

Building for Worship: A Structural history of St. James Evangelical Lutheran Church Gettysburg, Pennsylvania 2013

Over a span of more than 200 years, the congregation of Lutherans known today as St. James Evangelical Lutheran Church in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, has built and rebuilt structures in which they might worship the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I. The Union Church Years

It is not clear from historical records exactly when German Lutherans, migrating westward with some settling in Adams County, first saw themselves as a congregation in Gettysburg. Itinerant preachers would now and then pass through the region and gather the faithful for worship. Rev. Joseph B. Baker in his 1921 “authentic history of St. James Lutheran Church of Gettysburg, Pa.” presented 1789 as the start of Lutheran and Reformed Germans in Gettysburg worshiping in a log school house on the corner of East (now Stratton) and High Streets, which is the location of Trinity United Church of Christ today. We do know that in 1803 “the German Presbyterian [Reformed] and Lutheran Inhabitants of the Town of Gettysburg and its vicinity” tried unsuccessfully to raise money to construct a church building for joint use by both groups. In 1994, St. James voted to recognize 1802 as the year the congregation was founded, instead of 1789 as claimed by Baker.

In 1804, the Lutherans received permission to worship on Sundays in the newly completed Court House in the center of the town square. In 1811, the Germans tried again and were successful this time in raising enough money to build a two-story brick “Union Church” structure shared by both congregations, each worshiping on alternate Sundays. At the consecration in 1814, the *Adams Centinel* reported that J.G. Schmucker (father of Samuel Simon Schmucker) conferred “the name of St. James Church” on the new church. In 1821, a third fund raiser allowed them to add a 100-foot steeple to the Union Church.

The first resident Lutheran pastor, Johann Herbst, Jr. (1819-1828), was involved with the starting of Gettysburg Seminary in 1826 and was on their initial Board of Directors. He was influential in securing Gettysburg over Hagerstown and Carlisle as the location of the proposed seminary. Since the Lutherans at the Union Church only had two Sundays a month, half in German and half in English, there was only one Sunday a month available for seminary faculty to preach in English to seminary students attending Lutheran worship services. Consequently, a separate Christ Church was built and was consecrated in 1836 to serve the English-speaking needs of the seminary and Pennsylvania College (founded in 1832 and now called Gettysburg College). Benjamin Keller was called as pastor of both the German Church (1836-1851) and the English Church (1836-1839).

During the 1840s there were tensions brewing between the Lutheran and Reformed congregations of the Union Church. In 1840, the Lutherans established the “Sabbath School Society of Saint James’ Church.” In 1841, they wanted to build a Sunday School house jointly with the Reformed congregation, but were turned down by the Reformed congregation. Later attempts by the Lutheran congregation to separate from the Reformed congregation with offers to sell their interest in the joint property were rejected by the latter. A bitter legal conflict ensued. On May 20, 1846, the “Evangelical Lutheran Congregation of St. James’ Church Gettysburg Pennsylvania” received its charter of incorporation “by an act of the Supreme Court of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.”

II. Our Own Building

After receiving its charter, St. James started in 1847 to raise funds to build a new church. A lot on the corner of York and East Streets was essentially donated (sold for ten cents) by George Smyser. The cornerstone was laid on April 26, 1848, and the church was dedicated on December 31 of that same year, with separate services in German and in English. It cost \$4,425 to build the two-story brick church with exterior dimensions 48 feet by 70 feet. The Sunday School purchased a “Melodian” (Melodeon reed organ) to accompany the choir, which was located in the rear gallery of the nave.

