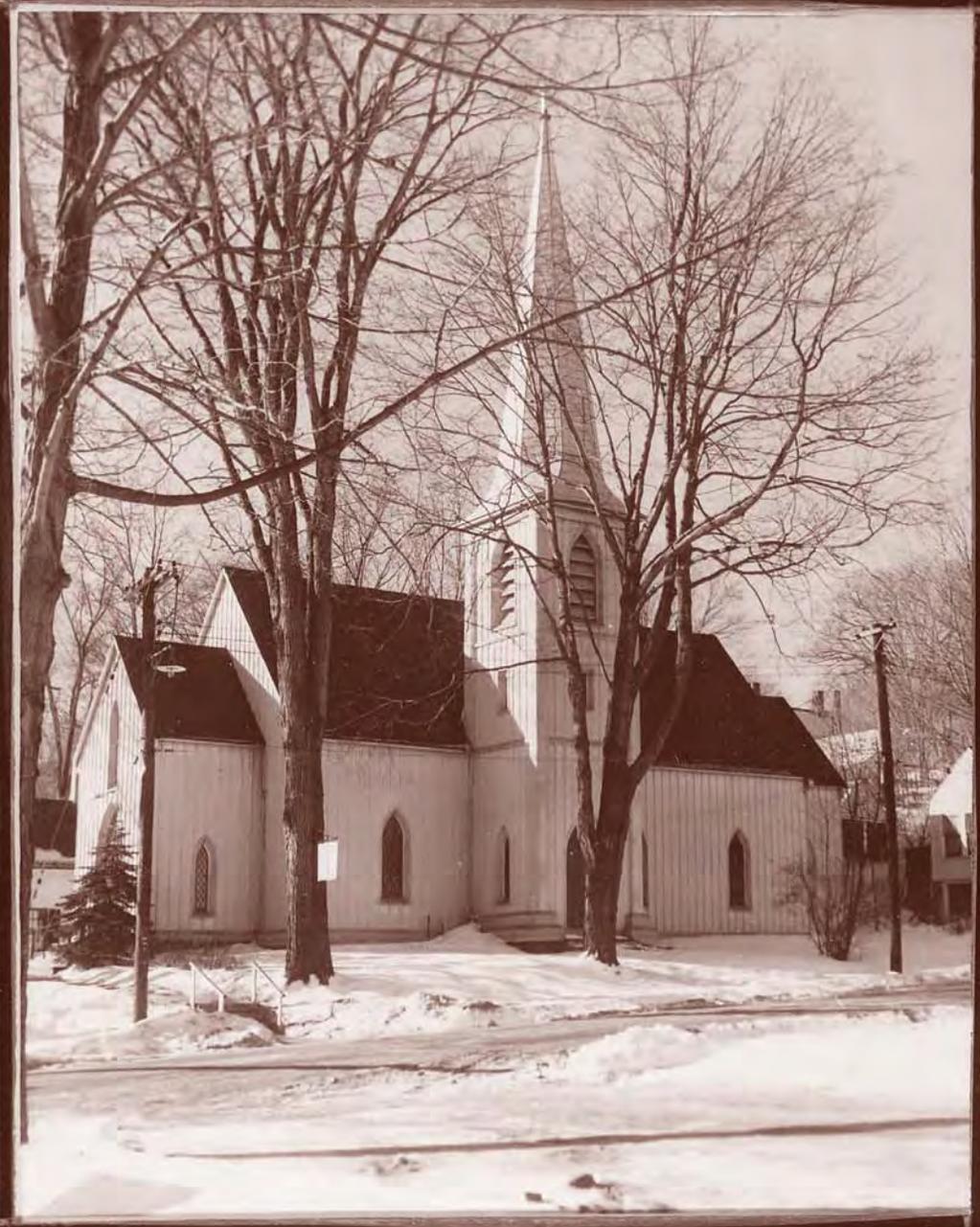


# Housing the Faith

*Places of Worship Through the Lens of the Historic American Buildings Survey by Joe Flanagan*

IN THE CROWDED HOLDS OF SHIPS BOUND FOR THE NEW WORLD, there were probably as many variations of hope as there were passengers. Printers, bakers, blacksmiths, farmers, mothers, soldiers, and nobles all no doubt pondered the equation of their circumstances—strife, finance, family, freedom, the odds of a life remade—as the endless horizon drifted past. They most likely thought of God, whatever they perceived Him to be. Religion was the unifier, a preoccupation they carried to the new continent. Today, its architectural manifestations are among our greatest treasures. Whether grand or modest, ornamented or minimal, they represent “humanity’s insatiable desire to state its relationship to the compelling and the inscrutable,” says former National Park Service Director Roger Kennedy in his book *American Churches*.

