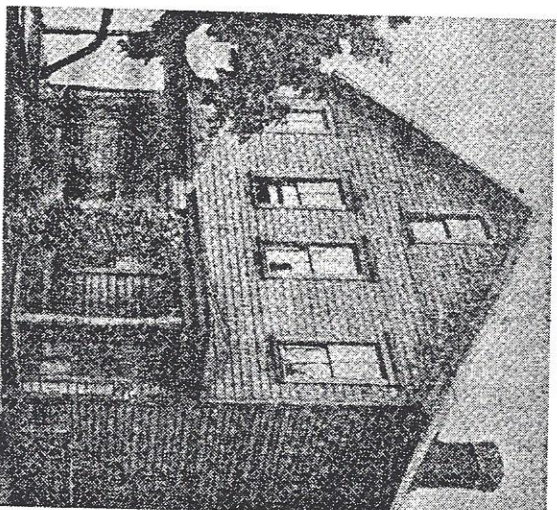


First Lutheran Church

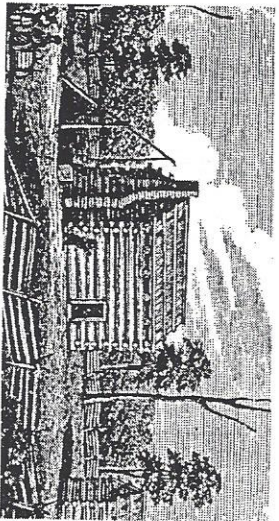
Washington, Pennsylvania



A Bicentennial History

1798-1998

Volume One: 1798-1883



Beginnings

In the years just prior to and during the American Revolution, German Lutherans and members of the Dutch Presbyterian (Reformed) Church were among those pioneers who immigrated to the Pennsylvania-Virginia frontier. Many of these people settled in the vicinity of Catfish Creek, were the community that would be initially known as Bassettown and eventually as Washington, Pennsylvania, was being established. By the time this new town was being formally laid out in 1781, traveling preachers were most likely conducting periodic services among these early German settlers. A letter written in German and dated October, 1782, asks that Adam Koechler of Bassettown be informed that a minister would be in the area. It was not until 1798, however, when a group of these pioneers met at the home of Jacob Weuler for "spiritual advice and comfort," that the Lutheran Church was firmly established in Washington, Pennsylvania. It is possible that the Weuler home was one of ten preaching sites for Reverend Johannes Stauch, pastor of the Bethlehem Church in Scenery Hill since its organization in 1791.

From 1798 to 1816, members of Washington's "German Lutheran and Presbyterian congregation" continued to meet in the homes of individual members. Following Rev. Stauch, the next known pastor to serve the early German settlers was Rev. Demas Hertzler (or Hutzler), a Reformed minister who made visits to Washington beginning in 1801 or 1806. The first regular minister appears to be Rev. John Peter Mahnenschmidt (often referred to as MoneySmith in early Washington County histories). According to one early account, Rev. Mahnenschmidt arrived in Washington in 1811 or 1812, and it was through his leadership that the congregation's first meeting house was erected.

The First Meeting House

On May 5, 1812, Jacob Weirich, Lewis Hewit, David Lediker and Christian Hornish, trustees of the German Lutheran and Presbyterian congregation, purchased two lots at what is today the southeast corner of West Walnut and North Franklin streets. The lots were purchased from Peter and Catherine Snyder at a cost of \$50 with an annual rent of \$2 to be paid to John and William Hoge (the original landowners) and their heirs forever (it is not known when the congregation ceased making rent payments, however, most such payments had ended by the time of the Civil War). At the time, the two lots, measuring 120'x240', fronted on Spruce Avenue (now Spruce Alley). In September, 1812, the trustees contracted with Washington carpenter James Chambers to construct a frame meeting house at

a cost of \$170, with materials to be furnished by the congregation. Raising funds necessary to construct the church turned out to be a difficult task, and the building wasn't completed until 1816.

