



# St. Luke's Episcopal Church

ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

# St. Luke's

## *Rochester's oldest building still houses a living, breathing parish*

By Vaughn Polmenteer  
Photos by Michael Schwarz

**T**he Gothic meeting house is dwarfed by office buildings now, hemmed in by the traffic along South Fitzhugh Street. Like Trinity Church in Manhattan, it looks like a quaint museum piece, a small jewel from the past. And if anything is representative of Rochester's past, it's this church — the oldest extant remnant of the buildings of Rochesterville, a building far older than anything surrounding it.

In fact, the church's charter is for "St. Luke's Church" in "Genesee Falls" — as Rochester was called in its early years.

Today it looks small. But when it was built, in 1824, St. Luke's Episcopal Church was an imposing structure. The neighboring streets were dusty lanes lined with modest frame homes — and log cabins. A few yards south, the Erie Canal had just been cut through. Unbroken forest loomed a few miles away.

The building was the pride of a parish that had been formed seven years earlier, in 1817, in a schoolhouse on the east side of the Genesee. A frame building was erected in 1820, at 17 S. Fitzhugh St. It sat on a lot set aside for a church by Col. Nathaniel Rochester, one of Rochester's founders.

In 1824, the simple frame building was moved to the back of the lot, and construction began on the stone edifice, designed by Josiah R. Brady, a New York architect. It was built of roughly dressed gray limestone quarried in Auburn. Its red quoins, or cornerstones, were hewn from Medina sandstone.

2

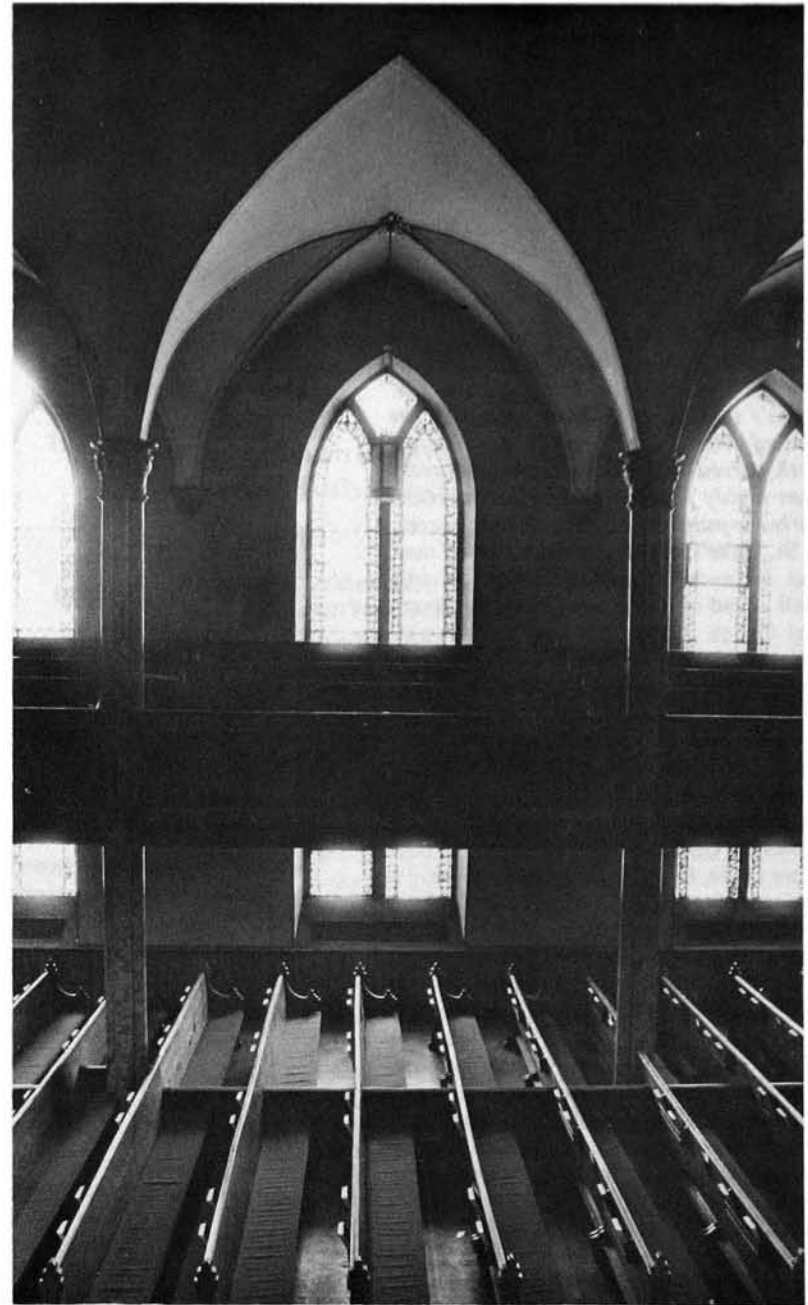
A jewel  
from the past...

