Bellefield's Tower:
THE CENTENARY OF THE BELLEFIELD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

James D. Van Trump

This is the first in a continuing series of articles to be reprinted from previous issues of the Historical Society quarterly. This excerpt is from a July 1966 article, written by well-known local history writer James D. Van Trump during Bellefield Presbyterian Church's centennial year. The church was demolished in favor of an office building in the late 1980s - except for its distinctive tower, which still stands beside the office building. It remains one of modern Oakland’s most unusual landmarks.

The original citation numbers appear here, but their accompanying notes are not included. The scholarly inclined may consult the original. Ellipses in the following text mark areas where the original has been amended.

The towers and domes of Oakland have for many years announced that district’s cultural supremacy in Pittsburgh, and still standing among them is the tall “early Gothic” tower of the Bellefield Presbyterian Church located at Bellefield and Fifth avenues. This year the congregation celebrates its 100th anniversary as a church organization and the tower calls attention to one religious aspect of the changing image of Oakland, an image that has evolved, amid ever enlarging mutations, from the farmland of the early 19th century to the monumental metropolitan quarter of today.

Bellefield’s tower has had to face many changes in the urban milieu that even before the beginning of the 20th century had begun to surround it. This essay is a “parish” history of an Oakland religious organization, but it is also a chronicle of the land and the people who produced the church. For the writer it is another part of the historical-religious-architectural mosaic of a city neighborhood in which he has long been interested.

The present Bellefield Church built in 1889-90 is, of all the buildings that surround the central campus of the University of Pittsburgh, the oldest. Its tower and that of the first wooden church of 1866-68 that preceded it solidly reflected the developing image of residential Oakland in both its rural-suburban and urban aspects well into the present century, but the erection, beginning in 1926, of the huge steel-framed tower of the Cathedral of Learning first projected into the adjacent cityscape the present enormous semblance of institutional Oakland. Thus the difference between the parochial tower and the academic is not one alone of architectural scale.

From the great complexes of monumental buildings that now cover Oakland’s acres it is perhaps a small historical relief to cast our eyes backward to the uncompli-
cated vistas of the earlier 19th century in order to search for the origins of Bellefield's tower. In one of the writer's previously published studies of Oakland buildings, we have already encountered the Bellefield beginnings. Like many other suburban churches, Bellefield had its inception in a Sunday School, which was, in this case, undenominational; like many worthy and socially productive activities in the early social history of the United States, this small institution was a communal effort, a common solution to a common need.

But what was common to the community that produced this need? The answer is to be found in the rather rapid development of Oakland from rural to suburban status after 1830. In the early 19th century, the district was one of large farm holdings. A large acreage held by James Chadwick in the western part of the district had been bought in 1836 by Charles B. Taylor and by him subdivided into lots of from eight to 20 acres. Many of these lots were sold to members of the Third Presbyterian Church (then located in downtown Pittsburgh) and the new owners built handsome country houses on their properties; this group of estates was known as "The Third Church Colony."

In 1837, a Sunday School was begun in a log structure on the property of Daniel Bushnell, but it was later moved to a small frame schoolhouse on the Eichbaum estate at Fifth Avenue and Darragh Street. This building, intended "for the children and the poor of the Colony," was later removed to Atwood Street by Dr. Theodore B. Lyman, the rector of Trinity Episcopal Church (1850-1862) who had bought the property. The mobility of the poor was limited; the well-to-do suburbanites could drive to town to attend church, but the transportation of their children was another matter. Consequently the foundation of a Sunday School was usually a necessary factor in mid-Victorian American suburbs.

Meanwhile, in 1850, Messrs. Rice and Dithridge bought a part of "Bellefield," the farm of the late Neville B. Craig (which lay in the eastern part of the Oakland district) and laid it out in lots, calling the new plan "East Pittsburgh." This area was to be the "parish" of the future Bellefield Church.

In 1862, a Mr. and Mrs. D. H. Fralic gathered the children of their neighborhood at their farmhouse on the eastern side of Four Mile Run. Here, on Sunday afternoon for a time, another Sunday School was established.

It readily can be seen that, given the circumstances, there was a communal need for some kind of well-established Sunday School. Since the members of no one denomination were numerous enough to set up their own school, an undenominational organization was the only solution.

The results of this need were foreshadowed by the establishment in the spring of 1863 of Sunday Evening Union Prayer Meetings and these gatherings were held in the houses of the East Pittsburgh suburbanites. These neighborhood "get-togethers" were, again, interdenominational, and in the words of a later chronicler were "largely attended, interesting, and harmonious."

As a result of these gatherings, a Union Sunday School was organized on 7 June 1863 in the unfinished parlor of Colonel D. B. Morris' house on Dithridge Street which was located where the Board of Education Building now stands. There were about 40 scholars in this school and a half-dozen teachers. John S. Davison was chosen superintendent and James D. Carlisle, assistant superintendent.
As these meetings attracted more students and aroused more local interest, it became necessary to find larger quarters. Accordingly, Messrs. Henry Lloyd and John S. Davison bought a lot on Henry Street (which still perpetuates Lloyd’s Christian name) and placed on it a former carpenter’s shop which they remodeled into a chapel and schoolroom. In rural-cum-early-suburban America, such architectural metamorphoses were not uncommon.

The first sessions were held in the new carpenter-shop chapel on 2 July 1864. The Sunday School was joined at the new location by the students who had been meeting at the Fralich house. Even the new building, however, soon proved to be too small; the Bible classes still met at the house of Colonel Morris, and in summer when the weather was fine, the Infant Department gathered on the lawn on the shady side of the chapel.15

East Pittsburgh (the name soon reverted to the earlier designation of “Bellefield”) was not a railroad suburb and it was even more distant than the Third Church Colony from downtown Pittsburgh by Fifth Street Road. It was inevitable that one of the denominational groups of the village would try to form a church and since the Presbyterians were relatively more numerous, pressure for the formation a Presbyterian congregation in Bellefield began to mount.

