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My Brother's Keeper

## **Danville business owner helping unhoused working people**

**John Crane**

Nov 25, 2023

**W**hen it was time for Nyx Mason to leave House of Hope homeless shelter, he had nowhere to go.

“I had no idea what I was going to do,” said the 25-year-old during an interview recently.

Mason’s 30-day time limit at the shelter was up, and he thought he would have to live in a tent.

“I probably would have froze to death,” Mason said.

But his luck changed, thanks to Steve Barrow, owner at Hammer Hill Computers on Wilson Street.



Nyx Mason, 25, has found a temporary home offered by business owner Steve Barrow to help him become self-sufficient and move on to his own long-term housing. Mason faced the possibility of living in a tent after completing a 30-day stay at House of Hope homeless shelter. Mason is pictured working at Barrow's business, Hammer Hill Computers.

John R. Crane, Register & Bee

Mason works at the business performing computer diagnosis and repair and now has a place to stay and a chance to transition to long-term housing.

Mason has been working for Barrow for about a month and living in a residence provided by Barrow for about two weeks.

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Barrow opened his computer repair and sales business nearly three years ago. He has also been teaching basic computer skills to those recently released from prison.

Now Barrow has expanded his offerings even further to offer help for working people struggling with homelessness.

He started the program, My Brother's Keeper, earlier this month. Barrow is working with the House of Hope homeless shelter to help the shelter's clients move on to permanent housing.

Barrow's program is for working men, most of whom have maxed out their allowed time at House of Hope. The shelter has a 30-day limit for its clients.

"What we do is give them an extended period of time to allow for them to get on their feet," Barrow said during an interview. "We are working with them to transition from homelessness."

Under his program, Barrow provides a temporary home for his clients, where they learn basic skills needed when residing in long-term housing.

“There are challenges,” Barrow said. “We are bringing people in that haven’t had their own home for a while.”

Participants are allowed to stay six months at the home. When that time is up, they are evaluated to determine what comes next for them. That could include an extension or a move to their own residence.

“The goal is for them to become self-sufficient in six months,” Barrow said.

Skills they may need to relearn include simple, everyday tasks such as cooking for themselves and cleaning up, grocery shopping, budgeting or even bathing and taking care of personal hygiene, Barrow said.

“The plan is for there to be a light at the end of the tunnel for everyone,” he said. “The whole thing is to make sure they don’t have to go back out on the streets.”

There are currently six residents in his program, which has a house at Berryman Avenue for participants.

Those residents are required to not only have a job, but perform work around the home as well. That includes pitching in on structural repairs and contributing financially every month, he said.

Another resident, 61-year-old Fred McGee, has endured struggles with homelessness that have included three stays at House of Hope.

He had been living with his brother in Milton, North Carolina, but moved out due to his nephew’s anger issues.



Steve Barrow, owner of Hammer Hill Computers, has started a housing program to help those struggling with homelessness transition to their own permanent residence.

John R. Crane, Register & Bee

“I left to get away from that,” said McGee, who is disabled with back problems and arthritis.

He collects disability and is unable to work full-time, but he pitches in performing chores at the home.

“It has helped me tremendously,” McGee said of Barrow’s program.

Barrow is paying for the program out of his own pocket but is seeking grants from local organizations to help cover its costs. He is also in the process of obtaining nonprofits status for My Brother’s Keeper.

He came up with the idea for the program when one of his employees at his business was staying at House of Hope.

“When the time came for him to leave [House of Hope], he had nowhere to go,” Barrow said. “So I’m thinking, ‘This guy’s working. Why is it he’s going back on the street?’”

Barrow’s employee also told him of others in the same situation.

“It makes no sense,” Barrow said. “You ask a person to get a job and be a productive person in society, and you just throw them out on the street.”

Fifty-three-year-old Thomas Cosby, who has worked at Burger King for about three or four years, was able to come in from the streets because of Barrow’s program. He had been homeless after staying at House of Hope for 30 days.

“I was sleeping at the library,” Cosby said.

House of Hope Executive Director Jude Swanson said My Brother’s Keeper is a valuable resource in the area.

“It’s definitely a positive thing for our community and for the people that need it,” Swanson said.

Some clients who stay at House of Hope may need more time to move through the transition to obtaining permanent housing, he said.

With surging rent and home prices amid a tight housing supply, homelessness has become more of an issue in Danville.

“It [Barrow’s program] speaks to how much these kinds of services are needed,” Swanson said. “We’ve been seeing more and more people at the shelter. It’s good to have some help.”

Mason, who moved from Lexington to Danville to escape a domestic violence situation, cannot praise Barrow enough for what he is doing. He credits Barrow for saving his life.

“I’m really happy that he’s helping people out,” he said. “He’s a good man.”

