



SHARPSVILLE AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

Declinism is a term used by both psychologists and political scientists to describe a predisposition to view one's social group or one's country as a whole as having its best days behind it. The main indicator of a declinist attitude is not how one assesses one's current situation but a loss of hope for the future. In opinion surveys, this is marked by how one answers the question, "Do you think your children's lives will be better off than your own." Different areas of the country vary widely in how the majority answer this question and does much to explain our current political divide. Declinist attitudes, while they may be predicated by worsening economic factors, grow to include fears of changes in gender roles, demographic status, and social mores. When mere nostalgia for what was lost becomes anger at what was taken away, these attitudes become a means of self-identification and, when shared, implacable tribalism. And even though this identity is a loss of status, it is worn as a badge of honor.

History shows that a society with a large number of members who view it in decline will exhibit a larger proportion of self-destructive behavior. In recent years here in America, this has been starkly exhibited in suicide rates and the opioid epidemic. A map of surges in opioid deaths corresponds neatly with counties that have long lost their status as home to prosperous industries or thriving farm or mining communities. While a prevailing despair that correlates with substance abuse seems self-evident, it also correlates with a destructive attitude toward institutions of all types: governmental, economic, media, educational. After all, one may feel, if these institutions short-changed me and failed to protect my community's way of life, then why not "burn it all down!" Faith is then transferred to those leaders who *do* restore status and hope, or as is more often the case, demagogues who *merely promise* such a restoration and cast convenient outside forces as enemies.

The Shenango Valley, unfortunately, can be described as declinist. This is not to discount the persistent dedication of entrepreneurs, civic leaders, and ordinary folk to improve our communities. Nonetheless, while the shock of the mass layoffs in the 1980s may have been met with some initial hope, the years since have failed to see a return to our glory days materialize.

What to do? Obviously, a sudden return of good-paying jobs would solve a lot of problems here. Until that comes, we need to meet declinist—yes, defeatist—attitudes head on. Celebrate our community's positives, not a common misery. Avoid a false nostalgia for a past that in some ways was good, but in many ways was, frankly, worse than today. Work to improve our institutions, radically when necessary, but not to destroy them. Anger does not go along with the needed roll-up-your-sleeves attitude. Have hope for yourself and our town.

Upcoming Events

COVID-19 UPDATE:

By order of the Commonwealth, museums are temporarily closed. We are normally open to visitors on the first and third Saturday of the month.
1:00pm to 3:00pm

Check our Facebook page for updates on when we can re-open.



The January meeting of the Historical Society has also been cancelled. We hope to resume our meetings soon.



Please watch for announcements of resumption of our other events.



As always, interesting items may be viewed under the Archives section of our website
www.sharpsvillehistorical.org

Contact Us

website: www.sharpsvillehistorical.org
email: sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com

see our website for officers' phone numbers

Headquarters: 131 N. Mercer Ave.,
Sharpsville, Pa.

Mailing address: 955 Forest Lane,
Sharpsville, Pa. 16150

Meetings are held the First Monday of the Month at 7:00pm at our headquarters

See above for cancellation of our January meeting

A Look Back

The Akron Plan

The First Universalist Church of Sharpsville—home to the Sharpsville Area Historical Society since 2000 is recognized for both its local and national architectural importance. Its pipe organ and stained-glass windows are described separately prior newsletters. It should be noted that the nearby Jonas Pierce House has also earned placement on the National Register of Historic Places.

This church, both the congregation and the building, owes its foundation to the fortune and influence of “General” James Pierce and his family; their importance to the history of Sharpsville is paramount. A native of New Hampshire, General Pierce came to the area in 1847. At that time, Sharpsville was a small village of about twelve houses with a small sawmill, gristmill, and two canal locks. By the year of Pierce’s death in 1874, Sharpsville was incorporated as a borough, and, owing principally to his enterprises, had become a leading iron producer in the nation. Pierce, and later his sons, had ownership in seven of the town’s nine blast furnaces, coal and iron mines, as well as Sharpsville’s bank, newspaper, and railway.

