

Historic Buildings of Connecticut

Asylum Hill Congregational Church (1865)



As the nineteenth century progressed, the Gothic Revival style was frequently used for Episcopal and Catholic churches (note, for example, Christ Church Cathedral and St. Peter's Church). Some Congregational churches were also built in that style, including the Asylum Hill Congregational Church, the only Gothic Congregational church in greater Hartford, which was built in 1865 and designed by Patrick Keely. A noted architect of Catholic churches, Keely would later design Hartford's St. Joseph's Cathedral, which was destroyed by fire in 1956. The Asylum Hill Church's first pastor was Joseph Twitchell, who was a good friend of Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens). The Clemens family rented a pew in the church. Today the church is also known for its yearly Boar's Head and Yule Log Festival.

Our Story So Far

In 1864, America was a country divided, gripped in the throes of a Civil War. [SEP] But in the minds and hearts of a small group of Hartford residents, the spirit of hope burned brightly – hope for survival and for the future, grounded in a faith in God. In the midst of bitter strife between the states, they built a house of faith that would offer healing and asylum in a harried and troubled world. And though only 114 in number, they built a sanctuary to seat almost 1000, which would be a beacon and a haven for future generations.

The first worship service was held on March 12, 1865, and on March 23, just two and a half weeks after General Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Asylum Hill Congregational Church became the seventh Congregational church to be formed in Hartford. The cornerstone was laid on May 5, 1865, and the completed church, costing just over \$116,000 including the land, was dedicated on June 15, 1866.

The history of the building

Built in 1866, AHCC is the only Gothic Congregational Church in Greater Hartford; its general outline follows the structure of 14th and 15th century English churches, with details borrowed from the great English cathedrals. The exterior of the church is sheathed in brownstone from Portland, CT. The church is noted for its outstanding stained glass windows in the main sanctuary and the magnificent pipe organ. The exterior of the church, with the exception of the steeple (added in 1875), remained unchanged for over 100 years, as in 1864, Architect Patrick Keely designed a structure far beyond the needs of the founding congregation.

In 1911-1912, the church was closed for extensive and much-needed repairs, including installing 2 inches of felt on the ceilings to help the acoustics and the separation of the pulpit and lectern. Beautification included the addition of a considerable amount of Gothic wood carving along the walls on the apse, complementing the lines of the new pulpit, lectern, and Communion table. The transformation included the addition of five stained glass windows in the apse, to commemorate the pastorate of Joseph Twichell, AHCC's first senior minister.

In 1913, it was recommended that a plan for be developed for memorial stained glass windows along the side aisles. The plan was adopted and the last of the windows was installed in the in 1920s. In late 2013, a committee was formed to investigate the restoration of the windows and work began on that project in March 2014. Other major renovations of that time included moving the site of the organ pipes to the rear gallery and installing a new Skinner organ console.

In 1940, a second extensive renovation project was undertaken. Along with improvements and additions to the sanctuary, it was decided that a smaller worship space was needed. The remodeling included changing the old chapel into an assembly hall (since named Drew Hall in honor of Rev. Bernard Drew), adding a stage, reconstructing the space on the first floor to offices and classrooms and moving the kitchen. Through the generosity of the Gross Family, the Gross Memorial Chapel was erected to the east of the main sanctuary, thus creating a more intimate worship space and an inviting courtyard between the two buildings.

In 2003, AHCC began a \$4.2M building campaign, Dreams to Reality. The campaign was not just about bricks and mortar, it was about the wellness and the health of a vital and historic church community and maintaining the blessing of the facilities so that the church might be a blessing to others. The renovations included extensive brownstone and roof repair, a new organ console, painting of the sanctuary and construction of a multi-level, multi-purpose space for Christian education, music, art and community outreach, a new west entrance, a stairwell and corridor outside the Twichell Room, expansion of the chancel, reclamation of McKeith Hall and creation of a labyrinth, improved sound and lighting in Drew Hall and funds pledged to begin construction of the Boys and Girls Club on Asylum Hill. Today, AHCC's large campus

is bustling with activity seven days a week. In addition to Sunday morning and monthly Wednesday evening worship, the church provides a meeting space for dozens community organizations, is a concert venue, a place for dance and creative summer camps and a City of Hartford run preschool. AHCC is also a beautiful is a sought-after setting for weddings and other community events. We invite you to take a virtual tour as well as a guided tour following a 10:15am Sunday service.

