

Historical Presentation Made at the Open House,
Held in Commemoration of Saint John's Episcopal Church, Keokuk, Iowa
Being Named to the National Register of Historic Places, July 11, 1989

Compiled by: Robert and Margaret Dowling

The Right Reverend Jackson Kemper, Missionary Bishop of the Northwest, visited Keokuk in April of 1850, for the purpose of organizing an Episcopal Church. At a meeting held April 20, the group moved to establish a parish to be named St. John's.

Under the guidance of a capable building committee a small brown frame church was completed and was ready for occupancy on June 30, 1852, just two years after the organization of the church. This building would serve the congregation for approximately 40 years. It is interesting to note that the lots were part of the Half Breed Tract.

In July 1871, a young bachelor priest, the Reverend Robert C. McIlwain of New York preached his first sermon in St. John's Church. He had received his college education at Harvard University and had studied for the priesthood at General Theological Seminary in New York City. He was a tall, handsome man of most determined character. It is more than justice to say that to Mr. McIlwain there is due credit for if it had not been for his continuing persistence, energy and aid, it is probable that the present church building would not be standing today.

It is without question that the background, training, and previous service in church work in the Northeast had a great influence on the design of the church that would be built. For a short period of time before graduation, Mr. McIlwain served as an assistant to the rector of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in the city of Boston.

In July of 1883, a committee was appointed to proceed with the building of a new church at a cost not to exceed \$22,000. Another resolution provided that it was to be of the same design as an Episcopal Church in Jamaica Plains, Boston, Massachusetts.

St. John's Church, built from 1885 to 1888, is one of the most outstanding and best preserved examples of late 19th century ecclesiastical architecture in Keokuk and the only one that combines Gothic Revival detailing with Richardsonian Romanesque form and massing. According to the Iowa Diocesan office of the Episcopal Church in Des Moines, St. John's is the oldest Episcopal Church of cruciform construction in Iowa.

The first service was held in the new building on February 12, 1888. After a brief service in the old church, the congregation processed to the new church for the first service. At the time the church was not completely paid for and Father McIlwain would not permit the consecration to be held until all debts were paid. There remained a debt of \$5,850, to be paid before the consecration.

On a Sunday in March of 1890, Father McIlwain preached a "*money sermon*," "The Lord Loveth a Cheerful Giver", on the status of the new building. The offering zoomed to a total of \$1,800

that morning. The congregation became so driven that they soon earned the balance owed; the church was finally debt free and consecrated on January 4, 1891.

There are six distinctive parts to the building. Beginning at the rear of the church we find the Narthex, the Nave (where the congregation is seated), Transepts (arms of the cross), Chancel, Altar Rail, and Sanctuary.

Most cruciform structures have only token transepts, whereas in St. John's one can actually see the cross. Transepts or arms of the cross are very pronounced and one can determine the shape of the cross without having to use any imagination.

The bell tower is 75 feet tall and is topped by a spire on each of the four corners. The tower contains five stained glass windows and houses the bell, which was installed in the original church in 1855 and was the first bell to be rung by an Episcopal Church in Iowa. It is one of two items moved from the original church when the present structure was built.

The other item is the baptismal font, which is housed in the rear of the church. William Bawden, a marble cutter and member of St. John's, carved the font out of a solid block of limestone. The font was originally presented by the Sunday School and installed in the original church, which was consecrated in 1852.

The massive gable roof is covered with gray slate imported from Wales. It has never been replaced but has been maintained by necessary repairs. The roofline is broken by three triangular clerestory windows on each side. These dormer windows on the East contain stained glass windows of three American Episcopal bishops of historic significance to St. John's: Bishop Seabury, the first Bishop in the United States; Bishop Kemper, Missionary Bishop of the Northwest Territory who established St. John's in 1850; and Bishop Lee, the first Bishop of the Iowa Diocese. The clerestory windows on the opposite side are of three Anglican Saints: St. Patrick, St. Columba and St. Augustine. These six windows were manufactured by the Wippell Co. of Exeter, England and were put in place in the 1970's. We are told they are exceptional for the modern companies.

The roof is supported on the interior by six arches of red oak tastefully crafted, massive and ornamental, resting on elegantly carved stone brackets.

The drainage system is the original copper.

The main entrances to the church and the parish hall are heavy double oak doors. They are not original but are exact replicas done by Burlington contractor High and Company during the 1960's or 1970's.