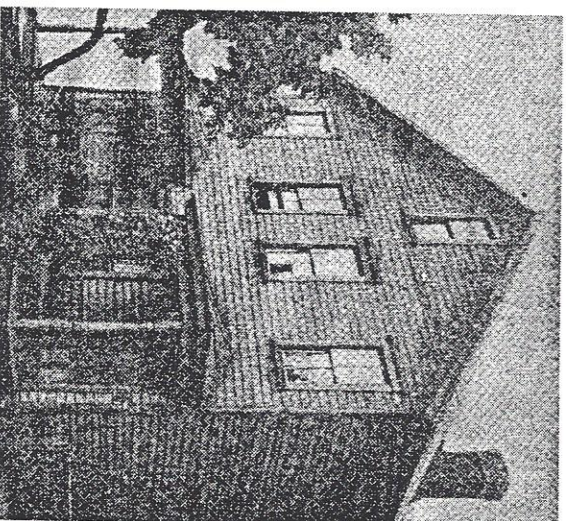
The meeting house of the German Lutheran and Presbyterian congregations faced Spruce Avenue and was located at what is today the rear of the old Beth Israel synagogue. It was a timber-frame structure, with brick laid between the wooden frame to create walls. The exterior of the building was covered with clapboard siding. The meeting house's interior was described to local historian Earl Forest in the early 20th century who writes:

The entrance was in the center of the building, fronting on Spruce alley. Just inside the door and to the left was a stairway which led to a balcony, which extended along the west and north sides and half of the east side of the building.

The pulpit was one of the old-time elevated style, resembling a half wine glass with circular stairs leading up to it. According to the description given the writer by Frederick Herrman, of West Walnut Street, who attended services there in the early seventies, it stood on the east side of the building, just where the balcony ended. The seats were simply oak benches and faced the pulpit, which was about nine or ten feet high.

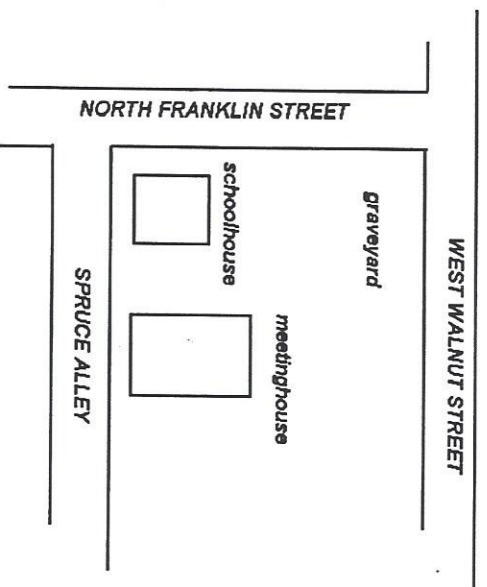
In older times the building was lighted with tallow dips, the only means of light in those days. In the semi-circular-rail of the pulpit

were a number of holes in which the candles were placed to furnish light for the minister. Candles were placed in other parts of the church to give light to the congregation, but at best we would have considered it very poor lighting.



Early 20th-century photograph of the first meeting house after its conversion into a dwelling.

For nearly 70 years, from 1816 to 1885, this meeting house served as the place of worship for Washington's German community. During much of this time the pulpit was filled by ministers supplied by the Lutheran, Reformed and Brethren churches. As in other communities, the common bond of these "union churches" was the German language and customs. In 1818, two years after the meeting house was completed, the desire to retain German language and culture led to the construction of a log schoolhouse for Washington's German-speaking families. Located next to meeting house, at the corner of Spruce Avenue and Franklin Street, the log structure was used as a school until 1831, when it was converted into a residence for the church sexton. The old German schoolhouse was torn down in 1902 for construction of the Beth Israel synagogue.



A map (not to scale) of the church grounds in 1820

The German Graveyard

The area behind the meeting house and log school was used as a graveyard. Though one account indicates that the first burial took place in 1811, the earliest recorded headstone is that of Henrietta Koch, who died on September 29, 1817, at the age of 11 months and 24 days. The same headstone also bears the name of Dorethea Koch, presumably Henrietta's sister, who passed away on December 15, 1822, at the age of one year, four months and 12 days.

