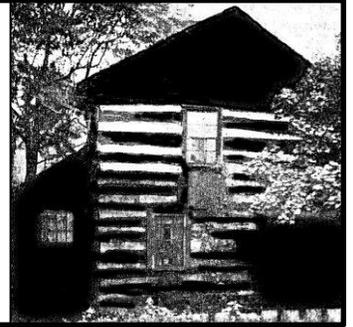


# A BIT-OF-HISTORY about Pittsburgh's EAST END

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### Albright: Jewel Box of the East End

There is a special allure in the roughhewn, soot-blackened facades of Pittsburgh's historic buildings. The ashen patina tells the story of a building that has been well worn by time. With its grand, Romanesque arches, soaring tower, opalescent stained glass, and craggy, stone exterior, Albright United Methodist Church is no exception. For 109 years, it has proudly anchored the corner of Centre Avenue and South Graham Street.

Originally built as the Zion Church of Pittsburgh of the Evangelical Association in 1906, Albright United Methodist Church is one of the few unaltered structures remaining from this neighborhood's early development. Formed in 1843 and formally organized in 1845, the Albright congregation is a descendent of one of Pittsburgh's oldest congregations.<sup>1</sup>

In 1852-53, the Pennsylvania Railroad completed a rail line connecting downtown Pittsburgh to the eastern suburbs. With transportation out of the congested urban core now easily accessible, many upwardly mobile Pittsburghers made the decision to relocate. Many religious groups, including the predecessor to Albright, moved too.

In spring and summer of 1905, architect Chancey W. Hodgdon prepared plans for a new stone church in Pittsburgh's burgeoning East End. On August 11, 1905, the Zion Evangelical Church purchased a vacant lot at Centre Avenue and S. Graham Street. That same month, Charles S. Smith of Squirrel Hill was selected as the general contractor and builder.<sup>2</sup> A survey of the lot was prepared in September 1905 and construction began that fall.<sup>3</sup>



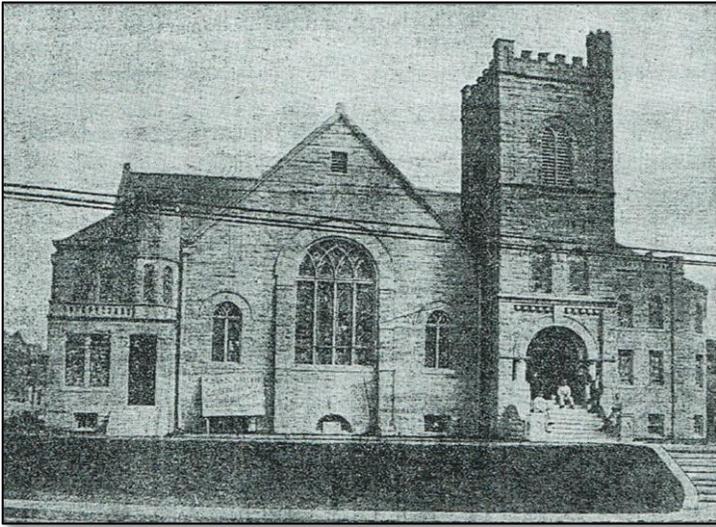
During construction, the cornerstone of the congregation's previous church on High Street (current site of BNY Mellon Tower) was relocated to the East End and installed in the new church's foundation. The inscription on the cornerstone reads:

*Evangelische  
Zions Kirche  
Gebaut 1851*

Clearly referencing the congregation's history as a German Evangelical church, the inscription translates to: *Zion Evangelical Church, Built 1851*. On July 1, 1906, the completed building was officially dedicated to service.<sup>4</sup>

#### The Architecture

The Albright United Methodist Church is an exceptional example of the Eclectic Period of architectural design in the United States and Pittsburgh.



Albright shortly before dedication, 1906

Specifically, it is representative of the late 19th and early 20th century popularity of the Richardson Romanesque style in Pittsburgh.

Spanning roughly from 1880 to 1930, Eclecticism was a period of architectural design exemplified by the sampling of established historic styles to create new and original designs.<sup>5</sup> Architectural historian Walter Kidney says of the Eclectic architect:

*The Eclectic saw himself as a participant in, or an heir to, a reform movement that had restored taste and literacy to architecture. Unlike the mid-Victorian, the Eclectic studied all aspects of the style in which he proposed to design not just the standard ornamental motifs, but the scale, proportions, massing, colors, and textures... Once his contribution was assessed, the Eclectic felt free to introduce variations of his own...*<sup>6</sup>

Among the most noteworthy, recognizable, and celebrated examples of eclecticism in Pittsburgh is Henry Hobson Richardson's Allegheny County Courthouse. Sampling from Italian, Spanish, and French Romanesque traditions, Richardson Romanesque utilizes strong massing, rough-hewn rusticated stone, recessed doorways, massive arches, and squat columns to impart a sense of weight and permanence. It is no coincidence that this style of architecture became one of the most popular in Pittsburgh following the Courthouse's completion.<sup>7</sup>

Albright United Methodist Church owes a great debt to Richardson and his design sensibilities, but it is not a direct imitation. As Walter Kidney suggests, the architect adapts the design vocabulary and integrates his own touches. The inclusion of medieval crenellation at the roofline and Gothic Revival elements in the stained glass windows make this building a wholly original design.