Unbroken forest  
loomed a few  
miles away.

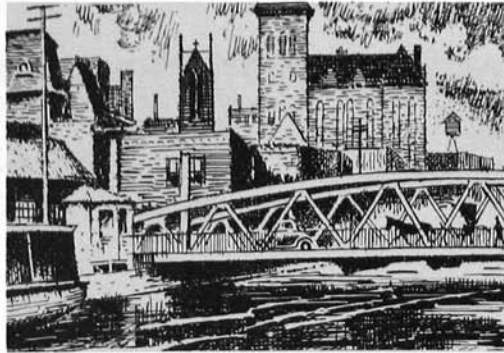
The building cost a then-considerable \$10,000 and boasted the first organ and the first church bell in town. First services were held in September 1825 — the same year the Erie Canal was completed.

In 1831, the *Gem*, a magazine published in Rochesterville, printed a sketch and a description of the church:

*It is built of stone, elegantly pencilled and finished, and is in style entirely Gothic. In the inside a gallery runs around it, except upon the west end, supported by six*



3



*triple-post pillars, painted in imitation of the grey marble . . . The finish of St. Luke's is said to be unsurpassed in the United States. It is neatly ornamented with carved and stucco work, and every part highly finished and fretted, particularly the pulpit, the altar and the chancel.*

St. Luke's may seem quaint to us now, but its architectural style was actually well ahead of its time. In 1824 the classical Greek Revival was in full flower. The Gothic Revival was still in its infancy, not yet "correct." The Anglican and Episcopal churches were then experiencing a revival of their medieval and "Catholic" roots, and elements of the old Catholic faith found expression in liturgies — and in architecture.

Many Gothic structures of the time were crude, fanciful attempts — representations of what an architect or builder *thought* Gothic should be. Mt. Hope Avenue's "Warner's Castle" (now the Garden Center's office) is a good example of this vernacular Gothic, and it was built much later — in 1854. It is heavy and plain. The obligatory crenellations, "castle" notches, are writ large along its roofline.

St. Luke's was different. Josiah R. Brady was an accomplished architect responsible for Manhattan's second Trinity Church. His design for St. Luke's was relatively light and airy.

Several of Rochester's first settlers were "Yankees" — New Englanders of Puritan, Presbyterian and Congregationalist stock. But the Colonel was a scion of

Col. Nathaniel  
Rochester  
Elisha Johnson  
Enos Stone  
Hamlet Scrantom  
"They were very  
sophisticated  
people."

southern Episcopalian gentry, and many other prominent city "founders" were also Episcopalian — Elisha Johnson, Enos Stone and Hamlet Scrantom among them. St. Luke's permanent, stone church would reflect the status of its congregation.

"They were very sophisticated people," says the Rev. Bruce Hanson, rector of St. Luke's. "And they were used to sophisticated churches in their home environments. These were the sort of people who had been to Europe, who had made 'the Grand Tour,'



Iron columns were painted to resemble blue veined marble.

and had seen the churches there."

The basic lines of St. Luke's reflect the chaste Greek Revival style. The pediments, or triangular gables, are measured carefully in Greek proportions.

The church, though, was built in a transitional period. Its decorative elements — windows, doors and frieze — are Gothic, and the exterior of St. Luke's is actually a study in the evolution of Gothic Revival. Arched windows at the sides are treated somewhat simply. The windows in the front tower are more elaborate, with intersecting arches forming "kites."

The tower itself is capped by a wooden belfry, built in 1856. It replaced an earlier, cruder bell tower and is an elegant, ascending explosion of filagree. High Gothic.

St. Luke's architectural sophistication owes much to the Erie Canal, Rev. Hanson says. "Being on the canal bank made it easy to bring in materials that were impossible to get before — like the stone. They still couldn't get marble, so the interior was painted to simulate pink marble, and the pilasters were iron columns painted to resemble blue-veined marble."

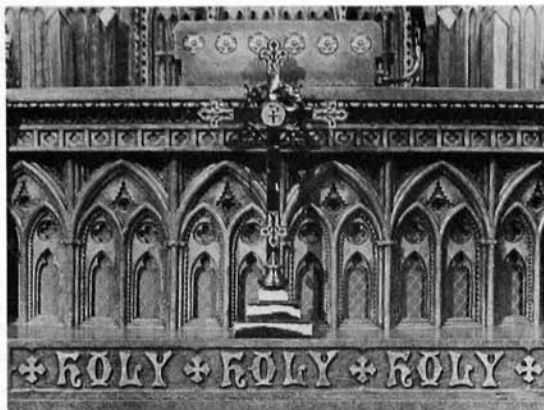
The church's interior is dominated by the sanctuary, where altar, reading desk and pulpit rise in perfectly symmetrical tiers. All are richly carved Gothic pieces, set in place between 1836 and 1844.