One of the most intriguing people from the early history of the church was Jacob Koehline, who dug graves in the Lutheran graveyard during the first half of the 19th century. Affectionately known as "Daddy" Koehline throughout the community, he operated a bakery on Main Street and was known by the children of Washington for his gingerbread. Again, through the memories of early residents and the pen of historian Earl Forrest, one can visualize the German baker standing next to a recently dug grave as a funeral procession proceeded toward the graveyard:

...the coffin would be carried [from the home of the deceased] through the streets by eight pallbearers. There were no high buildings in Washington in those days, only a few log cabins and frame houses, and both graveyards could be seen from the court house. As the coffin was carried through the streets, whether to the old graveyard in West Spruce

alley or to the Lutheran burial ground, the bell in the court house would toll once at regular intervals, and twice as the corpse was lowered into the grave. The funerals were always held at 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

The last burial in the "Old German Graveyard" took place in 1892. In 1924, the 373 identified graves were exhumed, in preparation for the construction of the present-day church, and the remains placed in a new burial vault in the basement of the new church, where many of the old headstones have been preserved.

Early Pastors and 1842 Incorporation

In 1818, two years after the meeting house was completed, Rev. Mannenschmidt was succeeded by Rev. G. Henrich Weygaundt, a Lutheran pastor who had been serving the Bethlehem and other Washington and Fayette county congregations since 1809. Rev. Weygaundt moved west to Ohio in 1829, and was replaced by Rev. John Brown, a Lutheran who was installed on February 21 of that year. It is interesting to note that at about this same time, the Rev. Abraham Winters of the United Brethren church began holding services in the meeting house. John Brown served as pastor from 1829 to 1834. He was replaced by the Rev. Charles Swissler of the Reformed Church. From 1839 to 1843, Rev. P.H.R. Mueller was pastor, and it was under his leadership that, on June 6, 1842, what had essentially been two separate congregations were

incorporated under the name "German Evangelical Lutheran and Reformed Church of the Borough of Washington."

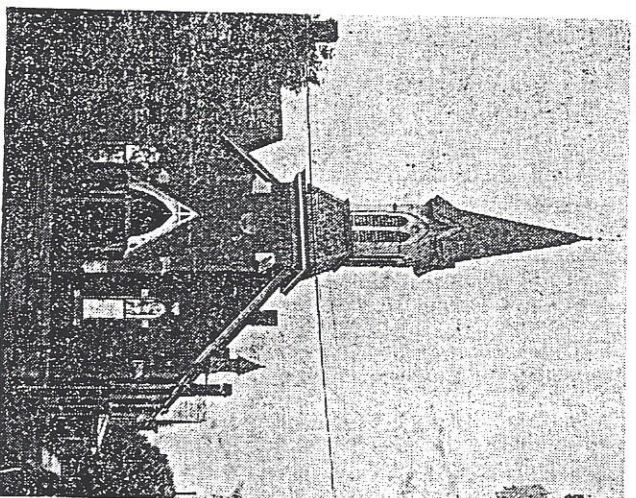
According to Ellis Beaver Burgess' *Memorial History of the Pittsburgh Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, the "charter of 1842 was in harmony of with the general principles of union churches of that day. It provided for the election of nine elders and trustees by a majority vote of the united congregations, whose duty was to employ a preacher and provide for his salary." During the next two decades, the minority Reformed members were gradually absorbed into the Lutheran congregation. By the 1860s there is no longer a reference to Reformed members in church records.

A Time of Transition

Shortly after the 1842 incorporation, Rev. Mueller was succeeded by Pastor Abraham Weills, who served the congregation from 1843 to 1855 and again from 1859 to 1863. Rev. John Haertle (also spelled "Hardle") served for a brief time between Abraham Weills' two pastorates. At the close of the Civil War, during the years 1864-1866, the pulpit was vacant and the church was eventually made a mission and placed under the care of Pastor Michael Schweigert. Under Rev. Schweigert, the aging meeting house was repaired at a cost of \$1,100 (a hatchet lost by James Chambers during the construction of the building was found at this time) and, most importantly, preparations were made for the introduction of English language services.