Learning financial literacy and how to be self-reliant, as well as taking computer classes, have benefitted Mason greatly.

“It’s helping me get my head together,” he said.

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## Couple refurbishing 19th-century Danville home, furnishing it with Thomas Day pieces

John Crane  
Nov 25, 2023



Luke Ramsey and Michelle Bowers are restoring this home at 842 Grove St., where the couple owns four historic homes between the John Crane

John Crane

**M**ichelle Bowers’s love of old structures dates back to her childhood.

Whether she was living in Virginia, Florida, Louisiana or West Virginia, where she was born, Bowers never failed to explore the area looking out for aged homes.

“We would pile in the back of the pickup truck and find old houses, cemeteries,” Bowers. 54. told the Danville Register & Bee during an interview at her home at 842 Grove St.

Now, after raising children and enduring the loss of her sister about nine years ago, Bowers is living her dream of buying up and refurbishing old homes in a city well-supplied with historic residences.

The property, lined with pumpkins along its walkway leading up to the front porch and decorated with scarecrows and chrysanthemums, is one of seven Bowers and Ramsey, 42, own between them in Danville.

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The couple lives two blocks away on Jefferson Avenue, but they stay in the Victorian, Italianate-style home on Grove Street about two nights a week.

There, they take care of their two cats, Grover and Lucky, at the two-story, 1875-built home Bowers and Ramsey are remodeling and have furnished with about 30 pieces of Thomas Day furniture.

Grover, a gray female tabby, and Lucky, a male Russian blue, came with the couple's properties on Grove Street. Lucky had lived for two years under the home next door at 834 Grove St., where Ramsey's business, Ramsey Restoration, is based.

Four of the couple's seven homes are on Grove Street, where they bought the four at once from Joe Garrett.

Bowers, who sells ads for old homes on her website, **[www.theoldhouselife.com](http://www.theoldhouselife.com)**, points to the importance of preserving them.

"It's part of America's built history, Danville's history," Bowers said. "The amount of time and effort that went into building them ... each one is unique."

Their Grove Street home is rich in history of its own.

Constructed nearly 150 years ago, the home was first owned by Ashley Davis, a tobacconist. The Davis family included Ashley, his wife and a son and a daughter, Mary Pocahontas Davis. Her grandfather was Confederate Gen. Benjamin William Cabell, a descendant of Pocahontas.

Cabell, who died in 1862 during the Civil War, is buried in Grove Street Cemetery.

After Mary's mother died, Mary took ownership of the home and ran it as a boarding house.

It's stories like this one that draw Bowers and Ramsey to Danville's rich stock of old homes.

"We love the history of the houses, the architectural details," Ramsey said.

Italianate-style architecture includes features such as large roof overhangs with corbels, or ornate brackets found beneath the roof. Ramsey likes the arches carved into the front door and the window pediments.

"There's so much value in these houses," Ramsey said. "To re-create one today would cost a fortune."

Besides architectural highlights built into the home, there is also at least one other mark from the past left by Mary Davis.

Her name is etched into one of the home's original windows. Supposedly, she had carved her name there with her engagement ring to make sure it was a real diamond.

The home has its original floors and windows, as well as original vintage light fixtures. It also has a spacious, airy kitchen where Bowers would like to add an island and attach a TV room.

In addition to the kitchen, the house needs work on its flooring and bathrooms, they said. Their goal is for the home to include two bathrooms and two bedrooms, Ramsey said.

So far, they have done plaster repair and painting at the home and to restore the original windows, replacing broken glass and glazing.

Their plans are to eventually live in the house.

"Out of all of our houses, this is the only one with HVAC," Ramsey said.

The couple has filled the home with 19th-century furniture, including an old dining table lined with chairs made by Thomas Day. Other Day pieces there include settees, rocking chairs and tables.

"He liked to use Honduran mahogany," Ramsey said.

Day, a free Black man, was a Milton, North Carolina, cabinet-maker and woodworker who was born in 1801 and died in 1861. The Thomas Day House and Union Tavern, where he lived and worked, is now a museum located in Milton.

Six of the 12 Thomas Day kitchen chairs were bought from Lou's Antique Mall and, fortuitously, Ramsey found the other six on Facebook Marketplace for just \$130.

Other pieces Ramsey and Bowers have added to the home include a circa- 1820 early Federal sofa, game tables, several bureaus and a bed made by Day.

The couple buys their furnishings from auctions, antique dealers and Facebook Marketplace.

They plan on offering Thomas Day tours at the home. Money raised from the tours will provide money for a college scholarship established, the Wesley Gene Honeycutt Historic Preservation Scholarship. It was established by Bowers, Honeycutt's mother, Wende and his sister, Tessa.