Stained Glass Windows

The stained glass windows installed in the sanctuary were designed by Charles J. Connick, America's premier stained glass craftsman of the time, according to a "systematic plan." The first to be installed were the Twichell Windows located above the apse. The central figure is the angel Gabriel and he is surrounded by the authors of the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The aisle windows are designed to present outstanding figures from the Old and the New Testaments. The Old Testament windows are on the west side of the nave, the New Testament windows are on the east side.

The Labyrinth

AHCC is blessed to have a beautiful seven circuit labyrinth in our choir room (McKeith Hall). Opportunities to walk the labyrinth are available on various dates throughout the year and by special arrangement. Information sheets on the history of the labyrinth and instructions for walking the labyrinth are available in McKeith Hall.

150th Anniversary

The story has it that in October of 1868, Samuel L. Clemens was taken to an evening reception held by a member of Asylum Hill Church, and as the minister stood close by, Mr. Clemens referred to it (indiscreetly) as the "Church of the Holy Speculators." Evidently, Mrs. Bliss, Mr. Clemens' publisher, then introduced the two men . . . thus began a friendship between Rev. Joseph Twichell and the man known as Mark Twain, that lasted until Twain's death in April 1910.

As we celebrated our 150th anniversary year in 2015 and 2016, we had the privilege to explore its history and tradition, its heroes and saints, and its challenges and victories.

From Kick-Off Sunday in March of 2015 until early in 2016, the "sesquicentennial" anniversary committee, invited every member, every committee, our neighborhood, the City of Hartford . . . the whole state of Connecticut, to join in our celebration, as we honored this milestone in worship, with receptions, classes, field trips, and a community gift, with opportunities for everyone to participate.

Asylum Hill Congregational Church Hartford CT

May 5, 1865 - Cornerstone Laid The exterior of the church is sheathed in brownstone from a quarry in Portland, CT. Eighty seven boat loads of stone were ferried up the Connecticut River at a cost of \$6,276.87 for the stone and \$4,891.46 for the boats.

May 21, 1961 - members vote to become part of newly formed UCC In 1948, members of AHCC gave approval to a proposed merger of the Congregational Christian with the Evangelical and Reformed Churches. However, implementation of the merger was delayed until court cases, brought by dissident groups against the proposed union, were settled.

When church officers were convinced that the Constitution for the merger drawn up in Cleveland, Ohio in July 1960, would not violate the principles of Congregationalism, they called a church meeting on October 6,

1960, to hear a report on the necessary revision of the bylaws to conform with the merger. Deacon Gross, who had performed many legal services for the church, had been appointed chairman of a committee to investigate the legal aspects of the merger to see that the rights of AHCC were adequately protected. Panel meetings were held in April 1961, at which both sides of the question of the merger were presented. A church meeting was held on May 10 to consider the framing of the question on the revision of the church bylaws which would be necessary for the union. On May 21, 1961, the church voted by ballot to approve the changes in the bylaws for membership in the United Church of Christ. The votes cast were 259 in favor and 78 against.

May 1, 2011 - Rev. Gary Miller retires Known fondly as "The Rev," Gary Miller brought a neighborhood vision and personal touch to the ministries of AHCC. Attendance and membership increased during Rev. Miller's ministry through his kind presence, his comforting messages, and his firm belief that all should feel reborn through their common experience of worship. His strong belief that music and the arts are "windows to the presence of God" created an atmosphere where creativity thrived, and music, art, dance and drama were welcomed into the worship life of the congregation. Rev. Miller – the trumpet playing preacher – also introduced the congregation to traditional jazz worship services. His friendly and welcoming manner touched the hearts of his congregation, and allowed people in turn to be in touch with God and the Spirit that transcends all of human life. Gary Miller is a man of faith, a man of wisdom, a man of energy – pastor, priest and prophet all in one. Rev. Miller retired from AHCC and full time ministry on May 1, 2011.