



The Church of the Pioneers

On June 12, 1842, "The First Christian Congregation of Geneva" was founded by Scott Clark's group of New Englanders who came to Geneva when the Depression of 1837 struck their businesses back east. Even before this, Samuel Buckingham, Harvard theology student, had started a Sunday School here in 1839 "to teach the children religion and morals."

The Church was erected in 1843, and the dedication took place on January 24, 1844. When built, it extended only to the middle of the fourth window. In 1855, the sanctuary was enlarged to its present size. The joining of the addition to the original building is still evident outside in the miter joint above the windows in the eaves at the junction of the old and the new. Inside, the difference is noted in the width of the floor boards in the sanctuary. In 1874, a small balcony or choir loft was removed, the front door centered and the front vestibule added.

The belfry tower was not part of the original building. It houses the bell which bears the inscription: CAST BY G. H. HOLBROOK, EAST MEDWAY, MASS. 1846.

The pews were purchased by W. D. Turner in 1879 from a Chicago church that was burned in the Great Fire of 1871. The colored glass windows, an outstanding example of the "painted glass" technique, were installed in 1879.

The parsonage, directly to the south of the Church, was built in 1893. When it was later no longer used as a parsonage, it was sold. Much later it was repurchased, renamed "Pioneer House" and used for UUSG offices and Religious Education classrooms for children.

The Church received extensive repairs in 1927-28 when Dr. Charles Lyttle became the minister. He was devoted to preserving our historic building. Additions to the west end of the building were made in 1950 and 1956. This gave us the Conant Room, furnace room, kitchen and the "Common Room" which is used for social and other group activities. The first furnace was installed, replacing three coal stoves in the sanctuary. Those stoves had needed to be almost continually stoked by stalwart UUSG members.

In 1987, an addition was built connecting the Church building and Pioneer House, enlarging the kitchen and the Common Room and adding the "Heritage Room," office space and classrooms and new bathrooms on the main and basement levels. The lower level classrooms were not finished until a few

years later. At the connection with Pioneer House, the former kitchen space was converted into a library on the main level and a supply room for Religious Education materials and supplies. Dedication of this major building project was held on January 24, 1988.

The sanctuary was renovated in 1997-98. During the extensive work on the floors and walls, it was rediscovered that during one of the early building projects, the floor was raised from near the front door, slanting downward until approximately the point of the original western end of the sanctuary, resulting in a canting that made it considerably easier for everyone in attendance to see the minister behind the pulpit on the chancel. In fact the height of the chancel is the same as the highest part of the canted floor. Over a period of about 2 years, each of the painted glass windows were removed, cleaned, repaired and re-lead individually. With the interior walls and ceiling of the sanctuary sealed with a fiber-glass fabric and repainted and the replacement of the 1930s-era chandeliers with new brass chandeliers more in keeping with the style of the church building, the result was a completely revitalized sanctuary.

In addition to general repairs and upkeep, the cedar shake roof was covered over by an artificial roofing process that used the rubber from old tires, converting them into replicas of aged cedar shakes. This was a significant ecologically sound process that resulted in an attractive roof that promised to last a good long time. At the same time, the exterior stucco was resurfaced and marked to emulate regular stones and the belfry and steeple were repaired, straightened and strengthened, starting off the 21st Century with a very attractive building, inside and out.

The most recent undertaking was the remodeling of the lower-level classrooms and the addition of a walk-in storage/supply room in the summer and fall of 2013 to provide better facilities for the YRUU teen-agers.

While occasional changes in some of the decorative aspects of the building occur, some items seem destined to remain yet some time. In particular, commemorative wooden wall plaques hung along the walls of the sanctuary honor those people who were influential in the founding and perpetuation of the Church. In addition, portraits of founding minister August H. Conant, Dr. Charles Lyttle and minister emeritus Donald B. King hang in the Conant and Heritage Rooms, along with a regularly changed displays of historic papers and pictures in a beautiful display table given to UUSG by Conant's great-great-granddaughter, Nita Dippel. Appropriately, the display table is kept in the Heritage Room.