"My plan is to open this house up every three months for Thomas Day tours to help fund the scholarship and to expand it," Bowers said.

Honeycutt, who died in a car wreck in the summer of 2022, had a passion for historic preservation and had worked for Bowers and Ramsey. He was attending school to study the subject at the time of his death.

The scholarship is open to students planning to attend college. Applicants must write essays on why historic preservation is important and how it has affected them.

The scholarship provided \$1,000 each to three students in May, Bowers said.

Of the four homes owned between the couple on Grove Street, Bowers owns 842 and 846, Ramsey owns 834 and they jointly own 805, which is across the street from 842.

Bowers's Facebook and Instagram pages, Old House Life, have more a million followers. There, she posts photos and prices of old homes from across the country.

"It's changed my life," she said.

She and Ramsey bought the four homes on Grove Street in January. Bowers knew she wanted the one at 842 Grove St. as soon as she saw it from the outside.

"Even without going into the house, I thought, 'I want that house,'" Bowers said.

They didn't have time to hesitate. Investors from Greensboro and Raleigh in North Carolina had their eyes on the properties.

Ramsey has had his restoration business for about 20 years, taking it over from his father after he died. Before that, he helped his Dad out in the venture.

"I grew up doing restoration," said Ramsey, who grew up in Nelson County and moved to Danville three years ago.

Literally from the time he was born, Ramsey was immersed in old ways, old things.

"I was born at home," he said. "My father took me to the corner store and weighed me on the post office scale."

Ramsey discovered Danville's architectural treasures after contacting Sonja Ingram, who was with Preservation Virginia at the time, asking if the group had homes for sale.

"She encouraged me to come here," he said.

Though he was hesitant at first, once Ramsey saw the city's supply of historic houses and their owners fixing them up, he knew he had found his new home.

"You could see scaffolding up, people working on houses," Ramsey recalled. "I said, 'This is my kind of place.'"

So many people in Danville, especially the Old West End, are interested in old houses, he pointed out.

"It's really just a community of like-minded people who are restoring old houses," he said.

Danville was not only where he found a new home, it was where he found Bowers, as well. First spotting her at Crema & Vine coffee and wine bar, he recognized her and made the first move.

"I told her, 'I know who you are,'" Ramsey said.

The rest is, well, history.



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EDITOR'S PICK

DANVILLE

## Historic Danville house of worship – christened 'Church of the Perpetual Boogie' – morphing into Airbnb

John Crane

Jul 11, 2023



Jeremy DiMaio stands in the sanctuary of the historic former First Presbyterian Church building in Danville Friday morning. He is converting the structure into an Airbnb called "Church of the Perpetual Boogie."

John R. Crane, Register & Bee



**W**hen Jeremy DiMaio took a look at the late 19th-century Gothic Revival church along Jefferson Avenue about three years ago, he asked his then 12-year-old daughter if he should buy it.

“She said, ‘no, but I know you will,’” DiMaio recalled during an interview inside the former First Presbyterian Church building. “So I did.”

Since closing on the purchase of the nearly 150-year-old structure at 200 Jefferson Ave. in April 2021, he has been working diligently to restore it and turn it into an Airbnb christened “Church of the Perpetual Boogie.”



A life-size figure of Barack Obama greets visitors in the living room at the former First Presbyterian Church, which Jeremy DiMaio is converting into an Airbnb called "Church of the Perpetual Boogie."

John R. Crane, Register & Bee

Though months away from completion, the building inside delivers a funky, humorous theme with irreverent touches and rich history.

In the spacious fellowship hall area converted into a living room, a life-size figure of Barack Obama sits cross-legged on a red leather sofa, sporting a smile and an “I voted” sticker.

