

**A Short History
with Pictures of
Christ Church
Reading, Pennsylvania
on the Occasion of the
City's 250th Anniversary**

ON THE COVER: *Christ Church's spire and south transept from the garden.*

I. Beginnings



The history of Christ Church in Reading, Pennsylvania, begins with a petition of July 13, 1760, from 22 inhabitants of Berks County in or about Reading and "Molattin" or Morlatton, now Douglassville, "To the Venerable Society for Propagating the Gospel in Foreign Parts" in London. The appeal states, "we much lament the case of our children and families who live entirely destitute of those instructions which we in our younger days had the happiness to be blest with," and it asks the Society, "whose tender concern for the extension of Christianity & welfare of His Majesty's Colonies have long been conspicuous," to send "a Missionary of the Church of England" to reside in Reading and to officiate also at Morlatton. The letter added the dark news that the unshepherded Anglican flock was being "drawn after various sorts of Sectaries, and which is still worse the Roman Catholic priests are making converts among us."

The petitioners bound themselves to pay a missionary "Sixty pounds Pennsylvania money, being about Thirty-eight pounds Sterling over and above what the Society may be pleased to allow him." Subscribers included men of some substance, and they had enlisted the advice and support of the Rev. Dr. William Smith, a Scot ordained in the Church of England who had recently been made first Provost or head of the new College of Philadelphia, soon to be renamed the University of Pennsylvania. Provost Smith had just returned in 1759 from a trip to England, and he seems to have been in a position to help his fellow churchmen in Berks County with a letter of recommendation to the Society. The Society's missionary in Lancaster, the Rev. Thomas Barton, also provided a letter of support.

These appeals soon bore fruit, and in a report of August 19, 1760, sent by one Rev. Dr. Bearcroft to the Archbishop of Canterbury concerning the state of religion on the Pennsylvania frontier, we find the recommendation, "In & about Reading the chief Town of Berks, a Mission might be opened to great advantage; and the People are now about framing a petition to the Society & Making a Subscription in order if possible to obtain an English Missionary in those places where there is at present scarce any religious Worship, except what is kept among the Germans in their own language." On April 17, 1761, the letters were presented to a meeting of the Society, which agreed to send the Rev. Mr. Alexander Murray, a young man of 25, at a salary of 30 pounds sterling

per annum to be supplemented by the petitioners' offer of 60 pounds Pennsylvania money. Like William Smith, Murray was a Scot and a graduate of the University of Aberdeen. He came well recommended by the Presbytery of Aberdour, but the Society did not dispatch him to Pennsylvania until he was found worthy of holy orders by the Bishop of London.

Mr. Murray sailed in August of 1762, and his ship stopped for a time in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where the ship's steward is said to have robbed him of most of his possessions other than a few books. He arrived in Philadelphia in December, and after kind treatment by the Rev. Dr. Richard Peters, rector of Christ Church, he proceeded soon to Reading. Dr. Peters also provided the young clergyman with a letter of introduction to James Read, Esq., a member of Mr. Murray's new parish, which was soon called St. Mary's. Mr. Murray found a flock of only seven families "amounting to the number of 48 souls" at Reading and 36 more families at Morlatton. In the first of a series of reports to the Society, Murray describes Reading in 1763 as including "210 families, that is about 1300 persons, young and old, 110 of these families are German Lutherans, who have a minister of their own, and about half as many German Calvinists, the rest chiefly Quakers and a few Papists" in addition to his own tiny parish. If we date our parish from these small beginnings in 1763, it was the twentieth Anglican parish in Pennsylvania.

The "English Church" first met in a private dwelling and, later, in the courthouse, but Mr. Murray labored mightily to build a church. His Reading congregation grew – he reported 22 families by 1765 – and a building lot was granted by the Provincial Government that year (later exchanged for the present site). Upon petition from Mr. Murray, the General Assembly of Pennsylvania in 1765 allowed a lottery to raise "3,003 pounds, 15 shillings" for St. Mary's and other Church of England parishes in the colony, and though our parish seems to have acquired some funds, the project lagged and was eventually engulfed by the controversies resulting in the Revolution.