Starting in 1870, James Pierce invited Universalist ministers from Erie and Crawford counties to preach occasionally at Sharpsville. Through the family’s influence, the nucleus of a congregation was gathered in a meeting-hall, Pierce Hall, and on January 31, 1875, 28 members were formally organized as a congregation. Far from the denomination’s New England center, and on the outskirts of areas populated by Universalist churches, this remained the only church of this faith in Mercer County. For over the next thirty years, sons of James Pierce would serve as lay officials of the church. The lot for the church was donated by James’

widow, Chloe, and she funded “the larger part” of its construction. Their sons funded the construction of the parsonage in 1888. Moreover, there was a close alliance with the denomination’s college at Akron, Ohio, Buchtel College (now the University of Akron), founded in 1870. The Pierces endowed a professorship there, and James was one of its original trustees. The president of Buchtel, Dr. Orello Cone, preached the sermon at the laying of the cornerstone and at the dedication of the Sharpsville church.

Never a large congregation, the church membership ultimately waned, with regular services ceasing about 1923, except for once-a-year by a visiting pastor. This was required to prevent the property from being ceded to the denomination’s state convention. This practice ended in 1938, and the deed was transferred to the denomination in 1940. No Universalist congregation has existed in the county since. The building also served as a temporary home for the Presbyterians in 1929 and ‘30, while they were building their new church. On February 3, 1941, the Sharpsville Women’s Club accepted the offer—made two months prior by Rev. Harris, the Universalist pastor here in the century’s first decade—to use the church as a “club and community house.” Terms included a nominal rent of \$1.00 and the building be set aside for “one Sunday service each year as a memorial to the Pierce heirs and the Universalist convention.” The lease was not finalized until September of that year, with the Borough agreeing to contribute \$50 toward the conversion of the building as a community center. One of the community uses the building



This view of the church is from shortly after its completion in 1884.

Cont'd. on page 4



This is apparently a parade float of the Rebekah Lodge, No. 110. They were a ladies' auxiliary of the Odd Fellows' Lodge, instituted here in 1902. While the photo is undated, the only reference found of the "Economy Store" in the background is from 1924, so the float is perhaps part of that year's Golden Anniversary festivities. The building appears to face Shenango Street, it what was later Stafford's Cleaners.

Collections Update

Rita Sloan donated a large decorative marriage certificate of the union of F. Dunham of Sharpsville and Alice R. Mitchell of West Middlesex, 1905, and a High School Diploma from 1916.

Elaine Schuster donated World War II era documents relating to fuel rationing.

Dan English donated school newspapers, a panoramic photo of the class trip to Washington, and other memorabilia of the Class of 1965.

Rod Alexander donated yearbooks from the Sharpsville Class of 1965 and 1966.

The Borough of Sharpsville donated a colometer, an instrument encased in a wood box from the 1960s used for measuring various chemicals in the water supply.

The Society also acquired a ca. 1950 Sharpsville Fire Department fireman's helmet.

With Gratitude

We received a \$2,000 grant under the CARES ACT from
Mercer County

Commemorative Bricks

Please consider an "In Memory of" or "In Honor of" brick for a loved one.

4" x 8" bricks with three lines of inscription—\$75

8" x 8" bricks with six lines of inscription—\$125

The bricks would be placed around the Shenango Furnace Ingot Mould in the town park.

**Stop at Mehler Insurance or call 724-962-2392
or email sharpsvillehistorical@hotmail.com**

The Akron Plan, cont'd.

saw was as a USO hall during World War II. In 1945, the building was purchased by a Seventh-Day Adventist congregation. In 2000, they sold the building to the Sharpsville Area Historical Society and has served as the Society headquarter ever since. Restoration of the building has been one of the Society's principal focuses and it has expended over \$200,000 toward its restoration.

The cornerstone of the church building was laid October 10, 1882, with completion of construction marked by its dedication on February 10, 1884. Though of modest dimensions, it is considered a locally important example of late Victorian church architecture, reflecting high-style influences and the development of new trends in the design of church interiors. Even in its day, the church was recognized as a showpiece. The 1888 *History of Mercer County* called it "a handsome structure, probably second to none in the county".

The building stands near the center of the Sharpsville's commercial district, on the east side of a block once dominated by the magnificent 30-room Pierce Mansion. That brick Second Empire style mansion, completed in 1875, was razed in 1952. The church's parsonage, a two-story frame dwelling with its original Queen Anne features now much obscured by subsequent remodeling, was built in 1888.

The church bears witness to the ornamental exuberance that marked the era's architecture. In a style best described as Ruskinian Gothic, the building's polychrome decorative scheme and steeply pitched hipped steeple roof, captures an inexact echo of the gothic architecture of Venice, so beloved by the English art critic John Ruskin.