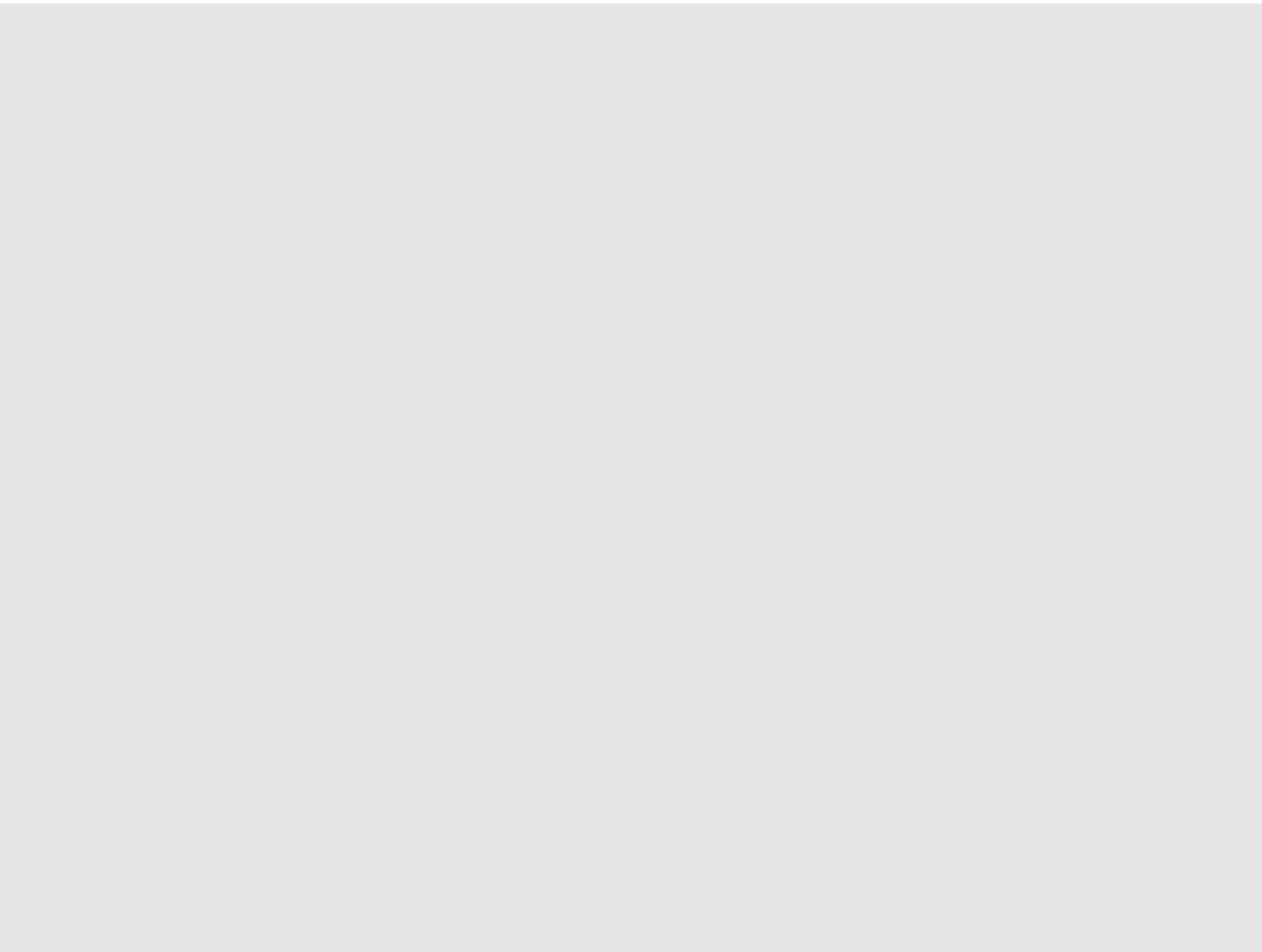
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A 36-pound, 30-foot wide reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper" on a thin, flimsy particle board adorns the back wall.

Other features include a bathroom with a blown-up 1929 First Mortgage Real Estate Gold Bond on the wall, a wood sculpture of a friar DiMaio bought at a flea market near Dulles International Airport and an enlarged First Presbyterian Church black-and-white choir photo from the mid-20th century. The latter was provided by the Danville Historical Society, he said.



