

SALEM LANDMARK CHURCH  
"Its Early History Up To Its Status as WELS Museum"

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What is history? History in general terms is looking back into the past to study the things which happened in the past. When we look back into past history, we can see how a particular area has progressed through out the years. Looking back into history can be beneficial and valuable for our learning. As members of the WELS we also have history which we can look back at. History can answer many of the questions we may have. Where did our synod come from? Where was the first congregation of our synod started? Who were the first members of our synod? Only by looking back at our early history can we answer these questions. It was questions of this nature that moved me to look into the early history of our own synod. Now the history of our synod would be a very large topic, a topic too large to handle in this paper. For this reason I am going to ~~write~~<sup>use</sup> this paper to concentrate on one of the congregations that was a part of our synod's beginnings. Salem Lutheran Church on 107th and Fondulac Ave in Milwaukee will be the congregation this paper will be discussing.

What is history? This is the question I asked to start this paper. History can cover many different aspects. History may be the study of one particular person. History may be the study of a particular people or culture. History may be the study of ancient buildings and their significance in history. This last aspect of history is going to be the emphasize of this paper. I will briefly describe the beginnings of Salem congregation, but the bulk and main thrust of the paper is going to be the history of the one particular building which is best associated with the

with the early history of the WELS. This building today is called Salem Landmark Church. This building as much as any other person or building stands for the WELS beginnings. This building was erected almost at the very beginning of our synod, and it is still very important in the keeping of WELS history. So let us start on our journey through the interesting history behind this very historic building.

Salem Lutheran Church is presently located on the lot found at the corner of 107th and Fond du lac Ave on Milwaukee's northwest side. On this corner we can track down a large portion of WELS history. On this very corner we can see a large stone which tells us a lot. The stone reads "Birthplace of the Wisconsin Synod" When Salem church was first established in the middle of the 1800's, that section of Milwaukee was called the Granville district. For this reason the congregation in its early years was called the Granville church. The church had its beginning in 1847. About 20 families settled on the northwest side of Milwaukee. From this mixture of Lutheran and Reformed Christians was formed the "Die Deutsch-Englisch Ev. Luterisch und Reformiert Salem's Gemeinde." Dec. 25. 1847 the first service was held by this small congregation. Under the steady leadership of layman Samuel Wambolt the congregation continued to hold regular worship services.

In 1850 at a convention held at Granville the first constitution for the "die erste deutsche evangelisch-luterisch Synode von Wisconsin" was adopted. Since the convention was held at Granville, and it included lay delegates, Salem church was

considered to be the birthplace of the WELS. From this brief history we can see how Salem had a lot influence on the early history of our synod. But to switch gears a little I would like to move from this history of the people and their actions to the history of the building itself which is called Salem Landmark Church.

As we look at this history, I would like to always keep in the minds of the readers the great grace which God showered on his people at Salem. Salem's early history was certainly full of many ups and downs, but lets begin on a up beat. In only two years from the time that Salem held its first service the members of Salem realized their need to have a place to hold their worship services. Under the guidance of their pastor Paul Meiss their first church was erected, and the members of Granville had their first house of worship. This building was a log building which was built at the meager cost of \$108.78. What a bargain! Some of the more important men at this time were the elders Samuel Wambolt, Frederick Bendt, and Aaron Leister. The trustees were Peter Herzwurm and Christopher Wagner. This was Salem's first church building, however, this is not the building which is standing today. But this begins to show us the modest beginnings of this now very strong church.

The next years which led up to the construction of Salem Landmark Church were like a roller coaster ride. In 1857 the reformed element of the congregation decided it was time to leave the synod. Under the leadership of William Buehre 20

families left the congregation and the synod to form the Presbyterian church which now sits across the street from Salem. For this short period Salem was in a downward cycle. But in this problem we can once again see the grace of God. Even though a large portion of their congregation left in the split, the congregation continued to grow. There was growth in numbers and growth in their scriptural adherence. The growth was so great that soon after the split the need arose for a new place of worship. The old log building no longer had the room to accomodate their growing numbers. At this time the members under the spiritual guidance of pastor Sieker proposed to build a new building in which they could hold their services. This sounded good, but the church had a major problem. The congregation only owned a small plot of land,  $\frac{1}{4}$  acre in the vicinity of the present building. Most of the land around the church had been sold to the people of Granville. Where were they going to find a place to build? God certainly does watch out for his people. Jonas Barndt a member of Salem had bought up some of the land around the church. He donated the a plot of land that was across the street from the old log church. This is the land where they decided to build their new church. Under the leadership of pastor Sieker and the members of the congregaion the yellow-cream colored brick building was costructed. The yellow-cream colored brick was a trademark of the Milwaukee brickyard for many years. A person can see this color in many of the older buildings. Another building which used this same brick is the Presbyterian church built across the street. Since it was built

about the same time as Salem's new church. Salem's new church had a seating capacity of about 200. It was built with a tall bell tower which in later years was cut down to the present day form. The bell wasn't placed in the tower at this time, but it was purchased and installed five years later. This new church was dedicated Oct. 28, 1863. Prof. Eduard Moldehnke delivered the first sermon in the new church. Pastor Muelhaeuser, Pastor Streissgut and Dr. Passovant were some of the other people present at this dedication service.

As the church continued its growth, the members decided that they needed an education system for their children. They didn't quite know where to put the children. In 1887 they decided to build an addition on to the church which would serve as the school. So from 1887-1942 this addition served as a school for the children of Salem. At the same time the small basement of the church was rearranged to be a small schoolroom with a small kitchen. With these small additions Salem was able to fulfill the education of their children for many years, until they purchased the Maple Tree school, ~~in~~ 1942.

