

Churches in the Shenandoah Valley

St. Paul Lutheran Church
156 W Washington St
Strasburg, VA 22657



A brief History

The early *German* settlers brought scant possessions with them, but among the intangibles — for most of them anyway — was their faith. The journals of itinerant preachers contain many references to people in the Shenandoah Valley hungry to hear the word of God.

Further evidence of the pioneers' faith is the fact that a church was often the first community building erected. A Moravian missionary passing through "the Chanador," as the area around Strasburg was sometimes called then, in 1747 reported the existence of a "church," the first reference to what became St. Paul Lutheran Church.

Church website: www.stpaulstrasburg.com/
Telephone : (540) 465-3232

Churches in the Shenandoah Valley

If, though, a church is considered the gathering of even a few believers to worship and praise God, the congregation's roots extend even further. John Caspar Stoever Jr., the first German minister based in Virginia, made seven trips through the Valley between 1734 and 1742. His first recorded baptism on the Shenandoah was of young John Frederick Brintzler on March 31, 1735.

George Samuel Klug, Stoever's successor at Hebron Church at Madison, also made regular visits to the Germans in the Valley. Their fervor for Lutheranism is evident in two ways. Several of the Moravian missionaries reported a frosty reception from the settlers. George Dellinger, the Lutheran elder who let the Moravian Leonard Schnell preach in his house in 1747, refused to let him do so again two years later because of the criticism he had received from his fellow parishioners. Second, they made several attempts to secure the services of a resident Lutheran minister.

There was only a handful of Lutheran ministers in the colonies, though, and not until 1772 when John Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg accepted a call to the Valley did a Lutheran pastor live in the Valley. When Muhlenberg left to fight in the Revolutionary War, another gap ensued until Christian Streit accepted a call to the northern Valley parishes in 1785.

The settlers did not lack spiritual nourishment between the random visits of the itinerant ministers, however. Simon Harr, a layman with enough theological training to be licensed as a catechist, conducted services at the Lutheran church throughout the last half of the 18th century. He also was schoolmaster at the church's school, the first in Strasburg.

Harr corresponded with Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, the patriarch of Lutheranism in America and the father of Peter Muhlenberg. Although considered merely a missionary pastor by the church fathers in Germany who had dispatched him to America, Henry Muhlenberg functioned as a bishop, nurturing fledgling congregations, counseling and encouraging ministers and seeking to maintain rigorous pastoral standards.

The church that missionary Schnell was denied use of in July 1747 was located on the church farm at Clary. The 200-acre parcel, part of Lord Fairfax's immense holdings, was surveyed on Dec. 20, 1751, "for the use of the Dutch Chappel or Society of Dutch Protestants including the said chappel." Listed on the survey are the names of Laurence Snapp, Heironymous Baker, Martin Roller and Henry Felkner, "Elders of the Lutheran Church and Congregation." Their names also turn up in St. Paul's early church records. The same structure is referred to in the will of George Sheasler, drafted in February 1749, as "the Dutch chappel."

When the original church on this lot on Washington Street was built is unknown, but it was probably in the late 1760s. In 1768 the congregation purchased the lot from Peter Stover, the founder of Strasburg, and the first church records date from 1769.

Henry Melchior Muhlenberg noted in his journal that fund collectors from Strasburg and vicinity had visited him on July 3, 1765. "They were formerly prosperous, but several years ago they suffered much from the hostile Indians, etc. Now that they appear to have some degree of peace, they are again coming back to their ruined settlements and are anxious to build a church."

Church website: www.stpaulstrasburg.com/
Telephone : (540) 465-3232

Churches in the Shenandoah Valley

The log church was located slightly to the west of the present sanctuary, near the parish house. It faced Washington Street, was 50 feet wide and 40 feet long with a balcony on three sides. Above the front door, in the gallery, was a pipe organ, said to have been built in Germany. Philip Eberly, who was born in 1822 reminisced in 1907 that the organ was a "monster, ... but it was not so sweet-toned as that of today."

The old church had no heat at first and some members opposed the installation of stoves, saying that they "were not bought with a view to obtaining comfort" but were "being prompted by pride." The lack of heat made naps during long sermons less likely.