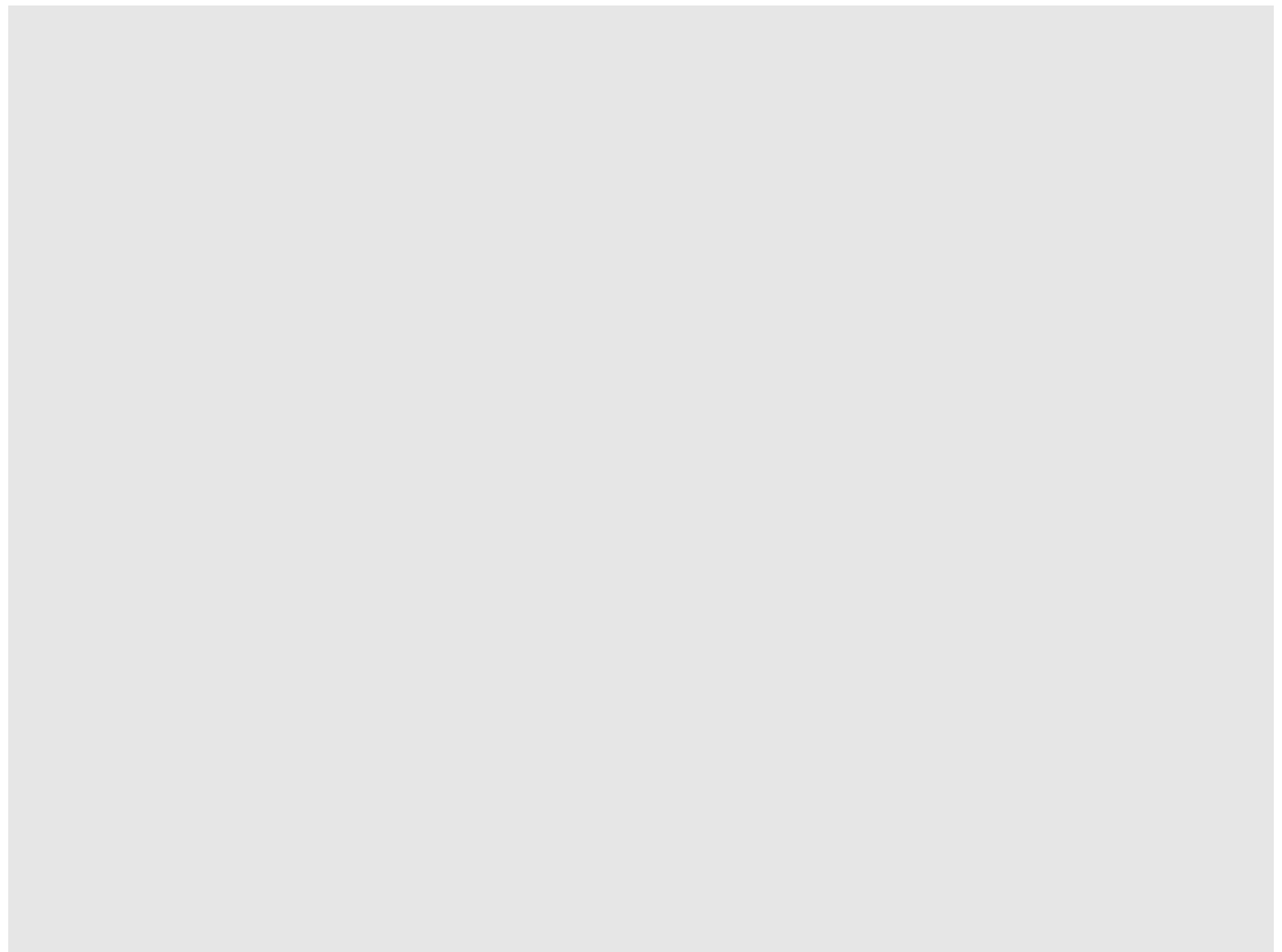
The former First Presbyterian Church building at 200 Jefferson Ave. is being converted into an Airbnb by Jeremy DiMaio.  
John R. Crane, Register & Bee

He has spent about \$130,000 restoring the building so far, and expects the project to cost about \$300,000 by the time he finishes. That also includes plans for turning the sanctuary — which boasts an 1899 pipe organ — into a music venue.

“It will be worth it,” DiMaio, 47, said of the costly endeavor.

The name “Church of the Perpetual Boogie” continues the 1970s theme from DiMaio’s other Airbnb he owns in Afton, “Boogie Nights Manor.” The name is a nod to the 1997 Paul Thomas Anderson film “Boogie Nights,” which is set mostly during the ’70s. It’s also the title of a 1977 hit song by the funk-disco group Heatwave.

“I kind of wanted to keep the theme,” he said.



Jeremy DiMaio is converting the historic former First Presbyterian Church building into an Airbnb called "Church of the Perpetual Boogie."

