

BUILDING MONUMENTAL METHODIST CATHEDRALS IN AMERICA'S CAPITAL CITY, 1850-1950

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Methodism's centennial era in America (1866-1884) coincided with its transformation into a solidly middle-class church. Nothing symbolizes Methodism's new status and social location better than the network of impressive, even monumental, regional Methodist churches that came to dominate the urban landscape during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. An earlier generation of Methodists considered elegant churches to be detrimental to spiritual worship. With the rise of middle-class respectability, however, fine church buildings were seen to demonstrate the authority and influence of the Methodists, as well as the wealth and status of its membership. Mid-century church leaders like Abel Stevens assumed that Methodism's "permanent hold upon its congregations, especially in the larger communities, will depend much upon the convenience and even the elegance of its churches."¹ Within this context, prospective members were seen as audiences to be wooed, rather than souls to be saved.

The new churches also reflected the hierarchy developing in connectional Methodism, with its accompanying centralization of power. A new generation of upscale churches was important regional centers of Methodist strength and missionary outreach. In every major city and town Methodists built large and refined architectural monuments to their spirituality. In smaller cities and prosperous rural districts Methodists built more limited versions of the same churches.

Not surprisingly, extraordinary efforts were made by Methodists to build monumental churches in Washington, DC, the nation's capital city, as a sign of their social prominence. Decades before the Episcopal Church began to build what has become the National Cathedral on Mount St. Albans in Washington, DC (construction began 1907, first services were conducted in 1912, building completed 1990), the socially-rising Methodist Episcopal Church undertook to build a national church of their own for official Washington. At the 1852 General Conference in Boston, a group of Washington Methodists presented a memorial asking the denomination as a whole to build a major Methodist church in the nation's capital city "of convenient and prominent location, combining commodiousness in its size and attractiveness in its interior and exterior style of architecture." Regarding the success of the plan of such "high importance to the interest of the Methodism throughout the country,"

¹ Abel Stevens, *The Centenary of American Methodism* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1865), 233-234.

bishops and conference delegates pledged to promote the project in all the conferences. In March of 1853, the church's seven bishops issued a pastoral letter supporting the project.

Following two years of fund raising, a lot near the capitol building was purchased and a prominent architect was engaged to plan a large church in Gothic style. The foundation stone was laid with great fanfare in October, 1854, by Bishop Matthew Simpson, who energetically supported the project. Fund-raising continued with a lead gift of \$100 from President Franklin Pierce. By 1860, the foundation for a large church had been completed, but the outbreak of the Civil War brought fund-raising and construction to a halt. Only the foundation walls had been completed. At war's end in 1866, the bishops appointed prominent New York clergyman, John P. Newman, to act full-time as fund-raiser for the project. Construction resumed and three years later (1869) the Metropolitan Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church was completed at a cost of \$225,000.²

The dedication on February 28, 1869, of what the press called "the Westminster Abbey of American Methodism" was timed to coincide with the inauguration of Methodist President Ulysses S. Grant when Washington was filled with dignitaries from across the land. Four days before the inauguration, 2,000 people crowded into the sanctuary with a seating capacity of 1,200. A third of the pews were reserved for dignitaries, including President-elect and Mrs. Grant, the Vice President-elect and Mrs. Colfax, Chief Justice Chase, and a large number of senators, representatives, and other leaders in state and church. Bishop Simpson read the opening prayers from the denomination's new (1864) liturgy for dedication of churches and preached the sermon. Descriptions of the event hit the headlines in newspapers across the country, including the *New York Times*. A lead story in *Harper's Weekly* called the new church "by far the handsomest and the most elaborate of the many fine churches in Washington" and included an engraving for the whole country to see.

Its design is pure Gothic. It is built of brown stone, rough hewed. The building fronts 75 feet on C. Street and 115 feet on [John Marshall Place]. It is about fifty feet in height. At the northeast corner of the structure is to be constructed a tower and a spire, the utmost point of which will be 240 feet from the pavement.³

To lend legitimacy the keystone in the arch above the pulpit was carved out of debris from Solomon's Temple, the olive wood of the pulpit and altar rail was from the Garden of Gethsemane, and ivy from the grave of John Wesley was planted to cover its walls.

Sixteen large stained glass windows commemorated founding fathers and mothers of the denomination. As it was meant to be the national church, one pew was set aside for each state and territory in the union and one for the

² Fund raising dragged on until 1884 ("Episcopal Address," *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1884, 39). In 2010 dollars, this would equal \$3,665,250.

³ "The Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church, Washington," *Harper's Weekly* (March 13, 1869): 173.