Resting on a rusticated sandstone foundation, the church is constructed of red pressed brick, vibrantly contrasted with Amherst bluestone trim. The gothic arches are constructed of alternating voussoirs of brick and stone. Stone stringcourses are used across the main body of the church as well as the steeple. Saddle-backed stone coping carved with complex geometric motifs sits atop brick pilasters while stone pillars with carved gothic capitals frame doorways and windows. A stone gable decoration is filled with dogtooth carving. The polychrome effect was continued with, according to a contemporary report, use of black and red roof slate. The slates were later covered over by roofing compound, which shortened their life and obscured the color pattern. Using the alternating horizontal bands of square and bevel shingles as a guide, the polychrome scheme was recreated when the roof was replaced in 2011 with synthetic slate shingles. Because of their fragile condition, the crenated tin cresting and roof ornaments were not re-installed but were saved for future replication.

Two of the four chimneys are placed on opposite sides of the church along its central axis. They emerge nine-feet from the ground, where they are corbelled-out from the wall and are each pierced by a lancet window. The decorative brickwork is continued in the upper parts of all four chimneys as well as in the corbelling and serrated molding beneath the cornices of the middle and lower roofs of the steeple. Old photographs of the two chimneys that are pierced by lancet windows show, and another facing toward the front, that both their top sections were reduced in height, eliminating many of the decorative brick-courses. In 2015, the south chimney was since been restored to its original appearance.

The first stage of the steeple, also brick trimmed with stone and with louvered windows in the belfry it contains, sits atop the tower base (which contains the vestibule and bell loft), separated from it on four sides by a hipped skirt roof. The wooden second stage of the steeple is painted off-white and employs serrated molding, two rows of nailhead bosses, and a row of gothic arches as decoration. A truncated roof with a dual-pitch—first shallow, then steep—divides the two stages. A steeply-pitched hipped roof, terminating in about a four-foot ridge, completes the steeple. Linked hip knobs of galvanized iron were placed atop this ridge. They were blown off in a windstorm in 2002. While they have been saved (in a damaged state) that have not yet been replicated or reinstalled. With the linked hip knobs resembling a handle, local lore, in one variation, attributes to Chloe Pierce the quote it was installed so that "Universalists can get a handle on their faith"; there was no such quote and is the result of a miscommunication.

Inside, wainscoting of red oak beadboard in red oak frames runs throughout the sanctuary and Sunday school room. The pews are of red oak, with thick-dimensioned, carved walnut ends. The windows and doorways, too of red oak, have very deep paneled reveals; trim is reeded and moulded with bulls-eye corner blocks. Ornamented Eastlake brass door and window hardware is featured. A heavy, carved cherry banister leads to the bell loft. A large, heavily-carved walnut rosette is placed in the center of the ceiling. The interior and exterior doors are also of walnut.

The curved pews, arranged in three sections separated by two aisles, and radiating from the centrally-aligned chancel

The Akron Plan, cont'd.

help define the auditorium-style sanctuary, a feature that rose to prominence in the 1870s and 80s.

While not confined to Akron plan churches, auditorium-style sanctuaries usually accompanied such a layout. The chief characteristic of the Akron plan *per se* is the adaptable communication between the Sunday school space to a common auditorium and/or the sanctuary, most typically, by means of sliding or folding doors or partitions. Here it is shown by the use of a large four-sectioned folding door to divide the wide passage between the sanctuary and Sunday school room.

The era's delight in ornament is further evidenced by the stenciled border of the Sunday School room's ceiling. While the original fresco stencil had been water damaged and later obscured by a layer of textured plaster, areas where this plaster later flaked away has allowed a recreation of the color and pattern of the original stencil on an overlaid layer of drywall. The special attention given to the building is likewise displayed by the use of gas lighting, well before any municipal service for lighting, whether illuminating gas or electric. Two gas fixtures, plus, mounted on the organ case, two electric fixtures which appear to be converted gas lamps, remain. Recollections of the adjacent Pierce mansion indicate it had gas lighting—apparently by means of an artificial gas machine on site. The church presumably had its own gas machine or tapped into the mansion's.