*Right: St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church, Hallowell, Maine. The design of this gothic-style church, built in 1860, is similar to plans in architect Richard Upjohn’s Rural Architecture, the so-called “Sears & Roebuck catalogue for churches.” The structure is clad with board and batten, an unusual low-cost choice for a parish that could afford a tower.*



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**FEW PLACES ARE SO INVESTED WITH MEANING, WHERE CULTURAL IDENTITY, HISTORY, ART, AND** profound personal significance converge in a single structure. They are among America's most endangered places, particularly the older, urban buildings whose congregations long ago fled the cities, ornate masterworks that are difficult to maintain and expensive to repair.

For nearly 75 years, the NPS Historic American Buildings Survey—whose work is shown here—has documented this dwindling legacy, from iconic cathedrals to obscure folk churches. The result, preserved at the Library of Congress (online at [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs\\_haer/](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/habs_haer/)), is nothing less than a cultural roadmap of America.

When the first English settlers came ashore, they brought with them the effects of sweeping cultural changes in Europe. In his book *American Buildings and Their Architects*, William H. Pierson, Jr., points to the impact of the Protestant Reformation on “the cultural destiny of America.” The movement, along with the architectural forms of the Renaissance, dictated how early houses of worship looked—expressive yet restrained, reflecting the back-to-basics spirituality of a Protestant Europe eager to define itself against Catholicism's opulence. In New England, the simplicity was fostered by a wish to separate from the Church of England, a Puritan desire to “purify” a religion seen as having strayed from truth.

The iconic clapboard church and steeple, synonymous with colonial America, owes its origins to events in Britain. When fire wiped out much of London in 1666, architects Christopher Wren and James Gibbs wielded enormous influence in the rebuilding, leaving their imprint with the seminal St. Paul's Cathedral and St. Martin-in-the-Fields. Their style, “so appropriate to the colonies,” Pierson writes, “provided all the architectural conventions for the ubiquitous box-and-spire.” The colonial churches were strictly rectilinear, with no ceremonial space, no statuary, and no stained glass; clear windows let in natural light. “Austerely plain by choice” and “insistently Protestant,” is how Pierson refers to them.

Restraint was the coin of the realm. With the availability of mass-produced nails and milled lumber, the style “began in confidence and came, in time, to be something like defiance,” writes Kennedy. It spread from New England to the Deep South.

*Left: Pilgrim Baptist Church, a Chicago landmark erected in 1891, creation of famed architects Adler & Sullivan. Originally the Kehilath Anshe Ma'arive Synagogue, the building was purchased by the Pilgrim Baptist congregation in 1922 as African Americans migrated to the region. The church suffered a devastating fire last year, leaving not much intact but the shell. The blaze earned the structure national attention, but its biggest claim to fame is as the birthplace of gospel music. Above: Cathedral of St. Peter in Chains (left) and Plum Street Temple (right), Cincinnati. The Greek Revival cathedral, designed by Henry Walter, was built in the 1840s and restored in the 1950s. The Byzantine-Moorish temple, designed by James Keys Wilson, was built in 1866 for the first group of Reform Jewish worshippers west of the Alleghenies. The neighborhood was in decline when HABS documented the structures in 1971.*



LEFT HAROLD ALLEN/NPS/HABS, 1964; RIGHT JACK BOUCHER/NPS/HABS, 1971



**IN EUROPE, THE CATHOLIC CHURCH REACTED TO THE TRENDS WITH “BURST** after burst of sensuous splendor,” Pierson writes. Glittering cathedrals spread across the continent, he says, steeped in theater and “conceived as instruments of propaganda.” This influence also took root, ironically, in the stark and arid American Southwest. Spain sent soldiers and missionaries into the desert; the result was what Kennedy calls “fortress-cathedrals.” Native American materials and building techniques yielded a hybrid both high-flown and elemental. Doors, facades, and steeples affected an elegant formality against blunt and defensive forms. The

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mission church adopted the idea of theatrical light from the European churches of the Counter-Reformation, drawing the worshipper’s eye upward in awe. Yet here there is a sense of shadowy mysticism as shafts of light—entering high-placed slit windows—direct the eye downward into the dark, mysterious space. Today many of these churches remain central to their communities, ancient and revered places that likely far transcend what their builders could ever have imagined.

