

Contact: Dominik Mjartan, 501-372-4201, dmjartan@southernfp.org

For Immediate Release

Centennial Baptist Church Receives \$300,000 for Restoration

HELENA-WEST HELENA, AR (December 15, 2006): The E. C. Morris Foundation announced that the National Parks Service awarded them \$300,000 to help restore Centennial Baptist Church in downtown Helena-West Helena. The award is one of 42 national awards through the Save America's Treasures program, a public-private partnership established in 1996 to preserve and protect buildings and collections that have significance to American history.

Centennial Baptist Church is nationally significant for its association with Dr. Elias Camp Morris, who was the pastor of the church from 1879 until his death in 1922. He was also the founding director of the National Baptist Convention, the largest African-American organization at the end of the 19th century and the largest today.

The Centennial building was designed and built by African-American architect Henry James Price in 1905. It is one of a small number of surviving churches built by African-American architects from this period.

The building has been unoccupied since the early 1990s, when the roof threatened to collapse. A series of stopgap stabilization and rehabilitation projects have kept the building standing since then.

The building's rehabilitation is being spearheaded by the E.C. Morris Foundation, which plans to create a museum of African-American history and culture once the building is restored.

"The restoration and preservation of Centennial Baptist Church will allow others to understand, epitomize, and embrace the productive efforts established by Dr. E.C. Morris," said Henrietta Williams, Chair of the Foundation's Board of Directors. "It will provide an avenue for us to utilize history and continue to converge upon the premises that Dr. Morris established during the early 1900s. We know that this can be accomplished when the community understands and embraces its past while actively preparing for the future."

Phyllis Hammonds, Executive Director of the Foundation, further described this goal.

"Centennial stands as a monument to celebrate the legacies and works of African Americans of the late 19th and early 20th centuries who made major contributions to the Arkansas Delta, the state, the nation and the world," Ms. Hammonds said. "Its restoration is just the first stage of a process that will transform it into an African American Museum

and Cultural Learning Center, where visitors will hear and learn the stories of those African Americans and other people of color who were contributors to Arkansas and American history. Additionally, the E. C. Morris Foundation sees this historic structure as a ‘Mecca for Change,’ a place dedicated to the restoration and revitalization of the community which surrounds Centennial Church.”

The E.C. Morris Foundation worked with Southern Financial Partners to develop the application for funding through Save America’s Treasures. Southern Financial Partners is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit lender and community development organization, founded in 1986, that facilitates a comprehensive community development initiative in Phillips County called the Delta Bridge Project.

The goals of the Delta Bridge Project are outlined in the Phillips County Strategic Community Plan, which was developed by more than 300 Phillips County residents during an 18-month strategic planning process. The restoration of Centennial Baptist Church is a specific action item identified in the strategic plan.

Dr. Steven Murray, Chair of the Delta Bridge Project’s Steering Committee, praised the project.

"It is gratifying to know that others engaged in historic preservation and community development recognize that one of Helena-West Helena's treasures is of national significance," Murray said. "I look forward to the day when a completely restored Centennial Baptist Church will be a cornerstone in a revitalized downtown Helena."

“We’re pleased that the Delta Bridge Project could assist the E.C. Morris Foundation in the proposal application. This marks another important step forward in the revitalization of Phillips County,” said Ben Steinberg, President of Southern Financial Partners.

Southern Good Faith Fund, Southern Financial Partners, and Southern Property Corporation are affiliates of Southern Bancorp, a \$500 million rural development bank holding company working to transform rural economies by stimulating investments in people, jobs, businesses, and property with banking operations in Arkansas and Mississippi.