

First Universalist Church of Rochester: A Landmark Dedicated in 1908

In January of 1907, members of the First Universalist Church of Rochester were deeply satisfied with their church, which had been completed in 1847 and extensively remodeled in 1901. But that month their mood changed quickly from complacency to consternation when the Board of Trustees received a stunning proposal from a real estate developer who wanted to demolish it and construct a hotel on the property. After much anxiety-filled negotiating between membership and leadership, the Board accepted the developer's offer and the congregation voted its approval to construct what would become their third spiritual home.

The Board hired Claude Bragdon, one of the city's most respected architects, to design the new church. He would use the dome of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul as the inspiration for his initial design of the sanctuary. He would incorporate a number of stained glass windows from the previous church, including the beloved Sargent window, modeled after a painting of Doré's Jesus the Good Shepherd. It had been donated by the famous locksmith manufacturer James Sargent, whose lock systems are still in use by the U.S. government. Bragdon would use the structural steel of the ceiling arches in the sanctuary as part of the room's ornamentation. He would design matching pews, rostrum, baptismal font and communion table of black walnut. There would be a large assembly room with moveable partitions for Sunday School classes. A gymnasium would be built above this room.

On the 15th of September, 1907, the cornerstone of the new church was laid with appropriate services. In December that year, the Board voted to contract for the purchase of a custom-built pipe organ from Robert Hope-Jones, the controversial owner of the Hope-Jones Organ Company in Elmira, NY. It would be his Opus 2. Because of his innovative designs, his organs were quickly becoming popular in theaters in a time before "talking pictures," and his Opus 2 would be a precursor of the Wurlitzer theater organ. But some opponents of Hope-Jones considered him a threat to the entire organ manufacturing industry. In October of 1908 an unknown malefactor attempted to disable the new church organ by mutilating the pipes and then meticulously replacing them. Fortunately the damage was discovered in time to secure repairs before the dedication concert just days later. Sometime during the autumn of that year, author Mark Twain was the only director of the Hope-Jones Organ Company to accept the invitation of its owner to hear a demonstration of the organ used as an accompaniment for the solo human voice—a function then considered unsuitable for that instrument.

By 1945, as the church was aging and becoming increasingly expensive to repair, the Board appointed a committee—the first of several over the coming decades—to investigate potential sites for a new location. In November of 1956, another such committee reported that a new church edifice would cost \$200,000 or more, but the assessed valuation of the church was only \$138,000. They were going nowhere!

By 1959 the gymnasium had long been out of use, and carpenters began measuring it to convert the space into church school classrooms. Eventually five rooms were built on the lower level, a third floor was created out of the space above, and three more rooms were built in that area. In August of 1965 the present office was created from a former stage area by installation of a partition and removal of a fireplace. In August 1966 the U.S. Department of the Interior surveyed the building as the first step of a process to have it listed on the National Register of Historic Places. This designation was granted in May of 1971.

In May of 1968 the congregation voted down the Site Committee selection of a lot on Kreag Road in suburban Perinton for construction of a new church. The money simply was just not available, and decisions about moving or remaining in the center city had to be made all over again. Two years later the congregation voted to sell the building to the city of Rochester as part of an urban renewal project, but two months later the Department of Housing and Urban Renewal refused to approve the sale, and a number of congregants were left financially and spiritually devastated. "Landmark Church on Death Row," reported the Times-Union in 1971. In October of 1972, as a result of severe water damage, the "Hope" tapestry in the sanctuary fell on the floor and sustained considerable damage.

At its annual meeting in May of 1975, the congregation voted, with only 3 opposed, to remain in its present location. In the years ahead, special efforts were made to focus on an "urban by choice" outlook. An organ restoration campaign was initiated. The Hope tapestry was restored and replaced. And the Universalist Restoration Fund was established, in conjunction with the 75th anniversary of the building.

But in March of 1989, restoration cost estimates provided to the church by an architectural consulting firm totaled \$881,860. Could this church be saved? The answer to this question was the S.A.V.E.I.T. capital campaign, which eventually raised three-quarters of a million dollars. And in May of 2000, the Capital Projects campaign, begun a year earlier, brought in over \$532,00 solely from members and friends. Funds from this venture provided for complete renovation of the Religious Education wing, construction of a new doorway and handicapped-accessible ramp to the outside in the Clara Barton Lounge, and installation of a lift elevator.

In May of 2003, the congregation voted to serve as a host church for the newly-formed Rochester Area Interfaith Hospitality network, with St. Mary's Catholic Church across the Square as its partner. The first hosting event took place in June of the following year. A year-long Centennial Celebration began in October of 2006 and concluded on September 30, 2007 with a sermon from the pulpit by Rev. William Sinkford, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association. And now with a new building fund proposal approved at the semi-annual meeting this month, we continue forward in our mission to Nurture the Spirit and Serve the Community.

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