Mr. Murray seems to have been a conscientious and forbearing priest, but the politics of the mid-1770s proved too much for a loyalist obliged by his ordination vows to pray for King and Parliament. One source notes of Murray that, "suspected of favoring the British, his house was mobbed, the furniture carried out and smashed to pieces and burned with his books and papers . . . [he] himself was seized by a mob and carried before the

Vigilance Committee, and preparations were made to tar and feather him," although another source doubts this story in light both of the esteem in which he was held and the prominence of his parishioners in the Revolutionary cause. In any case, in the autumn of 1778, Mr. Murray and his fellow missionary in Lancaster, Mr. Barton, left for England. Mr. Murray seems not to have borne Reading ill will, for he returned to Berks County in 1790 and ministered to his old parishes for several years before his death in Philadelphia on September 14, 1793, during a yellow fever epidemic. His remains lie in the burial ground of Christ Church, Philadelphia, near those of Benjamin Franklin.

The years 1776–1783 were dark ones for the Anglican Communion in what is now the United States. The patriot rector of Christ Church, Philadelphia, William White, later stated that these years "saw our ministry gradually approaching to annihilation." In 1783, White called representatives of the Pennsylvania parishes to a convention of reorganization, and in 1784 at Philadelphia, for the first time in Anglican history, the laity sat with the clergy at a council of the church, certainly at least partly a by-product of the social changes wrought by the Revolution. One of our parish's few records of this period without clerical leadership notes that James Read represented St. Mary's, Reading, at the convention. On February 4, 1787, William White, as bishop-elect of Pennsylvania, in company with Samuel Provoost, rector of Trinity Church, New York City, and bishop-elect of New York, were consecrated in Lambeth Palace by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, the Bishop of Bath and Wells, and the Bishop of Peterborough, thus helping to preserve the apostolic succession in a new, national church. Although Samuel Seabury of Connecticut had been earlier consecrated in Scotland, White and Provoost were the first bishops consecrated in the Church of England to serve on American soil. Among the first American bishops, however, one church historian singles out White as, "the architect and chief guiding spirit in the formation of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America." It was Bishop William White who consecrated the present Christ Church, Reading, in 1826.



*The front doors
surmounted by the
deep, Venetian
gothic arch.*



*Detail of the tower with two-legged dragon,
or wyvern, and crocketed gable ornaments.*

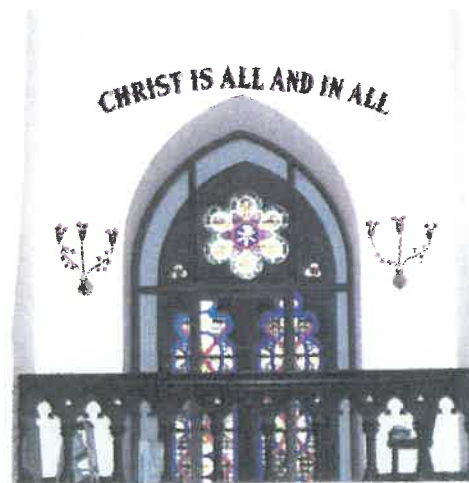
*Venetian arch and
door with foliated
ironwork in the south
front buttress.*



*View of the garden looking south toward
the Parish House.*



View of the nave and beamed ceiling showing the divided organ and deeply recessed choir and chancel.



Entrance through the tower surmounted by balcony and gothic arch at the first stage, giving a view of the 1860s geometric glass window.





*Ascension window,
reredos, altar, and
brass communion rail.*



*Tiffany-style Ascension window from
Lamb Studios above the altar.*

*Baptistry and font in
the north transept.*



*Detail of 1860s gothic
revival nativity window
in the south transept.
It may reflect the last
stanza of the then
contemporary "Battle
Hymn of the Republic"
... "In the beauty of
the lilies, Christ was
born across the sea."*



