

Sandwiching in History
Christ Episcopal Church
509 Scott Street, Little Rock
March 7, 2014
By: Rachel Silva



Intro

Good afternoon, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Thank you for coming, and welcome to the “Sandwiching in History” tour of Christ Episcopal Church! I’d like to thank the Rev. Scott Walters (who has been rector since 2009) and Christ Church parishioner Jay Jennings for their help with the tour today.

For any architects in the audience, this tour is worth 1 hour of HSW (Health, Safety, Welfare) continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. See me after the tour if you are interested.

Christ Church has a long history at this location. In fact, on March 10, 2014, the Christ Church parish will celebrate its 175th anniversary. However, Christ Church lost its first two buildings to fire, and the third and current church was built in 1940-1941.

History of Christ Church

The Episcopal Church, which had previously been known as the Church of England, was established in America after the Revolutionary War. In 1835 the General Convention of the Episcopal Church created large missionary districts in order to evangelize the American West. In 1838, just two years after Arkansas became a state, the Rev. Leonidas Polk was appointed to serve as missionary bishop of the Southwest, which included Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, the Republic of Texas, and Indian Territory. Embarking from his home in Tennessee, Bishop Polk set out to tour the vast territory under his charge and arrived at Little Rock on March 7, 1839. Christ Church traces its roots back to March 10, 1839, when Bishop Polk presided over the first Episcopal service in Little Rock and organized a parish. Because there was no Episcopal Church building in the city at that time, the service was held at the Presbyterian Church, then located near the corner of Second and Main streets. The parish was called Christ Church in honor of Christ Church of Alexandria, Virginia, of which several charter members of the Little Rock congregation had been members.

Bishop Polk chose the present location of the church and provided \$900 for the purchase of lots 2, 3, and 4 in Block 29. In 1840 the Rev. William Henry Christopher Yeager became the first rector of Christ Church. Before the construction of the first church building, Christ Church held services in various locations, including the homes of members and in a room of the Arkansas Statehouse.

Interestingly, the first Episcopal Bishop of Arkansas, Leonidas Polk, went on to become the Bishop of Louisiana and an officer in the Confederate Army. You see, Polk graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1827 but resigned shortly after to pursue a career in the clergy. When the Civil War broke out, Polk joined the Confederate Army and rose to the rank of lieutenant general before being hit square in the chest by a Union cannon ball on June 14, 1864, in Georgia.

First Building

In 1840-1841 a building was constructed for Christ Church just south of its current location at the southeast corner of Capitol and Scott streets [Christ Church did not own the corner lot (lot 1, block 29) until 1849]. The first church was a front-gabled, rectangular building with two entrances on the west side. It was made of brick and featured pointed-arch (Gothic Revival-style) windows along its side elevations. About 1847 a castellated tower was added to the front façade.

During the Civil War, Christ Church was first used by the Confederate Army as a hospital for wounded southern soldiers, and after the fall of Little Rock on September 10, 1863, the church became a Union hospital. During this time, Episcopal services were held in the homes of church members. After the war, Christ Church regained control of its building, and in 1871 Arkansas went from being part of a missionary district to becoming a diocese of the national Episcopal Church (Episcopal Diocese of Arkansas covers the entire state).

Tragically, between midnight and 2:00 a.m. on September 28, 1873, the first church building was destroyed by fire. The cause of the fire was a mystery, but it was attributed to lightning as there was “a terrific storm and torrential rain” that night. All church records were lost in the fire.

Second Building

For five years after the first church burned, services were held in various locations, including an Opera House, the Chamber of Commerce, and in the Supreme Court chamber at the Arkansas Statehouse. In 1878 a chapel was constructed on the site of the first church building, and services were held in the chapel for nine years while the second church was built on the corner lots. The second church building was used for the first time on Easter Sunday in 1887 (nearly 14 years after the first church burned).

