

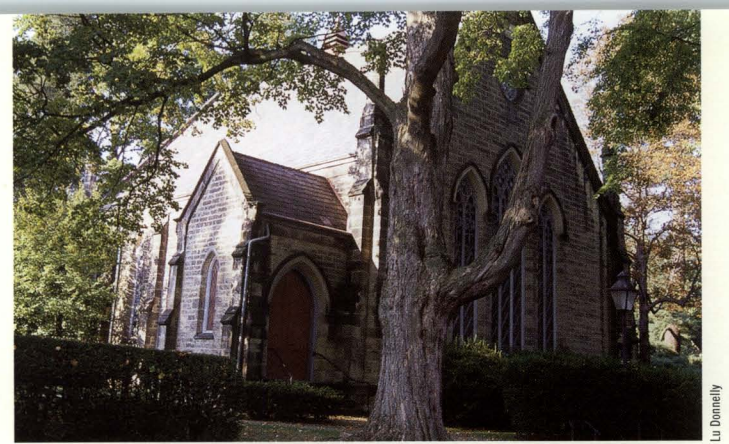
Architecture Around Us

By Lu Donnelly

Family Chapels – Part I of II

Western Pennsylvania has thousands of churches of all styles and denominations, but only a few built by single families to reflect their sorrows, joys, or aspirations. Each is a devotional gem donated by an individual or family to commemorate relatives and friends (many of whom are portrayed in stained glass windows). Two of these chapels are Presbyterian and two are Episcopal; all four are in small villages, which at the time of their building were accessible by train. Although there is an English tradition of building “chapels of ease” to serve outlying populations, the motivation appears to be as often doctrinal and personal as it is to provide a convenient place of worship.

The Shields Presbyterian Church (initially Leetsdale Presbyterian Church) was built in 1868 on Church Lane at Oliver Road in Edgeworth, northwest of Pittsburgh. Eliza Leet Shields (1784 – 1872), who donated the land and the money for the construction and maintenance of this church, was the daughter of Maj. Daniel Leet, who served on George Washington’s staff in the Revolutionary War. Born



Lu Donnelly

Shields Presbyterian Church, Edgeworth, was built in 1868 in a Gothic Revival style.

in Washington County, she studied at the Moravian Seminary in Bethlehem, Pa., and moved to the Sewickley Valley in 1823 at the age of 39. Her husband, David Shields, was an agent for the Harmonist Society in nearby Economy. Between 1823 and 1869, when the church was dedicated, her husband and three of her nine children died. The Civil War saw at least two of her grandsons in the thick of the fighting, only one of whom returned alive (pictured in this issue on page 25 in a painting of Gettysburg by Sewickley artist Audley Dean Nicols). During that time of heightened emotion and sadness, a doctrinal dispute with the Sewickley Presbyterian Church prompted the family to establish a congregation in their own backyard. In her 80th year, Eliza Leet Shields commissioned a stone country church in a Gothic Revival style.

The design of the church is attributed to Joseph W. Kerr, the first trained architect practicing in the Sewickley Valley, who had designed Eliza’s son’s nearby five-bay, red brick house in 1850. Kerr designed a range of buildings from residential to institutional, including the Gothic Revival cottages at Evergreen Hamlet and, ironically, the Sewickley Presbyterian Church. The Leetsdale church as built cost \$18,000. Nearly 30 years later, a Shields relative by marriage commissioned John Upton Barr to design an appropriate family mausoleum, like a small chapel itself, south of the church. At that time, the church was expanded to accommodate a pipe organ, and several stained glass windows were added. The family continues to own both structures, which are closed to the public.