The condition of the old church deteriorated over time and by 1840 members were complaining that it was "crumbling down" and "very inconvenient" for worship. A survey by the council showed that it was "more judicious" to erect a new church than to attempt to fix the old one.

The church farm was also in disrepair — the church fathers had trouble collecting rent from the tenants — and the Virginia General Assembly was displaying new coolness to church- owned property, which was not on the tax rolls.

The twin problems of the "dilapidated" church and the farm that "diminished yearly in value" combined for a solution: Proceeds from the sale of the farm were used to build a new church, which was dedicated on Nov. 10, 1844 "to the worship of the Triune God" and called for the first time "St. Paul's Lutheran Church."

Descriptions of the new church's interior are sketchy, but Miss Lucy Ludwig, longtime schoolteacher and church organist, noted that the building contained a gallery "for colored friends" and the Sunday school primary department. Two small rooms at the front of the church were entered from the porch. The room at the left contained the funeral bier, the room on the right the steps to the gallery.

The new building suffered the ravages of the Civil War. The interior was gutted by Union troops and used as a hospital, arsenal and stable. Only the shell remained. The damage was so extensive that the Virginia Synod made annual donations to the Strasburg church for two years after the war, the only church to receive such aid. It was repaired and rededicated in 1867 and then extensively remodeled in 1902

Union troops under Gen. Nathaniel Banks first took control of the church in the spring of 1862. As the North's presence in the Shenandoah Valley ebbed and flowed, under the persistent harassment of Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson and his successors, St. Paul's was often used by federal troops whenever they were in the vicinity.

It is doubtful that Southern troops ever occupied the church. Of seven people who lived within two blocks of the church during the war, only one recalled Confederate troops bivouacked in the church, and then for only a weekend in 1864.

While troops were not in the church continuously throughout the war, what they did to the building rendered it useless to the congregation. Parish records are nonexistent for the war years, but a church member said later that the Lutherans held services at the town's Presbyterian Church, which had suffered less at the hands of the armies.

Churches in the Shenandoah Valley

Yet whatever damage and dislocations the troops caused earlier in the war was overshadowed by the vandalism of October 1864, which gutted the church. "Nothing but the bare brick walls was left," a Union soldier reported. The church fathers were more indignant: The minutes of May 12, 1867, recounting the rededication of the church, decry its "having been torn to pieces and defaced by the fiendish hand of the Union Army."

Union troops first occupied the church in March or April 1862. Its proximity to the railroad line and the fort Banks erected on the hill just north of the church made it ideal as a storage place for ordnance. But not for long. On May 24, 1862, with Jackson racing from Front Royal to Winchester, Banks' rearguard, commanded by Col. Othenil De Forest, "emptied the church of the ordnance store and burned them."

Other Union visits were no so eventful although the church members who lived nearby recalled Northern troops in the church whenever they were in Strasburg. In its federal claim, the church sought \$25 per month rent as reimbursement in addition to the expenses of repairing the church from the vandalism of October 1864.

That incident is graphically described in a letter from Private Wilbur Fisk, Company E, Second Vermont Brigade, U.S. Army:

We have had a warm, bright Sabbath today, just such an autumn Sabbath as one loves to enjoy, and really seems to be designed on purpose to make delightful the worship of God. So clear and warm has shone the sun, so mellow and soft the air, while the crimson tinted foliage adorning the forests on the surrounding hills and mountains contrasting most beautifully with the serene blue sky above, all have combined to make nature more than usually lovely...

The brigade is back again to Strasburg. The 3rd and 4th are encamped on the flat by the railroad near the town. They act as Provost Guard — Col. Foster being Acting Provost Marshall. The 2nd is by the brick church, south of the town (Presbyterian), and the 5th is only a little further from the town, in the same direction, while one battalion of the 11th is further to the right of the town. We are very comfortably situated here. Our duty is to guard the town, that is, those that are on duty are to keep those that are not from stealing or making depredations in any shape upon the citizens' property.

We have improved the day the best we could. Chaplain Roberts had an appointment at one o'clock, but the funeral of a rebel officer, who died here in town, being appointed at the same hour, the Chaplain postponed his an hour later.