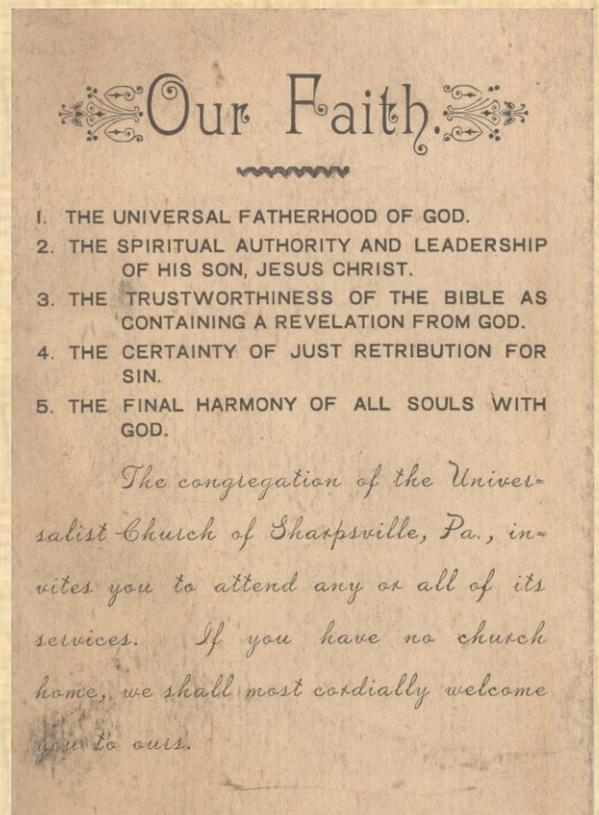
In a later addition, along the diagonal wall to the right of the chancel lies a walk-in baptistry, which is encased in the original wainscoting (taken from the wall behind). Its welded steel tank dates from around 1951 when it was installed by the Seventh Day Adventist congregation. A passageway through the original exterior wall leads into the baptistry from a small enclosed stairwell to the basement.

The local significance of the First Universalist's architecture can be gauged against other churches of the era within the Shenango Valley. Here, the earliest churches, built during the first half of the 19th century, were either log or simply-fashioned frame buildings. None still stand. During the second half of the century, as the area's wealth increased and population grew, these pioneer congregations were able to build more suitable churches. Population increase also brought with it additional denominations and Welsh and German congregations of existing denominations. Local historic context is provided by the nine remaining 19th century churches within the Shenango Valley. These churches include what were originally built as the West Middlesex Methodist Episcopal (1861), St. Paul's German Reformed (1874) in Sharon, and Sharpsville's First Baptist (1872), First Presbyterian (1882), First Methodist Episcopal (1886), Free Methodist (1888), and Grace Reformed (1890). These were all of either simple design or more complex frame buildings with cross-gable plan, corner entry, and multi-stage steeples. The ornamental schemes for each were modest.

The nearest comparison with the First Universalist is the First Baptist of Sharon (1884), a handsome High Victorian brick Gothic Revival church with a pointed spire, completed just five months after the Sharpsville church. It, too, contrasts stone with brick, in alternating voussoirs and plain beveled pilaster coping, but lacks the stringcourses and is on the whole more restrained, owing to its greater expanses of plain brick. Except for a gable decoration, carved stone ornament is lacking; decorative brickwork is likewise minimal. The amount of stained glass, three rose windows and six side windows, rivals the Universalist. No organ was originally included. The church does have a diagonally-oriented auditorium-style sanctuary fitted into the original nave. This was a later addition as evidenced by a sloping floor which overlays the original floor.

The cost of the First Universalist is perhaps the most objective measure of the architectural ambitions that Sharpsville's prosperity enabled. Of the sixteen (both extant and since razed) local 19th century churches for which costs are known, only two exceeded \$11,000 to build. Of these two, the First Baptist of Sharon had an original cost per square foot of \$3.39 (\$15,000/4,426 s.f. ground floor area) compared to an \$8.76 cost (\$16,000/1,826 s.f.) for the Sharpsville church.

Cont'd. on page 6



An invitation card, from the 1880s, which also describes the tenets of the Universalist Faith.

The Akron Plan, cont'd.

