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Houston History

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Things Become Holy

It is a phenomenon that traditionally occurs when new people begin to settle in a new place: they build a house of worship. Such is the case with the Christ Church Cathedral in downtown Houston, Texas. After Texas won its independence from Mexico in 1836, the Allen brothers purchased land to establish the city of Houston. A few years later, a group of local residents led by Colonel William Fairfax Gray, a gentry transplant from Virginia, decided it was time to form a congregation of Episcopalians, and later, build a brick-and-mortar church. The first building was a small space at the intersection of Texas Avenue and Fannin Street. Reconstructed and renovated several times, today's cathedral covers the span of two blocks and has been reoriented to face Texas Avenue, but the old church feel inside the sanctuary has remained constant since its founding.

Among the congregation, one will find parishioners who travel from near and far to reawaken their spirits within the quasi-Gothic walls of the cathedral. Although it has been designated as the cathedral of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, Christ Church's operations are not particularly extraordinary in contrast to other churches in the diocese. The church stays grounded by holding fast to its Episcopal values of restoration and acceptance despite the formal titles held by the clergy and the bishop having his seat there. Christ Church has taken pride in and ownership of its downtown location and serves as a refuge for citizens of all socioeconomic backgrounds. Specifically, the cathedral's diverse outreach programs like The Beacon and the

recently opened Hines Center for Spirituality and Prayer cater to the needs of the metropolitan city through a variety of services and activities.

Since its founding, the Cathedral has survived countless changes in the nation, the city of Houston, and, of course, its downtown neighborhood. This church has witnessed wars, social movements, natural disasters, and terrorist attacks. Not many of the downtown churches can make that claim because they have either been rebuilt elsewhere or their original congregation has moved out to the suburbs. The cathedral is one of the few remaining churches that started in downtown and stayed there. It has rooted itself and continues to extend its branches to cover more and more people within its reach, giving the cathedral a rich history and a bright future.

The Foundation

The city of Houston was founded in the summer of 1836, and the earliest religious organizations followed close behind. The idea of missionary work was struggling to get off the ground in the new state. The first priest coming to Texas on a mission landed at the mouth of the Brazos River and created Christ Church Matagorda. In 1835, Colonel William Fairfax Gray—Freemason, flute player, and former postmaster of Fredericksburg, Virginia—left his home on a commission to inspect land in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. Gray came from the established gentry and was descended from members of the Church of England. When his work was completed, he realized that Texas had opportunities for him Virginia could not offer and decided to move his family west.¹ After arriving in Houston, he and his wife recognized that a congregation for worship was needed to make the city more civilized.

¹ Marguerite S. Johnston, *A Happy Worldly Abode: Christ Church Cathedral, 1839-1964* (Houston: Cathedral, 1964), 14-15.

Some histories document the Rev. R. M. Chapman as the founder of Christ Church Cathedral, and while he was indeed influential, it was Colonel William Fairfax Gray who deserves the credit. He, along with twenty-eight other men, signed a document in 1839 establishing the congregation of Christ Church Cathedral.² According to Ed Stein, the current rector at Christ Church, the document technically makes the cathedral the first church in downtown. However, First Presbyterian Church claims the official title by having held the first public gathering at the capitol building. In 1845, the first rector at the cathedral, the Rev. Charles Gillett, led the people of Christ Church to finally break ground on a building of its own.³

A watercolor painted by a British correspondent covering the Mexican War in the 1840s hangs inside one of the cathedral buildings of this first church building. Before photography, correspondent reports often sent their reports with illustrations. Stranded in Houston without transportation, this correspondent bided his time by painting city images, one of those being the then-small Christ Church. A portfolio of his paintings was passed down through his family, who had discovered it after immigrating to Australia and eventually put it up for auction. One of the Christ Church parishioners who followed the antiquing world found the painting of the original building and bought it as a gift for the cathedral. The painting returned to the church only to be stolen and ransomed by the thief a year later. After it was found at a local art gallery, it returned yet again. Needless to say, the painting has since been properly secured.⁴

² Johnston, *A Happy Worldly Abode*, 27.