The plans for St. John's Church were designed by architects H. M. Stephenson and Daniel Appleton of Boston. As the building committee requested, the plans were patterned after St. John's Episcopal Church at Jamaica Plains, Boston, Massachusetts, which had been designed by the same architects. These architects also designed the plans for the Parish Hall addition, which

was built in 1895. This was done without disturbing the integrity of the original structure. F. W. Menke of Quincy, Illinois, was the builder of both the church and the Parish Hall addition.

The exterior walls are constructed of native limestone from Canton, Missouri.

Historical records indicate the Parish Hall addition was built of Bedford, Indiana, limestone. The architects and builders were careful to keep all features of the addition in harmony with original church building.

Several of the stained glass windows of St. John's were installed during construction so they have been in place for over a hundred years. Others have been added over the years with the most recent during the 1970's.

There are seven companies represented -- the Lamb Studio of New Jersey, Small Glass Company of St. Louis, Missouri; William Geissler of New York; Jacoby Company; Wippell Company of Exeter, England; and two of the finest, the Mayer of Munich Glass Company of Germany and the Tiffany Studios of New York, thus providing an exceptional gallery of stained glass.

Restoration was done by Shennandoah Glass Company of Front Royal, Virginia. Their people said our windows were among the top 3% in the United States ...real treasures!

The narthex is fairly spacious lending itself for the purposes of greeting worshippers, the formation of processions for church services, funerals, weddings and other ceremonial religious services. Five stained glass windows are found in the narthex, some of which were installed when the building was constructed.

The Archangel in the center in a bright pink robe is quite a unique Geissler window and is one of the earliest.

The narthex is divided from the nave by two tastefully designed columns and archways.

The nave contains 34 handsomely designed pews, which are divided by an aisle six feet wide. The pews are constructed of red oak, the top of the back and panels on the ends are of cherry.

The wainscoting around the exterior walls is of red oak. From the nave we can observe the beauty of the six red oak arches supporting the roof. The gas pipe fittings for the original lighting can still be observed from the bottom supports of the arches. The original lights have been replaced by electric lights selected to blend in with the original decor.

There are twelve windows in the nave, six on each side. There are three Tiffany windows (all angels) in the nave -- two on the West side and one on the East, For the most part; the details are actually "in" the glass, rather than painted, or stained on. The faces of the Tiffany angels are almost photographic. They have the distinctive coloring and milky depth of the Tiffany glass as well as the distinctive style.

The oldest Tiffany window, installed in 1897, is the Ascension Angel. This window shows a seated angel, with its finger pointing toward the heavens. The beautiful whites and creamy shadings of blue are most certainly in the fluid Tiffany style. Especially noteworthy are the "feathers" of the angel's wings, which were created when the glass was pouted.

In 1903, Resurrection Angel, another Tiffany window, was installed. It is executed in unusual soft shades of brown and rose. The Tiffany windows are unique in that they are the only windows visible at night when there is no outside light. This window has a double face -- the face shows both inside and outside -- which is quite rare. The window is almost completely double glass. Guardian Angel is a fine example of draped glass that makes a milky depth distinctive of Tiffany. It was installed in 1910.

On the East side, toward the back, is St. John the Divine, manufactured by the Lamb Studio of New Jersey. It was installed in 1895 and, although approximately the same age as the other windows, it has a distinctive look.

The other eight windows on the sides of the nave are all Mayer of Munich Glass Company of Germany windows. They were all installed at the time of construction or soon after.

Above the main aisle in back of the nave are the three windows, Faith, Hope and Charity. It is interesting to note that, while Hope and Faith are both portrayed by women, Charity is represented by a man, the Good Samaritan. In this detailed panel all of the characters of the parable can be seen. They are bordered with a complex vine and floral pattern -- the only windows bordered in this way. They are believed to be some of the most valuable and outstanding windows of St. John's, and were put in place in 1886 when the church was constructed. They are fine examples of Mayer of Munich windows.

The transepts, or arms of the cross, originally contained pews for seating the congregation. In more recent years the East transept has been converted to a chapel for daily worship service. This is the place where you will find the huge, lovely Jesus and Saint Peter window. Mrs. Robert Farmer Bower installed this window in 1988 in memory of her husband. He was a successful wholesale grocer and prominent Mason. He has the finest collection of Masonic books in the country, which became the nucleus of the Masonic Library in Cedar Rapids. Mr. Bower was instrumental in founding the Keokuk Public Library. This, too, is a Mayer window. In this transept you may also find two more modern windows depicting the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah by the Whippel Company of England.

The West transept is used as a prayer center for private prayers. The magnificent Conversion of Constantine window, installed when the church was built, is located here. This window was given by the Damascus Commandery of the Knights Templar in Keokuk to commemorate their dead. The Rev. McIlwain was very active in the Masonic orders. This also is a Mayer window.