In the summer of 1866, an application for permission to form a church was sent to the Presbytery of Ohio, which then had jurisdiction over Pittsburgh. The church project was favorably received in the neighborhood, and without respect to sectarian differences, some eighty persons, members and non-members, subscribed to the petition.16 Many of the signers who were not Presbyterians later withdrew to found their own churches in Oakland.17

The Bellefield Church was organized in the Henry Street Chapel on 9 September 1866, with Messrs. John S. Davison and John McCurdy as elders and J. D. Carlisle and George Wilson as deacons. Rev. David McKinney acted as stated supply of the pulpit.18 Henry Lloyd provided the site of the church building at the northeast corner of Bellefield and Fifth avenues. The new edifice was completed and occupied by the congregation for the first time upon the occasion of the funeral of the superintendent of the Sunday School, John S. Davison, and his son who lost
World Industry Looks to Pittsburgh

RECENTLY members of the economic missions of Great Britain, France, Belgium and Italy visited Pittsburgh for the purpose of learning what amount of basic world commodities produced here could be secured for the rehabilitation of the devastated areas of Europe and the re-establishment of industrial activities.

The importance of their Pittsburgh conference can be understood only when you fully appreciate how much the industrial and even the commercial activity of the world depends upon the production of the great basic industries of this district.

Pittsburgh manufacturers in every line have a distinct advantage in developing foreign trade for their products because of the paths that have been blazed and the goodwill won throughout the world by the basic products of this district. Our Foreign Trade Department with its world-wide banking facilities can be of inestimable aid to you in merchandising your products abroad.

Mellon National Bank
Smithfield Street
Fifth and Oliver Avenues

(Circa 1919)

We have a history of providing solutions.
America's First Carnegie Library

The opening of the Carnegie Library in Braddock, Pennsylvania on March 30, 1889, started a saga of enlightened philanthropy probably never to be equaled.

Before he was through, Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) had donated $56,162,622 for the construction of 2509 library buildings in the English-speaking world. The “patron saint of libraries” made his money in Pittsburgh ... and here he formulated his gospel of giving.

“Unless we build things spiritual, we build in vain,” said the self-made, Scotland-born steelman. The free public library was to him a temple — a place of contemplation, and communion with ideas.

And it all began here — another example of the achievements and quality of life in Pittsburgh, then and now.

PARKER/HUNTER

Serving Investors Across Generations
with Financial Planning and the Portfolio Management Process

www.parkerhunter.com
800/441-1514
their lives by drowning at Beaver on 2 June 1868.\(^9\)

The Union Sunday School was transferred to the new building on 20 August 1868. On 20 September of the same year, Rev. D. T Carnahan was installed as pastor. The new church, which had been erected mostly at the expense of Henry Lloyd, was on 20 December completely destroyed by fire, and the Sunday School returned to the Henry Street Chapel.\(^{20}\)

The church building was rebuilt as rapidly as possible on the site and it was completed and reopened on 29 August 1869. At this time, the Atwood Street Sunday School, then under the superintendence of John B. Semple, was united with the Union School which was now merged with Bellefield Church.\(^{21}\)...

In 1888, 27 discussions began in connection with the building of the present church structure, which resulted in the plans of the Pittsburgh architect F. J. Osterling\(^{22}\) being submitted for approval. The front section of the old church was demolished, and the new structure built during 1889-90. The new church was occupied and dedicated in September 1890.\(^{23}\)

At about this time, Mrs. [William J.] Holland bought the lot across Bellefield Avenue from the church and built the Manse, a solid stone building in the Richardsonian Romanesque style. Sold by the Hollands in 1912, it was for a time occupied by the Knights of Columbus and now houses the television station WQED.\(^{20}\)

Not one of Osterling's better efforts, the present church building is an aggressive and rather infelicitous (although representative) example of the American Protestant auditorium church of the late 19th century. Its tower (the best part of the composition) was praised obliquely by Montgomery Schuyler, the great American architectural critic, in a statement generally not very complimentary to the architect.\(^{21}\)

In 1898, it was decided to demolish the remaining part of the old wooden church, and to erect a new chapel and Sunday School building after the designs of James T. Steen, a local architect. Designed in the same style as Osterling's auditorium, the new structure was completed and dedicated in 1900.\(^{24}\)...

Meanwhile, the character of Oakland had completely changed since its early suburban days. With the erection of the first Carnegie Institute building in 1891-95,\(^{25}\) it was evident that the quarter was destined to become the "civic" and cultural center of the city. After 1900 appeared the first of the large upperclass apartment houses (the Iroquois Apartments, also designed by F. J. Osterling, built in 1905; and the Bellefield Dwellings, designed by Carlton Strong, of about the same date) which were later to become a marked feature of the district. During the same period Franklin F. Nicola (1859-1938)\(^{26}\) — an astute real estate entrepreneur — and his Schenley Farms Land Company bought the last of the great Oakland farm tracts, the Schenley dairy farm, and laid out their development, called Schenley Farms, on mostly monumental lines, although a portion was retained for residential use.

Nicola was instrumental in helping to bring the Western University of Pennsylvania (it became the University of Pittsburgh in 1908) to Oakland. In 1900, Andrew Carnegie provided funds for the establishment of the Carnegie Institute of Technology and with the establishment of these two large educational institutions, a transient student element in the population of Oakland became increasingly evident. After 1900, it became apparent that the image of Bellefield as a simple quasi-suburban parish church inevitably would be subject to considerable modification....\(^{27}\)