³ Sandra Cook, "175 Years of Sanctuary," *Downtown Magazine*, 2014, 2.

⁴ Ed Stein, interview with author, March 17, 2016, (hereinafter Stein interview), UH-Oral History of Houston, Houston History Archives, Special Collections, M. D. Anderson, University of Houston Libraries, Houston, Texas.

Although the cathedral has been rebuilt over the years, the old-church feel has been thoughtfully preserved. Its original brick construction suggests that the building planners intended for the church to last. When the vestry was struggling to raise the funds to finish the building, a few members drew up a plan to “rent” pews to parishioners. Upon completion in 1847, it seated seventy people but was quickly outgrown. This pattern of growth proceeding faster than church buildings could be constructed continued for much of the cathedral’s existence.⁵

The next building went up in 1860, a year before the Civil War, and was reoriented to face Texas Avenue instead of Fannin Street. William Ward Watkin, who designed the quad at Rice Institute, built the cathedral’s side chapel. The second church looked similar to the current church with its Texas conception of, in Ed Stein’s words, a “wannabe-Gothic” style. The building lacks the grand, high ceilings typically found in Gothic cathedrals, however, it has been well maintained and remains unaltered by modernization in contrast to other churches in the Houston area. “One of the gifts of being in great struggle in the 1970s was that was when everybody was leaving downtown and the congregation of the cathedral was at a very low ebb, they didn’t have any money to modernize,” observes Stein.⁶

While many other churches were tearing out their original furnishing in exchange for new ones, the cathedral lacked the funds to update. Now, churches are trying to reclaim some of the old-church style to which the cathedral has stayed true.⁷ The current building was finished in 1893, making it the fourth oldest church in downtown. In 1938 a fire at a nearby furniture store

⁵ Johnston, *A Happy Worldly Abode: Christ Church Cathedral, 1839-1964*. Houston: Cathedral, 1964, 59.

⁶ Stein interview.

⁷ Stein interview.

caused damage to the sanctuary. The roof collapsed over the altar, but a determined Roman Catholic fireman saved the rood screen, which suffered minimal charring and still stands today.⁸

The Interior

The Rev. Stein contextualizes the history of the cathedral in terms of three crises it faced in regards to downtown Houston's social climate. The first crisis began at the very beginning of the city itself. In the early days of the Republic of Texas, Houston was very poor but experienced rapid growth in population facilitated by people who were often "infamous for drunkenness, dueling, prostitution and profanity."⁹ State leaders moved the capitol out of Houston, restricting the city's ability to gain credit in New Orleans and the East.¹⁰ In the decades following its founding, the church struggled to survive. "Texas was so poor, and so cash poor," said Stein. "How do you build a building? How do pay your priest? It was sort of living hand-to-mouth for years until all of a sudden, the city hit a certain mass where it went from survival to flourishing in a very short time."¹¹

Second, in the 1920s and 1930s, Stein says a "mass exodus" occurred as the population began to shift to the suburbs. Christ Church became one of the few churches remaining in downtown as many other churches followed the people outward. Property values were rising, and the Hogg brothers offered the church's dean—a term for a clergy person who has pastoral, administrative, and liturgical responsibilities at the Cathedral—Peter Gray Sears \$750,000 to purchase the cathedral's half block on Texas Avenue. Dean Sears believed that the church

⁸ "History | Christ Church Cathedral, Episcopal," Christ Church Cathedral, <http://www.christchurchcathedral.org/history/>

⁹ Cook, *175 Years of Sanctuary*, 1.

¹⁰ Johnston, *A Happy Worldly Abode: Christ Church Cathedral, 1839-1964*. Houston: Cathedral, 1964, 49.