**MOST CHURCHES WERE CUSTOM-MADE, DISTINGUISHING THEM FOR THE AGES** and demonstrating the reverence of the faithful. Yet the most prized elements—the brass, marble, mosaics, stained glass, and impossibly pitched slate roofs—pose a serious challenge to preservation, and to modern heating and cooling. Add to that the ebb and flow of economic fortune in the urban neighborhoods where many reside, and their very survival comes into question.

Philadelphia is an example. “It seemed there was once a church on every corner,” says Carl Doebley, a conservator specializing in religious architecture with the firm DPK&A Architects, which oversaw the renovation of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Savannah.

For those that remain, safety often trumps preservation. Rotting trusses and compromised masonry threaten many houses of worship. When the preservation group Partners for Sacred Places asked Doebley to assess the condition of Christ Memorial Reformed Episcopal Church on Pine Street, he told them, “Forget the assessment. You have a major problem here.” Some months later, its massive stone tower crashed to the ground. “People don’t want to lose these buildings because of the unique architecture and tradition they represent,” says Paul Dolinsky, chief of the Historic American Landscapes Survey. “But is that enough to keep them up and running?”

**AFTER THE REVOLUTION, THERE WAS A SEARCH FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY.** The new constitution, which promised freedom of worship, prohibited official religion. “Pluralism became the hallmark of the American religious experience,” writes Robin Langley Sommer in *The Old Church Book*.

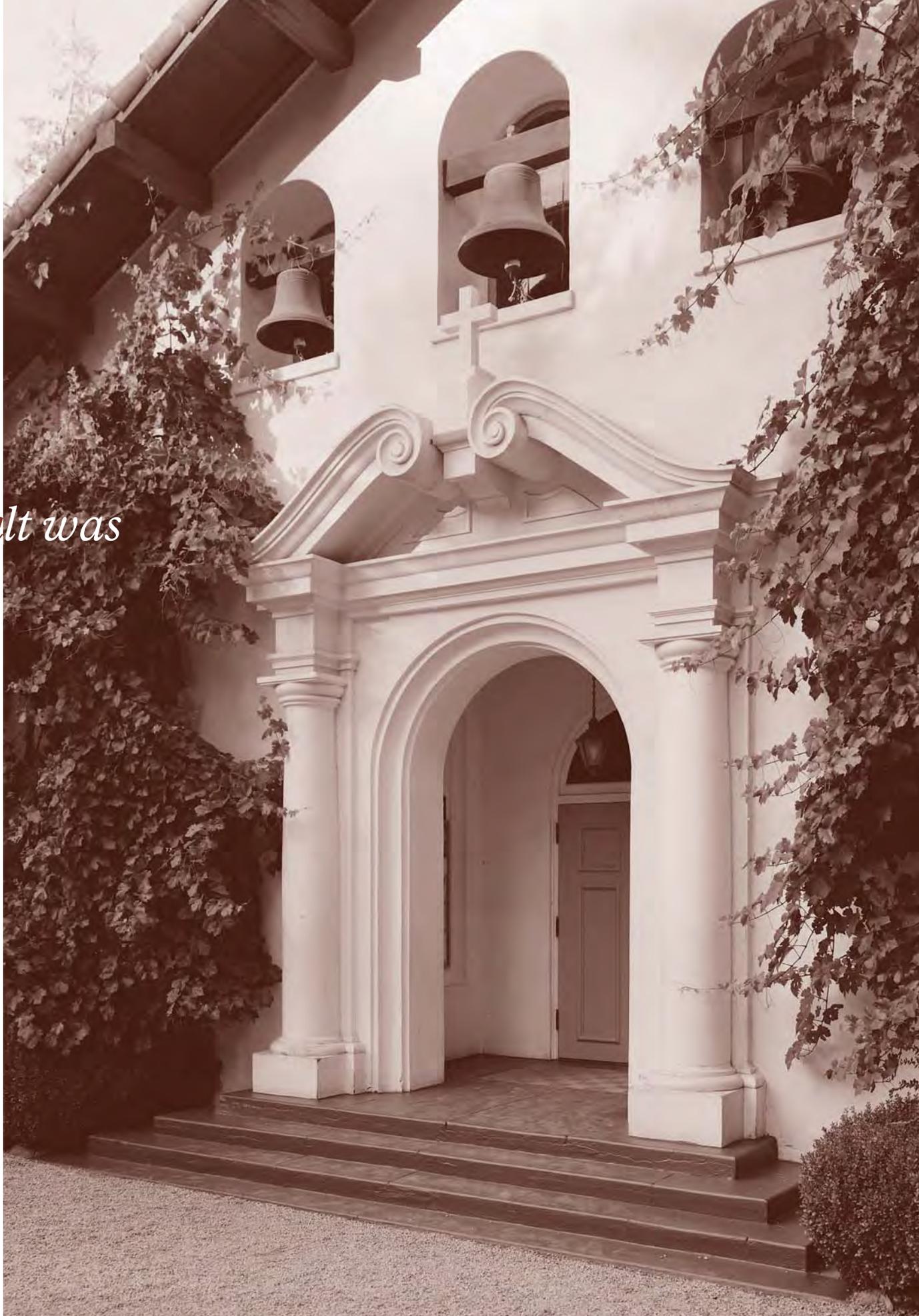
Americans looked to ancient Greece and Rome for inspiration. The classical world was perceived as the source of a “pure” aesthetic and true democracy. The young nation eagerly appropriated the symbolism. Churches took on the look of miniature temples. Stone was the material of choice, but wood was chosen also, often painted white to resemble marble.