There are also two Whippel windows of the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel, are in this transept.

A Gothic arch separates the nave from the chancel. The hand painted-dove at the top of the arch symbolizes the third part of the Trinity -- the Holy Spirit. At the entrance to the chancel is the

pulpit and lectern. On one side, a pulpit of brass and red oak and on the other the brass eagle lectern, one of the finest in any Episcopal church in Iowa. The lectern was first used at the Easter service in 1890.

The chancel houses the choir and the organ. It is quite spacious, providing room for a large choir.

The Temple Organ Company of Lamoni, Iowa, built the present organ in 1965. There are 22 registers, 127 ranks, and 1,520 pipes. There is an echo or processional organ in the rear of the nave.

A chancel screen on each side of carved red oak enhances the chancel. Note the chancel carvings repeat the architectural borders that are found on most of the Mayer windows.

The altar rail is of red oak, supported by elegant ornamental brass standards. Only the priest, acolytes, altar guild and other authorized persons may enter here.

The altar is of red oak with three carved panels. The reredos is similarly paneled and carved of red oak.

The rear of the recessed sanctuary is a curved wall forming a 180-degree arc. This area of the church is known as the apse. The roof of the apse is vaulted or arched in shape. The significance of the apse is that the dome represents power and authority.

In about 310 A.D., Constantine, who was a Christian, through several major battles brought the Roman Empire under one head -- himself. Rome was basically pagan at that time. His first Christian endeavor was to build churches. The first one was in Jerusalem, believed to have been built over the tomb of our Crucified Savior. It was called the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and was finished in approximately 336 A.D. The basic element of this church was the domed roof over the grave. From this day on, all buildings signifying power and authority have domed roofs. Constantine had two more churches built simultaneously, one in Byzantine. Istanbul, then called Constantinople in honor of Constantine, was called the first Christian City in the World. This church was also domed, and the Roman Empire was ruled from this city for several hundred years; it was the seat of Christianity, as Constantine decreed that the Roman Empire disclaim paganism and adopt Christianity.

The apse form is found in two locations in St. John's Church -- at the main altar and at the altar area in St. Andrew's Chapel. Another form of recognition of Constantine's contribution to the history of the Christian Church is found in two stained glass windows in St. John's Church. The Cross of Constantine is the window in the vestibule and is the first one observed as one enters the church through the main door. There is also the larger window, Conversion of Constantine.

Paul Pausch of Quincy, Illinois, beautifully and uniquely painted the ceiling of the sanctuary in 1955.

Above the reredos are five stained glass windows. In the center is Christ flanked by the four New Testament saints -- Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

When the church was built, St. John was placed in the center, over the altar. Then, in 1900, when the other four windows were given, St. John was moved to the side so that Jesus the Good Shepherd would be in the center. At the same time, the two windows on either side -- the Ascending Angel and the Guardian Angel were given.

A unique and distinctive feature of the decor of the church is the woodcarving, which was crafted by William Bartels of Carthage, Illinois. The carvings include the reredos, altar, altar rail, chancel screen, and pew ends. The front of the altar has three panels -- grapes symbolizing the wine, wheat symbolizing the bread, and in the center panel, a bas-relief of Christ carrying the cross to Calvary. This Bartels is considered to be his masterpiece, and is signed. Other notable work by Bartels includes his collection of carved parlor and bedroom furniture, used in an apartment for the Governor of Illinois during the World's Fair in Chicago, 1893. Queen Victoria offered a million dollars for the furniture to be used as a wedding gift to the Prince of Wales but Bartels refused to sell. It is now in the Governor's Mansion in Springfield. It is on record that the great woodcarver devoted over eight years of his life to carving this celebrated suite of furniture. A gavel he carved from a log obtained from the log cabin at New Salem where Lincoln boarded and later presented to President William McKinley is now in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. While he acquired many fine carving tools, Bartels did most of his work with a jackknife or penknife.

The sacristy is located to the right of the chancel, separated by a partition of geometric stained glass. In addition to the 43 windows visible from inside the church plus several in the bell tower, there are three windows in the sacristy, four in the parish hall entry, and three in St. Andrews' Hall (Parish Hall). They are geometric or floral in design, rather than figurative like the others.

There are so many interesting stories about St. John's that it is impossible to share them all at this time.

We do give church tours on request. If you or a group you belong to would be interested in a Tour, please call the church for an appointment.

As one member of the State Historical Committee said -- "This is not a restored structure, but one that has been lovingly maintained for over 100 years." We of St. John's only hope that those who follow us will be as pleased with the way we have cared for this lovely church as did those who preceded us.