In order to satisfy the complaint of the German contingent to have more than one service a month in German, the council in 1857 contracted with Seminary professor C.F. Schaeffer to preach a service in German every other Sunday afternoon. This appeared to be working well until one Sunday in 1858 when Dr. Schaeffer presided over a full liturgical service and was wearing a clerical robe, all without permission of the council. Council responded by passing resolutions “to dispense with the using of the clerical robe in public worship” and “to adhere to the liturgy of the General Synod in the altar service” The German portion of the congregation proceeded to withdraw from St. James and form a third Lutheran church in Gettysburg, St. Paul’s German Lutheran Church, with Dr. Schaeffer as pastor conducting services in McConaughy’s Hall located across the street from the present-day Majestic Theater and where the old *Gettysburg Times* building now stands. In 1860, St. James dropped all preaching in German. Dr. Schaeffer abruptly left Gettysburg Seminary in 1864 for a position at the new Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia. Consequently, in May of 1865, all thirty-five communicant members who had left St. James to found St. Paul’s returned and were received back into St. James. The new pastor, Edward Breidenbaugh (1865-1872), restarted the practice of preaching in German on the last Sunday of each month.

Abraham Essick (1861-1864) was the pastor of St. James during the battle of Gettysburg in July of 1863. Just the previous year, he had confirmed Mary Virginia Wade on April 20, 1862. “Jennie” Wade was the only Gettysburg civilian killed during the battle. As with other churches in Gettysburg, St. James was used as a hospital – for five weeks. There was extensive damage to the building as a result, and the cost of repair was approximately \$2025. A bill was sent to the United States government, but it was not until 1915 (over 50 years after the battle!) that St. James received a reimbursement check for all of \$120. A Mason & Hamlin reed organ was installed in 1865 to replace the Melodian.

In 1888, during the pastorate of Joel E. Swartz (1881-1894), there was a major remodeling of the 1848 St. James church building. The exterior design of the 1888 remodeled church building dramatically changed the look of the earlier 1848 building. A new facade was built, rectangular windows became rounded on top, and a bell tower was constructed. Inside the church, the rear gallery was removed, the choir loft was moved to the front, and new pews were purchased. The total cost of the renovation was \$5,600. A new Vocalion reed organ was also purchased. Some other highlights during Pastor Swartz's tenure were the formation of the Mite Society and the Women's Missionary Society in 1882 and the Christian Endeavor Society in 1888. An Estey pipe organ was installed in 1903 to replace the Vocalion.

III. New Building and Rebuilding

The second century of existence for St. James involved even more building for worship. The very energetic and charismatic pastor, Joseph B. Baker (1909-1922), exhibiting both wit and determination during his tenure, was a strong leader of the congregation. He started *The Messenger* monthly newsletter in 1909, oversaw the construction of a grand new church building, sponsored revivals along with other Gettysburg churches, and witnessed a significant increase in church membership.

On January 10, 1910, the congregation decided to build a new church after having debated for several years whether to rebuild or remodel to meet the increasing need for more space. The bid accepted by the congregation for constructing the new building was \$34,913. On Monday, March 13 of 1911, demolition of the old church began, followed by construction of a new church on the same site. A Sunday School wing was included in the new design. Its chapel was built according to the "Akron plan" in which the worship space was surrounded by connecting individual classrooms on two levels. A new parsonage was constructed next to the church. During the construction, the congregation worshiped in Brua Chapel at Pennsylvania College. The church cornerstone was laid on June 9, 1911. Dedication was September 15, 1912, and the mortgage was paid off in 1919.

The next significant structural event was during the pastorate of Earl J. Bowman (1923-1934). An Austin pipe organ was installed in 1925, replacing the Estey organ of 1903. Then early in the morning of October 31, 1928, St. James Lutheran Church was destroyed by a consuming fire believed to be caused by a short circuit of some wires in the organ. Arrangements were made to hold worship services at the Majestic Theater (just across the street from the former site where the Germans of St. James had worshiped as St. Paul's Lutheran Church from 1858 to 1865). The church was rebuilt using the same basic plan as in 1911, but with a "modern Lutheran chancel" and an expanded Sunday School wing. Instead of a high central pulpit and no altar, the rebuilt church had a raised central altar flanked on both sides by a pulpit and a lectern. A new Austin pipe organ replaced the one destroyed in the fire. The rebuilt church was dedicated on December 8, 1929.

During the pastorate of Ralph R. Gresh (1941-1955) and after a two-year planning committee study, the congregation recommended in February of 1949 that there be redecoration and minor remodeling of the nave, redecoration of the Sunday School facilities, and finishing the basement area under the nave to provide extra space. The completed project was dedicated on September 11, 1949. In 1958, the parsonage adjacent to the church was renovated to form a parish house for Scout activities, office space, and a new church parlor.