As the eastern cities overflowed their bounds, a proliferation of sects filled out a complex religious landscape. The nation witnessed a series of Great Awakenings, periodic religious revivals. Unfulfilled by traditional denominations, and feeling that core truth had been lost, people met under tents and in “brush arbors” to find their faith and discuss issues like slavery and temperance. It was the start of the great revival meetings of the late 19th century. Writes Kennedy in *American Churches*, “Religious impulse was seeking new means of expression. The great age of the Evangelical sect was dawning.”

*Above far left: Mission San Jose y San Miguel de Aquayo, one of four preserved at San Antonio Missions National Historical Park. Completed in 1782, it was the largest of the group—“Queen of the Missions” was its nickname. Having fallen into decay over the years, it was stabilized by the National Park Service and now has services every Sunday. Above near left: Mission San Francisco de la Espada. Another one of the park’s missions. Right: Our Lady of the Wayside Catholic Church, Portola Valley, California. Architect Timothy Pflueger was only 21 when he designed the red-roofed structure in the early 1920s. Colonial Revival meets Spanish Mission with its Georgian entrance and Monterey-style eaves.*

*the result was*

LEFT JET LOWE/NPSHABS, 1983; RIGHT JACK BOUCHER/NPSHABS, 1975





*Unfulfilled by traditional*



LEFT ROGER STURTEVANT/NPS/HABS, 1934; NEAR RIGHT JET LOWE/NPS/HABS, 1991

Jews gained enough of a foothold to build their own temples. The new synagogues looked like nothing before them. “This was the Jewish struggle for identity,” says Dolinsky. “They chose styles that were intentionally different.” They favored the Moorish, Babylonian, and Egyptian revivals—visual references to their faith’s origins.

In the 1830s, nostalgia ushered in a new form. The Episcopalians, primarily, were not comfortable with the restraint of the classical style. The structures they built, in gothic revival style, at first glance resemble the Catholic churches of the Middle Ages. Yet, says Kennedy, they were “as anti-Roman Catholic as the austere Puritan churches of the colonial and neoclassical eras.”