Isolation, not dispute, was the inspiration for Kane Presbyterian Church, located not in a wealthy suburb but in rural McKean County. Thomas Leiper Kane (1822 – 1883) was born into a prominent Philadelphia family and served his jurist father as a clerk in the United States District Court. He studied in Paris and London, and married Elizabeth Dennistown Wood, one of the first graduates of the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania. He was an avid reformer and a man of principle who resigned a high paying position as a United States Commissioner because he refused to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Kane settled in McKean County to pursue the lumber business, but is best remembered for leading the Bucktail Regiment from the northern counties during the Civil War; he might even have crossed paths with the two Shields grandsons at the battles of Chancellorsville



Thomas Kane's body lies entombed in Kane, Pa. between the twin front entrances of the chapel he had built with local sandstone, c. 1876. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints restored the chapel in 1970 and maintains it as a historic site.

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, photo by Gary Ritchie, 1999

or Gettysburg. Kane returned to McKean County to rebuild his lumber empire. The discovery of oil on his lands assured the family's income, though he died before he could enjoy its fruits.

The financial patron of the chapel was Kane's aunt, Ann Gray Thomas, a devout Presbyterian who encouraged Kane to build a chapel in the wilds of Pennsylvania's lumber territory in 1876. Its design is attributed to Henry J. Taylor, but little is known of him. Built of local pinkish sandstone, the chapel is said to be modeled on one in Kent, England, seen on a trip abroad by Thomas Kane and his cousin. Unlike the other chapels described here, this one has the shape of a Greek cross with two entry pavilions on the northwest elevation. It was used as a Presbyterian chapel until 1967, then sat empty for three years until purchased by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

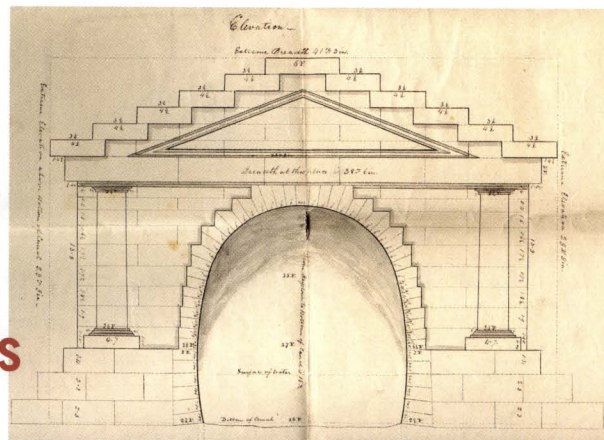
Kane's interest in the Mormons' plight stemmed from a lecture he attended in the 1840s in Philadelphia. He traveled extensively in the Midwest and West to learn more about their ways. Convinced that they were being unfairly persecuted, he publicized their ideas and defended them from being militarily overrun when they balked at having a non-Mormon governor in Utah. For his devotion to their cause, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints named a town in Iowa after him. The church also bought this chapel, restored it, and keeps it open as a museum in his memory.

To be continued in the Summer 2003 WPH magazine.

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania*, a forthcoming book in the 58-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled *Buildings of the United States*. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics.

L&A Treasures

By Steve Doell
Director, HSWP Archives



HSWP Library & Archives, Coltart collection

Joseph Coltart (1788-1866) immigrated to Pittsburgh from Dumfries, Scotland, in 1817 and was naturalized in 1826. He established himself as a stone mason in the city and worked on a number of notable projects throughout the region. He built the "new" Allegheny County Courthouse in 1836 for architect John Chislett. For the Pennsylvania Canal, he built a stone pier and walls for the water reservoir at Cecil Way near the St. Clair Bridge (now the Sixth Street Bridge), and the archway entrance to the Grant's Hill tunnel. He also built or oversaw the building of two churches in downtown Pittsburgh – Second Presbyterian Church at Penn and 7th Street, and Associate Presbyterian Church at 7th Avenue and Cherry Alley.

Mr. Coltart (often spelled Coultart or even Colthart) married Jean Ritchie in 1821, and they had five children. Their two sons, Robert, a lawyer, and William, an oil trader, died fighting in the Civil War.

The surviving papers of Mr. Coltart include the articles of agreement for all his building projects, his will, various receipts, and a drawing of the arch he built for the Pennsylvania Canal tunnel. The tunnel and archway were rediscovered in the excavation for the United States Steel Building in 1967.

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