

# Trinity History ... A Look at the Buildings that Shaped Our Congregation

This is the first part of a series of articles I plan on writing about the history of the various worship buildings that have been a part of Trinity Lutheran Church. This first article will focus on the history of a building that actually was not used by the Lutherans as a worship location; however, it became an integral part of the Church's history.

Let me first start by describing how the Lutherans got started in Newport News. There were only a couple of Lutheran families in town in the early 1880s when the city of Newport News was formed. It would be a decade later before there were sufficient numbers of Lutherans to establish a Church. Services were held semi-monthly during the winter of 1897 and spring of 1898 in the Disciples Church building on the northerly side of 30th Street between Washington and West Avenues. The Rev. J. E. Shenk, Pastor of the Lutheran Church in Norfolk, presided over these services. By November 1898, the Church had a full time pastor in the Rev. E. Ashby Shenk. Services were held in Moss' Hall, the property of the Honorable A. A. Moss, several times Mayor of Newport News. On Sunday, December 4, 1898, the Trinity Lutheran Church was formally established. On April 19, 1899, Trinity agreed to purchase the 27th Street Church from the Presbyterians for \$7,000, which became the first permanent Church building for Trinity. I will talk more about this building in next month's article.

Under the guidance of Collis P. Huntington, in late 1881, The Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad was extended from Richmond into what is now downtown Newport News. As part of the development of the city, Huntington created a landholding corporation, The Old Dominion Land Company, to help lay out the city and provide essential institutions for the growing community. In 1882, a small wooden building was erected on West Avenue between 27th and 28th Streets. The building, known as the Union Chapel, was used by the Episcopalians, Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians one Sunday per month each. There was a common Sunday School



*The Union Chapel in the 1880s served many denominations. It would later be used as a lecture room and Sunday School by the Presbyterians and later by the Lutherans.*

for all denominations. Other denominations used the Chapel on occasion. As each denomination grew in membership, they gradually moved out into their own buildings. By 1891, only the Presbyterians were using the Union Chapel, which by then had been relocated to 27th Street, between Washington and West Avenues. Within a couple of years the Presbyterians had outgrown the Chapel and they constructed a new Church on the north side of 27th Street, just off West Avenue. Preserving the Union Chapel meant moving it, a second time, to the back of the new Church property. It was connected to the new Church and served as the lecture room and Sunday School. Other modifications were made to expand the Sunday School over the years. The old Union Chapel remained in this capacity until the last Lutheran service at the 27th Street Church, which was held on June 15, 1958. After Trinity moved to the present location, the 27th Street property was sold to make way for an office building. The Church and the original Union Chapel were demolished.

References for this story include *History of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 1923, Church Cabinet and *Centennial History of First Presbyterian Church*, J. E. Peebles, 1983, Dorrance and Co.

Following last month's article, I will now focus on the first Church building that Trinity Lutheran could call its own. The Church was originally built by the Presbyterians in 1893 on the north side of 27th Street along what is considered the 100 block. The Union Chapel was moved one last time to the back of the lot and attached to the new building. Within four years, the Presbyterians had outgrown their church and they started the process of building a new church on 32nd Street. On September 1, 1899, the 27th Street Church became the property of Trinity Lutheran for the sum of \$7000 plus an additional \$350 for the pews. The first service in the new church was held two days later with 81 people in attendance.

In the fall of 1916, the interior of the church was modified to be more churchly and in line with



*Trinity Lutheran Church on 27th Street, Newport News, Virginia (1923).*

Lutheran practices. The original platform in front was enlarged to run across the entire width of the sanctuary and an altar, new pulpit, lectern, and a baptismal font were purchased. An art glass window was also added just above the new altar. In 1918, while the war raged on, renovations were made to the Sunday school rooms (the old Union Chapel), which consisted of new flooring, new paint and

wallpaper for the walls, and a modern lighting system. By the end of the year, a new Møller pipe organ had also been installed in the choir loft area, which contributed significantly to the attractiveness of the Church. In 1920, a new heating system was installed for the church building as well as the Sunday school rooms.

As a side note, in order to ensure the success of Trinity, the congregation approved the purchase of a parsonage in 1920. The property selected was at 217 34th Street. Another purchase was made sometime



*Interior of church with new lighting and organ (1923).*

in the early 1940's. The building was the house at 115 27th Street (next door to the Church), which was used as a parish house. During both World Wars, Trinity as well as many other churches in the area, helped soldiers and sailors as they prepared to deploy or when they returned from the war front. The military personnel outnumbered civilians as Newport News became a focal point for the soldiers and sailors to rest or train as well as a camp for prisoners (Camp Patrick Henry).

In 1945, the members of the church realized that they were outgrowing the location and started preparations to build a new Church. The current property situated between Huntington Avenue and River Road was purchased for the grand sum of \$5000. With the property secured, efforts turned towards the building fund.

Mother nature took a small hit on the church in 1954 when Hurricane Hazel blew in. Damage to the

building included a shattered main stain glass window and the rear portion of the church and parts of the roof had to be replaced. While the photo below shows the bell tower missing, it is the author's belief that it was removed sometime before the hurricane hit as there is evidence that at the 50th Anniversary of the church the bell tower had already been removed.

Services continued at the 27th Street Church until 1958, when ground was broken on the new property and the new stately brick church was built. The final service was held on June 15, 1958. The church and parish house were sold to FMV Investment Corp. who demolished the Church and parish house to make room for a new office building.

References for this story include *History of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1923*, Church Cabinet and several undated articles from the Daily Press.

*Articles written by Clifford Obara*



*Hurricane Hazel destroys the main stain glass window in addition to parts of the roof (1954).*



*Trinity Lutheran Church following repairs as a result of Hurricane Hazel. This is how the Church looked in the days leading up to the final service on June 15, 1958. The building to the right of the Church was the Parish house.*