Numerous denominations adopted the look, which spread from coast to coast, reaching an apogee in landmarks like St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City. English architect Augustus Welby Pugin, a Catholic convert who held sway in Europe, advocated gothic as the only true form of Christian architecture. Richard Upjohn’s pattern book *Rural Architecture*—likened to an ecclesiastical Sears cata-

*Left: The domed roof of California’s Fort Ross Russian Chapel. One of the structures built starting in 1824, several years after a Russian trading company started a colony here. The high style is unusual for a remote fur-trapping post. The church has been rebuilt several times since it collapsed during the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, a later victim of three fires. Left below: The first building used by St. Patrick’s Roman Catholic Church of Barrow, Alaska. The structure was patched together from abandoned World War II buildings in the mid-’50s—just as Catholicism was taking root—to be replaced in 1992 with a modern structure. Right below: Indian Fields Methodist Campground, Dorchester County, South Carolina, erected in 1848. The 99 cabins, an early commune of sorts in a circle around a main tabernacle, are representative of the 19th century evangelical movement. Services are still held every year during the last week of September.*

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JACK BOUCHER/NPS/HABS, 1987

logue—heralded what Dolinsky calls “the hegemony of the Gothic cottage church in America.”

Today, a blighted section of Philadelphia boasts the purest example of the Gothic style. St. James-the-Less, built between 1846 and 1848, is a near-precise replica of the Church of St. Michael in Cambridgeshire, its construction closely supervised by church authorities in England (see photo, table of contents). “St. James-the-Less is unmatched for quality and authenticity by any other American church of its time,” says Pierson. The structure was a powerful expression of Pugin’s idea that all that was wrong with the modern world could be righted if society returned to a simpler, more natural way of living—reminiscent of 14th century rural England.

Today, the future of St. James is uncertain. It would have gone the way of many abandoned churches, but for members who stayed loyal when they moved out of the declining neighborhood. Episcopalians embracing a conservative strain of the faith closer to its Anglican roots, they disagreed with the more liberal hierarchy of the diocese—deciding to withdraw while claiming the structure where the parish had worshiped for more than 150 years. A legal dispute went all the way to the state supreme court, which ruled against the parish. Today, St.

James stands empty. What will become of the national historic landmark remains unknown.

“We’re dealing with an era of economic dislocation,” says Bob Jaeger, executive director of Partners for Sacred Places. A source of grants and expertise, the group finds innovative ways to help churches stay open. Studies show that in most churches, about 80 percent of the people coming through the doors are not members. Day care, after school care, meeting places, community centers, soup kitchens, and performance venues account for the bulk of the use. Jaeger tells civic leaders, policymakers, and potential donors, “Don’t look at them as sectarian places anymore. They are really de facto community centers.” The group trains congregations in things as varied as finding roofers and finding partners, such as advocates for the homeless, at-risk youth, the elderly, and the arts. “Unless they build a constituency,” says Jaeger, “they will not survive.”

# “We’re dealing with an era of economic dislocation,”

**IN THE LATTER HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY, CATHOLICS, ONCE MARGINALIZED** and prohibited from worshipping together, came into their own. Attaining political and economic security, with their numbers swelled by immigrants, they began building in grand style. As the Catholics embraced the traditional, the 1880s saw evangelical Protestants introduce a radical change to the very idea of worship. Their auditorium churches were rambling stone structures whose exteriors borrowed from the Romanesque or Gothic. But the interiors were pure theater. Seating sloped upward from a central stage, with opera boxes, proscenium arches, and marquee lighting. Services took on the elements of performance. These were the antecedents of today’s megachurches.