"And they were a theological statement," Rev. Hanson says. St. Luke's was decidedly "Low Church" — more Protestant than Catholic. Its congregation re-



St. Luke's Church,  
1823, on South  
Fitzhugh Street,  
opposite the old  
City Hall, 1875,  
and beside the  
Rochester Academy  
building, 1873.  
The Erie Canal,  
now covered by  
Broad Street, used  
to cross in the  
foreground, just  
below this photo.





The front of the reading desk, midway between the altar and the high pulpit.

sisted the "Papist" trends of the Anglican Communion, and reading desk and pulpit loom over the sanctuary, looking like the furniture of a New England meeting house.

But the ensemble does include an altar. In early St. Luke's a balance was struck — between the "liturgy of the word" and communion rites.

A tin pipe once ran from the pulpit to the first pew, where hard-of-hearing parishioners could attach their ear trumpets. The "diamonds" of stained bottle glass in the windows are not really stained at all but painted with a light gray patina. Broken panes have been replaced by diamonds that have a slightly pink cast to them.

"They don't know how to get that gray today," Rev. Hanson says.

The church has undergone alterations over the years, he adds. "But if Col. Rochester walked in today, he'd recognize most of what he'd see. The old box pews would be gone, of course, but most of the church is the same." This is partly due to a 1966 restoration project which relied on old photographs and records.

The church is full of curiosities — some not easily seen. The roof beams are pegged like ship's timbers, and the church is literally held together by slender iron rods spanning the ceiling eave. The girders are richly carved where they cut through the church's interior;

they look like delicate decorative touches — not the very practical structural elements they are.

St. Luke's bell, reached by a series of staircases and ladders, is carved with the names of parishioners who served in World War I. The hand-hewn timbers of the belfry show the marks of axe and adze.

One of the church's curiosities — the "Enulf Stone" — is 700 years older than the church itself.

Enulf was the Bishop of Rochester, Eng. from 1114 and 1124. He was also the architect of Rochester Cathedral, and several stones in the cathedral bear his seal — an X-shaped St. Andrew's cross. In 1927 the



Tom Boland rings the bell before Sunday services. The bell once also served as the city's fire bell.



Two services Sunday, one Tuesday. Rector in the high pulpit, Priest Associate at the reading desk, a Lay Reader at right.

English church donated one of their "Enulf stones" to St. Luke's to honor the ties between the old Rochester and the new.

The stone was imbedded into the right-hand wall of the nave, near the sanctuary. The walls also hold memorial plaques to Col. Rochester and other prominent parishioners.

For years St. Luke's was Rochester's "prestige" church. Parish records of marriages performed in 1826 reveal names familiar to modern Rochesterians, names seen on buildings and street signs: On April 18 Samuel Stone married Caroline Allcott. On Sept. 24 Jonathan King married Harriet Amanda Scrantom.

But 1826 records also state that on July 23 Thomas Simpson married Agnes Kohnson, and it notes that they were black. The Third Ward black community is as old as its white community. From the first, St. Luke's was an integrated parish,

ministering to both the "ruffled shirt" crowd and blue collar workers.

It's a small parish today, with only 250 pledged parishioners who hail from all over Monroe County. The parish is partly funded by an endowment, accumulated over the years and by contributions from a number of groups headquartered in Tyler House, the parish hall built at the back of the church in 1925.

Tyler House is home to several organizations which play an active role in Rochester. An Alcoholics Anonymous chapter meets there, and Genesee Ecumenical Ministries is headquartered there. GEM is an umbrella for a number of social agencies: The Women's Refugee Program, for example, provides instruction in English for immigrant women.

Dignity-Integrity, a group of gay Catholics and Episcopalians has an office in Tyler House and holds services each Sunday in the church. ACT(s)



II, a family counseling service, has a Tyler House office.

The Tyler House groups, Rev. Hanson says, are part of a long tradition of ministry at St. Luke's. "We've always been in the mainstream of those churches which see the immediate relation between the gospel and everyday life. We've always been into social action. Tyler House was built in the style of a social center (gym, meeting rooms, etc.), which was very much the vogue in the '20s."

St. Luke's would be an important fragment of Rochester, if only for the character of its building and the history it embodies. Rev. Hanson notes that St. Luke's could easily be a museum piece, living on its endowment and its past.

"But we're not. We're a living, breathing parish," he says. "We're small, but we're still here." ■

VAUGHN POLMENTEER often writes about architecture and history in *Upstate*.

Reprinted with permission, from the  
Sunday Democrat and Chronicle  
Upstate Magazine, July 3, 1983.  
Mary Rita Kurycki, Editor.

St. Luke's Episcopal Church  
The Reverend Bruce E. Hanson, Rector  
17 South Fitzhugh St., Rochester, New York 1461





Old City Hall on the left, old county Courthouse on the right with St. Luke's seen through the arch.

These drawings, showing the church at various times in its history, were made by Ralph Avery for St. Luke's sesquicentennial in 1967.