



# History and Design of **THE CHURCH BUILDING**

**B**eginning in December 1905 a series of Sunday evening meetings were held in Allegheny City to consider organizing a Unitarian society. The Second Unitarian Church was officially formed by a vote of the charter members on 6 May 1906.

The congregation continued to hold their Services on Sunday evenings in Allegheny's Carnegie Music Hall, but by year's end they were taking steps to acquire their own place of worship. On 11 December 1906, a site for a new church building was secured at the corner of West North Avenue and Resaca Street, as it was then known.

In July 1907, the Commonwealth granted the congregation a charter as the North Side Unitarian Church. Architect R. Maurice Trimble, from a prominent Allegheny City family, was commissioned to produce the design for the new church. The drawings were ready by 15 September 1907 at which time the congregation unanimously voted to approve the plans as presented by Mr. Trimble

After nearly two years of fund raising, ground was broken for the new church on 8 July 1909. The building permit, issued in the City of Pittsburgh (Allegheny City having been annexed in 1907), was recorded 22 July. It indicated that there would be built a stone church with slate roof, sized 41 feet wide by 73 feet deep, one story in height, J. M. Poorbaugh as builder, and all at a cost of \$15,000 (bringing the total with land to \$25,500)

The Services dedicating the new church building took place in the morning and evening of 6 February 1910.

ALLEGHENY UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH



Allegheny City's Carnegie Library and Music Hall from Ober Park



View of lot at the corner of Resaca Street and West North Avenue, 1904



All Souls Church Braintree, Mass.  
Edwin J. Lewis, 1905

## THE ARCHITECTURE

Gothic Revival architecture entered its final phase in the years after 1890. Church designers began to study and use the Perpendicular, the last phase of English Gothic which had been largely ignored by the earlier Gothic Revivalists. More innovative designers in this style used the Perpendicular as a starting point for a kind of 'Free Gothic,' with building elements reimaged or combined in nontraditional ways. In addition, the Arts & Crafts movement was reaching the height of its development and was also having an influence on church design.

Gradually, mid-century High Victorian Gothic gave way to this later phase that, like its predecessors, looked back to English Gothic precedents as a starting point for the design of a more contemporary Gothic Revival style.

During this period, some religious denominations in the United States were experiencing resurgent growth. A number published plan books illustrating Gothic Revival designs for their new and expanding congregations. The Gothic Revival had previously found its strongest proponents in the liturgical denominations, but Gothic Revival eventually emerged as the recommended style in many non-liturgical denominations as well.

In 1902, the American Unitarian Association published its *Plans for Churches* with a number of commissioned designs by Edwin J. Lewis, Jr. (1859-1937) of Boston, a well-known designer of Unitarian and Universalist churches in the late Gothic Revival style. The Lewis examples in the plan book are based upon medieval English parish churches—entrance porches, half-timbered gable ends, and sturdy two-story towers are common elements—but they also represent contemporary development of the style.

It was in this context that R.M. Trimble was commissioned to prepare drawings for the North Side Unitarian Church in 1907. His one previous church commission, St. Thomas Episcopal Church (Oakmont, Penn.), was a study in the west-tower form of the English parish church. For the North Side Unitarian Church Trimble again drew upon medieval precedents, but developed an architectural expression appropriate for its time and place.

Each of the major building elements contributes to the design. The church walls are of random ashlar, quarry-faced stone. The roof is composed of large cross-gables whose ends are faced with decorative half-timbering. The eaves are finished with barge boards framed into octagonal pendants at the peaks. The three large stained glass windows are flat-headed, and are centered just below the gable ends. This configuration, including the rectilinear window tracery and the half-timbering, was inspired by Perpendicular-style architecture.



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Trimble's watercolor rendering of the proposed church, 1907



The church as completed in 1910



The church interior retains all of its original design elements

The church porch was a later addition to the design. Timber-framed entrance porches, with their roots in medieval English church architecture, are a feature normally reserved for a more open setting (the porches that are illustrated in *Plans for Churches* are featured on buildings in open sites). At this urban corner though, the porch still functions traditionally as a place of transition between the busy sidewalk and the church interior.

Other distinctive characteristics of the architecture are observed in the design of the tower and in the overall massing of the church. The solidly-proportioned tower is topped with a variation on the broached spire. The spire is set between corner drum turrets and breaks downward to form deep, bracketed overhangs for the tower's glazed second story. This spire form dates to the earliest medieval churches, while the turrets are of Perpendicular inspiration.

The relationship between the tower, the porch and the building mass creates a dynamic composition on the site. The architecture draws inspiration from medieval precedents, but is very much of its time and location. This is a building both expressive of its religious purposes through the use of style, and at home in its residential neighborhood through careful proportioning and massing.

## THE CHURCH INTERIOR

Unlike many Unitarian churches of its time (and those illustrated in *Plans for Churches*), the Allegheny church is of the auditorium type with curved pews and no center aisle. This arrangement may be due to the architect's personal familiarity with Presbyterian auditorium plans, or to the congregation's history of holding services in an auditorium setting (Carnegie Music Hall), albeit one with a center aisle.

The simply designed spaces do feature some decorative elements such as the Tudor four-centered arch used in the chancel and chancel window, and the faux-timber ceiling. The parlor fireplace, the stair rails, and the glazed interior doors show the influence of the Arts & Crafts style which is complementary to the more traditional Tudor detailing (the Tudor style is an extension of the Perpendicular).

The west auditorium window was presented to the congregation by the family of Dr. William Judson Riggs (1849–1909). In the mid-1990s, the west and south windows were recreated to the original designs and the Riggs dedication pane was re-leaded into its former location. It is the only piece of original glass in the new west window.



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Architect, Robert Maurice Trimble

## THE ARCHITECT

Robert Maurice Trimble was born in the Sixth Ward of Allegheny City in 1871, son of businessman John H. Trimble (1841–1908). The Trimble family had originally settled in Butler County but moved to Allegheny City in 1861. John Trimble founded the family construction business. He also served for 17 years on the school board for the Sixth Ward, and later represented the Ward for ten years on Allegheny City Council.

R. Maurice graduated from Allegheny High School in 1887, and studied at the Western University of Pennsylvania in 1888. He then associated with his father in the general contracting business until 1892, when he began the study of architecture with Frederick J. Osterling. He worked with Osterling as a draughtsman until 1898, when he opened his own architectural office.

The North Side Unitarian Church was among his earliest commissions. Some of his other churches and public buildings include St. Thomas Memorial Episcopal Church (1905), Ben Avon Presbyterian Church (1911), Ben Avon (Woodland) United Presbyterian Church (1911; destroyed by fire), Sarah Heinz Settlement House (1913), First UP Community House (1916), the North Side YMCA (1926) and Perry High School (1931).

## INSTRUMENTS OF MUSIC

The church organ is a documented Carnegie donation dating from 1914. Records of the Estey Organ Company (Brattleboro, Vermont), show that this organ, Opus 1279, was built for the North Side Unitarian Church. At the time that the instrument was designed, the pipe organ superintendent at Estey was William E. Haskell, a well-known organ builder and developer of innovative stops. The small, eight-rank instrument has two manuals and a pedal. Its tubular pneumatic action is typical of Estey organs.

The Steinway parlor grand piano was presented to the congregation in the 1960s by the estate of former Church organist, Mary Sundholm.

In its day, the Model A-1 was, at six feet in length, the smallest of the true Steinway grands. It has a Victorian case with a round tail, round arms, and double moldings. This piano, serial number 80688, was built and shipped in 1893–94.

