Architecture Around Us
By Lu Donnelly

Family Chapels – Part II of II

Although Western Pennsylvania has thousands of churches of all styles and denominations, only a few were built by families to commemorate their loved ones and serve outlying areas. Part one of this article looked at Shields Presbyterian Church in Sewickley, Allegheny County, and Kane Presbyterian Church in McKean County.

Another wealthy, well-connected Philadelphia family built their chapel in Foxburg, Clarion County in 1881. The Foxes were descendents of George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends. One Fox descendant was the speaker for the Colonial Assembly in Philadelphia, another president of the Bank of Pennsylvania. They began buying land in Clarion County in 1796. Joseph Mickle Fox (1789 – 1845) was the first family member to settle nearby, setting up a law practice in Bellefonte, Centre County. In 1827, he decided to improve the beautiful piece of land at the confluence of the Allegheny and Clarion rivers, which was later named Foxburg. In 1845, his son Samuel Mickle Fox (1821 – 1869) built the core of a large stone house there. In 1880, Samuel’s wife, Mary Rodman Fisher Fox, commissioned the Memorial Church of Our Father in the village to commemorate her late husband. She chose her son William’s University of Pennsylvania classmate, James Peacock Sims, to design the chapel. He was assisted by his apprentice, Wilson Eyre, Jr., who took over the practice when Sims died during the construction of this church.

The warm, beautifully proportioned interior has trusswork of ash, brass chandeliers, and a mural titled “Angel of the Resurrection” by Edwin Howland Blashfield. The same artist later designed and executed the murals in the dome of the Main Reading Room of the Library of Congress that have been called “the culmination of the entire interior decorative scheme.” During the course of construction, Mary’s son William Logan Fox (1851 – 1881) died of a heart attack while running to catch a train near the site of the church. Her daughter Sarah Lindley Fox, who was in her twenties, died the same year. She had earlier convinced the family to convert to Episcopalianism. Blashfield’s mural is dedicated to Sarah, whose memorial service was the first held in the newly completed chapel.
All Saints Episcopal Church in Brookland, Potter County, was commissioned by the four children of Henry Hatch Dent in 1889. They hired New York architect Henry Martyn Congdon to design yet another stone Gothic Revival church, and again, a gripping family story prompted the construction of the chapel.

Henry Dent was born in England but reared in the southern U.S. He was a friend of Jefferson Davis in childhood. Dent graduated from Yale University in 1836, and practiced law with Francis Scott Key in Washington, D.C. He went to Coudersport in Potter County after his wife, Anne Maria, died young and left him with four small children. He brought his widowed mother and the children to this remote territory to oversee her inherited acreage and additional lands he purchased.

The cultured southerner was considered prideful and soft on slavery by his northern neighbors. His time in Potter County was often difficult, leading him to leave Coudersport for the much smaller town of Brookland. He returned to Maryland to die in 1872, but his children stayed in Brookland and lavished the interior of the tiny church they commissioned with butternut woodwork, red and white Italian marble flooring, and stained glass windows made by the English firm of Heaton, Butler & Bayne. One large window, titled “Jesus Blessing the Children,” pictures Dent’s five-year-old grandson, who had died of pneumonia, in the arms of Christ. His daughters and several grandchildren are buried in the adjacent churchyard.

Each chapel tells its story in a unique way using buttresses and belfries, windows and chandeliers, to bring solace to the families who commissioned them. These people transformed their personal sorrow into architectural beauty that we all can share.

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.