First Lutheran Church

Washington, Pennsylvania



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Volume Two: 1883-1998

A New Charter and New Church

On January 1, 1883, Rev. G. A. Wenzel, DD, became pastor of Washington's German Evangelical Lutheran and Reformed Church, a congregation which had been divided for several years over the use of the German or English language for services. Rev. Wenzel responded by holding two services each Sunday morning, one in German and one in English, with an additional evening service held in English. With the language issue solved, the congregation turned its attention to the future.

After nearly a century of worshipping in the Washington community, the congregation affiliated itself distinctly with the Lutheran Church and began the process of replacing its meeting house, which had served them for 70 years, with a larger building. In July 1884, the congregation amended its charter, changing the name to that of the First Evangelical Lutheran Church of Washington, PA, with membership in the Pittsburgh Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. While their charter was being amended, the congregation sold the southern portion of their property to John Dye for \$995, continuing to use the rest of the lot for a cemetery. These funds were used to purchase a lot on the corner of Franklin and Beau streets for \$800. On this site, the congregation built its second church, a 36' x 40' brick and stone structure with a tall wooden steeple. The cost of construction was \$4,154. Pastor Wenzel dedicated the new church on January 25, 1885.

Upon locating to the new church, the original meeting house was converted into a double dwelling and the old school house was used as a residence. In 1902, the school house site at the corner of Spruce and Franklin was sold to Beth Israel



Reverend G. A. Wenzel
1883-1895

Synagogue and another portion of the property was sold to a local barber, I. E. Asbury. The last burial in the church graveyard took place in 1892, when Mallorena Alrutz was laid to rest.

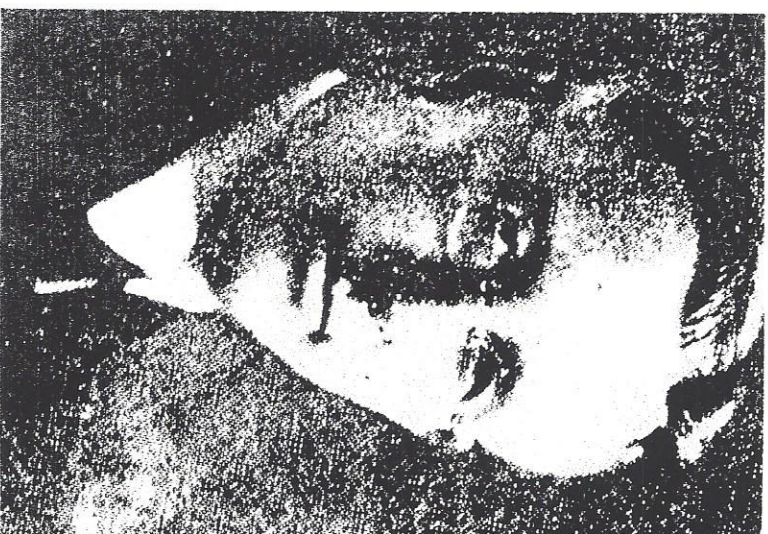
During the period in which the second church was being built and up to 1891, when additional assistance was declined, the congregation received missionary aid. During the last decade of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the congregation grew steadily in numbers. By the time of the First World War, the congregation, in a period of 30 years, had outgrown its second church. A building committee worked with

an architect to design a third church and five lots on East Chestnut Street were purchased for \$21,500. On August 12, 1919, the church and a parsonage, which had been built in 1900-1901, were sold to the Christian Science Church for \$7,000 and \$5,000 respectively. The last service in the congregation's second home was held on October 26, 1919, by Rev. Frank E. Jensen. The last service included demobilizing the service flag, a World War I flag containing 112 blue stars and two gold stars, encasing the colors, enshrouding the chancel furniture, which included, the altar (made by Rev. Hemsath), pulpit, lecturn and baptismal font. These items were to be installed in the new church building. Unfortunately, according to John M. F. Hana, a member of the congregation and local attorney, when the property of the church was removed from the parsonage, the box containing many old records was overlooked or lost in some manner.