President, Vice President, Chief Justice, and Cabinet. When the church was dedicated it was still incomplete, for it was without the spire. Two years later, on Thanksgiving Day, 1871, the 240 foot spire, one of the tallest in the city, and its many ton chime of eleven bells were dedicated.

The first chairman of the board of trustees was not unfamiliar with administrative duties. He was President Grant. Other trustees of the first board carved their place in the nation's history: Salmon P. Chase, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and Matthew G. Emery, mayor of the city of Washington. President Grant and Mrs. Grant occupied the President's Pew for eight years 1869-1877. At the turn of the century, President and Mrs. William McKinley sat in the same pew regularly during his term of office, 1897-1901. Methodist President Hayes (1877-1880) and his wife Lucy chose to attend Washington's oldest Methodist Episcopal Church, Foundry Church, as did President and Mrs. Clinton (1992-2000). Foundry Church had built a large new church in Romanesque style at 14th and G streets in 1866.⁴

At its inception, Metropolitan Memorial Church boasted only one hundred members, but by 1894, when the church celebrated 25 years in ministry, Metropolitan had 550 members and average attendance in Sunday school of 280 and approximately one quarter of its \$9,600⁵ budget going to missions, charities and other ministries of the church. The congregation continued to flourish at its downtown location until the 1920s when its traditional core membership of middle and upper-middle class moved further into the northwest section of the city and the expansion of government buildings necessitated the 1930 acquisition of the property by the District government for the completion of Judiciary Square. This special place of worship was described by Richard Goode, in his 1979 book *Capital Losses: A Cultural History of Washington's Destroyed Buildings* as "probably the most important of over seventy-five Gothic Revival churches that have been built in the Washington area during the last 175 years."⁶ If my reckoning is correct, its site today is occupied partly by the Canadian Embassy and partly by Marshall Park. The congregation relocated and built an even grander Gothic revival church on a new site on Nebraska Avenue near American University which was dedicated in 1932.⁷ In the post-World War II period, Metropolitan's growing congregation crowded its building. A new education building was ready by 1951. But all too soon the sanctuary was too small to accommodate the congregation, so in 1957 work began on expanding the worship space of the church. In 1959, the congregation joined in worship in the enlarged sanctuary for the first time. During these years President Nixon attended the new Metropolitan Church when he was senator and vice president (1950-1961).

⁴ Homer L. Calkin, *Castings From the Foundry Mold: A History of Foundry Church, Washington, DC, 1814-1964* (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1968), 91-98.

⁵ In 2010 dollars this would equal \$240,672.

⁶ James M. Goode, *Capital Losses: A Cultural History of Washington's Destroyed Buildings* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979), 204.

⁷ Lillian Brooks Brown, *A Living Centennial: Commemorating the 100th anniversary of Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church* (Washington, DC: The Church, 1969).

Six years after their northern kin, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, also planned a notable presence in the nation's capital. The Washington congregation of the Virginia Conference petitioned the 1858 General Conference for assistance in building a church that would worthily represent the denomination in the nation's capital. Southern Methodism's first congregation in Washington had been organized and its first modest building was erected in 1850 and rebuilt in 1869. The General Conference agreed that "Southerners who annually congregate in the metropolis of the Union" should be represented there by "a Church worthy of the noble body of Christians whose great purpose it is to spread Scriptural holiness over these lands without turning aside to make war upon the rights which we enjoy under the Constitution of a great and free people." The lengthy resolution, dripping with venom aimed at northern Methodists, concluded: "Every member of this body must feel that so great and influential a denomination as the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, should be represented by a large and flourishing society at the seat of the Central Government."⁸

The impending Civil War brought the plan to naught. Not until 1906, did a campaign get underway for a major Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in Washington. The Board of Church Extension was given the responsibility for planning a "representative" church building to cost not less than \$275,000⁹. The next year a choice lot was purchased at the junction of K Street, Massachusetts Avenue, and Ninth Street and a large building was planned. In the Jim Crow Era (1890s-1930s), Methodists in the South shunned Gothic and Romanesque revival styles favored by northern Methodists and chose instead Greek revival (plantation-style) churches with flat tops fronted with tall pillared porches. But another war (World War I) interfered with the speedy completion of fund-raising and construction. Mount Vernon Place Methodist Episcopal Church, South, a monumental, white-marbled, Greek Revival (Parthenon-style) church which cost more than \$500,000¹⁰ was not completed until 1917 and came to full power under the pastorate of Clovis G. Chappell, pastor from 1918-1924. During the 1940s and 1950s, after Methodism's north-south reunion, the church became a center of spiritual growth and social service in the center of Washington. The church's membership continued to grow rapidly, making the congregation one of the largest Protestant congregations in the city. At its height, the congregation numbered more than 4,500.¹¹

Rivalry between divided Methodisms in the nation's capitol extended to the Methodist Protestant Church. Not to be outdone, denominational leaders

⁸ Methodist Episcopal Church, South. *Journal of the General Conference, 1858*, 385, 416-418.