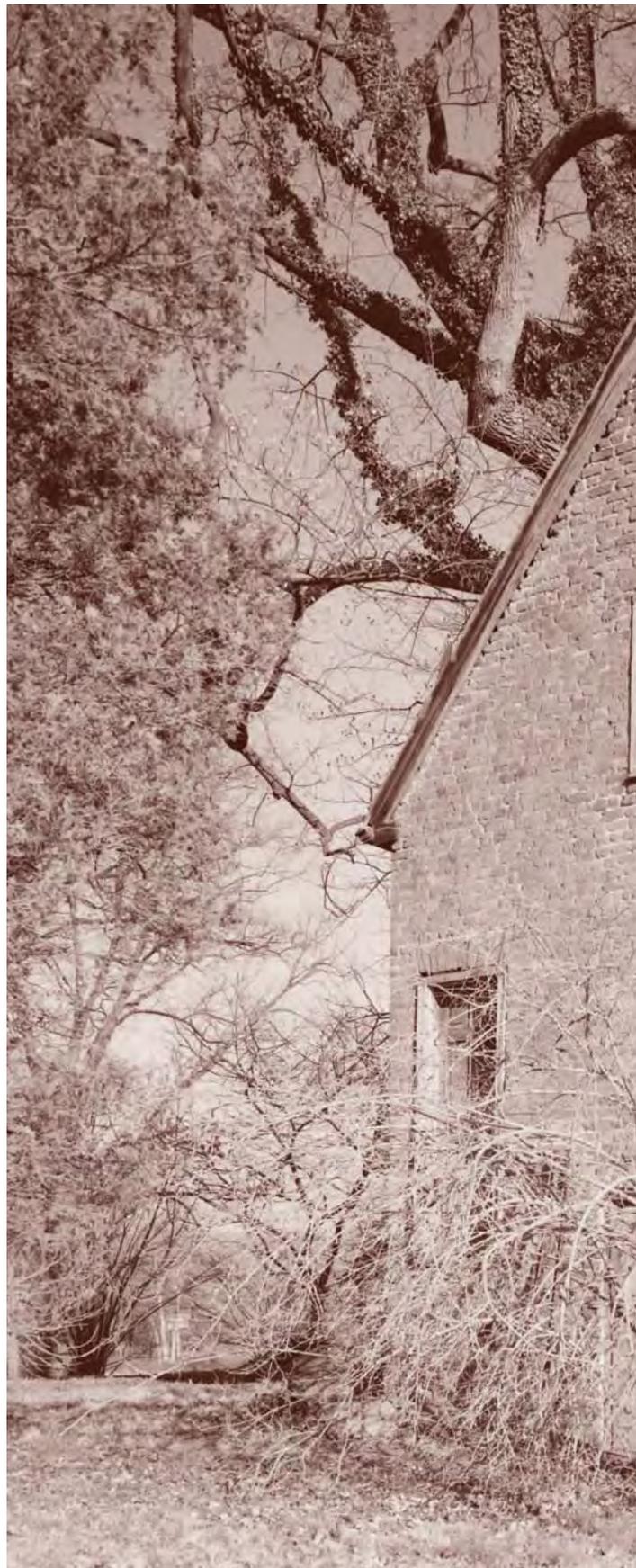
The roots of these churches were in the early part of the century, in the days of circuit-riding preachers and tent meetings and the move to explore spiritual life outside defined avenues. In her book, *When Church Became Theater*, Jeanne Halgren Kilde suggests that they were a manifestation of nascent consumer culture. The congregation had a choice in how to experience the service, and even a say in its choreography, a re-negotiation of authority. Auditorium churches were adopted by Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Methodists, a banding together in a time of anxiety at the dawn of a new century. The unity

was ultimately broken as liberal and conservative schools of thought clashed and separated.

**AFRICAN AMERICANS MIGRATING TO THE** northern cities established spiritual communities wherever they could. Often it was in a church that once belonged to another denomination. Chicago’s Kehilath Anshe Ma’arive synagogue, built in 1891, was sold to a black congregation 30 years later. The newly named Pilgrim Baptist Church became fertile ground for a new way of worship. Pilgrim Baptist, today known as the birthplace of gospel music, drew singers such as Mahalia Jackson, James Cleveland, and Sallie Martin. A fire gutted the church in 2006, and all that remains are the walls.

As the 20th century progressed, traditional church architecture seemed to disappear with the consuming wave of the new. Dowdy, drafty, dark, antiquated—these were the terms associated with the old styles. Once again, the faithful stepped

