

Grace Episcopal Church

A brief history

From the time of its inception through the efforts of a Christian Socialist bishop, Frederic Dan Huntington, Grace Church has vibrated to the footsteps of a Christian community committed to friendship and service. The stone and mortar structure which we call Grace Church stands as a permanent commemoration of these people and their quest for a closer walk with God.

On November 10, 1868, the Episcopal Diocese of Central New York was organized from the Diocese of New York. Grace Church was begun as a mission in 1870, and a small frame church was erected at the corner of University Avenue and Madison Street in 1871. On March 27, 1871, Grace Church was organized as the diocese's fourth new parish, and it became self-supporting in 1873. Its namesake may have been Grace Smith, the beloved child of Andrew and Kate M. Smith who died at the age of 1 year, 6 months on August 11, 1869. She and her sister Agnes who died in 1874 at the age of seven are memorialized in the Good Shepherd window above the high altar.

The parish grew quickly along with the surrounding Eastside neighborhood, and plans were soon made for erecting a permanent stone building. In 1876, the Diocese received a substantial gift from the Schermerhorn family of New York City that allowed for construction of the new building to begin. The selected architect, Horatio Nelson White (1814-1892), was one of the most prominent in the region, whose designs included the Syracuse University Hall of Languages (1871-73) up the street from the church, as well as about 100 churches. For Grace, White designed a Victorian Gothic Revival-style building of Onondaga limestone, with a polychrome slate roof, projecting chancel, chapel wing, and prominent four-story tower. Above the front door of the church on University Avenue, a relic stone from Canterbury Cathedral in England was mortared into the local limestone. According to noted historian, Harvey J. McKee, Grace Church is one of his best designs. It is well proportioned and detailed; the details being successfully subordinated to the overall effect.

The four-stage Norman-style tower, once visible from afar, suffered from structural problems and was shortened in 1940. The lowered tower was redesigned by noted local architect Melvin King, reportedly to give the church a "modern English appearance."

The interior plan is of a five-bay unaisled nave (40' by 100') which originally sat 300 people. Significant interior features include wooden hammer-beam trusses, which were reinforced by tie rods in ca. 1970. The original 1876 color scheme consisted of terracotta/apricot walls with pale-green window wells, ultramarine blue ceiling panels, and ceramic tile floor. A major redecoration in 1892, also funded by the

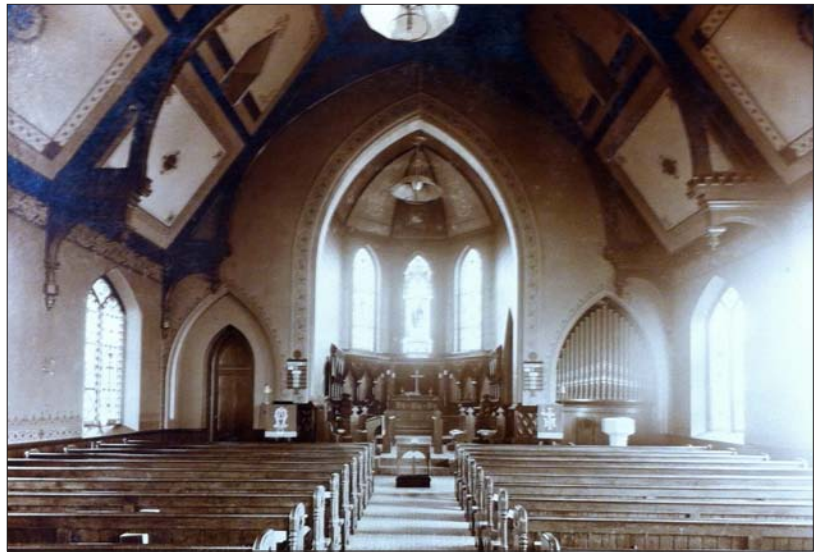


Grace Church, looking from Madison Street with the chancel, sacristy, and chapel wings at left, ca. 1878. (Syracuse University Archives)

Schermerhorn family, added extensive stenciling to the ceiling and walls. The marble altar was installed by the parish in 1920 on the occasion of its 50th anniversary.