The building's architect, Sidney W. Foulk, began his practice in nearby Greenville, Pa. He had a modest practice, drawing plans for residences in the town as well as for the Zion's Reformed Church there. While lacking a polychrome exterior, this 1886 brick Gothic revival building possesses similarities to the Sharpsville church, in the corbelling and serrated patterns of the brickwork, stained glass motifs, and quatrefoil windows. However, the Zion's Reformed does not share the Sharpsville church's auditorium-style sanctuary or Akron plan Sunday school. Other local commissions include the West Middlesex United Presbyterian Church and the second addition to the Mercer Avenue (later called the Deeter School) in Sharpsville. In 1883, Foulk moved to New Castle, which was soon to experience an industrial boom. In an unpublished manuscript, "S.W. Foulk: A Lost Victorian Master," Slippery Rock University Professor, Kurt Pitluga, gives the only comprehensive survey of Foulk's career. After Foulk's move to New Castle, he established himself as a highly accomplished architect who worked across a range of historical styles and a variety of clients: residences, churches, hotels, colleges, and YMCAs. His work was not confined to New Castle, where he was instrumental in shaping the physical appearance of the city in the late nineteenth century, but included commissions in such far-flung locales as Virginia and North Carolina (where he opened offices), Florida, Colorado, and California. His association with New Castle native, Ira D. Sankey, the evangelist and gospel singer famed throughout the country, may have resulted in recommendations for these southern church and YMCA commissions.

Indeed, the development of the Akron plan provides a second historic context for the significance of the First Universalist's architecture. In its broadest sense, the Akron plan refers to creation of adaptable space by connecting Sunday school classrooms to a common auditorium and/or the sanctuary, most typically, by means of sliding or folding doors or partitions. First conceived by Lewis Miller, an engineer and manufacturer, who, assisted by Akron, Ohio builder and architect Jacob Snyder, used it for the 1870 Sunday school building of the First Methodist Episcopal of Akron. It was in his non-professional capacity as Sunday school superintendent that led Miller to devise the Akron plan for his parish. Sunday schools had, since the Civil War, become increasingly central to the mission of Protestant churches in America. Burgeoning enrollment and professionalized religious instruction led to the separation of pupils into grades. With separate grades, Sunday schools could no longer make-do with existing church spaces and called out for efficiently arranged classrooms and assembly rooms. In response to this need, Lewis Miller devised the Akron plan. The plan, in various forms, reached widespread popularity among all Protestant denominations from the late 1880s to about 1910. In this original conception, two tiers of several classrooms opened onto a semi-circular auditorium of a separate Sunday school building. Other early uses of the plan (such as in Bruce Price's 1876 First M.E. of Wilkes-Barre) used the same arrangement but attached to the church, though not communicating with the sanctuary. (It should be noted that while the term 'Akron plan' is independent of an auditorium-style sanctuary, the two features are very much connected and sometimes confused. Auditorium-style sanctuaries pre-dated development of the Akron plan and frequently did not include it; conversely, Akron plan Sunday school space usually went hand-in-hand with the auditorium sanctuary.)

The Akron plan developed to be what architect George W. Kramer called the "Combination Church"—the plan's standard configuration during its years of popularity. From 1879 Kramer was affiliated first with Jacob Snyder in Akron, and after Snyder's death in 1885, with Frank Weary, before moving to New York in 1894. Kramer is considered the great popularizer of the Akron plan. He saw the Akron plan could be employed to create not just adaptable Sunday school space but also adaptable sanctuary space. Hence, his creation of the Combination Church featured the Sunday school space opening onto the sanctuary itself, by means of the hallmark sliding or folding doors. Such a configuration not only allowed the children to join the rest of the service, by opening the doorway to the sanctuary once the Sunday school lesson was completed, it also permitted an expansion of sanctuary space for holidays and other events. It was an extremely adaptable plan, as shown by the eighteen "typical plans" given in Kramer's *The What, How and Why of Church Building*.

Configured as a Combination Church, the First Universalist Church of Sharpsville stands as an important example of the Akron plan's development because it is one of the few documented examples of the Akron plan built before 1885. Moreover, the compelling influence of the Combination Church, even during this early period of the Akron plan's development, is shown by the Sharpsville church's adaptation of the design typically employed in much larger churches with graded Sunday school classrooms. The Combination Church plan found at Sharpsville—joining a single Sunday school room to the sanctuary—was necessary for a small church that would hardly have sufficient pupils to fill graded classrooms. Nonetheless, the essential feature of the Combination Church is its creation of adaptable space by connecting the Sunday school space to the sanctuary with folding doors. This is clearly shown by the layout of the Sharpsville church.