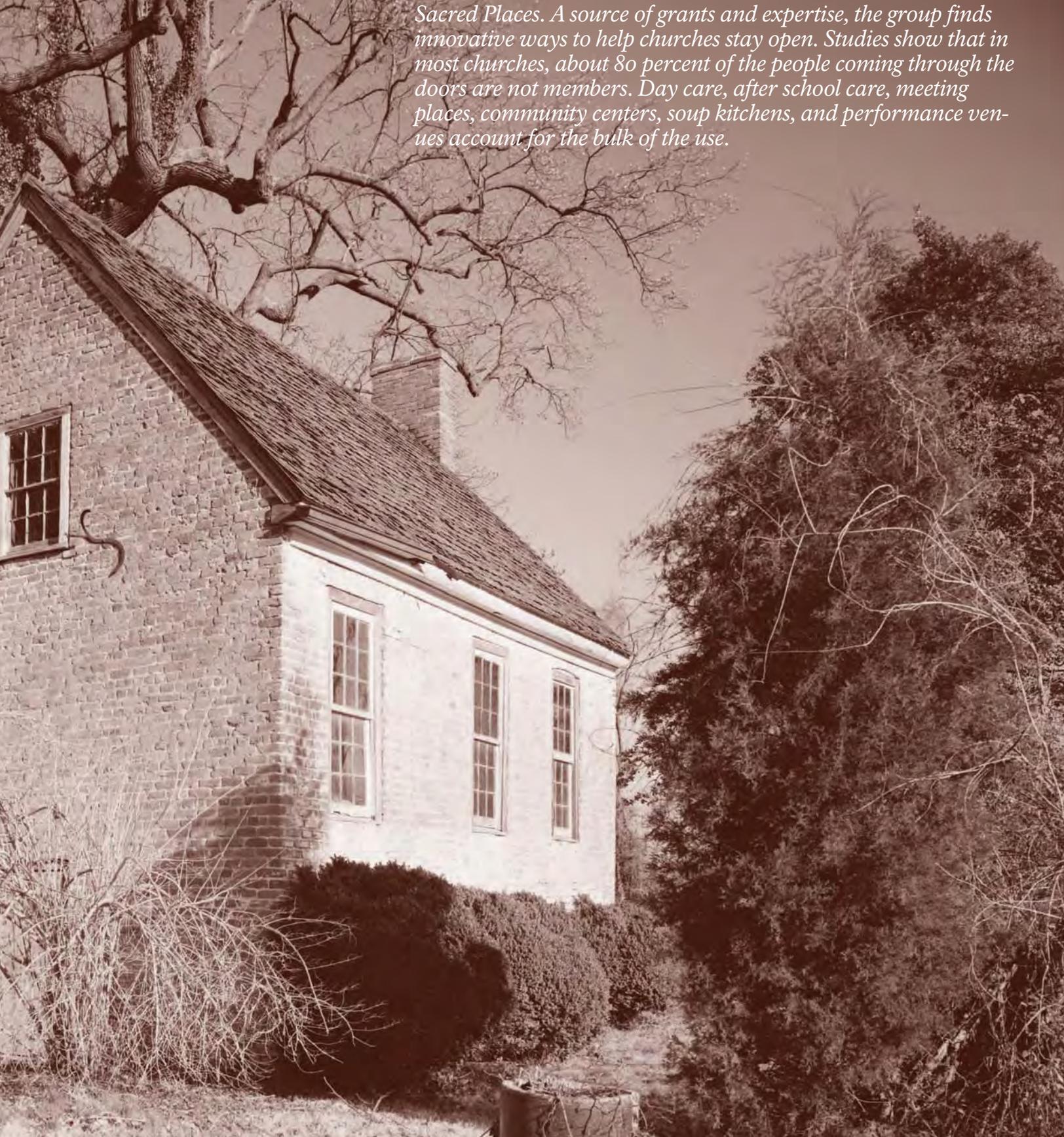
*Above: Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in 1847. A social institution with Atlanta’s African American community, the church hosted President Taft in 1911 and Nelson Mandela in 1990. Black architect J.A. Lankford transformed the structure from Victorian to Romanesque Revival. Right: Compton Bassett Chapel, Upper Marlboro, Maryland. A private chapel from around 1783, the Georgian structure recalls the state’s persecution of Catholics, forced to worship in secret. Many families built them, but most are gone.*



LEFT: JAMES R. LOCKHART/NPS/HABS, 1979; RIGHT: JACK BOUCHER/NPS/HABS, 1989

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*Right: St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage, Alaska. An asymmetrical A-frame designed in 1955 by Edwin B. Crittenden and Associates as part of a complex that includes a parish hall and rectory to complement the church.*

back to reassess the very approach to the idea of God. The new forms were influenced by secular architecture. Modernism was changing the face of cities and neighborhoods alike with sleek lines, cubic forms, and glass planes.

