

## FIRST CHURCH OF CHRIST, SCIENTIST: GREEK REVIVAL HOME TO 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY'S FASTEST GROWING RELIGION

### Why do you think Greek Revival style was so popular for 19<sup>th</sup> century religious buildings?

The First Church of Christ, Scientist, is an elegant classical gray stone building located at the corner of Logan and 14<sup>th</sup> Street. It was designed by Ernest Phillip Varian of Varian and Sterner in 1904. The building is an unusually pure example of the Greek Revival style of architecture and has detailing that is reminiscent of ancient Greek temple architecture.

### Structure

The main entry to the building on Logan Street features a large portico with a triangular pediment atop six massive stone columns with ionic capitals. "The Eternal God Is Thy Refuge" is incised along the frieze below the pediment. The building is square in plan, with each side stretching 125 feet. The design is capped with a segmented copper-clad dome (Noel and Norgren, 1993). Inside, the layout of the sanctuary is inspired by the design of ancient Greek theaters. The floor is sloped and the seating is arranged in semicircles focusing on the central podium where the First Reader (a lay minister) reads the scripture passages for the church service. The sloped floor allows each congregant to have a clear view of the podium. The sanctuary has individual stadium seats instead of traditional pews. When it was built, the sanctuary had the largest open unobstructed auditorium in the city and held 1,800 people. Deep steel beams cross the ceiling and are capable of holding the roof up without additional columns. The architect specified quarter-sawn Russian oak for the wood trim throughout the building. Russian oak has finer grain and is denser than American red oak (Murphy, 1995).

Classical architecture became popular in America after the 1893 Columbian World's Exposition in Chicago, which launched the City Beautiful movement. One of the primary concepts of the movement was that beauty had the capacity to inspire human thought and behavior, encouraging civic loyalty and harmonious urban moral order. The idea of elevating thought through architecture was very appealing to church leaders and many early Christian Science churches were built in classical styles.

The organ has 3,360 individual pipes, only 86 of which are visible from the sanctuary. The smallest of these pipes is about the size of a pencil and produces a high, shrill note. The largest pipe is 16-feet long and produces a floor-shaking baritone blast. The sloped floor and the overhead domed ceiling give the sanctuary unusually good acoustics, which was particularly important at the turn of the century when the building was constructed because there were no sound amplifying systems available at that time.

The building at 1401 Logan was built to replace an earlier Christian Science church, which sat three blocks north at 1751 Logan. The original church was built in 1891. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian Science was the fastest growing religion in America. By 1899, only eight years after the first church was built, the congregation realized that they needed to build a new church to accommodate their growing numbers. At the time it was built, the church at 1401 Logan was the largest Christian Science church west of the Mississippi (Grinstead, 2002).

The First Church of Christ, Scientist was the first large structure in Capitol Hill built of lava stone, which was produced by the Kerr Quarry in the Arkansas River Valley near Salida, Colorado. The

cornerstone of the building is made from granite quarried in New Hampshire, the home state of Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of the Christian Science church.

### **Architect**

The building's architect, Phillip Varian, was born in Plainfield, New Jersey in 1854. He began his career as a contractor and worked for several large New York firms before coming to Denver in 1880. In 1885, Varian established a partnership with Fredrick Sterner, and their 16-year partnership was prolific. Their work includes the Denver Athletic Club, Tears-McFarland House, Pearce-McAllister House and Bosworth House. In 1901, the partnership was dissolved and by 1909 Sterner moved back to New York. Varian remained in Denver and established a partnership with his son Lester Ernest Varian.

### **Christian Science**

The Church of Christ, Scientist, or Christian Science, founded by Mary Baker Eddy in 1879, is a Christian denomination. The Bible and especially Jesus' teachings are the heart and soul of its theology and practice. The word *science* in the church's name implies that Jesus' teachings are based on the law of God, a law that is to be practiced in all areas of life to redeem, restore and heal. Those who practice Christian Science strive to live the compassionate and selfless love that Christ Jesus exemplified and taught, especially in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), which Mary Baker Eddy called "the essence of this Science." Many church members dedicate themselves full-time to the ministry of Christian Science healing, a spiritual healing ministry based on prayer.

The church is headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, and has branch churches in some 70 countries worldwide, including this church in Denver (there are currently 26 other branch churches and societies or smaller churches located in Colorado). Christian Science churches hold worship services on Sundays, which consist of hymns, silent prayer, the Lord's Prayer and a sermon based on Scripture read by lay members. They also hold Wednesday testimony meetings to glorify God together -- to share gratitude for spiritual insights and healings they've had. Anyone is welcome.

### **References**

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Murphy, J. 1995. *Geology Tour of Denver's Buildings and Monuments*. Denver: Historic Denver, Inc.

Grinstead, L. 2002. *Molly Brown's Capitol Hill Neighborhood*. Denver: Historic Denver, Inc.

First Church of Christ Scientist, Denver Fact Sheet.