

ST. LUKE'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH,
BROCKPORT, NEW YORK

A Brief History
In Celebration of 150th Anniversary of the Church Building
1855-2005



With grateful acknowledgement to Eunice Chestnut for providing much of the historical documentation for this brief account of St. Luke's story.

The Building

It all began with the faith and determination of a few strong women. Soon after the completion of "The Grand Canal," Phoebe Merrill Brockway and the other Episcopal ladies began meeting and organizing fairs and suppers to raise money for missionary work. Longing for stability they exercised their only power, that of persuasion, to convince their husbands and other male members of the community to establish an Anglican church in Brockport.

Those faithful pioneers must have been elated when, on September 17, 1838, the men of the new church met and approved the Articles of Incorporation officially declaring St. Luke's Episcopal Church an independent parish in the Diocese of Western New York. * Elias E. Holmes, Jerome Fuller and Samuel H. David signed the certificate of incorporation, dated September 20, 1838, with Reverend Tapping Reeve Chilton serving as the first rector. Services were initially held in local homes and community halls, until the Free Will Baptist Church on King Street was leased.

Sixteen years later, in 1854, construction of the Medina sandstone building at the corner of Main and State Streets began on what is now the oldest church building on Main Street. When the building was completed the following year at a cost of \$6,897.03, the seventy-foot spire must have towered over the tiny village. The small one story building offered a place to worship, but no meeting space. The Vestry met in the downtown offices of the faithful. The congregation was called to worship by a bell for the first time in 1863. In addition to calling the faithful, the bell also served as the village's fire alarm.

The Parish Hall was added to the church in 1903. This addition permitted great expansion of the work of St. Luke's. Aside from church school and meeting space for parishioners, the facility was designed to serve the wide needs of the community. The original structure encouraged community use with a gymnasium in the basement, a stage on the third floor, and enough flexibility to even be

* In 1930 the eastern parishes, including St. Luke's, became a part of the newly formed Episcopal Diocese of Rochester

used as a hospital for a weeklong public clinic for tonsillectomies. The first of many a fitting use for a church named in honor of St. Luke, the physician.

Music has always been a special ministry at St. Luke's. In the old days, in order for the organ to be played, bellows had to be pumped. Once in awhile boys of the parish were needed for this task. They got to ride up and down on the handle, which was a big treat in the days before video games and DVDs. Today the choir is under the direction of Brenda Trembly, who has played a significant role in encouraging the Brockport Symphony, as well as special guest musicians, to hold community performances at St. Luke's.

Sunday School children, inspired by their teacher Mary Jane Holmes, a famous local author, presented the church with a baptismal font that was dedicated at the 1867 Christmas Eve service. The children raised the money for the font by picking fruit, stacking wood, giving up chewing gum, and holding a fair that was organized by their teacher. Mrs. Holmes wrote a book entitled, "The Christmas Font" that was sold at the fair. The Italian marble font bears the carved wording, "Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not", as well as crediting the children for the gift.

One of the great treasures of St. Luke's physical plant are the three Tiffany windows. The first Tiffany window was the three-paneled window entitled, "Peace, Perfect Peace" and was dedicated in 1914. It is located above the Main Street entrance, depicting landscape scenes of a lake in the central panel and branches of thick pines in the side panels. The landscape seems to glow, as the natural sunlight shines through the subtly hued colors of the window.

The beautiful three-paneled window over the altar, "The Nativity," was given in 1917 by Sara Morgan Manning as a memorial to her son Arnold, who died at the age of 22. So taken by the beauty and subject of the window, the Eastman Kodak Company photographed it and used it as a panoramic Christmas display in Grand Central Station in New York City in 1955. Millions of travelers were able to share the delight of that offering. The third Tiffany found on the south wall depicts two angels and a cross, offering yet another superb example

of Tiffany's gift for creating pictorial details. Louis C. Tiffany's signature may be viewed at the bottom of this window.

Following a more than \$400,000 restoration project, a rededication service was held in 1999. The church received a new roof, structural work, painting of the inside of the church and the creation of a renewed sanctuary space. The new altar, credence table, and railings were crafted by a local artisan out of black walnut trees that had been knocked down in a violent windstorm on Labor Day in the mid-1990's. Fletcher Garlock, a life-long member of St. Luke's, who remembered as a very young boy helping his grandfather Gifford Morgan plant the trees, donated the wood. Mr. Morgan had also been a member of St. Luke's.

In 1990, St. Luke's was designated a National Historical Landmark. The Landmark Society of Western New York further honored St. Luke's in 2000 with the bestowal of their Stewardship Award.

The People

The course of St. Luke's has not been without some trials and tribulations. St. Luke's 1911 annual expenses were listed as \$2,660 and its income at about \$1,600, of which \$900 went to the rector as salary. In 1914 the wardens and vestry acknowledged that the church could not have continued to be without the aid of the various women's organizations. Today the parish continues to rely on the energetic and vital contributions of its Women's Group.

Fr. Talbot Rogers, rector from 1919 to 1921, was very unpopular with his congregation following some remarks he made about unethical business practices in Brockport. Although encouraged to resign, he refused to do so until some of the wealthier members paid off the church's outstanding debts.