The second building to house Christ Church was a classic example of the Gothic Revival style with two towers of different height, ornate cast-stone detailing, pointed-arch window and doors openings, and a large rose window in the front gable end. [This building looked very similar to First Lutheran Church at 8th & Rock. First Lutheran was designed by Thomas Harding, Sr., and built in 1887-1888. And like the second Christ Church building, First Lutheran was red brick—until 1927 when buff brick was added on top of the original brick walls.]

The second Christ Church building cost about \$56,500, most of which was paid by subscriptions, and the parish was left with a debt of \$7,000. However, it wasn't until 1901 that the second building was completely paid for (14 years later). It was then consecrated by Bishop W. M. Brown on May 1, 1901.

Parish House

After the second building was finished in 1887, the chapel, which was located south of the church, was used as a rectory until at least 1908 and then became the parish house (auxiliary building for classrooms, recreation, fellowship). The old chapel was demolished in 1928 to make way for the new parish house, which was built in 1929 under the guidance of the Rev. William P. Witsell, who served as rector of Christ Church from 1927 until 1947 (for those of you who know Charles Witsell, this was his grandfather). Rev. Witsell envisioned a large, new building for the church youth and for community outreach and programs.

The cornerstone for the Parish House was laid on January 23, 1929, and the building was completed in early June of that year. The building was designed in the Collegiate Gothic style by well-known architect Charles L. Thompson, who was also a parishioner. The parish house, which was connected by a covered walkway to the 1887 church, contained classrooms, assembly areas, offices, kitchen, dining hall, and a gymnasium.

The 1929 parish house is still extant and in use. More about that later...

Third Building

In March 1934 the Vestry began a 5-year centennial program in order to prepare for the 100th anniversary of Christ Church parish in March 1939. As part of the program, the church remodeled the chancel and redecorated the entire church in 1938. The improvements were to be dedicated during a special service on Sunday, October 2, 1938.

About 2:00 a.m. on October 1, 1938, the second Christ Church building was consumed by fire. The cause of the fire was undetermined, but it was theorized that painter's supplies used in the redecoration may have spontaneously combusted. Although the second church was completely destroyed, the 1929 parish house remained intact. The parish house gymnasium was used for services the next day and for the next few years until another building was constructed.

The resilient congregation undertook yet another capital campaign, but after Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939, parishioners feared a shortage of construction materials and possible U.S. involvement in World War II, which, as we know, later happened. This situation prompted the building committee to move as quickly as possible to initiate construction of the new church.

The Little Rock architectural firm of Wittenberg and Delony was selected to design the third church building, with specific instructions that Edwin B. Cromwell, of their staff, be used as the chief architect. Cromwell was a member of Christ Church and had helped to redesign the chancel before the 1938 fire. Ed Cromwell was the son-in-law of Charles Thompson (he married CT's daughter, Henrietta, in 1937) and in 1941 joined the architectural firm started in 1885 by Benjamin Bartlett and Thompson, eventually serving as senior principal for over 25 years. Cromwell was one of the founding fathers of historic preservation in Arkansas. One of his most notable achievements was the 1983 restoration of the Capital Hotel, which saved it from the wrecking ball.

The Christ Church parishioners who served on the building committee for the third and current building truly had their work cut out for them. The original plans, which called for two towers like the 1887 church building, were altered to stay within the \$120,000 budget and keep the church from going into debt. Next, there was quite a controversy over the building's exterior finish. Some parishioners wanted the church to be red brick like the previous church and the Parish House (the parish house has now been painted to match the current stone building), while others favored the use of native Arkansas stone. Finally, each parishioner was given a ballot to vote on the issue. Out of the 254 ballots received, 189 voted for stone and 56 voted for brick, so the church was finished with stone.

The cornerstone for the new building was laid on October 1, 1940, exactly two years after fire consumed the previous church. The building was dedicated on September 28, 1941, though a baptism and two weddings had already been held there (baptism—Alice Louise Witsell; weddings of Olivia Owens & Alexander Wyckliff Nisbet and Maude Estelle Witsell & Allen Newton Jones).