John R. Crane, Register & Bee

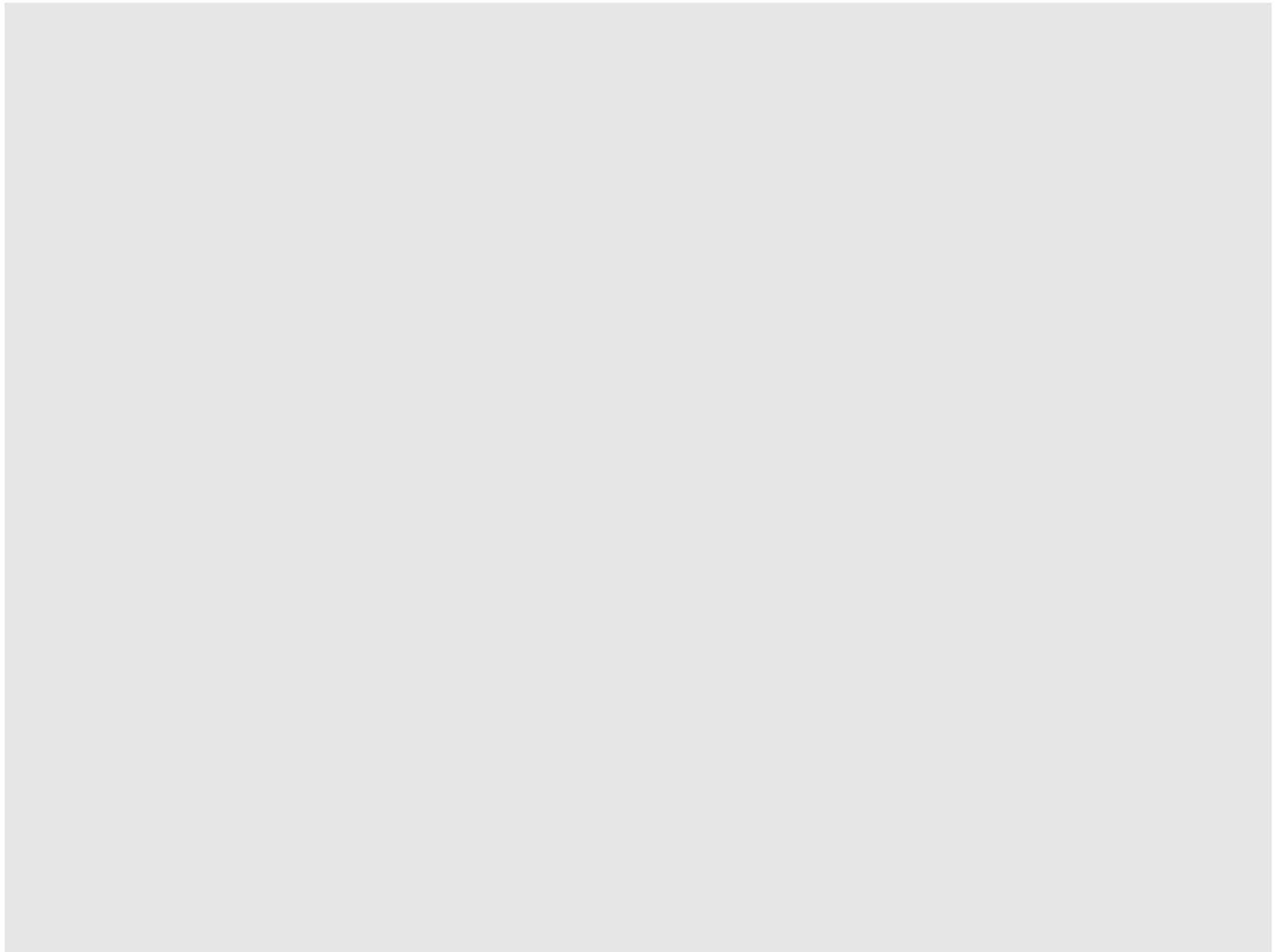
DiMaio's ongoing project has a Facebook group with about 2,000 members. Word of the "Church of the Perpetual Boogie" has spread.

"I felt really validated when it showed up on Google Maps," he said. "It showed up as 'Church of the Perpetual Boogie.'"

Built around 1879, the grayish white structure contains nearly 9,000 square feet and includes a bell tower stamped in 1840. The bell tower was cast by John Wilbank, who also cast the replacement for the damaged Liberty Bell, DiMaio said.

The First Presbyterian Church was the first church in Danville when it started out as a wooden structure in the 1820s, DiMaio said. It was later expanded.

The congregation outgrew the building and moved to the currently operating First Presbyterian Church location on Main Street around 1910.



An original hand-painted rose glass window can be seen over the balcony in the sanctuary at the former First Presbyterian Church, which Jeremy DiMaio is turning into an Airbnb named "Church of the Perpetual Boogie."

John R. Crane, Register & Bee

The Jefferson Avenue building, which DiMaio believes is limestone over red-brick masonry, had been vacant for 11 years when he bought it.

