



LIBRARY & ARCHIVES TREASURES

By David R. Grinnell, Chief Archivist

Assigned Seating—Not Just for School Kids

Remember “assigned seating” in elementary school? Some teachers arranged students in alphabetical order, others by height—tall kids to the back, please! At a glance the teacher knew if someone was present or absent.

Adults usually aren’t required to follow formal seating arrangements, although ticket holders at concerts and sporting events are guided to coinciding numbered seats, and planners of weddings and formal dinners assign seats to encourage harmonious socializing.

Although as creatures of habit people tend to sit in a regular spot in church or synagogue, those seats aren’t normally reserved or assigned. But a person attending religious services in Pittsburgh during the 19th and early 20th centuries probably had an assigned pew in which to sit.

Visitors to a church or synagogue built prior to the First World War might find numbers on the end of each pew. Congregations’ archives often list “pew rents” in the financial materials, and receipts for “pew rents” even appear in collections of family papers. But some congregations had professionally printed pew plans indicating the annual rent for each pew. Shown here is an example of a printed pew plan from Christ Methodist Episcopal Church, created by Wegner & Braun, lithographers, in 1855.




Street scene along Penn Avenue near Eighth Street with Christ Methodist Episcopal Church in view.

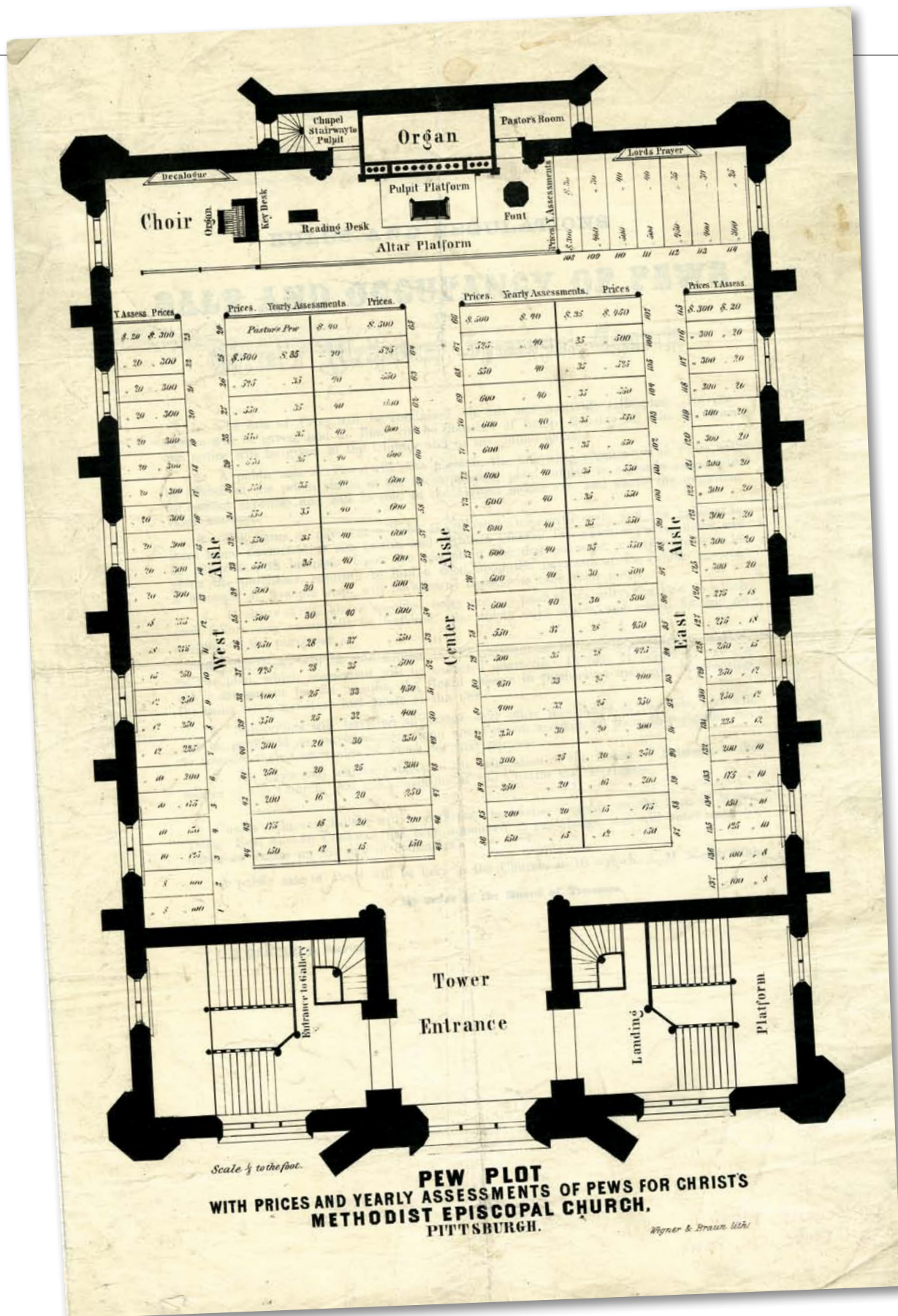
HHC L&A, James Benny III, Photograph Collection, PSS #20, Box 1, Folder 33.

Pew rent at First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh ranged from \$10 to \$800 annually and at Christ’s Church the range was \$8 to \$600. What a job the ushers must have had making sure everyone sat in their “rented” pew and that any visitors were not improperly seated! It’s likely that the concept of pew rent was created to ensure sufficient funds to pay the minister and provide building upkeep. Although no pew appeared to be more luxurious or comfortable than another, location seemed to drive the rent—the most expensive pews were on the center aisle about one-quarter of the way back from the pulpit.

Pew renting disappeared around World War II, in part due to the further democratization of American society, but

perhaps because it was seen as not very friendly either. Remnants of these past traditions appear in the archives, where their presence helps explain the way society was organized in the past. 

The pew plans are part of the vast archival treasures held in the Heinz History Center’s Library & Archives division, which collects material related to the history and culture of Western Pennsylvania. The L&A Reading Room is open for research 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday. Many resources from L&A can be accessed online at <http://www.heinzhistorycenter.org/libraryArchives.aspx/>.



Pew plan from Christ Methodist Episcopal Church, created by Wegner & Braun, lithographers, in 1855. Both HHC, Library & Archives.