

OBSERVER-DISPATCH

Opinion

GUEST VIEW: Preserving our past must remain a priority

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In recent weeks, the Observer-Dispatch announced the purchase of the former “Al’s Auction House” at 613 Columbia St. by the Irish Cultural Center. Scheduled for demolition to create parking space, 613 Columbia boasts a rich history, well worth remembering.

Zion Lutheran Church built 613 Columbia as an elementary school in 1880. Zion was a German congregation and heavy “old country” immigration during that era overcrowded its school’s existing facilities in the basement of the church’s Fay/Cooper Streets sanctuary, creating the need for a new building.

Often called Zion’s “School Hall,” 613 Columbia was dedicated on Sept. 12, 1880. After a service at the church, hundreds of Utica’s German- American Lutherans paraded down Fay Street to Columbia for a ceremony at their new school. Pastor John Philip Lichtenberg and 180 elementary pupils led the procession, followed by groups representing Zion’s societies. The Rev. Edward Bohm, the first President of Concordia College, preached at the dedication.

Architect Jacob Agne designed the School Hall. A lifelong Zion member, Agne grew up on Water Street, a poor neighborhood north of today’s “Utica Aud.” His life provides a superb example of American social mobility.

Agne’s parents’ industry and devotion financed their son’s education at the former Utica Business College. After graduation, Agne apprenticed with architects William H. Hamilton and Adolphus Simmons. In 1884, he

established his own practice and he prospered. Among his credits are the former Maennerchor Hall on Columbia Street, New Hartford's Butler Hall, Mayor Thomas Kinney's home at 5 Rutger Park, Utica Free Academy on Kemble Street, and the John C. Hieber Dry Goods Company (now the Children's Museum). His work in creating "impressive public buildings" was praised throughout the United States.

Zion's elementary school's curriculum included instruction in German and English, which helped students assimilate while maintaining an attachment to their native culture. In the fields of music and stagecraft, the school eclipsed the offerings of its public counterparts. Teachers Herman Doering and Herman Breitenbach guided Zion's children to impressive performances at Utica's Opera House (a large theater located where Hotel Utica now stands) and at the city's annual German Day festivities. Newspapers applauded the high standards that the church's elementary pupils exhibited. Doering and Breitenbach also served as music directors of Utica's Maennerchor.

Financial difficulties forced Zion to close its school in 1901. In 1916, the congregation remodeled the building into a parish center. This move greatly enhanced the church's outreach into West Utica and the city at large.

The new "Zion's Hall" contained an auditorium, with a stage and kitchen, on its first floor. This facility provided an ideal home for the church's "Crescent Dramatic Society," a theatre troupe founded by Doering and Breitenbach's stage-savvy students. The Crescent Society, renamed "Zion's Players" in 1928, produced comedies that regularly attracted packed houses. During the Great Depression, the church's actors and its "German Group" created entertainment that brought good times to thousands of stressed city residents. Newspapers praised the Crescent organization as "Utica's best amateur theatre."

In the Depression years, Zion's Hall hosted "penny suppers," where the church's talented old world cooks offered "pay what you can" dinners to the general public. The church frequently sponsored German suppers where, for a nominal fee, Utica's residents could savor sauerbraten, schnitzels, and kugens, delicious Central European delicacies that would otherwise be unattainable.

After Zion relocated to French/Burrstone Roads in New Hartford in 1959, the congregation sold the old hall to St. John's Missionary Baptist Church. As time passed, several businesses occupied the former school, Al's Auction House being the last. Since Al's closed, the building has deteriorated beyond restoration, a situation leading to its imminent demolition.

An important artifact from Zion's past, however, remains in 613 Columbia Street. During the dedication ceremony in 1880, the congregation placed a time capsule in their school's walls. The metal box reportedly contained a hand-written history of the school; a list of students, teachers, and church council members; copies of the German Lutheran catechism and Lutheran Herald publications, and newspaper articles that described Zion's school.

Zion's congregation would like to recover the time capsule, an invaluable message from their forefathers, 138 years past.

To their credit, Utica Mayor Robert Palmieri, the Utica Urban Renewal Agency's staff, and Irish Center officials have responded positively to requests from the church and deserve thanks for their willingness to cooperate. In our ever-digitizing, often impersonal world, historic preservation needs to be a public policy priority.

The City of Utica boasts a rich history and every attempt at preserving this past deserves our utmost attention.

Jack Henke, a retired social studies teacher at Brookfield Central School, is the author of several books, including his most recent, "A 175th Anniversary History of Zion Lutheran Church." He is church historian for Zion Lutheran in New Hartford.