been in existence for five years, which gives a Lovejoy award each year and brings in a speaker on freedom and justice, but it doesn't have enough independence to go on after I'm gone.

Jean: What about your church carrying on?

Robert: If the next minister has not historical commitment, as my predecessor did not, then the cycle operates the other way – it falls into rot and ruin. Preservationists and historians have to be diligent. You can never stop

*At his point, I concluded the interview. I was pleased with the content, and chose to write up the interview in this form so as to capture the personality of the speaker. I was afraid I would lose some of his enthusiasm and energy by summarizing his remarks, rather than using his own articulate delivery.*

*Several things came to mind when I had finished the interview. Preservation happens because one or two people are inspired. The dynamic personal involvement of the minister, and the similar enthusiasm of the chairwoman of the Restoration Committee, made the restoration effort possible. Many helped, but it was their driving force that made things happen . . . .*

*As for the future of the old stone meeting house – I think the congregation will continue to preserve it. It has become very much a part of their life as a place of worship and for celebrations of special occasions . . . .*

*Jean Streeter  
November 30, 1981*