

“Ever Faithful, Ever Sure”
I Peter 2: 4-10 and Psalm 150
275th Anniversary Celebration

By the time he died at age fifty-five in February, 1777, Robert Smith had not yet been recognized as one of the most important and skilled architect-builders in colonial America. However, at least one publication of the time noted that the Walnut Street Jail was “one of the many buildings for which Philadelphia is indebted to that excellent and faithful architect,” Robert Smith. Despite inevitable changes in architectural tastes through the centuries, over fifty of Smith’s buildings have been identified. As one biographer notes, Smith’s “buildings remain stubbornly in view.” You may have seen some of them: Nassau Hall at Princeton University, the steeple of Christ Church and Carpenter’s Hall in Philadelphia, the Mental Hospital in Williamsburg, Virginia, Third Presbyterian Church (Old Pine) in Philadelphia - served by George Duffield, who also served here - and, of course, the building in which we are gathered to worship, First Presbyterian Church, on the Square, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Thomas and John Penn signed the patent granting ownership of this lot to trustees appointed by Presbyterians, September 20, 1766. Fundraising had already preceded the acceptance of the ground on which Smith’s design gradually took form and shape. No plans survive, but a contract in 1769 refers to Mr. Smith’s plan to erect “a shell of seventy feet front and fifty feet deep in the clear.” Though unfinished at first, accounts suggest the building was available for services by the fall of 1773. Final finishing occurred in the late 1780’s following the Revolutionary War.

This venerable stone edifice was in contrast to the small, rude structure built of wood and hope and Scots-Irish tenacity, evidence of which we so eagerly sought beneath the sod at Meeting House Springs Cemetery these recent years. A rusted hinge, some hand cut nails, bits of glass and layers of stone suggesting a foundation of sorts were all the remnants found - unless you count the tombstones. Those visible records of a church - not as building but as people - have been recorded as completely as possible in Richard Tritt’s book, *Here Lyes the Body*.

With names like McKeehan, Anderson, Forbes, Black, and Dunbar, these people, along with others, eventually became the church which occupied this meeting house built of native ashlar stone, assembled through the heat of summers and the cold of winters until, fifty feet by seventy feet, it inhabited its allotted space on the northwest corner of the Square. Successive generations which have been the church beneath the vaulted ceiling which curves above a clear, freestanding space have been illumined especially on bright days like this one by light beaming through windows placed symmetrically in the deep walls, as though to lend not only light but also a sense of balance and order, stability and strength, and perhaps a bit of harmony, all of which have been needed, some times more than others, for the building of a spiritual house.

Today we remember our forebears all, whether or not their names come readily to mind.

We are here because of them. The legacy passed to us is sometimes like the exterior of the south and east walls of Robert Smith's structure on the Square. The stones are smooth, resting easily side by side, from earth toward heaven. The joints are generally straight and pleasing to the eye. Sometimes our legacy is like the north and west walls, although the west wall is now hidden. Here the stones are more roughly set and angular. The joints form a kind of crazy-quilt pattern. Evidence of changes can be readily discerned where higher windows used to be. Yet, all four walls connect with each other firmly at the corners and rise toward the sky. As anyone coming upon the crossroads at High and Hanover can see, this church still "remains stubbornly in view."

So, too, for the spiritual house we inherit. Some of the stories told this past year have revealed some patterns at once smooth and solid which strengthened and sustained the this church in ministry and mission. From time to time, the way of service has been clear: from praying on the Square for soldiers passing through on their way to battle, to preparing an apartment for a Bosnian refugee family; from raising the roof or improving classroom space for a growing congregation, to sending children to camp and young people to the Youth Triennium. Our new history books continue to tell these stories.

At other times, the patterns are more jagged, the lines not quite as straight. These stories, too, we tell. In its early days, for example, members of the congregation held slaves, and yet the church provided space where slaves and free blacks were taught how to read. This congregation was part of the internal struggles within the denomination and even became part of another presbytery, yet this room was the site for the gathering of two General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church. When women were not readily allowed into leadership positions in general, this church elected women to serve as deacons and then as elders. The zig-zag line of such stories are also a valuable part of our inheritance.

When taken together in the grace of God, all the stories connect. Together they provide openings for light and, if we are willing to learn from them, sources for balance and order, stability and strength, and not a little harmony as we seek to be faithful in ministry in the years to come. Nevertheless, it is not what we have done or have not accomplished that makes a church. We are indebted to that "excellent and faithful architect," Jesus Christ. The foundation for our spiritual house is laid down by the grace of God in him. The mortar holding our story together is God's story. This is the story we proclaim in every baptism, God claiming us by water and Spirit - and every time we gather at the Lord's table, God feeding us with new life in Christ our Lord.

We have nothing to do with this good news other than to receive it - and then to live it - with gratitude and thanksgiving. What this spiritual house - and this house of stone, for that matter - are here for - is to "declare the wonderful deeds of God - who called us out of darkness and into the marvelous light of God." Through our life as a congregation - Presbyterian by inheritance - we are called to keep the light of God "stubbornly in view" not for our sake but for the sake of Jesus Christ and his love for all the world.

When the additions were added to Smith's structure, stones were hauled from the same quarry. The church was built out and up. Then the quarry was closed. No matching stones are available. . Sometimes we persuade ourselves that the church cannot continue because we think that somehow resources are limited or cut off. The quarry is closed. And yet, as our legacy reveals, the church grows and will continue to be strong in ministry and mission because of God's faithfulness at work in all things.

Witness the treasures God has already given. Please stand if you have ever served or presently serve in this church as:

- A Christian educator, teaching children, leading youth, educating adults;
- A choir member or musician;
- A participant in some form of mission;
- A part of the church staff (secretary, sexton) or as a "church mouse";
- A deacon;
- An elder.

For this day and for the future, God has already given the living stones that will speak of God's wonderful deeds. Therefore, I invite you stand:

If you joined this church before 1920...between 1920 and 1950....between 1950 and 1980... Between 1980 and 2000... Since 2000.

Look around and give thanks. The quarry is not closed! God's future lies ahead. By the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be built into a spiritual house. God is faithful - and God will do it.

"Let us with a gladsome mind praise the Lord who is so kind.
For God's mercies shall endure, ever faithful, ever sure!"

RESOURCES:

Hale, Jonathan, *The Old Way of Seeing: How Architecture Lost Its Magic (and how to get it back)*
Peterson, Charles, *Robert Smith: Architect, Builder, Patriot 1722-1777*

*Rev. Jon A. Black
First Presbyterian Church
On the Square
Carlisle PA
Anniversary Celebration / Reformation Sunday*