

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

Carroll's Yesteryears
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Union Church a local landmark
by Joe Getty

"The old "Meetin' house" has gone, its bricks used in the construction of a canning factory, and even the old sounding board, the high-backed pews, and the altar rail, around which our ancestors has so often knelt in prayer, cut up into kindling wood, and sold to the highest bidder...this may be a modern improvement. I call it Vandalism."

Mary Bostwick Shellman

"Pioneers of Early Westminster," 1925.

One hundred years ago this summer, Carroll County lost one of its significant landmark buildings when the Union Meeting House in Westminster was demolished. This church structure was representative of a regional style found in the Pennsylvania German settled regions of Carroll County.

Mary Shellman and many other residents deplored the loss of this structure. It had played a major role in the early history of the community and was linked closely to the lives of several generations of local residents.

A newspaper clipping dated 1883 in the J. Leland Jordan collection of the historical society library provided this reminiscence about the Union Church:

"At the Union Church, in Westminster cemetery, now used as a sort of tool house, there are many interesting things to be observed. The internal arrangements are novel in this day, and the building is a relic of the past. It has the old style side galleries and the high pulpit. The fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers of the present generation came to worship there, and contributed their weekly mite in the silken purse that was attached to a long handle and passed around. The men used to sit upon one side and the women on the other, and the gallery on the east side was set apart for colored people. The boys in years gone by were much like the boys of the present age. All over the walls and pillars are the names of the boys half a century ago, written there by themselves during the tedium of the long sermons they could not comprehend. Many of those who inscribed their names on the walls of this old building have long since passed to their final reward. Other are scattered in various parts of the county, and others are now gray haired citizens of this city. Mingled with these names are the names of many of the boys of

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today, and even visitors to the old church have written their names, addresses and date of writing on the once sacred walls.

"Ministers of various denominations preached in the old edifice. In September, 1830, nearly fifty-three years ago, Rev. Lorenzo Dow, an itinerant preacher of great celebrity, preached eleven sermons there, and one of his most attentive listeners was the late Mr. William Crouse, father of Mr. Ira E. Crouse, Mr. Crouse always occupied the same seat, which was near the pulpit, on the west side, behind one of the pillars. On the pillar he penciled Mr. Dow's texts, only a few of which are now legible. One was 11th verse, 1st chapter of John, another 14th verse, 16th chapter of John, another 15th verse, 15th chapter of Matthew, and another 11th chapter, 4th verse of John.

"Mr. Ira Crouse's mother recently told him of Mr. Dow's visit here, of his sermons, and of his father's writing down the texts. In going to the church a few days since, and to the pillar where his father sat, he saw the texts just where his father had written them more than half a century ago.

"The old church is going to ruin day by day. This should not be permitted. The walls are good and it would not require much outlay to restore the building. A building is needed in the cemetery and this one is in just the right location, being near the centre, and upon the highest ground. The church is the oldest in Westminster, and one of the oldest buildings in the city, having been begun about the year 1800 and completed several years after, in 1811. Mr. Nicholas Shaeffer was the builder."

The June 27, 1891, edition of the American Sentinel carried the news of the building's fate:

"The Old Union Church – At a meeting of the Westminster Cemetery Company, held on Wednesday last, the following action was taken in regard to the Old Union Church Building:

"WHEREAS, the Old Union Church, now standing with the Cemetery enclosure, has from many years been abandoned as a place of religious worship, and is now in such a condition of dilapidation and decay as to make it dangerous to children and other who visit the Cemetery, and who might be tempted to enter it; and

"WHEREAS, Its unsightly appearance greatly detracts from the beauty of the Cemetery grounds, and its restoration and repair would, in the judgment of the Board, involve a large and unnecessary outlay, therefore,

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"RESOLVED, That the President and Secretary be, and they are hereby authorized to advertise the Said Meeting House, to be sold at Public Sale, on Saturday, the 18th day of July, 1891, at 2 o'clock, P.M., to the highest bidder for cash, with the provision that the entire structure be removed within thirty day from the day of sale.

"RESOLVED, That the President and Secretary shall have power to do any other act in connection with the sale and removal of the building, that they may deem necessary to carry out the object of the Board, in the premises."

A sale bill for the public sale ran in the local newspapers for several weeks before the auction. It stated that, "The building is 50 feet long by 40 feet wide and 25 feet high to the square, built of a superior quality of brick, with walls 18 inches thick. There is a large quantity of good foundation stones, and a great deal of lumber in the building."

The church building was sold to Dr. Charles Billingslea. The construction materials salvaged from the demolition were used to construct a storehouse for canned goods at the cannery of the Smith, Yingling & Company at the center of town.

Many relics were recovered by local citizens at the site during the demolition. Over the years, the historical society has received contributions of these relics including a keystone from the church windows in the J. Leland Jordan collections; a spindle from the altar rail given by Mrs. John W. Smith; a settee made from wood in the church given by Miss Elizabeth Billingslea; a prayer stool given by Mrs. Frank Z. Miller and a funnel made from a solid piece of wood used for the communion service given by Mrs. Kester B. Null.

Photo credit: Courtesy of Historical Society of Carroll County

Photo caption: The old Union Church formerly stood in the Cemetery Grounds in Westminster.