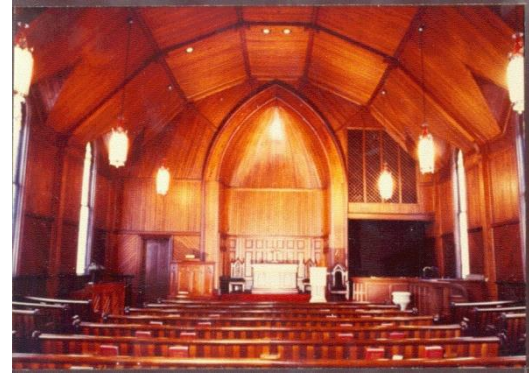


Chapel Anniversary - A Commemorative History



Happy Birthday Sweet 150!

by Ken Bohl



A Star Is Born

The First Congregational Church of Babcock's Grove started out in 1851 as a group of nine who met in the village schoolhouse, who then moved in 1856 to the Baptist Church building just north of Danby (which we know today as Glen Ellyn).

On December 3, 1868 the church congregation, now 16 people, returned to Babcock's Grove and built & dedicated a chapel on a site next to what is today the United Methodist Church, on the northeast corner of Main & Grove (now Maple) Streets. Less than one year later that chapel was totally destroyed by fire.

The congregation adopted a new location on the southwest corner of the same intersection, on property donated by a church member. Around that time the town was incorporated into the village of Lombard. The Chapel we know & love was built in the style known as "American gothic", "carpenter gothic", or "rural gothic". The architecture was very popular from 1840 to 1870, due to the abundance of timber in this country, and an improvisation of the stone structures of the middle ages in Europe. The Chapel was dedicated May 29, 1870.



Oldest picture we have, circa 1870.
Note the original entrance doors on the north side

There were no sidewalks. Maple Street was a mud road, and a wooden fence served to keep livestock off the premises.

Consider how different things were. The Civil War - and slavery - had only ended five years before. President of the United States? Ulysses S. Grant. And, one historical event which had *not* yet occurred was the Great Chicago Fire of October 8-10, 1871. We can't verify this, but it has been said that citizens of Lombard made the climb up into the belfry of the Chapel's steeple to watch the ominous orange glow from 20 miles away.

In 150 years, the Chapel has seen the Chicago Fire, two world wars, the Korean War, the Viet Nam war, and 9/11. Yes, it even saw the Cubs win the World Series in 1907 & 1908, and patiently waited 108 years until they won again in 2016. In its lifetime 13 states have been added to the union, and there have been 28 presidents of the United States. And, it has hosted over 1,000 weddings.

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A Very Special Place

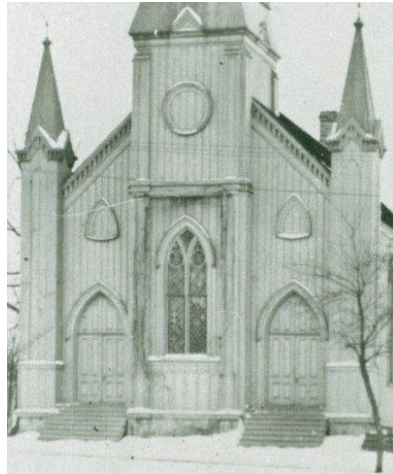
As we said, the basic architecture of the Chapel is “American Gothic”, whose most distinctive feature is the pointed-arch shape of windows and doorways. This shape on the back of the altar area has resulted in what many people feel looks like the hull of a boat. The stained-glass windows are in the “Grisaille” style, with a background of baked-on black paint (we don’t know how or when it started, but at the Maple Street Chapel they were often referred to as “calico” windows.). The beaded board in both the walls and the pews was distinctively stained in slightly different shades, giving a striped effect. The bell was cast by the Meneely Bell Foundry, one of the finest bell makers in the country.

The Early Years, Changing With the Times

The village of Lombard grew up around the Chapel in so many ways. It was the spiritual center of the community, and it provided many of the practical needs of the new village, including providing the meeting place of the village board and summoning the fire department with its bell.

In many ways the Chapel has changed in appearance, some apparent, others subtle. Many of the changes to the Chapel we hardly notice, which is our goal - to do what is necessary.

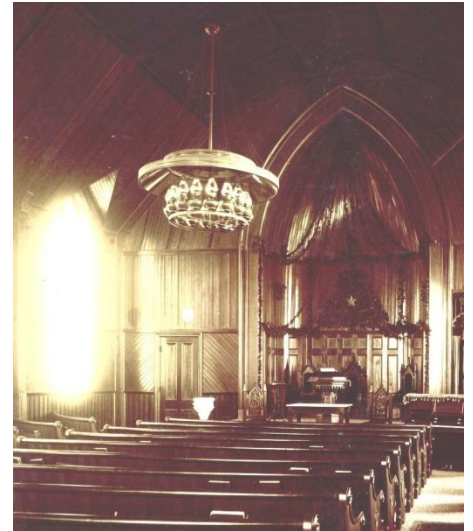
The most obvious change to the exterior is the change of entry on the north side. There were originally two large doors with stairs coming straight up from the north. In 1918, due to the widening of Maple Street and the addition of sidewalks, these doorways and stairs were eliminated, and two entry breezeways were added at the corners. The original doorways are now multi-light windows.



