The Old Church

In 1882, fifty Presbyterians organized a new Portland congregation. They engaged architect Warren H. Williams to design a structure combining the spare simplicity of their denomination with the grandeur of their aspirations. Williams' rendering of classic ecclesiastical forms in wood produced a striking example of "Carpenter Gothic" architecture. A year under construction, the building was completed in 1883 at a cost of $36,000 on land donated by parishioner William S. Ladd. Originally, a rectory occupied the lot north of the church on Eleventh Street. The Old Church, on the NE corner of SW Eleventh and Clay, is the oldest church building in Portland still standing on its original site.

Calvary Presbyterian occupied the building until the 1940s. Subsequently, two Baptist congregations successively owned the building until 1965, when it was once again put up for sale. With the building in disrepair and no new owner on the horizon, the church was slated for demolition. In 1969, an effort led by Lannie Hurst saved the old building from the wrecking ball, and The Old Church Society was formed to restore and preserve the landmark. This non-profit, non-religious organization has completed much of the restoration work, with preservation and renovation ongoing.

The approach to restoration has been to follow the founders' plans of the building with some modern improvements. A stage was added to the front of the auditorium to accommodate events. Modern upgrades include an elevator for access to updated restrooms in the basement, a small lavatory on the main floor, and a ramp entrance for wheelchair use.

Of special interest inside the building are the large "Consider the Lilies" window—one of several prominent leaded, stained glass windows made in the Portland studio of the Povey Brothers—and a tracker-action, Hook and Hastings pipe organ that was brought around Cape Horn and then transported by ox-cart from San Francisco. Restored to its original beauty and sound in 1997, this instrument attracts musicians from around the world. The auditorium's acoustics are excellent, and its original wooden pews seat 300 for musical events. Audience members can gaze at the graceful Gothic curves of the vaulted ceiling structure and the details of the cast iron and plaster Corinthian support columns.

The most outstanding feature of the exterior is the porte-cochere under which early parishioners pulled their horse-drawn carriages in order to enter the church, sheltered from the rain. Some time before The Old Church Society acquired the building, the porte-cochere had rotted and was removed. As the major restoration of the building was underway, Jerry Bosco and Ben Milligan (collectors of old building pieces) stepped forward and offered to donate the original porte-cochere (salvaged years before) to The Old Church. The finials and the cresting on the roof ridges had also long been lost but were restored as accurately as possible from old photos of the building.

The Old Church was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972. It now serves Portland as a unique community facility, offering spaces for rent for weddings, receptions, concerts, etc. The revenue from events, grants, memberships in the Society, donations, and bequests supports the continued operation of the building. Management of the historic building is overseen by an elected board of directors. As a gesture of appreciation to the community that saved it, The Old Church has hosted free sack-lunch concerts virtually every Wednesday since begun by Portland organist Lauren B. Sykes in the late 1960s.

This Carpenter Gothic jewel has earned an increasingly prominent place in the civic landscape as the neighborhood changes. Residential towers now surround it on three sides, but The Old Church building remains graceful and welcoming to offer Portlanders and tourists a taste of the city's early history.

Written by William C. Lawrence III

Further Reading:

For more information, see www.OldChurch.org.

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