Details

The third Christ Church building is an excellent example of the Gothic Revival style, which sought to recreate building design from the Middle Ages and was most commonly associated with the stone cathedrals of Europe. In America the style was championed by Richard Upjohn, the founder and first president of the American Institute of Architects.

Christ Church features Gothic Revival characteristics like pointed-arch window and door openings, crockets (or finials) on the front parapet wall, and buttresses.

The church was finished with native Arkansas limestone and decorative cast-stone details. The roof was covered in slate. The interior was finished with marble and tile flooring, acoustical plaster, cast-stone details, and oak beams.

The stained glass windows were manufactured by the Franz-Mayer Company of New York (they had a Germany office, but these came from NY, considering the timing). The Rev. W. P. Witsell worked closely with the Franz-Mayer Studio to create the stained glass windows. The upper level (beginning on the north side), or clerestory (clear-story), windows (including the windows in the transepts and west wall) tell the story of the life of Christ from prophetic foreshadowing to the ascension. The lower tier of windows (beginning on the north) tell the story of the Gospel in New Testament times to the establishment of the Church of England to its arrival in America at Jamestown to the organization of Christ Church in Little Rock (Leonidas Polk in window).

The pews were manufactured by the American Seating Company of Grand Rapids, Michigan, and were paid for by church members, who gave them as memorials, tributes, or thank-offerings.

Light fixtures are original to this building, and you will notice a few of them in the new addition. At some point, those fixtures were removed from their original location above the chancel and sanctuary and were later discovered and put to use in the area by the offices.

The altar & chancel rail and paneling are oak, as are the pulpit and lectern. The lectern features an eagle balanced on a ball, which symbolizes the word of God being carried throughout the world. The eagle is also symbolic of the Gospel of St. John, which is read often. Interestingly, the lectern is always placed on the right (north) side of the chancel (choir) in a place of honor because from it, the word of God is read. The pulpit is always on the left (south) side of the chancel because it is the place where man stands to interpret and apply the word of God. So, you see, the word of God itself is greater than man's interpretation.

The baptismal font is original to this building and is made out of Vermont marble.

The Nicholson-Simpson pipe organ was made in Little Rock and installed in 1989.

Witsell Chapel is on the north side of the church. Named in honor of Dr. Witsell, longtime rector of Christ Church. The chapel is used most often for Wednesday noon Eucharist. The pews in the chapel face are set up to face each other, which goes back to the Monastic tradition of reciting scripture back and forth.

Red doors—Historically, the color red represented safety and refuge. A soldier could not pursue his enemy behind the red door of a church. It also symbolizes the blood of Christ and the blood on the doors during Passover, which ensured safety for those inside.

New Addition & Close

A new addition was constructed in front of the 1929 Parish House to provide additional office and classroom space (built 1980s). The addition obscures the original façade of the parish house, but you can still tell that the old building is there if you look at it from across Scott Street. The parish house cornerstone is also visible from inside the new addition.

The addition created an interior courtyard, or close (term for an enclosed garden). [Ashes are interred in the close, but not urns. There is a marble plaque on the wall with the names of parishioners whose ashes were interred in the close at Christ Church.]

Rev. Scott Walters will tell you about some current programs at Christ Church. AR Local Food Network, Green Groceries program, concerts/music, art, 175th anniversary celebration.

Next tour is April 11 at Philander Smith College in LR. Remember that it is the second Friday instead of the first (AHA conference is April 3-5).

Extras:

Trinity Episcopal Cathedral—built 1884-1892. Cathedral church for the Diocese of Arkansas. Bishop's chair. Located at 17th & Spring. Current Episcopal Bishop is the Rev. Larry Benfield.

By 1920, Christ Church re-purchased its old rectory at the NW corner of 7th & Cumberland. It remained in use as the rectory until at least 1947. No longer extant. Now the site of Buffington Tower Apartments.