¹¹ Stein interview.

needed to be where the people were and prepared to accept the offer. However, when he presented the opportunity to the vestry, they declined, and Sears eventually left the cathedral to form Palmer Memorial Episcopal Church across from Rice Institute. The downtown location became permanent when the Episcopal Diocese of Texas appointed Christ Church as the official cathedral of the diocese in 1949.¹²

The third crisis was the collapse of downtown in the 1970s and 1980s. “Retail abandoned downtown, entertainment abandoned downtown,” Stein explained. Poor leadership within the church exacerbated the issues revolving around the fall of downtown. The late 1960s into the beginning of the 1970s brought great change to Houston. Racial politics and integration pushed white families to the suburbs, and neighborhoods and schools within Loop 610 began to decline. Families no longer wanted to make the trip into downtown, which at this point had a negative reputation. “Black Houston was terrifying to white Houston,” observed Stein. Churches that remained after other congregations fled included First Methodist Church, Annunciation Catholic Church, Antioch Baptist Church, and Christ Church Cathedral.¹³

The dean at the time was revered as a friendly, personable man, but his church vision lagged behind the times. He was not equipped to adapt to the social changes happening downtown and the financial strains endured by the church, causing the congregation to suffer. He eventually resigned, leaving the cathedral in one of the lowest states it had ever seen. In 1976, the cathedral had no dean, and the interim bishop appointed to the cathedral had died. Essentially, Christ Church had no leadership until the Rev. J. Pittman McGehee arrived in the late seventies. McGehee was a charismatic spirit who brought the cathedral up from rock bottom.

¹² Cook, *175 Years of Sanctuary*. Houston: Downtown Magazine, 2014, 3.

¹³ Stein interview.

He began to draw large crowds at church services with his powerful sermons, started the docent tour program, and allowed the congregation to suggest changes and additions to shape the cathedral's future.¹⁴ Throughout its history, strong leadership has always driven the church's progress and health, and MeGehee is only one example.

Music has served as another common thread holding together Christ Church since its founding. The cathedral's first organ was installed in 1876 and lasted until 1938, but surprisingly was not damaged by the furniture store fire. The church had already planned to replace the old organ before the fire with an Aeolian-Skinner organ that was installed just before Easter 1939. The organ currently has ninety-seven ranks and 4,470 pipes with an antiphonal division that was added in 1991. The entire restoration was completed in 1998.¹⁵

According to Robert Simpson, the current director of music at Christ Church who also teaches liturgical music at Rice University, the music has been a defining element of the cathedral. By adhering to traditional styles of worship, the choir and the organ are the only instruments necessary. The eleven o'clock choir at the cathedral is a force to reckon with. Boasting about sixty voices with a dozen professional vocalists, the choir has traveled the world singing songs of praise. Members must be invited to audition for this choir. A separate volunteer choir sings at the nine o'clock service. The cathedral also has a children's Treble Choir that has performed at Carnegie Hall. The quality of the music, along with the appearance of the building, saved the cathedral in its darkest times according to parishioners.¹⁶

¹⁴ Cook, *175 Years of Sanctuary*, 3.

¹⁵ Cook, *175 Years of Sanctuary*, 2.

¹⁶ Stein interview.

The Exterior

Christ Church has opened its doors to all through many poignant times in Houston and American history. Before, during, and after the Civil War, the church welcomed African-Americans with open arms because in the Episcopal Church, all baptized Christians are welcome, regardless of race. During World War II, the parish hall hosted USO dances for young soldiers. The cathedral also felt the impact of the most devastating terrorist attacks the United States has ever experienced. After 9/11, fifteen hundred people crowded the grounds of the campus and filled the sanctuary intended to seat only 750 because they knew the church would hold a service at noon following the terrorist attack. “There were office workers piling out looking for someplace to reflect,” recalled Stein. Desperate times sometimes call for spiritual measures.