Creativity, a long-standing attribute of members of St. Luke's, was obvious in a late 1940's parish Lenten effort based on the parable of the talents. A sixty-day note was set up at what was then the Lincoln Rochester Bank (now Chase). Each adult and older child was given a \$10 bill and asked to put it to work. There were neither records kept nor strings attached. The initial investment was to be returned to the

church on Easter Sunday with any money earned through the talents of the individual given the original \$10. A tiny, elderly lady purchased \$10 worth of supplies for making dish cloths, which she sold from door to door. One frigid, stormy February night she ventured out commenting, "Who would turn down an old lady who comes to their house on a night like this selling dish cloths for the church?" Spunk, along with creativity, might be said to be an attribute of St. Luke parishioners.

Community Ministry

St. Luke's community service ministry was highly visible during the World War II years. The parish house provided a workroom for the Red Cross, as well as housing a teen canteen. The Parish Council Memorial Fund, instituted during the rectorship of Fr. Burtis Dougherty (1945-1953), signaled new growth and life in the parish that began as an ecumenical effort. The parish house sheltered Nativity School students while repairs were being made on their school building, following a fire that gutted it. During the rectorship of Fr. David Crump (1953-1956), Jewish students from the college were invited to hold their Seder worship at St. Luke's.

Significant new approaches to ministry and service began under the leadership of Fr. George Stiegler (1957-1964). The parish hall was opened to residents that had lost their electricity in a ferocious storm in 1964. The Red Cross supplied generators, cots and blankets. Families were assigned to Sunday School rooms to afford them some sense of privacy. An Ecumenical Migrant Ministry program, a hallmark of St. Luke's work still today, also began under the direction of Fr. Stiegler. Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, continuing still today, were held in the parish hall for the first time.

The Crypt, a coffee house ministry developed under the direction of Assistant Rector John VanDuyne (1963-1965) in partnership with students from the college, was located in St. Luke's basement from 1964 to the mid-1970's. College students were encouraged to offer readings of their poems and essays and to share musical creations.

Under the leadership of Rev. David K. Robinson (1986-present), the church has continued to open its doors and participate in community

ministry. The mission of the Brockport Ecumenical Outreach Committee (BEOC), formed in 1989, is to promote a peaceful multicultural community and the organization has been strongly supported by St. Luke's since its inception. In 1991, St. Luke's again opened its basement space to house the BEOC Clothing Center, which continues to be in operation with six different churches each overseeing the staffing and maintenance for two months per year.

Responding quickly to the need, Fr. Robinson opened St. Luke's doors to the community for an ecumenical service following the 9/11/2001 terrorist attacks. Weekly peace services were provided for the community during the initial period of military conflict in Iraq. In times of crisis, the greater Brockport area has been able to count on St. Luke's providing individuals of all faiths opportunity to come together as a community in prayerful response.

St. Luke's has actively supported the Brockport Ecumenical Food Shelf with a weekly collection of canned goods as a part of our offerings to God. Members of St. Luke's have also served on the Food Shelf Board and as packers and distributors of the food.

An ecumenically based local Amnesty International (A.I.) Group, founded in the early 1970's, extended opportunities for church involvement through A.I. Urgent Action appeals. With the encouragement of Fr. Robinson and the active A.I. membership of several members of St. Luke's, A.I. Urgent Action Sunday has been a strong partnership for almost two decades. In conjunction with A.I., St. Luke's Social Ministry Committee has co-sponsored two major events: a presentation and discussion of the death penalty as a sentencing option by the Rt. Rev. Jack McKelvey, Bishop of the Diocese of Rochester, in 2001, and three offerings of the play, *The Exonerated*, in 2005.

In 1991, St. Luke's made the first annual donation of \$500 to the Lakeside Memorial Hospital St. Luke's Fund to help provide medicine for the working poor. Also that year, the parish hall was used as a blood donor center. St. Luke's has also provided space for numerous Scout troops, Hispanic youth dance group, YMCA classes,

Literary Volunteers, BEOC meetings, as well as to Al-Anon and A.A. groups.

The first annual ecumenical Martin Luther King, Jr. remembrance celebration was held in 1996. Guest speakers, such as Rochester Mayor William Johnson, have helped the service affirm St. Luke's and the Brockport community's commitment to the importance of Dr. King's life and work.

In May, 2001, St. Luke's hosted a celebration of thanksgiving for community partnerships in ministry and the designation of St. Luke's as a Jubilee Parish by the National Episcopal Church Jubilee Office. The designation is in recognition of the work of St. Luke's among poor and oppressed people.

Rural and Migrant Ministry (RMM), a statewide multi-faith organization, was welcomed with office space in 2002. RMM serves rural and migrant people through programs of youth empowerment, education, and a partnership of support.