Throughout the years the improvements continued. These improvements are of note, because they make up the church that we now see in the present day. For instance there were improvements made in 1915 and 1918. In 1915 the Ladies Aid donated the gasoline lights so that the church would be so-called modern in its lighting system. The church now had lights so that the congregation could worship at night if it wished. In 1918 a committee was formed to look into the purchase of a pipe

organ to enhance the worship service. The committee traveled down to Chicago to look into a organ for the church. The committee came back with their recommendation. They suggested the purchase of a pipe organ that was ~~used~~<sup>used</sup> by the theatre in Chicago. The congregation voted on the matter, and the vote was to purchase that pipe organ. The organ was purchased and remodeled. In late 1918 the pipe organ was installed in Salem church. Once again the Ladies Aid was a large contributor to this important project.

As the years rolled along there were many small improvements made on the building. However, the bulk of the improvements were made on the church during the year of 1922. Since this was the year they were going to celebrate their diamond jubilee, they wanted the church to be in tip-top shape. These improvements were amazing, because the American people were in deep financial troubles following their involvement in World War I. In this post-war period building improvements ~~were~~<sup>were not</sup> being done, because there wasn't much money. But we can see how God blessed his people at Salem. They had been blessed enough so that they could afford to fix up and remodel their house of worship. Many things were changed or replaced during this year. And as we look at the church today, we can see most of these changes evident in the present day building. The beautiful leaded- stain glass windows were installed at this time. These stained glass windows replaced the small-paned windows which had been in place from the churches beginning in 1863. The original pointed steeple was replaced by a square

crenellated tower. This is the tower on the present building. The congregation decided to build a sacristy for the pastor at this time. One of the places where a person could notice a big difference is in the way that they replaced the furniture at this time. They removed the old altar, pulpit and font, and they replaced them with white painted wood which gives the church its very distinctive look today. The altar also replaced the old altar which had the painting of the Lord's Supper on it. The curved pews were installed at this time. And to finish off the improvements made during this diamond jubilee, they painted the church again.

The next great endeavor undertaken to improve the church was to build a full basement under the church. Up to this time the basement was very small and wasn't fixed up very nice. This task proved to be a very large undertaking. What <sup>made</sup> things so difficult was the fact that the people who built the church used big boulders for their foundation. Therefore to build the basement these boulders would have to be removed without disturbing the structure of the church. Imagine moving those stones and keeping the church together, all done without modern machinery. But under the watchful eye of Mr. Hans Schuller the task was started in 1942. With wheelbarrows, picks, shovels and tractors and plenty of zeal from the members the task was finally completed in 1946. Salem now had a basement which was very beautiful. It was complete with marbleite floors and a modern kitchen. A new oil burner was installed to replace the old furnace.



Because of the great amount of help contributed by the members, they were able to keep the cost of this big job down to \$11,838.00. This new basement now completed, the school could once again open its doors to its children who had to travel to St. James during this project. With the basement and addition the school was able hold all their children.

1950 brought a few new changes to the scene. The curved pews were replaced with the straight blond colored pews which are in the church today. Also the corner screens were replaced with blond colored screens to match the new pews. The chandeliers were replaced at this time also.

This marks the end of the additions and improvements made on this building. This is the way that Salem Landmark Church appears to us today. But Salem Church has not fallen into disuse. Its history continues. Since Salem church was one of the oldest buildings in the Milwaukee area, people wanted to make sure that it was recognized as a historic site. Salem was important to Milwaukee's early history and also to WELS history. For this reason Salem church was given landmark status by the Common Council of Milwaukee in 1977. It was declared to be a part of the West Granville Historic District, because it was one of the oldest buildings in Milwaukee. This landmark status doesn't provide the funds for the upkeep of the building, but it does indicate that Milwaukee does recognize it as an important historic site.

As for the WELS acknowledgment to the fact that this

church was very significant in its synod's beginnings, we see this happening on April 21, 1985. On this date Salem Landmark Church was dedicated for use as the official WELS museum. In 1987 a committee was formed to supervise the restoration of this beautiful church. They made sure that Salem church was restored to look as close to the past as possible. The upstairs was still a church, while the basement was fixed to be a museum which houses and displays the history of the WELS. The basement is decorated with an old-fashioned pastoral study, a classroom, a kitchen and a meeting room. There are also displays depicting some of the early history of our synod. The church itself is still open for special occasions such as weddings, funerals and other special services. The building is open to make appointments for tours. Also work is being continued to piece together other parts of our early history. More work is being done to get oral history from some of the elderly people, and under the guidance of the WELS Historical Institute more artifacts are being brought in to show things about our early history. What better place to house some of these treasure than in one of the treasures itself namely Salem Landmark Church.

Salem Landmark Church is just one small piece in the big picture of our synod or even in God's church, but I hope that this paper led you to better appreciate and understand that Salem is interesting history. And from this study of Salem church we can see and better understand some of the early history of our synod. \_ Salem may be one small part, but

this one small part was led by God himself. God in his grace blessed this congregation and church throughout its brief history. Whenever we look at Salem church or at our synod the WELS, let us think of the great blessings God has bestowed on us his people. That he would take a small group of believers in 1847 and lead them to the present day. Through trials and tribulations God was there and is there today. God gives us all our history. Thanks be to God.

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1 Misc. Articles and Minutes stored in WELS Archives at the Seminary.