

The History of Our Church Buildings

May Memorial's history begins in 1836 when a few Unitarian families moved to the Syracuse area. They got together for occasional services whenever a traveling minister was available. Sometimes they met in homes, sometimes in a school building, and occasionally in an old Baptist Church on West Genesee Street. A decision to become an organized church began with a covenant signed by 14 people on September 3, 1838 (noted as September 13 in one source). Several people took part in a first communion service on September 3, 1838, administered by Rev. George Ripley, a Unitarian minister. Rev. Joshua Leonard (shown in the list of members for the first 100 years of the church described in the resources section) was listed as involved, but not much is known about him.

On October 4, 1838, there was an organizational meeting at a Dr. Mayo's schoolhouse on Church (now Willow) Street, but we know little about that structure. The elected officers are known and the proceedings were legally recorded in the County Clerk's office on January 2, 1839, making our organization official. We were known as the Unitarian Congregational Society of Syracuse, but often referred to as the Unitarian Church of Syracuse.

Our ancestors began collecting funds for a church building and asked Unitarians in Boston to help in finding a minister. Our first official building was a wooden chapel that was built at 317 East Genesee Street for a cost of \$607. No paintings or photos of that first building are known to exist. In the meantime, several ministerial candidates visited Syracuse and one of the last ones was Rev. John P. B. Storer of Walpole, Massachusetts. He was well liked by the selection committee and accepted an offer to be our first minister. He was installed on June 20, 1839, in the First Methodist Church to provide enough room for those participating. Rev. Storer often referred to that first building as "The Little Tabernacle."

Rev. Storer was instrumental in considerable growth taking place, and the small chapel quickly became too small. He then expended considerable energy and traveled frequently back to the east to raise money for a replacement, collecting nearly \$2000. Two lots on the corner of Burnett Avenue and Lock Street (now called State Street) were purchased. Additional money raised from parishioners resulted in \$5000 to cover the construction of the Church of the Messiah, our second building. It was dedicated on November 23, 1843. Unfortunately, Rev. Storer did not enjoy the success he had on our behalf in raising monies for long, as the efforts took a huge toll on his health and he died of a heart attack on March 17, 1844.

The designer of the church was Horatio Nelson White, a church member and partner in the construction firm that framed and finished the building. It was 69 feet long, 47 feet wide, with brick walls resting on stone foundations. Masonry work was done by David Cogswell, also a church member. The front door was framed by two square Ionic columns and a stone lintel. Above the pediment over the entrance stood a square bell tower topped by a weather vane. Inside the front entrance way were stairs down to the basement and up to the gallery and belfry. The auditorium had "delicate and rich pilasters and entablatures of marble on either side of the pulpit."

That building was enlarged in 1850 as our congregation continued to grow. No known pictures of that second building exist, but it was described as having a steeple and a later drawing depicts it that way. Unfortunately, in the early morning of Sunday, February 29, 1852, a big wind storm (officially categorized at the time as a hurricane) came through Syracuse and basically demolished the building. The rear wall fell on to the house behind us, destroying it but sparing the people inside (our ancestors paid to have the house rebuilt). A new building was built on the same spot, minus a steeple (only photos of this second building exist), for a cost of nearly \$10,000. Most of those monies were raised by the sale of pews. However, \$2,000 was contributed by friends in New York and New England, and \$750 by members of other denominations in Syracuse. It was dedicated on April 14, 1853.

Sadly, some thirty years later the tracks of a loud and busy railroad were laid nearby necessitating the construction of our fourth building. On March 13, 1884, the Trustees appointed a committee to begin planning for a new church. On October 25, 1884, it was resolved and approved by the congregation that a new church should be built. Horatio White was authorized to solicit construction proposals and find a new lot. Early the following year a vote approved purchasing a lot at 472 James Street. At subsequent April meetings it was resolved that material for the structure be Onondaga Limestone with a rough Ashler finish; Horatio White was again appointed the architect. On June 7, the building committee contracted with Mr. E. M. Allen to build it at a price of \$29,000. However, it was later found that the total cost would be approximately \$50,000, \$12,000 more than available funds. To meet this deficit the Trustees asked for and received the necessary additional money. The construction proceeded rapidly and the church was dedicated on October 20, 1885.

Continued growth over the years prompted the need for another new building. Subsequently, 80 church members became involved with new building plans by working on 11 committees. They interviewed 14 architects and eventually hired

Pederson, Hueber, and Hares, a Syracuse firm that contracted to work with the eminent architect Dean Pietro Belluschi of MIT as design consultant.

After numerous committee sessions and six congregational meetings, the committees prepared background information for the architect, including a request for the use of natural materials and design simplicity. They asked for architecture marked by beauty, challenge, dignity, serenity, stimulation, and strength.

The new building was planned in 1964 at a cost of \$446,391. To meet this need the society borrowed \$180,000 to be repaid over 30 years. At the annual meeting in the spring of 1964, the finance committee reported another record amount in pledges, \$52,000. In September a \$75,000 offer for our James Street property was accepted, just in time to pay for furnishings and equipment needed to open the new building. The construction activities proceeded over several months and a formal dedication was held on Sunday, October 10, 1965. Design architect Dean Pietro Belluschi flew in from Boston for the occasion. Organ builder Walter Holtkamp was also recognized. John Fuller's sermon dedicated the building to "the truth that makes men free ... the spirit of liberty ... brotherhood ... ongoing works of love ... peace ... the worship of God and the service of man." He said, "Let this hall be the sanctuary of every seeking, questing soul, and let this house forever have an open door to all truth and all men."

Resources for Further Study

1. A listing of May Memorial members for the 1st 100 years of our existence: <http://history.mmuus.org/members1st100yrs.html>
2. An atlas from the late 1800s showing a birds-eye view of Syracuse as drawn by H. H. Bailey, from the Library of Congress archives: <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html> [then click on "Cities and Towns," then on "Panoramic Maps - 1847-1929," then on "Browse by Geographic Location," then on "New York," then click on "Next Page" until you reach #171, click on it, then click on the city view that is shown, and then experiment with the zoom and window size button on the "Zoom View" until you get the size and location you desire]. The Church of the Messiah is number 42.
3. *A Backward Glance O'er Traveled Roads*, the history of our church, 1838-1938, by Helen Saddington and Elizabeth Walsh: <http://history.mmuus.org/backwardglance.html>
4. *May No One Be A Stranger: 150 Years of Unitarian Presence in Syracuse*, the history of our church, 1838-1988, by Jean M. Hoefler and Irene Baros-Johnson: <http://history.mmuus.org/stranger.html>

5. *May Memorial Church: An Account of its Dedication on October 20, 1885, Together with a Brief Sketch of the Origin And Progress of the Unitarian Congregational Society of Syracuse:* <http://history.mmuus.org/maychurch.html>
6. The stained glass windows in the James Street church, with narrative description: <http://history.mmuus.org/windows.html>
7. Building the current church, photos and narrative: <http://history.mmuus.org/churchbuilding.pdf>