IV. Rebuilding Again

In 1967, St. James called two young men, Frederick A. Foltz and E. Edward Keyser, to be co-equal pastors. Their very effective team ministry lasted for 35 years (the longest tenure at St. James) until both retired in 2002. Their start was literally a trial by fire as on the evening of January 27, 1969, St. James once again experienced a major fire that severely damaged the nave, but left the walls standing. Around this time there were several suspicious church fires in the Gettysburg area. Arrangements were made for the congregation to worship at the Seminary Chapel.

The congregation decided in September of 1969 to stay at its central location in town and rebuild. The traditional nave was redesigned into a contemporary style with a tent-shaped ceiling and the altar and pulpit in the center of the long wall that covered over the previous east windows. The new two-person pew benches were movable and placed to surround the movable altar platform on three sides. Unique, modern stained glass windows replaced the destroyed windows on the west wall. The Sunday School wing had not been as seriously damaged as the nave, and it was remodeled to include a floor that separated the earlier large chapel into two separate floors. The rebuilt church was dedicated on May 23, 1971.

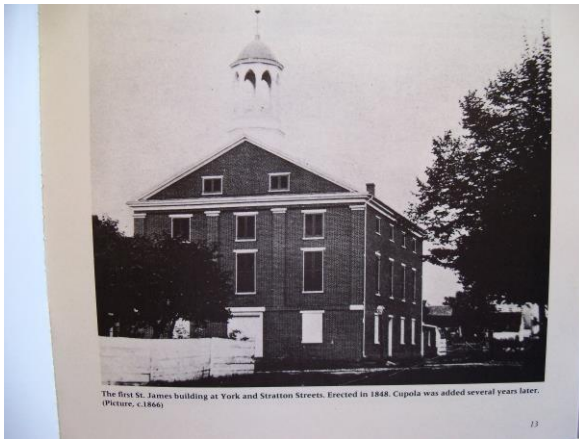
In 1997-1998, St. James carried out a construction project to expand the church into a complete rectangle that included the “old” church and an additional area opened up by demolishing the adjacent Parish House. This improved the overall flow of traffic within the church to include the sanctuary, a gathering area, office space, and more Sunday School and Child Care spaces. Again, the congregation worshiped at the Seminary Chapel during the construction.

After a few years of interim pastoral leadership following the Foltz/Keyser retirement, the congregation called Michael E. Allwein as Senior Pastor in 2004, and then Jeanette D. Leisk as Associate Pastor in 2008. In 2009, the Zimmer pipe organ was refurbished by R.J. Brunner & Co. At the present time (2013), St. James is in the midst of fund raising for a Worship Area Renewal project to replace pews and redesign the sanctuary and surrounding space.

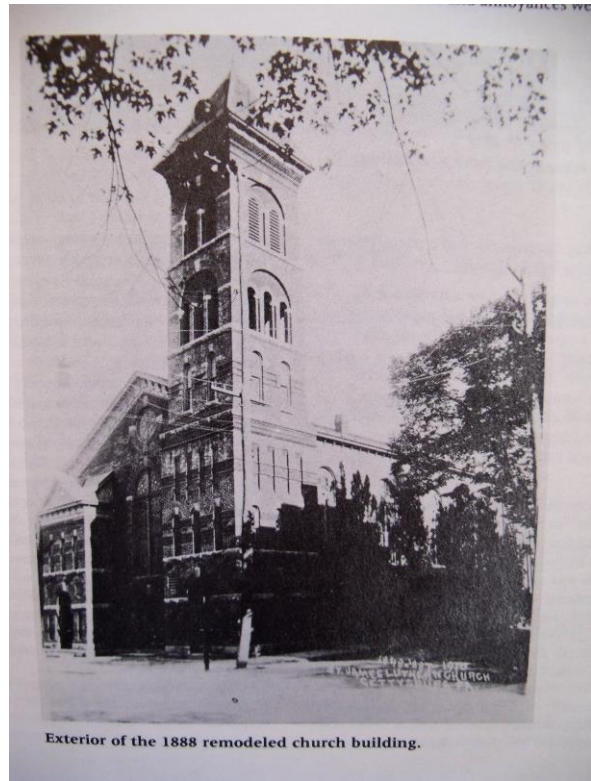
Lutheran worship utilizes not only a building and an organ, but also a worship manual. The congregation used the *Book of Worship* of the General Synod during much of the 19th century and reaffirmed its use in 1922 and after the fire in 1929. It was not until 1942 that they adopted the *Common Service Book with Hymnal* (black CSB). In 1958, they moved to the *Service Book and Hymnal* (red SBH). In 1979, Minister of Music Timothy E. Braband utilized the Adult Choir to assist the congregation in its transition to the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (green LBW). Since September 9, 2007, the congregation has used the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (cranberry ELW) as its worship resource.

