

CENTRAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH: A HOME FOR ONE OF DENVER'S EARLIEST CONGREGATIONS

What do you think the role of a church might have been during the rough, early years of the city's history?

Central Presbyterian Church, a Richardsonian Romanesque structure designed by Frank E. Edbrooke in 1892, is the third home for this congregation dating back to 1860. The church is located in North Capitol Hill, among other important civic and cultural buildings. Capitol Hill is one of Denver's most well-known neighborhoods and home to many of the city's most influential families of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It derives its name from the acceptance of Henry Brown's donation of land for the construction site of the Capitol building.

Structure

After one small, early building, a second, more useful building was erected in 1876 at the corner of 18th and Champa in downtown Denver. Several prominent parishioners wanted a "suitable" roof for the church and solicited donations from gamblers and saloonkeepers for a slate roof. The slates were black and red in color, installed in a symmetrical design of eight large red diamonds on one side, seven on the others. Thereafter, the church was unofficially known as the "Church of the Seven Spot Diamonds." (History).

The church's first two locations were both downtown, however by the late 1880's the church's growth was such that a much larger facility was necessary, and the congregation purchased 12 lots along Sherman Street south of 17th Avenue and commissioned Frank E. Edbrooke as the architect. After worshipping in the Broadway Theater during the church's design and construction, the congregation requested several significant design elements reflecting the theater layout, including banked curved seating, box seats and side balconies, corner fireplaces, theater-quality acoustics and sightlines and multi-purpose lobby (or narthex) areas.

The resulting red sandstone Richardsonian Romanesque structure, dedicated in December 1892 with over 75 non-figurative stained glass windows, imposing facades on three sides and a tower which was for decades the highest point in downtown, is counted among Edbrooke's masterpieces. The church's site is the northern gateway point to the Colorado State Capitol, and in its architecture and materials matches other significant structures in downtown Denver, including the Brown Palace Hotel, the Schleier Mansion, the Woodward House (Woodward was a Central Presbyterian Church member, and part of the building committee for Central's current building) and others. A noted landmark on the Denver skyline for many years, the structure was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on November 21, 1974 (History).

Architect

Frank E. Edbrooke was born November 17, 1840 in Lake County, Illinois. One of nine children, Edbrooke attended Chicago public schools and later served in the Civil War. Edbrooke's exposure to architecture began when his English-born father, Robert J. Edbrooke, rebuilt many of the structures after the

infamous 1871 Chicago fire. After seven years of work in Chicago, Edbrooke designed depots and hotels for the Union Pacific Railroad.

Edbrooke came to Denver in 1879 to supervise the construction of the Tabor Block at 16th and Larimer Streets and the Tabor Grand Opera House at 16th and Curtis Streets for his architect brother, Willoughby Edbrooke. After completing the Tabor buildings, Edbrooke remained in Denver to begin a very successful career as the city's premier architect. Designing everything from commercial, institutional and domestic architecture, Edbrooke introduced new styles and techniques to Denver. His work ranges from the Romanesque style Brown Palace to his own Queen Anne inspired residence at 931 East 17th. He became a founding member of the Colorado AIA and the final architect for the Colorado State Capitol. He retired in 1915 and died in Glendale, California, May 21, 1921. He is buried at Fairmount Cemetery in a mausoleum he designed for himself (Frank E. Edbrooke: Colorado Architects Biographical Sketch).

History

In the summer of 1860, the Reverend A.T. Rankin of Buffalo, New York, headed for the new settlements near the junction of Cherry Creek and the South Platte River with the intention of organizing a Presbyterian church there. His first day in Denver was a memorable one. Accompanied by General William Larimer, a well-known Denver figure and a trustee of the new church, Rev. Rankin went to the Rocky Mountain News office to insert an announcement that religious services for Presbyterians and others would be held the following Sunday. An enraged resident was at the news office and was attempting to kill its editor when Rankin and Larimer walked in. The two immediately intervened, saving the life of the editor. Thus began the legacy of Central Presbyterian Church (as Rankin's mission church came to be known in 1882) in Denver (History).

From 1873 until 1928, Central founded and maintained a ministry to railroad workers in the downtown area. The Railroad Union Mission was crucial in reaching out to a group of people who, up until that time, did not have ready access to religious services. Central also ran the Chinese School in Denver from 1877 until 1919. Here, immigrant workers received both educational and spiritual support.

Presbyterian Hospital (now Presbyterian-St. Luke's) is also one of the countless other missions, agencies and churches that Central has initiated through the years. Central was one of the hospital's principal founders early in the 20th century. During the depression years, Presbyterian Hospital was in danger of closing due to lack of funds. At the same time, the church was set to expand its own facility. Many community leaders donated to ensure that the hospital – so important to the Denver community – did not have to close its doors. Central joined them and contributed the funds planned for its own building to keep the hospital open.

References

Central Presbyterian Church. History. Retrieved from <https://www.centraldenver.com/history/>.

History Colorado. Frank E. Edbrooke: Colorado Architects Biographical Sketch. Retrieved from https://www.historycolorado.org/sites/default/files/media/document/2017/Architects_edbrookef.pdf.