A more subtle change was, if you look closely at the picture on page 1, you will see multiple chimneys. Remnants of those chimneys exist in the Chapel’s attic today, two above the sanctuary, and one above the Reade Room. The location of the Reade chimney is quite apparent today, with a cover over the stove pipe still visible at the top of the south wall. The chimneys date back to the time when the Chapel was heated by multiple pot-bellied stoves, which brings us to the changes to the interior. When we see radiators and imagine a coal-fired boiler in the basement, it seems really old-fashioned. But a centralized heating system was a big breakthrough over individual stoves all of which had to be tended and cleaned.

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Similarly, people think of gas lights as old-fashioned, but they were a step up from the individual kerosene lamps, with the gas main being a single constant source of fuel. Each kerosene lamp had to be filled, lit, and extinguished. The central “light fixture” in the sanctuary was simply a round tray holding about 20 kerosene lamps. The fixture was lowered and raised as needed. Through the years the kerosene lamps were replaced by gas lights and then by the electric fixtures we see today.



But the most major change to the interior was also a major improvement. Most people are unaware that the majority of the beautiful beaded board on the walls & ceiling is not original to the Chapel. There was originally only a wainscot up to a height of 3½', and plaster above that. The rest of the beaded board was added in 1892.



This picture is not of the Maple Street Chapel, it is a chapel of the same vintage in the historic Fort Steele in British Columbia. But it is a good representation of how things used to be with the plaster walls, kerosene lamps, and pot-bellied stoves.

Music, particularly organ music, has always been an integral part of the Chapel. We know very little about the original organ except what we see in the upper picture, a self-contained console and pipes, presumably with a pair of pedals the organist pumped.



In 1920, the Chapel acquired a much larger organ from a theatre. It consisted of 138 metal and teakwood pipes, for which a section of the roof was raised and a room was built in the attic. This originally had large pedals that a boy would pump while the organist played. Eventually a motorized pump was installed.



That organ saw the end of its useful life, and in 2010 Tom & Shirley Scott donated a state-of-the-art Rogers electronic organ. We still have the room full of pipes and the Rogers organ could be made to drive them, but we are quite happy with the sound it produces.

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The Chapel's Near-Death Experience

The Chapel served as the home for First Church from 1870 to 1959, when the congregation both outgrew the sanctuary and had a need for more facilities for its many outreach programs. The Chapel's usage gradually diminished to almost nothing, while the building experienced a gradual deterioration. The predicament was that the beautiful Chapel needed ongoing tender loving care, but the charter of a church is caring of its membership and outreach to the community & the world, not the preservation of a historic building. The crisis came to a head in the 1970's when the Chapel needed wood repairs, the beautiful stained-glass windows were falling apart, and the heating system was failing. Faced with the monumental cost, a proposal was made at a First Church congregational meeting to tear the Chapel down! The Chapel had very few devoted friends at this time, but among them were Dr. Thomas and Shirley Scott. They asked if anyone had researched the cost of demolition vs. the estimated cost of renovation. This caused the motion to be tabled until the next meeting 3 months later. During this time, several people did the research and came up with an estimate of a total of \$70,000 in renovations the Chapel required, compared to \$55,000 to tear it down. People who were devoted to the Chapel organized and took on the task of raising the \$70,000. Two of the things they did were:

- 12 people each pledged \$2,000 for the restoration of a stained-glass window.
- They organized an event they called "A Dickens of an Auction", held on a Saturday night at the Yorktown shopping center. People donated many items, and the auction ran until 1:00 A.M., and raised \$35,000 in that one evening.

This effort not only addressed the current need, but established the support of people who wanted to maintain & preserve the Chapel for all time. Shortly after this, the Chapel was added to the National Register of Historic Places, in 1978.

A Proposal to Relocate, and New Life

After the financial crisis and resolution in the 1970's, care of the Chapel continued, and it began hosting the folk concert series. But it didn't really have a firmly-established identity or purpose. In 2000, a new commitment was made to organize a group of people to work collaboratively to preserve & improve the Chapel. In clarifying this purpose, a new non-profit organization was created and chartered as *The Maple Street Chapel Preservation Society*. But then a proposal was introduced to gift the Chapel to the Village of Lombard, which would move the building to Lilacia Park to become part of the park district. This was a highly controversial issue, arousing a lot of emotion on both sides. In the end, the congregation of First Church voted against the plan, and the Chapel remained in its home, with the escalated challenge for the Preservation Society to bring their promise to independently preserve and improve the Chapel to reality.

In the past 20 years, the Preservation Society has kept and exceeded that promise, making the organization financially viable, maintaining the Chapel's upkeep, extending programs to reach out to the community, and doing sensitive modernization improvements. Many of these were spelled out in the last issue of the Chapel Bell, including the fire alarm & sprinklers systems, full handicapped access, air conditioning, upgrades to the electrical & heating systems, a new roof, and several repaintings. We've also evaluated possible weaknesses and future needs. We are very devoted to our title of *Preservation Society*, with a commitment to do the long-term efforts to see to the Chapel's future for the next 150 years and beyond.