⁹ In 2010 dollars this would equal \$6,638,500.

¹⁰ In 2010 dollars this would equal \$8,485,000.

¹¹ Royce L. Thompson, ed. *History, Mount Vernon Place United Methodist Church, 1850-1976* (Washington: The Church, 1977); Methodist Episcopal Church, South, *Journal of the General Conference, 1906*, 194-195; see also Harvey Marinus King, *The Board of Church Extension, A History: Semi-Centennial 1882-1932* (Louisville, KY: Board of Church Extension of the ME Church, South, [1932]), 106-108. Fund raising dragged on until 1932.

laid plans for a landmark church in the early 1870s. A corner lot was purchased on North Carolina Avenue at Eighth Street in the Capitol Hill section of the city upon which a modest brick church opened in 1872. By the turn of the century (1900), the congregation outgrew its facilities and set in motion plans to replace the old church with a much larger one. The elegant new church featured both a new exterior style (Romanesque) and a new interior plan (theater-style sanctuary and Akron-plan Sunday-school). The massive church was built around a large corner tower surrounded by broad transepts with curving, arcaded porticos. The rough stone-faced exterior with deep-set, intricately carved openings made a powerful statement. Inside a broad worship space inspired by the arrangement of the secular theater replaced the congregation's old narrow sanctuary. Galleries surrounded the central pulpit platform on three sides so that every hearer was as close as possible to the preacher. On the fourth side and behind the pulpit area the space was filled with the ranks of the choir that reinforced the appeal of the preacher with its devotional singing, and behind the choir rose the gilded pipes of the organ.¹² Curved pews circled the dominating pulpit, lush carpet covered the sloping floors and radiating aisles, plaster moldings circling walls and ceiling echoed exterior Romanesque carvings, large Tiffany stained-glass windows flooded the interior with delicate hues. The architect brought the Sunday school out of the basement where it had been crammed in the old church and gave it as much attention and space as the new sanctuary. Patterned after what came to be known as the Akron-plan, the Sunday school featured two curving tiers of classrooms facing a large central auditorium. The plan efficiently gathered a large number of classes close to and in full view of the superintendent who led the school in opening and closing worship from a platform at its center after which doors slid closed to allow individual class sessions.¹³

The movement to establish a United Brethren presence in Washington began in 1891 when the denomination's Church Erection Society began a church-wide campaign to raise funds for a national United Brethren Church. Two years later Memorial United Brethren Church was completed on a "high and commanding" lot one mile north of the capitol building. Modest by Methodist standards, the small brick church of Romanesque design costing

¹² Thomas H. Colhouer, *Sketches of the Founders of the Methodist Protestant Church* (Pittsburgh: Methodist Protestant Book Concern, 1880), 272f. *North Carolina Avenue Methodist Protestant Church Yearbook and Directory, 1907* (Washington, DC: The Church, 1907).

¹³ For fuller discussions see Kenneth E. Rowe, "Redesigning Methodist Churches: Auditorium-Style Sanctuaries and Akron-Plan Sunday Schools in Romanesque Costume, 1875-1925," *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission and Identity*, edited by Russell E. Richey (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 117-134; and Jeanne H. Kilde, *When the Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford UP, 2002).

\$17,000¹⁴ was dedicated by Bishop Jonathan Weaver in January, 1893.¹⁵ A second, much larger stone church also of Romanesque design, First Memorial United Brethren Church, was dedicated debt-free to the worship of Almighty God in May, 1905, at a cost to the denomination of \$32,000.¹⁶ “The Church is one of the finest in our denomination. Our people may well rejoice in having had a part in the building of this metropolitan church in the great city of Washington.”¹⁷ The building of a substantial United Brethren church at the nation’s capital was achieved through many obstacles and at great expense, but “the end justified the means” wrote the editor of *The Religious Telescope*, “All United Brethren take an honorable pride in having so fine and prosperous a church at the Nation’s capital.”¹⁸

As early as 1864, the Evangelical Association established a mission in the nation’s capital city. Two years later a lot had been purchased on Sixth Street and a modest chapel was dedicated. However, the mission venture failed and the 1877 General Conference reported the project closed and the property sold. Although the matter of a landmark church in Washington was considered again in 1891, it was not until 1923 that any impetus was given to establishing a landmark church in the city honoring the denomination’s founder. Albright Memorial Evangelical Church in Washington was first proposed that year at a general missionary convention in Baltimore. Two years later the project got under way when the church’s Board of Missions approved the plan. A pastor was appointed “missionary to Washington” and began a church-wide drive to raise funds. By the summer of 1926, the pastor had purchased a lot on the fashionable Rittenhouse Street, NW, pitched a tent for services and recruited twenty-six charter members. That fall, the General Conference of the church added its approval. The Woman’s Missionary Society devoted its 1927 Day of Prayer offering for this project. With gifts totaling almost \$100,000,¹⁹ the first unit of a substantial church complex in Gothic style, the Sunday-school, was completed in November, 1927. The large sanctuary was not completed until 1954.²⁰

¹⁴ In 2010 dollars this would equal \$410,380.