After the funeral today, the Chaplain went personally to the camp and gave notice of a meeting to be held at four o'clock at the brick church on the south part of the town (Presbyterian) used as a rebel hospital. The Chaplain had friend and foes for his audience, but the wounded rebels appeared to enjoy the discourse very much, as did also the well Union boys. The attendance was not large, however. The regiments were drawing beef just at that time, and you know soldiers, just like all the rest of the world, love the meat which perisheth a great deal better than they do the bread of life...

There is another brick church in the opposite part of town (Lutheran) and Chaplain Roberts had

Church website: www.stpaulstrasburg.com/

Telephone : (540) 465-3232

Churches in the Shenandoah Valley

intended this as a place to hold our meetings and we were congratulating ourselves upon our good fortune in having so good a place for this purpose; but one cold morning last week the boys conceived the idea of appropriating some of the inside work for their own comfort and benefit. Before their depredations were discovered, they had completely torn out the inside of the house and destroyed it for use. The pulpit was entirely taken away, the seats were removed, and doors, windows, casings, and everything that could be used in any conceivable way to build a "shanty" was taken. Nothing but the bare brick walls was left. It was too bad, not only on account of the destruction of property, and spoiling the place we had intended to use ourselves in an appropriate way for religious worship, but on account of the good name of the troops The General was indignant when he heard what had been done and would gladly have made restitution but that was beyond his power.

John S. Bowman recalled in an affidavit supporting the claims suit that "in 1862 when they [the Northern troops] first got hold of it was very good — but when they got through with it [it] was very much dilapidated. Torn to pieces you might say, nothing left on the sides, except a little flooring. To put this building back in the condition it was when United States soldiers first got it there had to be a new floor, new windows and pines [sic], a gallery, doors, pews and pulpit."

Helen R. Spangler, who lived a block from the church during the war, echoed that view, but she also recalled that in the fall of 1864 when the Confederate troops were falling back from Winchester, they used the church for a few days to house their sick. "The church at that time was not fit for anything as it was badly demolished."

Minutes of the Virginia Synod indicate that the Strasburg church suffered the most devastation from the war. In 1866 and 1867 the synod appropriated \$200 to the congregation — no other parishes received such donations — to help it recover from the war's ravages.

At its October 1866 meeting in Winchester the synod reported that "one year of peace has not been sufficient to repair the injuries which our people had sustained, it." The Strasburg congregation "is supplied with stated preaching" by W.A. Rusmisse, "but, owing to his superabundant labors elsewhere, [it] can receive no pastoral attention from him." The Strasburg congregation "now stands disconnected from any charge." The synod recommended "uniting it to some other congregation" and making "an appropriation ... to aid in repairing their church as they suffered so greatly, in that immediate vicinity, from the presence of contending armies." The synod also voted a \$100 subsidy to the congregation to help pay for a permanent pastor.

The 1867 minutes from the conference in New Market report that Rusmisse had accepted a call to Strasburg, with Lebanon as the second parish. On May 12, 1867, the Strasburg church was dedicated "in consequence of the desolations caused by the Federal Army." The Rev. W.T. Dosh, a son of the congregation who later served briefly as president of Roanoke College, preached.

The congregational minutes show the slow, persistent efforts to repair the damage and to return to normalcy.

On Feb. 9, 1866, the council elected officers and discussed subscriptions for "rebuilding our Temple of Worship, now in ruins." In April a building committee was appointed. By August subscriptions to pay for the project were being solicited and a new committee to repair the brick was named. At year's end the council

Church website: www.stpaulstrasburg.com/
Telephone : (540) 465-3232

Churches in the Shenandoah Valley

was ready to hire a pastor. Rusmissell began his ministry on March 1, 1867, with 113 members on the roll.

The church was rededicated on May 12, 1867. Several pastors participated and 48 members communed.

The building committee reported its costs on May 4, 1867: lumber, \$179.79; carpenters, \$570; painters, \$245; hardware, paints, tinning, plastering, \$446.36; total \$1,441.15.

The United States provided restitution to the church in the early 1900s after the trustees brought suit in the Court of Claims and provided documentation of the damage done by federal troops. That payment helped finance the renovation of 1902 in which the bell tower was erected and the north and south walls of the building were reworked in the neo-Gothic style that survives to this day.

Other changes followed, the most extensive being the major renovation in 1986 that reversed the worship space and added a narthex and balcony.

Submitted by John Horan, Church Archivist, May, 2013