

WESLEY CHAPEL - A Personal History

Incidentally, Amherst is the same New England town that Judith, my wife, and I drove into in connection with my work, and in search for the perfect place to live happily ever after. On first arriving, we noticed a church, called Wesley Chapel, for sale on Main Street, east of the Emily Dickinson House.

There were some rumors that a developer was planning to demolish the structure to make room for several houses. On the following day we noticed a local mason carefully measuring the building in order to determine the number of bricks he could possibly salvage from the demolition. We bought it that very same morning to save the building and to serve as our temporary home and studio. Thirty-four years later we are still here. Temporary is a relative term, I suppose.

I remember pitching a tent in the place back in 1972, and working on it whenever I could find time. Because many of the windows were broken it was not unlikely for a pigeon or two to be roosting high on crossbeams. At night several bats came down from the belfry and flew around the large cavernous space, keeping it free of insects.

Gradually, we gathered scattered brick which over the years had dislodged and fallen from the upper corners of the belfry. We repaired many of the broken stained glass windows and replaced ones which were irreparably damaged with clear glass. We shoveled hundreds of pounds-actually, 1,150 pounds-of pigeon droppings from the bell tower, along with many skeletons of squirrels, bats, and assorted other animals which had once resided there. We hacked down weeds and brambles in the vacant lot behind the chapel, and collected rusted cans, old tires, rotted wood, bedsprings, and other discarded neighborhood trash.

It should be mentioned here that the building's previous owner had modified the space in practical but nevertheless architecturally disastrous ways. In particular, they had built a suspended ceiling covered with acoustical tile, which in time had become water stained. We removed this to uncover two magnificent arched beams and two round stained glass windows positioned high in the chapel at each gable.

In time, we built living quarters on the first floor and ceramics and architectural studios on the second. On the uppermost level we built several lofts including a north and south loft connected by a bridge. Essentially, we built an entirely new building within the shell of the old. This enabled us to insulate the walls as well as do all the required electrical and plumbing improvements while preserving the masterfully built and beautifully detailed exterior of the building.

Over the years I have grown to appreciate this sacred place. Older people in the community have stopped in occasionally and recalled the time when, as children, they attended Sunday sermons here and played in the front yard. It has convinced me that by becoming familiar with a building's personal history and the process by which it was built, as well as the individuals involved in its realization can we begin to truly appreciate the value of the structure itself and the importance of preserving it.

Demolishing a building for reasons of economics, changed zoning patterns or because it needs extensive repair, erases not just the physical building but also its long history. For

example, note the minutes related to the construction of Wesley Chapel:

"Considerable prosperity has attended us and summons us to arise and build. It appears to be addressed from on high."

"God's hand was seen every step of the way. Every dollar of the money came from faith and prayer."

"Great praise should be given to the building committee, whose courage and self denial has made the building a possibility."

As you can see, the construction of the chapel was not simply a casual undertaking. When one considers that the large stones for the foundation were moved from miles away by horse and wagon, the brick was made especially for the building at a brickyard site nearby in town, and that the entire construction was accomplished without benefit of power tools, backhoe or bulldozer, seems a miracle even today.