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The Centennial Renovation

Revelle S. Gwyn

Our Congregation continues to enjoy the beautiful legacy of our founders—our sanctuary—almost a century after its construction. Our Centennial Renovation honors these men and women, their faith and their labor.

The renovation of our sanctuary building proceeded in two phases: exterior and interior. The exterior work began in November 1993, and included repairing our original slate roof, removing the original galvanized metal ornaments on the spires and roof line, duplicating them in copper (for durability), painting them to replicate the original color, pointing-up the brick and limestone facade, installing new copper gutters and flashing, stabilizing the roof decking where needed, and sealing our chimney and towers from birds and other winged creatures. Our efforts were met with frustration at several points. We could not find commercially available mortar to match our tinted original. We spent hours making our own recipe from a variety of unlikely ingredients. The press-molded brick which gives our facade its unusual uniformity is no longer made in this area, and repair and replacement of broken and damaged brick became a game of scrounging appropriate brick from unseen areas to use where visible and replacing them with new or non-conforming brick.

Weather conditions always make exterior construction work interesting. When the winter and early spring rains came and would not leave, we thought that we would never finish. But we did, only to evict the Congregation from the interior and begin work there.

The complicated roof structure of our sanctuary is an architectural treasure. All of the rafters and beams are Southern heart pine—there are no steel or other metal supports. Overall, water damage has been the building's chief enemy over the years. The patchwork roof repairs finally became inadequate, and in the process much of the interior plaster became loose and unsalvageable. We knew that our late nineteenth-century electrical system was dangerously wanting, our heating and cooling system was inefficient, and that we needed a security and fire alarm system. The growth of our membership resulted in crowded seating, and our carpet and other decorative appointments needed freshening. Our interior renovation addressed all of these areas and more.

We have installed insulation in the large attic which extends over the entire interior of the sanctuary and improved access to the attic so that routine maintenance can be undertaken more easily. We now have a system of ladders which extends to the full height of the inside of our tallest spire, making inspection for water and other damage easier. All of the plaster in the sanctuary is new, as is the electrical wiring, and we have a security and fire alarm system. We removed exposed heating and cooling ducts and opened the raised seating area on the east side of the sanctuary.

The casual observer is challenged to guess what of our woodwork is new and what is original. If you determined that the low wall, railing, and steps which separate the raised seating area on the east from the main sanctuary is new, you have a good eye. The prior bima was removed during the heating and cooling work, and we discovered the original bima substantially in place underneath. To give our Congregation more space for the original pews and temporary seating for special events, the bima was returned to approximately its original size, a reduction of 24 inches around its exterior perimeter. We discovered the original heart pine flooring still in place and refinished it in the vestibules. Many in the Congregation wanted wall-to-wall carpet in the sanctuary for decorative and acoustical purposes, and so we have it.

One of the vestibules had been converted to a temporary storage area. This was opened, and all of the exterior doors were rebuilt, with original and additional hardware repaired and installed. The woodwork has been repaired, stained, and cleaned. The original pews have been refurbished, their backs braced and new upholstery installed. The sanctuary lighting has been improved. The furniture on the bima has been repaired and the ark has been relined. New covers grace our lecterns.

The original rabbi's study on the northeast corner of the sanctuary building has become our Founders' Room, a place for memorials and other items which evidence the life of our Congregation since its founding in 1876. The mantel in the Founders' Room originally surrounded the fireplace (now covered) between the two doorways on the southeast side of the raised seating area.

All this has been done, but our work is not complete. In the near future will be improvements to our Educational Building, new landscaping, and the renewal of our courtyard as a place for meditation and events.