There is a lot more to the history of St. James Evangelical Lutheran Church of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. I have chosen to focus on the buildings used for worship, starting with German Lutherans coming into Gettysburg and covering over two hundred years of buildings constructed to the glory of God.

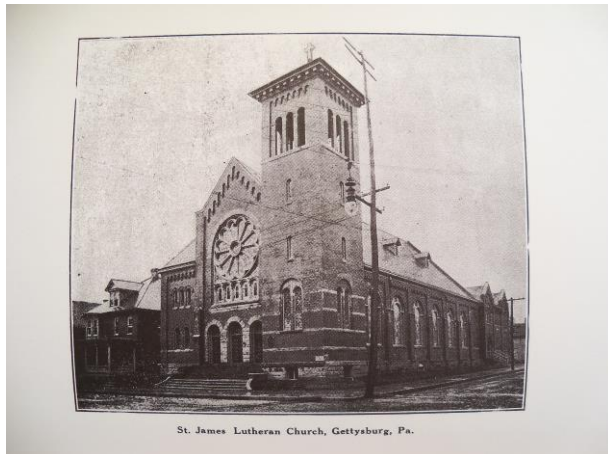
EXTERIOR PICTURES:



1848 Church Building



1888 Remodeled Building



1912 Church Building



1998 Renovated Building

INTERIOR PICTURES:



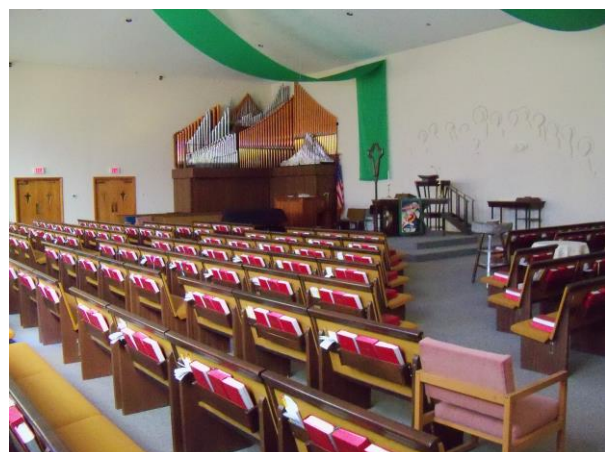
1910 Nave of 1888 Building



Nave of 1912 Building



1944 "Modern Chancel" of 1929 Building



2013 Contemporary Nave of 1998 Building

NOTES:

Most of the material for this expository article comes from the following three books: (1) *History of St. James Evangelical Lutheran Church of Gettysburg, Penna: 1775-1921* by Rev. Joseph Baer Baker in 1921 and reprinted in 1969 by Times and news Publishing Company, Gettysburg, Pa.; (2) *Living in the Light: A Short History in Word and Picture of St. James Evangelical Lutheran Church, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania* by A. Roger Gobbel with Elaine C. Matthews and printed in 1989 by the Craft Press, Inc., Chambersburg, Pa.; (3) *Centennial History of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of West Pennsylvania: 1825-1925* by Adam Stump and Henry Anstadt and printed in 1925 by J.R. Kerr & Bro., Chambersburg, Penna. I thank Susan Hill for editorial suggestions. David E. Flesner

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