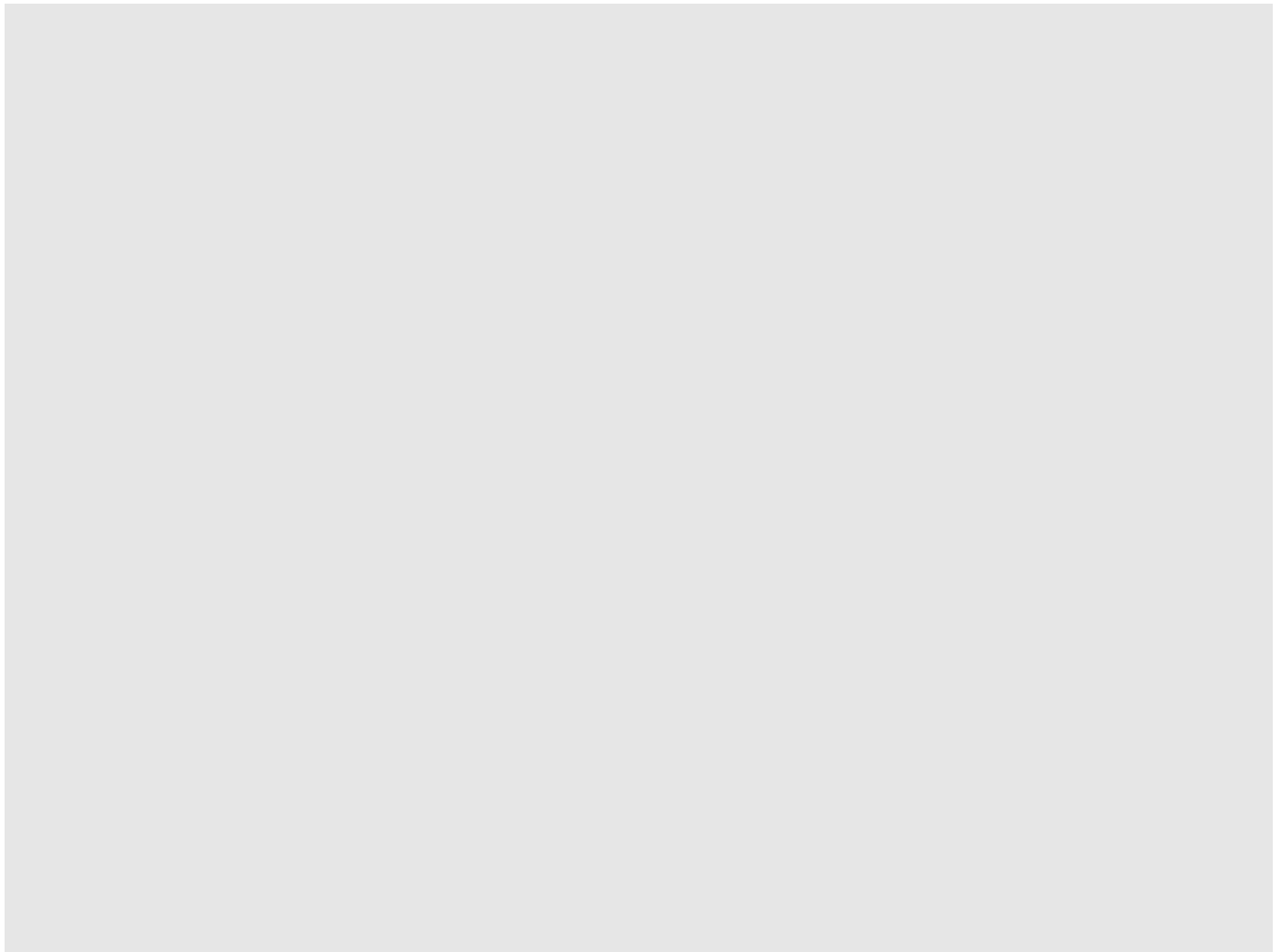
“I try to buy interesting properties and convert them,” he said. “I tend to find properties that have sat on the market that no one else seems to want and find an adaptive re-use.”

His Airbnb will be one unit, with three bedrooms including a total of four beds. Eventually, it will have four bedrooms, DiMaio said.

“I’ve always liked churches,” he said. “I came in here, the first thing that struck me is how sad is a building this old and this historic that’s just rotting.”

At 150 years old, the building was not going to survive much longer, DiMaio thought to himself.

He has converted one room into a dining area. That part of the church required a lot of work. The floor had three layers of paint and DiMaio spent five months scraping red paint off the wall with a razor blade.



Church of the Perpetual Boogie, an upcoming Airbnb in a historic church building in Danville, contains an 1899 pipe organ.

John R. Crane, Register & Bee

The building also had no furniture.

“Over the last two years, I’ve acquired every single piece of furniture,” DiMaio said.

He bought furnishings and decor from all over, Facebook Marketplace, auctions and his own travels.

