

THE OPENING OF THE 1856 CORNERSTONE SUNDAY, AUGUST 6, 2006

Friday, August 4, 2006

It was 12 noon on Friday, August 4, 2006. The Historical Committee had to trust that the congregation would understand what we were about to do. In preparation for the Cornerstone Opening Ceremony we were about to ask two stone masons from Kepler Masonry, Linglestown, to prematurely remove the 1856 cornerstone from the southeast corner of the sanctuary building. We knew that if a box was present in the stone we may need to determine a way to open it during Sunday morning's ceremony.

The outdoor temperature had finally dropped from the high 90's to the mid 80's, and the humidity was dropping, too. It was a partly cloudy day with a nice breeze. Thank goodness! It was more comfortable for us, for the stone masons, and for whatever we would find in the stone.

Present were members of the Historical Committee (Kathie Gifford, Chair; Laura Gifford, Historian; Polly and Dale Smith; Bill Minsker; Ruth Shaffer; Darlene Yoder; and Earl Caswell), the St. Thomas UCC consistory vice-president (Scott Endy), the designated photographers (Barb Meehan and Earl Caswell), the St. Thomas UCC pastor (Rev. Donald Wetzel), and the Christ Evangelical Lutheran pastor (Rev. William Stickley).

Using a battery-powered saw and drill, and a hammer and chisel, the masons cut through the mortar around the cornerstone and then gradually removed courses of brick, three deep, until they could get in behind the stone and wiggle it loose. Mortar covered the top of the stone. We waited – actually with bated breath – as they lowered it to the ground and brushed the mortar from the top.

The top cleared, and then there it was – a small tin box fitting perfectly into its home in the stone. With increased enthusiasm we moved on; we needed to know if we could remove the box, and what we would have to do to open it. We set about prying it from its 150-year-long home in the stone.

The box was obviously tin, and it fit perfectly into the hole that had been created for it. At first gentle prying didn't budge it. Then the lid loosened and came off (it hadn't been sealed in place). We had our first view of the inside! Moldy paper. We moved on. There were some maneuvers to grasp the side of the box and gently pull it from the stone. The rust on its sides gripped the stone and then gave way as box slipped out.

Okay, so probably we should have stopped there. We should have left further exploration for Sunday morning. We didn't. We wanted to see what was under the moldy paper. Was it total destruction? We checked. Then we put everything back as we found it. The box went back in the stone and the stone and bricks were slipped back into place in the corner of the building. Those present pledged themselves to secrecy.

Sunday, August 6, 2006

Sunday, August 6, 2006 – a beautiful day! We were blessed with pleasant weather for an outside ceremony. For this special Sunday there was only one service followed by the ceremony at the cornerstone, 10:30 – 12:00. The sanctuary filled and overflowed into the south foyer. We were joined by several members of the congregation of Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church (their congregation was in union with ours in the building of 1856); their Council president, William Madara; and for the cornerstone ceremony, their pastor, Rev. Dr. William Stickley. Also with us were two of our former pastors, the Rev. Charles Strasbaugh, 1953-1957, and the Rev. Stephen Gifford, 1974-1992, who co-celebrated communion with host pastor, the Rev. Donald Wetzel.

Before the service began, the Chair of the Historical Committee, Kathie Gifford, took us back to the sanctuary that was built in 1856-57. In our mind's eye, we stripped the trappings of the last 150 years (alcove, foyers, woodwork, electricity, tin ceiling, stained glass windows, etc.) and returned to a stove-heated, simple room with a gallery in the back, a high pulpit in the front, and windows much higher than today. The service followed with special music including the brass ensemble, a duet by Crystal Nosworthy and Marilyn Beistel, and solos by Rev. Stephen Gifford and Rev. Susan Mulford.

The congregation left the sanctuary to the sounds of the brass ensemble and once outside gathered around the cornerstone. In all of our minds were thoughts of the two congregations that had gathered in that same place 150 years earlier to lay the stone that we were about to open.

Those who on Friday had pledged themselves to secrecy did good! The congregations seemed ignorant of what we were about to find. Following words of inspiration by Bill Minsker from the St. Thomas UCC Historical Committee and Bill Madara from the Lutheran congregation, Scott Endy and Jason Shay removed the loose bricks and slid the stone out of its place. As they brushed dust and mortar from the top of the stone, the announcement came, "We have a box!" The interest in the crowd heightened. Smiles were seen on faces. Jason and Scott (with his trusty needle-nose pliers) worked the box from the stone and, for the first time in 150 years the contents were exposed to the two congregations. We removed the damp, moldy and disintegrating items from the rusty tin box: a small book with one word visible on its spine, "Bible"; two folded sections of newspapers, one with banner wording ". . . theria . ." and one with banner wording ". . . German Reform . . ."; a thin, possibly leather-bound item (unidentifiable); a stack of folded papers (number of items indiscernible); and a section of a document that had rusted to the bottom of the box (identity obliterated by rust).

The Cornerstone Ceremony ended with a hymn led by members of the choir while the cornerstone items were moved to an open-air canopied site where everyone could view them. The congregations adjourned to a pig roast and luncheon in Crist Fellowship Hall offered by the Elders of the church and created by a group of cooks led by the Yingst family.

Addendum

The items were displayed for the next 80 days. They were cared for using techniques suggested by archivists. Gradually they dried and could be unfolded and identified:

- A small bible, recognizable from the word "Bible" on the spine (pages pasted together);
- An item that appeared to be a leather-bound pamphlet, front cover indicated "Sunday School";
- A newsletter, *The German Reformed Messenger*, dated September 10, 1856;
- A newsletter, *The Lutheran Observer*, dated September 12, 1856;
- A newspaper in German text, "Lutheran" appeared to be in the title, shredded beyond recognition;
- A newspaper, *The Harrisburg Weekly Telegraph*, dated July 24, 1856;
- An unknown newspaper, shredded beyond recognition;
- The Minutes of the 109th Ministerium of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1856;
- A handwritten letter (the item that had rusted to the bottom of the box) in such poor condition that only small segments of script were readable. The subject of the document was not discernible, but it was held in high regard. [Ed.: Later the text of this document was discovered.]

During a special ceremony on October 29, 2006, St. Thomas returned these items to the stone. Each item received its own polyethylene zip-lock envelope, and all were sealed in a new air-tight stainless steel box created by Unique Specialties, Linglestown. A hand-written letter from the Historical Committee was included to indicate the 2006 entry, the cornerstone contents, and best wishes from 2006 to the future.