¹⁵ *25th Session of the Church Erection Society of the United Brethren in Christ held in Dayton, Ohio, May 10, 1893* (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Publishing House, 1893),4-5; “Our Work in Washington City,” *Religious Telescope* (February 1, 1893): 7; (February 8, 1893): 83. A much larger stone church in the required Gothic style was completed and dedicated debt-free in 1905.

¹⁶ In 2010 dollars this would equal \$772,480.

¹⁷ *Annual Report of the Pennsylvania Conference: Minutes of the 116th Annual Session of the Pennsylvania Conference of the United Brethren in Christ held in the First Memorial U.B. Church, Washington, D.C., Oct. 17-23, 1905* (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Publishing House, 1905),18-19.

¹⁸ “[Our] Church at Washington, D.C.,” *Religious Telescope* (January 16, 1907): 21. The 1893 building was refitted for Sunday-school and social meetings.

¹⁹ In 2010 dollars this would equal \$1,253,000.

²⁰ “Proposed Albright Memorial Evangelical Church,” *Evangelical Messenger* 81.3 (January 15, 1927): 6-9; *Proceedings of the General Conference of the Evangelical Church, 1926*, 113-114; Wilbert F. Snyder, *Albright Church: Twenty-Five Years* (Washington, DC: The Church, 1951).

In the post-Civil War period the three African-American Methodist denominations also made extraordinary efforts to establish a permanent presence just a short distance from the White House and the U.S. Capitol in order to pressure the federal government for equal treatment of African American people. The African Methodist Episcopal Church's city congregation, formed in 1821, was designated the denomination's "Metropolitan" or national church in 1884, while its new building was still under construction. A.M.E. Church members throughout the United States contributed funding to build a large red-brick Victorian Gothic "cathedral" for their denomination. Metropolitan A.M.E. Church, which seated 2,000, opened in 1886 at a cost of \$70,000.²¹ The denomination's presiding bishop announced: "The building is a monument to the love of the race, for the church of God, and for the good of man." Some years later the sacrificial gifts were memorialized in a group of 29 which chronicle the AME church's phenomenal growth during a period of racial oppression. In segregated Washington, Metropolitan AME's stained-glass lined sanctuary was one of the largest meeting places available to an integrated audience, and therefore attracted prominent speakers, including President Taft and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and later, Dorothy Height and Bishop Desmond Tutu. It was here that the funeral of congregant Frederick Douglass was held in 1895 and where mourners said goodbye to Rosa Parks a century later. In the 1990s, the building was added to the National Register of Historic Places. In the new century, structurally compromised, the building urgently requires a multi-million-dollar effort, a capital investment that Metropolitan AME Church's community of dedicated supporters cannot afford. In 2010, the National Trust for Historic Preservation added this historic church to its list of "Most Endangered Historic Places" in the nation.

William H. Miles, one of the founding bishops of the Colored (after 1954 Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church, was determined to establish a prominent CME church in the nation's capitol. By 1876, just seven years after the denomination's founding, Bishop Miles succeeded in persuading an A.M.E. congregation to join his church, giving the CME church an instant presence in the city. The 1878 General Conference expressed the gratitude CME's felt by adopting a resolution which called for the denomination to assume responsibility for the mortgage, renamed the church Israel Metropolitan C.M.E. Church, and authorized special collections throughout the denomination to support the congregation.²²

The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church followed suit by rebuilding Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church in 1888. Founded in 1832, the church served as a station on the famed "Underground Railroad," was the birthplace of the first public school for Washington's African-American children, and as Metropolitan Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church became the principal public

²¹ In 2010 dollars this would equal \$1,689,800.

²² C. H. Phillips, *History of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in America*. (Jackson, TN: Publishing House, CME Church, 1925), 102.

witness of the denomination in the nation's capital. The church relocated to its current site in northwest Washington in 1956.

From anti-slavery leadership in the mid-nineteenth century to AIDS education and voter registration projects, today these three "national cathedrals" of African American Methodism continue to be at the forefront of the religious, civic and cultural life of African Americans.