Leading practitioners of the form tried their hand at the spiritual. Eero Saarinen's North Christian Church and Tabernacle Church of Christ, both in Columbus, Indiana, are considered major works of this period. Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple, a national historic landmark in Oak Park, Illinois, is another. Viewed in the context of their times, these structures are a breathtaking challenge to the spiritual status quo. Whether they work as churches is the point of much debate. In their abstraction, repeated geometrical forms, and plain surfaces one can see why Valparaiso University humanities professor Gretchen Buggeln, writing in *The Christian Century*, would call modernism "the death of ornament."

Many Catholics blame the Second Vatican Council of the mid-'60s for helping erode the faith's uniqueness. The sweeping changes that altered so many aspects of Catholic culture, they argue, found their way into church architecture.

Today, modern often means megachurches—stadium-size structures with stereo systems, mixing boards, and giant video screens preaching to audiences of thousands, with parking lots so big they are frequently located on the outskirts of cities. Buggeln says these structures bear the "unmistakable influence" of office parks and shopping malls.

A common complaint is that a sense of the sacred is missing. The backlash against modernism and careless rehabs has yielded books like *Ugly as Sin: Why They Changed Our Churches from Sacred Places to Meeting Places*. One writer titles her critique "How Great Thou Aren't."

## THE PRESERVATION OF MIDCENTURY MODERN CHURCHES POSES A DILEMMA.

For now at least, they have not galvanized a broad constituency, but that may change soon enough given the style's surging popularity. The urgency, for the moment, seems to weigh in favor of places freighted with age and history.

Since 1986, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, among the most active groups dealing with the issue, has given over \$5 million in grants to more than 600 religious properties. "In New York City," says president Peg Breen, "developers are literally going door to door asking churches if they can buy them and tear them down." The group works with the state historic preservation office to provide congregations with technical assistance, fundraising advice, and architectural referrals. The conservancy promotes heritage tourism, too. "A lot of tourists come to see these structures and hear gospel music," says Breen.

## THE PROBLEM IS NOT CONFINED TO CITIES. "MANY RURAL PARISHES ARE

smaller than ever," says Jaeger. In North Dakota, he says, "twenty percent of the rural churches are empty, because of the depopulation of farmland. It may be closer to half in another few decades." In upstate New York, shrinking congregations are consolidating into fewer buildings, says Ann Friedman, director of the conservancy's sacred sites program. Doebley says it's often a question of "haves and have-nots." When his firm renovated Savannah's St. John the Baptist, it was thanks to "an affluent congregation that could raise the funds." On the other side, he adds, are "congregations that can hardly scrape together the \$1,500 to match the grant they're getting. Poorer churches need roofing and wiring upgrades. There are a lot of church fires."

Grandeur can be a blessing or a curse. It's the very quality that saves some houses of worship and condemns others. Churches are often large, complicated structures that do not lend themselves readily to



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*Far left: Beth Shalom Synagogue, in the Philadelphia suburb of Elkins Park, a later Frank Lloyd Wright work and his only synagogue. Construction began in 1957 and ended shortly after Wright's death in 1959. The design includes many elements of Jewish symbolism; services are held daily in the recently designated national historic landmark. Near left: Our Lady of Lebanon, formerly the First Congregational Church of Austin, in Chicago. A small prairie-style church designed by Wright's chief draftsman, William E. Drummond. Built in 1908, the structure was Drummond's first commission.*

other uses. "I've seen them turned into apartments, bars, and restaurants, but it doesn't really work," says National Park Service photographer Jack Boucher. "What else can it be but a church?"

In the face of a seemingly inexorable trend, some have chosen to light a candle rather than curse the darkness. The New York City

council, for example, is discussing a task force to assist struggling congregations, which would help preserve communities, too. Says Bob Jaeger, "Many can be saved with the right intervention."

For more information contact Partners for Sacred Places, (215) 567-3234, email [partners@sacredplaces.org](mailto:partners@sacredplaces.org), online at [www.sacredplaces.org](http://www.sacredplaces.org), or Ann-Isabel Friedman at the New York Landmarks Conservancy, (212) 995-5260, email [annfriedman@nylandmarks.org](mailto:annfriedman@nylandmarks.org), online at [www.nylandmarks.org](http://www.nylandmarks.org). The National Park Service works with a host of partners to preserve this precious legacy through Save America's Treasures grants, the National Historic Landmarks Program, the National Register of Historic Places, and other initiatives. Contact your local state preservation office or go to [www.cr.nps.gov](http://www.cr.nps.gov).