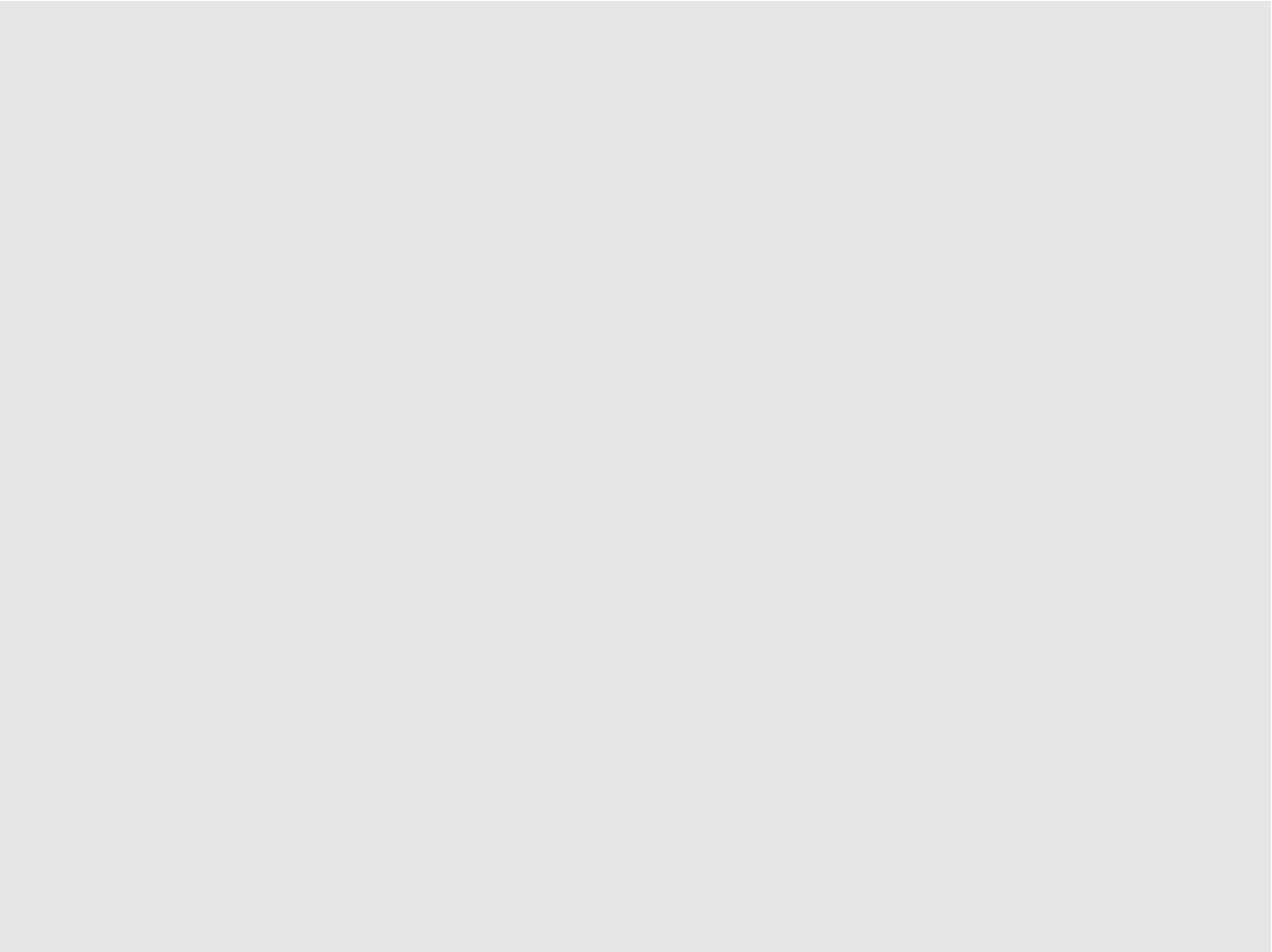
One item is an old machine, used to make communion wafers and patented in 1908, from a monastery in Northern Virginia. Another one of his finds includes a wine sacristy — for storing wine — made in the 1800s.

The dining room also features a Jacobean buffet table from the late 19th century. A Moroccan clay menorah, which DiMaio bought in Morocco, sits on the table and is more than 100 years old, he said.

He’s turning the fellowship hall into a living room where the sacred altar is a bar. The room is where DiMaio is rebuilding the floor.

“This area took a lot of water damage,” he said.

Half of the old nursery will become the master bedroom and the former pastor’s study will be converted to a bedroom, as well.



Jeremy DiMaio is converting the historic former First Presbyterian Church into an Airbnb called "Church of the Perpetual Boogie." Pictured is part of the dining room.

John R. Crane, Register & Bee

As for the spacious sanctuary, that is an entire project onto itself.

“My goal is to work on this space early next year,” DiMaio said.

The sanctuary includes its original hand-painted rose-glass window overlooking the balcony, as well as the original pews.

He also has plans to record an episode of the PBS series, “The Life of A Musician” in the sanctuary in front of the organ and hold a house concert for the show in the fellowship hall.

“It will be a cool music venue,” DiMaio said.

Describing himself as a gypsy, DiMaio has traveled to more than 30 countries and divides his time among Danville, Afton and Northern Virginia.

He is in Danville every other week.

“My friends and social scene is here,” DiMaio said. “It’s a cool enclave of creative, artistic people here.”



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