The original 1876 Gothic-arched windows feature stained glass in the chancel, and Grisaille quarrels with colored borders in the nave. Six art glass memorial windows were added between 1876 and 1922. One of these was damaged in the Labor Day storm of 1998 and replaced with the existing Oakerhater window. The rose window above the entrance was patterned after those found in parish churches in England. The

original Steere & Turner pipe organ installed in 1877 still fills the sanctuary with music. The altar was moved to the center of the sanctuary in 1971 as a symbol of communal worship. In 2008, the parish completed a major renovation of the sanctuary that included a new ceiling, lighting, and reconfiguration of the pews that kept the altar in the center.



The Grace Church sanctuary, showing the 1892 redecoration, ca. 1900. (Syracuse University Archives)

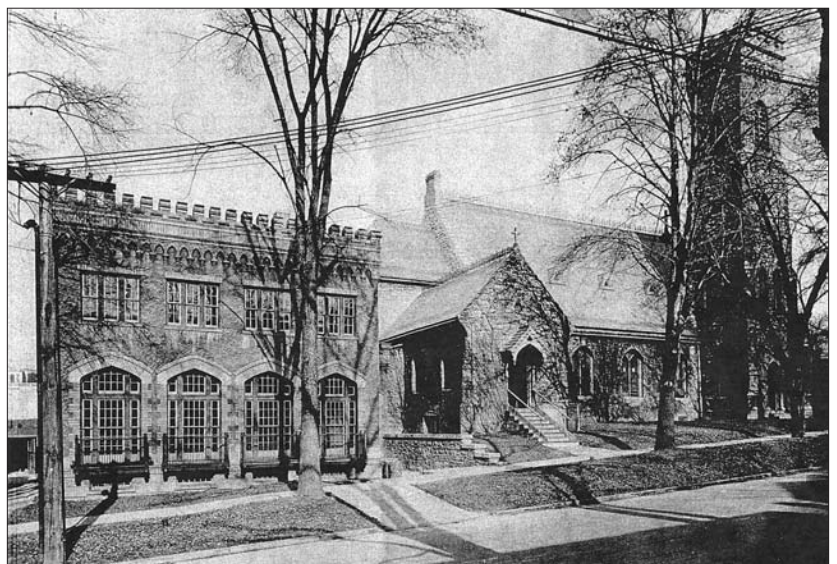
The parish house was added to the church in 1916-1917 according to the design of Justus M. Scrafford (1878-1947), a Beaux-Arts trained professor of architecture at Syracuse University. The building was made possible by a generous gift from Mr. Dann, a great friend and admirer of Grace's rector, Rev. Dr. Herbert Coddington. Scrafford's design reflected the Gothic style of the church, complete with a crenelated parapet that evoked the one on the church tower. His design also showed influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement in the pebble-dash stucco and interior woodwork. The building featured an auditorium with stage (parish hall), classrooms, offices, a kitchen, and a bowling alley in the basement.

Grace Church has a long history of social activism. It was at Grace that the first Native American saint of the Episcopal Church, David Pendleton Oakerhater, was baptized in 1878 and later ordained a deacon. Under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Herbert Coddington during the early 20th century, the parish grew its outreach to the sick, poor, and troubled. He also ministered to Syracuse's African-American community, which led to the opening of St. Philip's Church on Almond Street in 1922, also designed by Justus Scrafford. The parish was closed in 1957 and subsequently lost to urban renewal. Many of the parishioners joined Grace, forming the diverse congregation that exists today. Rev. Walter N. Welsh, who began at Grace in 1949 and served through the 1970s, led the parish through tumultuous times of racial integration and urban decline. This time saw meetings of COR (Congress for Racial Equality) at Grace between 1963 and 1965, and hosting of HeadStart, Vista Volunteer, and Peace Corps programs. In 1974, Betty Bone Schiess of Grace was one of the eleven women ordained at Philadelphia, three years prior to the Episcopal Church's

recognition of women priests. Today, Grace continues its worship and ministries that include a food pantry, weekly community dinners, and a ministry to incarcerated youth.

In 2013, the parish house suffered a devastating fire, which led to a major rehabilitation that included a new kitchen, food pantry, sacristy, and rector's office; structural corrections to the trusses in the parish hall; and improvements that made the entire complex universally accessible. Remaining restoration challenges include failing walls and buttresses on the tower, and stucco on the parish house.

Adapted from "Grace Episcopal Church: The Building and its History" (unattributed, ca. 1990) by John Auwaerter, 5/2016



The Grace Church parish house built in 1916-17, looking northeast from Madison Street, ca. 1930. (Onondaga Historical Association)