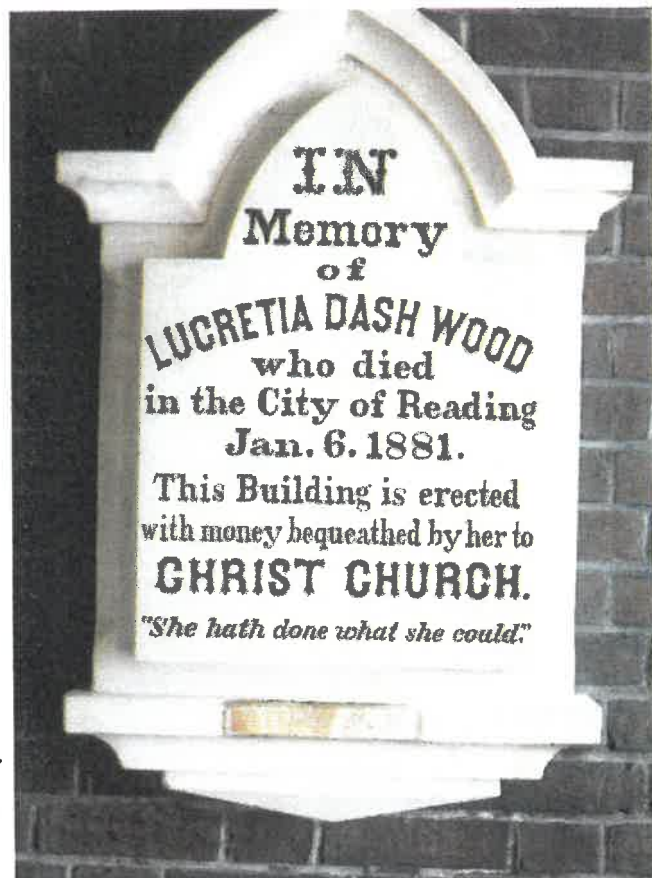
*Lamp and gilded pendant
in nave.*



*Interior view of the
tower with levers
controlling the chimes.*



Victorian window from the former Wood Chapel. This window, as well as two others, are preserved in the "kindergarten room" in the Parish House.



Memorial from the former Wood Chapel, now outside the present chapel.

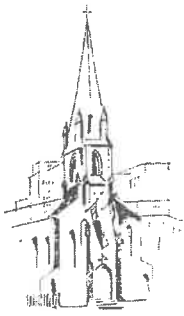


View of lectern, communion rail, and altar in the chapel.



Angel doors to the new Parish House.

II. Christ Church, Reading, Pennsylvania



Alexander Murray planted an Anglican parish firmly enough in Reading that it survived for many years without a church building or a permanent rector and 64 years before today's structure was consecrated. In 1815, the present site of our church was donated by the widow of a former warden of St. Mary's to be used in perpetuity for an Episcopal Church, burial place, "and for no other purpose whatever," and from this time forth the parish was known as Christ Church, after Christ Church, Philadelphia. It is almost certain that some kind of structure preceded today's building on this site, for records of the period make reference to a church, note that a sexton was paid for making fires and ringing the bell, and seem to indicate that our facilities were shared by the Presbyterians when they were constructing a new church in 1820. Certainly burials were made on the site. There is a record of the Rev. Mr. Levi Bull of Morgantown conducting services in 1823, and later that year, the Rev. Mr. Robert T. Davis began a three-year relationship with the parish. A building committee to plan a permanent structure had been formed in 1822, and at long last on May 10, 1826, a solid and substantial church building was consecrated by Bishop White, who had come by canal boat from Philadelphia along with many delegates to a convention of the diocese, which enhanced the occasion. The construction and subsequent consecration and convention seem to have exhausted poor Mr. Davis, who resigned on May 12, two days later!

The first version of Christ Church remains in the front part of the nave. It seems to have been a squarish building with gothic windows and a tower to the west or Madison Street end, with burial grounds beyond. While this may have been a handsome and well-constructed church, there is nothing to suggest that it was more than a typical example of American vernacular architecture of the period.

After four rectors with short tenure following Mr. Davis, the longer 1834-1850 ministry of the Rev. Richard Umstead Morgan saw another period of expansion. In 1837, the ladies of the church purchased a rectory, and in 1842, a small gallery was added to the east or North Fifth Street end "containing 8 pews to accommodate 40 persons." The interior walls were "a stone color." In 1847 and 1848, however, a major renovation and expansion took place that began to give Christ Church its present character. The western tower was removed and the church extended 32 feet, 6 inches, creating an elongated nave more in keeping

with the gothic style which had come into favor, especially among Episcopalians. A member of the Keim family later recalled, "The entire interior was altered and handsomely decorated in gothic style, 26 pews were added and the windows were painted in imitation of ground glass with stained borders." Finally, graves to the west were removed to the new Charles Evans Cemetery.

A drawing of 1857 shows the 1848 incarnation of Christ Church from the east. There is no tower, but the building has gothic embellishments in the form of battlements, two quatrefoil details, and gothic arches above the front door and central window. A pair of gracefully curved front stairs more in keeping with an antebellum neoclassical building, however, betrays the 1848 designer's sense of the gothic as a matter of optional decoration to be mixed with other fashions of the day. The renovated Christ Church was rededicated on January 30, 1848, by the Rt. Rev. Alonzo Potter, Bishop of Pennsylvania and a churchman almost as distinguished as William White, but it was his son, Edward Tuckerman Potter, who was to have the more lasting influence on Christ Church.