Each of the stained glass windows, which are 39 in total, can be directly attributed to Pittsburgh's S.S. Marshall & Bros. Founded in 1872 in Allegheny City, S.S. Marshall & Bros. was one of the oldest art glass studios in the country that continued to manufacture pressed flint and lime glass, an older method of creating stained glass.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps best known locally for creating some of the more prominent windows in the First English Evangelical Lutheran Church on Grant Street in downtown Pittsburgh, the windows present in the Albright building are exceptionally unique. The building houses the largest art glass program in Pittsburgh that can be directly traced to the S.S. Marshall Studio.

### **Chancey W. Hodgdon, Architect**

In comparison to some late 19th and early 20th century Pittsburgh-based architects, Chancey W. Hodgdon is relatively unknown today. His lack of notoriety, however, should not be a reflection on the caliber or quality of his work. A host of engineering and architectural journals document many of his commissions. He designed everything from modest row houses to well-appointed single family homes; from commercial storefronts to industrial garages and warehouses.

Chancey W. Hodgdon was born on September 1, 1851 in Hopkinton, New Hampshire.<sup>9</sup> The son of Charles W. Hodgdon, a carpenter, and Harriet H. Hodgdon, a housekeeper, Chancey had aspirations of following in the family profession: carpentry.<sup>10</sup> By 1880, Chancey was living in Lowell, Massachusetts, had married, and was actively practicing as a carpenter.<sup>11</sup> However, his brother George, had relocated to Allegheny City (now the North Side of Pittsburgh) and was practicing as an architect.<sup>12</sup>

Between 1880 and 1889, Hodgdon also relocated to Pittsburgh and began practicing architecture.

It is not known where Hodgdon studied or apprenticed, but his work suggests at least some formal training. His earliest known, published commissions appear in 1889.<sup>13</sup>

From a stylistic perspective, Hodgdon's canon of work is impressive and suggests that he should be recognized among Pittsburgh's cadre of Eclectic architects. His buildings often sample from multiple architectural periods: Queen Anne, Tudor Revival, Romanesque, Gothic Revival. The majority of his known buildings span from 1889 to 1925. The Albright building appears to be one of his first known commissions for an ecclesiastical building. It is one with which Hodgdon was clearly pleased. This building served as inspiration for many of his later ecclesiastical works.

Hodgdon was a regional architect, designing buildings as far south as Canonsburg, Pennsylvania and as far north as Mars and Tarentum, Pennsylvania. After a successful career as an architect for nearly 30 years, Chancey W. Hodgdon died June 13, 1925 at the age of 73. He is interred in Uniondale Cemetery.<sup>14</sup>

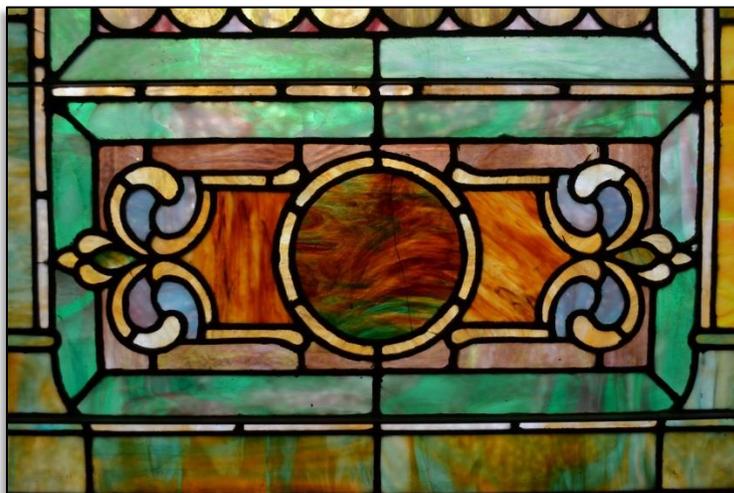
## Toward the Future

In 2013, the Albright congregation moved their services offsite due to a roof leak, but continue to maintain the building. Despite the leak, the building's integrity is exceptional and the structure is sound.

However, the Albright United Methodist Church has an uncertain future. Congregants recently learned of a local developer's plan to purchase and demolish the building. The plan for the site includes a new retail development, including a drive-thru for a ubiquitous national coffeehouse chain.

The Albright congregation has been active and vocal in their support of the building's preservation. They have developed an alternative plan for the building's use and have engaged Preservation Pittsburgh, a local non-profit historic preservation organization, to assist in the building's landmark designation.

The East Liberty Valley Historical Society has submitted a letter of support for the building's designation as a City Historic Structure. The matter will appear before the Historic Review Commission in Fall 2015. The loss of this building would be a detriment to the architectural heritage of the East Liberty Valley. We sincerely hope that this jewel box can endure for the next 100 years.



S.S. Marshall Stained Glass in Tower  
Photo Courtesy of Matthew Falcone, Falcone Foundation

## Citations.

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**Editor's Note.** Portions of this work have been appropriated with permission from the Pittsburgh City Historic Structure Nomination for Albright United Methodist Church, prepared by Justin P. Greenawalt and Matthew W.C. Falcone of Preservation Pittsburgh at the request of the Albright Congregation, August 2015.



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