The Court House Years

The site on East Chestnut Street was found to be unsuitable for a church building. Members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Washington, PA, worshipped in the court house from 1919-1926. The areas used by the congregation included the Public Meeting room, one of the corridors and a storage room, when the room was not being used for storage of illegal liquor from prohibition raids. The limited space did not affect the activities of the Sunday School, attendance remained high. All classes were organized and met regularly at class members' homes. Other organizations also carried on their activities including a Sunday School Orchestra, Luther League and the Brotherhood of the Church. In 1920, Rev. Frank C. Oberly became pastor. Under his guidance a building fund was begun. In 1921, Attorney John M. F. Hana petitioned the Courts

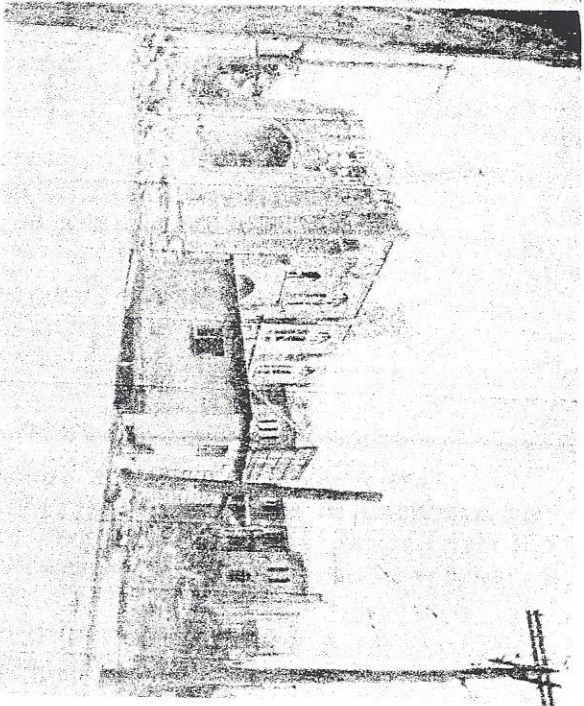
for a decree authorizing the church to vacate the property used as a burial ground. The Court handed down the decree but directed the church to advertise this in two newspapers for two weeks so that friends or relatives who so desired could take charge of any bodies in the graveyard and remove them to any place they wished. Building plans were laid aside with the untimely death of



Reverend F. C. Oberly
1920-1922

Rev. Oberly in 1922. Our present organ is a memorial to Rev. Oberly. Rev. Harry B. Ernest was called in October 1922, and plans for our present building resumed.

35 members of the Brotherhood met at Wigman-Iams Lumber Company and constructed small individual caskets for the remains excavated in the old graveyard. On October 5, 1924, a private recomittal service was held as the remains were reinterred in the new burial vault.



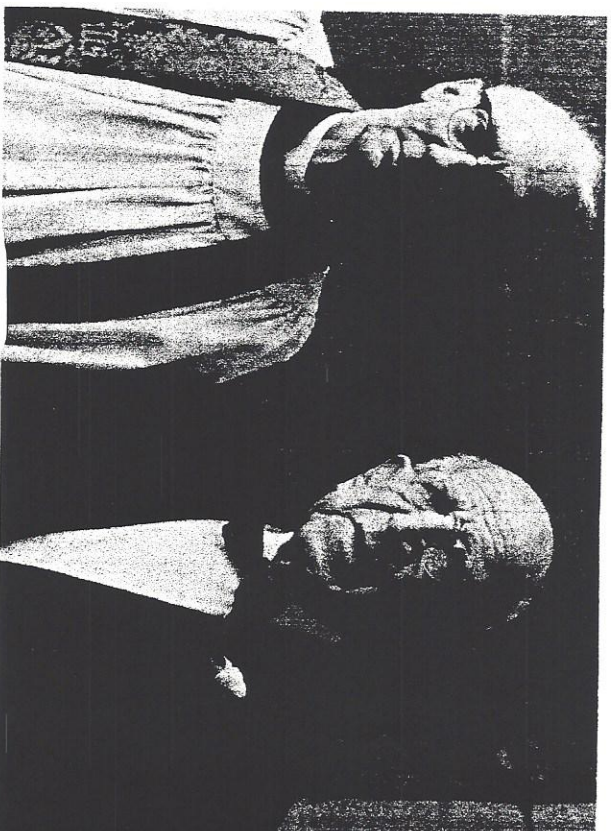
The Third Building in Progress

Church Dedication

From the Lutheran Herald, published by Rev. H. B. Ernest:

*At 10:30 A.M., on June 20, 1926,
the Church Council, Pastor
and visiting ministers assembled
at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Hewitt
on Church Street, and a stately
procession marched to the church
bearing Bibles and sacred vessels.*

*The procession delivered the keys,
unlocked the doors, and entered
the church to deposit
the Bibles and vessels
in their respective places.*



Reverend Reginald E. Dozer, DD
1950-1973

Reverend Harry B. Ernest
1922-1949

The new building was a large brownstone structure which was erected and furnished at an approximate cost of \$200,000.

Continued Growth

In less than 40 years the congregation of First Lutheran Church of Washington, PA, was threatening to once more outgrow its building. Plans were adopted, under the leadership of Rev. Reginald E. Dozer, DD, to build a new Parish Education Building. The new two story structure cost more than \$200,000 and adjoined the existing building. The building provided room for offices, church school classes, nursery and lounge.

By 1971, the congregation had grown to a size requiring an associate pastor and Rev. Kenneth N. Schott was called. In 1973, Rev. R. E. Dozer became Pastor Emeritus.

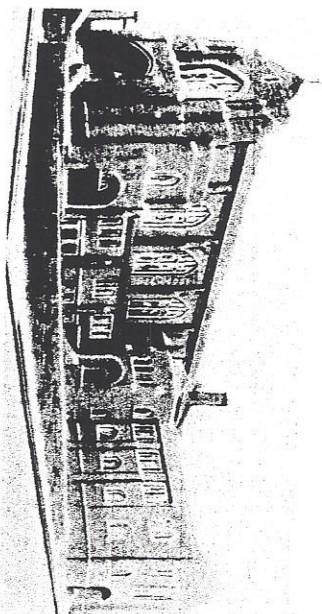
Looking to the Future

In 1998, First Lutheran Church of Washington, PA celebrates 200 years of ministry. In preparation for the 200th anniversary celebration some recent changes have taken place on the church property. One of the most notable changes is the Garden of Hope located on the east side of the property. This area was developed in conjunction with the lowering of the east wall for security and beautification purposes. The Garden of Hope is a well manicured garden setting with four stone benches where anyone may sit for quiet contemplation in the hurried and harried world in which we now live.

The new stone bulletin board is another addition to the property and is located on the front corner of the church lawn.

The board is made from the same stone as the church building. This stone is no longer available. The sign announces special services, sermon titles and has drawn many positive comments from passersby.

The third addition to the church property is the stone marker located at the Walnut Street end of the Garden of Hope. This marker was placed in honor and memory of many friends and families of the church.



The Present Church Building

Generation to generation praises your work and power.

PSALM 145:4

This Psalm has been adopted as the theme for our 200th anniversary celebration and accurately states what has happened and continues to happen within in our church. The congregation continues to grow and do benevolent works. One of our 200th Anniversary projects is a monthly mission. Each member of the congregation is asked to donate one dollar each month to support a different local charity.

In honor of the 200th Anniversary we used the format of the church dedication of 1926. An outdoor worship service took place on June 21, 1998, in the Garden of Hope followed by a strawberry festival. On June 28, 1998, a more formal celebration took place. There was a regular worship service with a festive air and then a banquet to celebrate 200 years of ministry.

As this congregation looks into the future and a new millennium we hope to continue the traditions that have become a comfort to those who worship at First Lutheran Church. Traditions of a loving and supportive congregation who adhere to God's word.

*And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people,
and they have all one language; and this is only
the beginning of what they will do; and nothing
that they propose to do will now be impossible
for them."*

Genesis 11:6

This publication was prepared for the Bicentennial of First Lutheran Church of Washington, Pennsylvania, in 1998. Text and design by Daniel J. Freas, Donna McDowell, Brenda Neundorf and Kenneth Neundorf.