III. Edward Tuckerman Potter



The Rev. Alexander Griswold Cummins was rector of Christ Church from 1861 to 1867, and despite the turmoil of the Civil War, he led the parish in the largest building effort since construction of the original church in 1825 and 1826, an effort that gives both the exterior facade and the interior of the sanctuary the distinctive stamp they retain today. The vestry probably secured the services of the New York architect Edward Tuckerman Potter because he was the son of the bishop, but it was unusually fortunate in its decision.

Potter was an expert in Episcopal ecclesiastical design, a specialty for which he was well-fitted by birth and inclination. One brother succeeded his uncle as bishop of New York, and another was a distinguished Episcopal clergyman, becoming president of first Union and then Hobart College. Church architecture also ran in the family. His bishop brother initiated construction on the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, and still another brother, William C. Potter, was also an architect who designed a number of churches. Ironically, Edward Tuckerman Potter's most famous building is not a church but rather the flamboyant Mark Twain House in Hartford, Connecticut.

The challenge for Potter in designing a new front for Christ Church was that, in the nineteenth century, the church did not stand free but was built in on both sides. Accordingly, he planned a massive facade of red sandstone, rock finished with cut stone detail, dominated by a huge tower nearly 200 feet high that lifted the church above the mundane row houses that surrounded it. Potter had begun his architectural study under Richard Upjohn, the greatest and most devout American gothic revival architect. Despite Upjohn's early preference for the decorated gothic style, which he used in the famous Trinity Wall Street, he came to believe that the plainer early English and pointed gothic styles were more religious in feeling, and Potter followed his master in our rugged stone spire. Potter's adornment of the spire reflects the desire for accurate treatment of gothic detail characteristic of the Anglican Ecclesiological Movement of the 1840s.

The main entry through the spire is surmounted a deeply overhanging, swollen arch in the Venetian gothic style, which had been recently popularized by John Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice*. On either side of the main entry are what Potter called "entrances to the schools" of heavy oak with foliated hinges that bypass the sanctuary (there was an "addition in the rear" invisible from the street). The spire includes emblems of the four evangelists and the twelve apostles, sixteen symbols of Christ, dragons, shields, crockets, finials, bell flowers, ball flowers, flowing tracery, and buttresses in the best gothic revival fashion.

The spire is Potter's finest feature, but he also gave Christ Church a more accurately medieval interior. Insertion of the tower into the fabric of the old church eliminated the inappropriate eastern balcony, but he could do nothing about the excessive width of the nave in proportion to its height. Potter partly solved this problem with the magnificent beamed ceiling, a daring invention because the horizontals further emphasize the nave's breadth, but they make possible the curved supports, higher vertical beams, and pointed arches that draw the eye upward. He also pulled the eye to the center of the wide nave with a high central archway to the sacrum flanked by two smaller arches that hold the pipes of the divided organ, an unusual effect of which he was particularly proud. This triple-arched arrangement necessitated a narrow if appropriately lofty choir, but Potter made a virtue of necessity by placing half of the stalls forward, proclaiming that "the congregation is thereby encouraged and incited to take part in the services." Potter also appears to have added the transepts, which do not appear in the 1857 view, giving the sanctuary its cruciform shape. Finally, the oldest glass currently in the church seems to date from

the Potter renovations. This is found in the geometric lancets on the east wall, portions of the tower window, the geometric lancets on the east sides of the transepts, and the large north and south transept windows which illustrate scenes and motifs from the life of Christ. Potter either designed or chose all of this glass, which employs the favored gothic revival technique of grisaille, or painting of designs on colored glass.

IV. The Cathedral



After the new Diocese of Central Pennsylvania was formed out of a portion of the Diocese of Pennsylvania, which had grown too large, Christ Church was the designated cathedral from 1871 to 1895. During these years, the church achieved its present form in all but a few details. In 1873, a recess chancel was added, presumably to accommodate the activities of a cathedral. In 1875, the original single tower bell was replaced with a chime of ten bells cast by the Meneely Bell Foundry of Troy, New York. In 1885, a simpler parish house was replaced by the ornate, high-Victorian Wood Chapel.