Christ Church Cathedral has served as a sanctuary to the denizens of downtown, especially those less fortunate, since its founding. Today, the Cathedral feeds 500-600 homeless people on the first floor of their parking garage on a regular basis. “That’s part of our life,” explained Stein. Being in the heart of the city also brings unique ministry experiences for clergy. “When you’re running errands, people just stop you. They see the collar. I’ve had Prayers of the People out on Main and Rusk. One day some guy came off a construction site and asked me to pray for his wife who was sick.” A city as diverse as Houston is guaranteed to have diverse spiritual needs. This dedication to people and dedication to service manifests itself in more concrete ways, as well. The cathedral strives to meet the needs of its community through outreach organizations like The Beacon and the Hines Center for Spirituality and Prayer.¹⁷

¹⁷ Stein interview.

Opened in January of 2007, The Beacon is a center for the homeless that provides numerous helpful services such as Healthcare for the Homeless, pro bono Beacon Law, Bridge of Hope for people leaving incarceration, COMPASS employment assistance, and Coordinated Access housing. Director Charly Weldon notes that The Beacon is leading the push to centralize homeless services downtown, which allows for greater collaboration and specialization among the various organizations in the area.¹⁸ With the efforts of The Beacon, Houston has become the first major city to effectively eradicate veteran homelessness by having a housing option available for every homeless veteran.¹⁹ The Hines Center opened in 2016 and was established in response to the need for alternative spiritual practices in Houston. It offers workshops, lectures, and seminars on topics like meditation, yoga, and dance, combining Eastern and Western ideas in a unique downtown location.

The cathedral has a bright future laid out on the Houston horizon. The installment of a young dean, Barkley Thompson, has demonstrated the commitment of the diocese to reach out to new demographics. Houston's Hispanic population has become the largest single ethnic group, and the cathedral has taken notice and is adapting by providing Spanish-speaking services and small groups to foster community and offer a spiritual outlet for this upcoming racial majority. Millennials represent another demographic challenge with which churches, especially more traditional, liturgical churches, all over the country have been grappling. With current housing developments being centered in downtown, the cathedral is preparing to accommodate this often misunderstood generation through resources like the Hines Center. "I have no doubt that these

¹⁸ Charly Weldon, personal conversation with author, November 13, 2015. (Hereinafter Weldon interview).

¹⁹ Weldon interview.

young people are just as—if not more—spiritually hungry than other generations,” stated the Rev. Thompson of Gen Xers.²⁰

Christ Church Cathedral is a sacred space in the heart of Houston for many reasons. The preservation of the original architectural vision of the church has provided a sense of connectedness within the congregation. “You don’t make a thing that is in itself holy; that would be idolatry,” noted Stein. “Things become holy by being used in a holy manner. And over the years [the cathedral] has become a sort of image of what church should be. You walk in, and it feels like church.”²¹ The cathedral has drawn in people from all over the city for some reason or another. “One of our best acolytes was this kid, when he was like fourteen...he came with some friends or something,” recalled Stein. “He would bike to the train line and ride down. And once a stray starts sitting in the eleven o’clock, you notice him real quick, so we put him to work immediately. He just finished off at Austin College and was here like clockwork every Sunday.”²² The Episcopal church is dedicated to each of its parishioners, and everyone who walks through the door of the cathedral has the capacity to leave a mark on someone’s life. For others, the music keeps them coming back. The richness of the organ in harmony with the sound of traditional hymns invites members of the congregation to be transported to a more sacred time and place than the chaos of everyday life. Stories like this are common as people drift into the church and feel at home.

Its title as the official cathedral of the Diocese of Texas does not place the church above everyday people. The congregation is larger and it has more activities and ministries, but to put it simply, church happens here. The cathedral has welcomed people from all walks of life and

²⁰ Cook, *175 Years of Sanctuary*, 6.

²¹ Stein interview.

²² Stein interview.

provided comfort for those in need by doing what churches do. “We are a community of faith that is nurturing and embracing to all of God’s people,” says Dean Thompson. “Anyone can walk through that door and be completely yourself, no matter where you are in your faith journey.”²³ Christ Church Cathedral has given thousands of Houstonians a place to call their church home for almost 180 years. As the cathedral looks to the future, its past and the people of this city will continue to be at the center of its mission.

²³ Cook, *175 Years of Sanctuary*, 6.