Inclusiveness

St. Luke's has a long history of moving towards becoming more inclusive. In the 1950's, in accordance with church law, the Vestry was an organization for men only. As a response to that exclusionary rule, a Parish Council, open to both males and females, was organized. Parish Council members attended Vestry meetings and shared Vestry responsibilities so that women could participate in decision-making. It was not until 1966 that the first woman, Gertrude Kelley, was elected to St. Luke's Vestry. Nationally, the first female Episcopal priest was ordained in 1974. Fifteen years later, in 1989, the first female Episcopal Bishop was ordained. Although the parish has not as yet been lead by a female priest, many female seminarian students have enjoyed their yearlong field placements at St. Luke's.

The Episcopal Church invites all who have been baptized to partake of the Holy Eucharist, believing that God welcomes all to His table.

Today St. Luke's is pleased to welcome all, regardless of race, creed, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.



St. Luke's Episcopal Church.

St. Luke's Episcopal church was organized September 2, 1838. The present church building was erected in 1855 and was consecrated July 1856 by Bishop DeJacy. The present rector is the Rev. W. H. G. Lewis.

The church was organized with a very small but influential membership. It had thirteen rectors, of whom three, Drs. Harris, Wilson and Selbt have been advanced to seminary professorships. Of former rectors the best known is the Rev. C. H. Selbt. The son of a Lutheran minister and born in Saxony, he served Brockport 18 years. All the other rectors were American-born, save Rev. R. C. Wall, an Irishman, and Rev. Henry Rollings, who came from Canada and was born in England. These two served but one and three years. The average length of service is five and a half years. In actual length of service the Rev. Selbt comes first and the Rev. John S. Littell second.

After making considerable improvements in the church property and placing a fine new organ in the memory of Mrs. Richard C. Shannon, Mr. Littell and vestry found themselves grappling with plans for the Cary Memorial House.

This was made possible by the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. Shannon, Mrs. Jane E. Cary, who secured for herself the privilege of naming the new institution after members of her husband's family who had been influential in the founding of the church; and by the industry of a guild of women who had saved \$2,000 during a

term of years; together with a large number of subscriptions in smaller amounts made by people of all ages, callings and religions.

The formal opening of the Cary Memorial House took place May 4, 1905. The house is a handsome and durable structure of brown stone, two stories high, and large enough for any purpose for which it may be required. This gives Brockport one of the finest parish houses of any town of its size in Western New York.

Although largely built through the persistence and energy of the Rev. J. S. Littell, it is not intended to be an exclusive Parish House, for the benefit of church members only, but will be open to all who care to make use of it. In the basement of the building is a large gymnasium, fitted up with over \$500 worth of apparatus, which was subscribed by public minded citizens of the village.

In the building is the Brockport Public Library, which is constantly growing in size and usefulness, and is fitted with sectional bookcases, presented by some of the young ladies of St. Luke's church. On the first floor is the guild room, rector room, choir room, dining hall and kitchen.

The second story is entirely devoted to an assembly hall, which will seat about 1,000. It has a convenient rostrum and dressing rooms and is one of the fine halls in the village available for public use. The building is fitted throughout with gas and electric lights, steam heat and all other modern conveniences.

1880
AT ST. LUKE'S.

The Christmas tree was held at the church Tuesday evening, and in spite of the severe cold and tempestuous wind the church was packed full, standing room and all. As always, the occasion was heartily enjoyed by all, and the lively carols of the children seemed to bid defiance to the storm without.

The distribution of the ocean of gifts caused a continuous and lively sensation, and those who did not receive presents seemed to enter into the enjoyment of the occasion as heartily as the rest.

The most interesting feature of the evening was the reading of a kind letter of remembrance from Mrs. Mary J. Holmes, now in Paris; and the distribution of a set of elegant presents to the teachers of the Sunday School, the organist and members of the choir; and also presents from Mr. Holmes to the members of his class.

Through the kindness of the Rector, we are permitted to publish Mrs. Holmes letter:

PARIS, NOV. 22D, 1880.

To the Dear Friends at Home :

When I said good-bye to you last May, and knew that more than a year would elapse before I should see you again, one of my deepest regrets was the thought that Christmas would come and go and I should have no share in the Festival, except as I might be a memory in the hearts of some, who would kindly think of me on that day. Then it occurred to me that by sending you some little token of remembrance, I could bring myself into close communication with you, and be a part of the Christmas-tree; and that plan I resolved to carry out. Gladly would I send something to each of you, but that is too great an enterprise to undertake when we remember the remorseless Custom House Officer, through whose hands every article must pass; and I have decided upon the Rector, the teachers of the Sunday School and the members of the choir, while Mr. Holmes joins me by remembering his class. And so, almost as soon as our feet touched the foreign shore the work began; and I assure you it has been a very pleasant task, gathering up here and there little gifts, which in themselves are of no especial value except as they represent the friendship we feel for you all, and will tell you how much you have been in our minds and how often your names have been on our lips. It seemed like a bit of home Christmas when we sat down to arrange and mark the things, wrapping up in each package more good wishes than can be expressed on paper.

And now that our task is done and the box packed, there comes over me an intense longing to go with it across the sea, but this cannot be. And so with a Merry Christmas for you all, and a prayer that when next the Christmas-tide comes round and you keep the Festival in the dear old church, we may be there in body as we are now in spirit, I bid you good bye.

Very truly,

MARY J. HOLMES.