During the last quarter of the century, geometric glass on the north and south walls of the nave was replaced by memorial windows that constitute a fine museum of American church glass of the period. Some continue the traditions of the gothic revival, while others show influence of Morris, Burne-Jones, and the Arts and Crafts Movement. Still others show the Victorian love of carbuncles, glass jewels, and ripple-textured glass. All of this Victorian glass contrasts with the later, western windows – two lancets in the transepts and the Ascension window above the altar. Created by Lamb Studios and installed around the turn of the century, these windows show influence of the art nouveau and Tiffany styles in their use of opalescent, molded, and multiple-plated (one color over another) glass that contrasts sharply with the clearer colors and painted surfaces of the older glass.

The first bishop of the new diocese was the Rt. Rev. Mark A. DeWolf Howe, a well-to-do New Englander who continued to maintain a home in Bristol, Rhode Island. His Reading residence had some claim to being called a bishop's palace, the huge Victorian house still standing at 730 Centre Avenue and later called "the Wilhelm Mansion." Bishop Howe initially provided firm diocesan leadership, but Christ Church parish responsibilities fell on the capable shoulders of the Rev. Dr. William

Pendleton Orrick, first dean and then rector from 1873 to 1910. A relic of Christ Church's years as a designated cathedral is the bishop's throne in the south transept. As Bishop Howe aged, diocesan responsibilities increasingly were borne by an assistant, Bishop Rulison, who lived in Bethlehem, much closer to the center of the diocese. Upon Bishop Howe's death in 1895, diocesan headquarters moved to Bishop Rulison's place of residence.

V. A City Parish

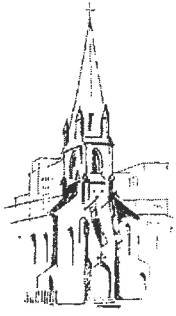


One hundred years ago, Reading was much richer, sootier, and more populous than it is today, and Christ Church was a leading parish in this bustling industrial center. Even this early, however, membership began slowly to shift farther away from the church building in the heart of old Reading. Four strong and farsighted rectors – Frederick A. McMillan (1911-1946), W. Paul Thompson (1946-1953), Charles E. Sutton (1954-1978), and Walter L. Krieger (1979 to the present) – saw in their different ways the need to build endowment, adapt to the changing character of Reading, and to supplement a handsome Victorian sanctuary with the facilities necessary for modern parish life.

In 1946, a one-story frame building on the corner of Fifth and Court streets and a three-story brick house immediately south of the church were razed, creating a green space and allowing fuller southern light to enter the church. In 1957, Wood Chapel was removed, and the present modern parish house was dedicated in 1959. The rich, dark wall colors and stencilled decorations of Edward Potter's church gave way to a lighter sanctuary in successive repaintings, and the organ has been rebuilt and enhanced several times until it has become one of the finest in the region.

Like many old urban Episcopal parishes, Christ Church today has a smaller and more far-flung membership than it once did and an ever more varied array of mission activities as befits a parish brought into being through the generous mission efforts of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, but most of these missions are not in "foreign parts" but in the surrounding city. In 1998, the year of Reading's Bicenquingenary, Christ Church remains firmly rooted in the city with which it has shared most of those 250 years.

Acknowledgments



The 250th Evensong Committee of Christ Church is immensely grateful to the following for their commitment to and work in putting this short history of Christ Church together: Dail Richie, chair, and Runette Gabrielle, co-chair, of the committee, for their leadership; Jill Braun-Helwig, and her sister, Betsy Billigmeier, for having the idea in the first place; Dr. Richard G. Androne, member of Christ Church and professor of English at Albright College, for writing the history from many sources; Peter Braun, for taking all new pictures; an anonymous parishioner, for providing funds for printing; Judith Krieger, for her splendid rendering of Christ Church; and Debby Black, for typesetting the copy and acting as factotum for this project.

PICTURE CREDITS: All photographs by Peter Braun, except for front cover and photograph of chapel which are by Debby Black.



Christ Church Evensong Committee

Richard G. Androne

Bruce P. Bengtson

Deborah G. Black

Jill Braun-Helwig

Paula Flippin

Runette E. Gabrielle, Co-Chair

Victor R. H. Yarnell

Donald Hinkle

Walter L. Krieger

David A. McConnell

Ray Neag

Dail M. Richie, Chair

Morna P. Traffas