

Universalist church

(Continued)

about 1820 to 1845.

Englishmen had visited Greece early in the century, and had been deeply impressed by the ancient architecture and the democratic ideals that had flowered there.

Many Americans picked up this interest, along with a popularized support for a Greek liberation movement in ferment at that time. Their enthusiasm for the Greek revival style was spurred by the political symbol it was vaguely thought to represent.

The interior provides a good example of the Italian trompe l'oeil (meaning "trick of the eye") technique, giving the walls an illusion of depth, especially behind the pulpit, which appears to be a shadowed alcove. The work was done by a young German artist, Carl Wendte, an expert in the illusory style.

The walls are now undergoing a restoration under the direction of Columbia University professor Norman Weiss, who directed graduate students last summer in erasing the grime.

"There's an element of bravura and humor to it," Weiss said of Wendte's fanciful painting.

The church's membership continued to grow during the 1860s, a time when it served as a cultural and social as well as religious center of town life. The seating capacity of 408 couldn't accommodate all the Sunday worshippers, who often packed the aisles.

By the 1920s to 1930s Sunday attendance had declined to about 200 to 300 people. Though the music and lecture series were still active, including talks by then Cmdr. Donald MacMillan, who had accompanied Admiral Perry to the North Pole, community participation had begun its downhill slide. The church now has 31 members.

Leonard Ferguson, chairman of the anniversary committee, said that at one time the church's influence in town was much greater than the proportion of its membership. He said the decline in the church's influence in this century is due to "the impetus toward individual initiative and the move towards individuals' deciding moral questions for themselves."

In the old days, Ferguson said, "people acted as the Church, their parents, or the government dictated. Now, people are saying, we want to decide what to do, what to think, how to behave. With today's ease of communication, there are many alternatives, whereas there used to be only one right way."

Ironically, the independence of thought which is now leading to a decline in church influence in America is not strikingly different from the independence that led Murray to reject Calvinism.

Ferguson said, "In the separatist movement of the 1600s people said 'we want to decide what to think', and set up autonomous churches; in the 1960s people said we want to think for ourselves, which led to a severing of church ties."

The ironic twists of history result from the varieties of people and cultures that mold that history. The celebration next year will try to embrace that variety. Specific dates will be announced as plans take shape.

The Advocate, Thursday, December 27, 1979

Church uplifted by facelift

The facelifting of Provincetown's beloved Universalist Church is the most visible manifestation of a revitalization of enthusiasm this year among church members.

The end of 1979 is also the close of the church's 150th anniversary celebration, a birthday party that has included many community-oriented events.

But more than anything else the membership this year found a renewed sense of dedication to the old building and its traditions this year.

"A few years ago our church was open only part of the year, with its members and church property in decline," said Dr. Richardson Reid, pastor. "Now the church has been holding regular services, providing a place for numerous community activities, while the church property is being restored to its original beauty."

Reid emphasized that the restoration work is largely the result of donated effort from church members and the community at large. "The facelifting of the front of the church is giving a terrific boost to the morale of us all," Reid said.

The physical revamping includes the restoration of the trompe d'oeil interior, repainting the front and repairing its pillars. The sagging floor of the auditorium has been shored up and nearly leveled by building piers beneath it. A priceless Sandwich glass chandelier was restored and hung in the sanctuary.

Other nuts-and-bolts repairs have also been done, including replacing a section of the church's brick foundation.

Reid is especially pleased members are now seeing physical improvements as a result of their contribution of money, time and effort. He said the results of the donated work has all been highly professional and a delight to the church community.

"The church is finding new life," Reid said, "Thanks to the kindness of people throughout the Lower Cape community."

The Advocate, Thursday, May 21, 1981

Church art being restored

By Catherine Gammon

Professional conservator Linda K. Tucker has been at work in Provincetown this month restoring the trompe-l'oeil murals in the Universalist Church.

The murals, which depict columns and scrollwork and create an illusion of openness and depth on the church interior walls, were originally painted by German artist Carl Wendte when the building was constructed in 1847.

The church is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. In the last five years a number of restoration projects has been undertaken, including strengthening the steeple, rebuilding the foundation and painting the church exterior.

Plans to restore the murals began more than 10 years ago when Joseph Acker and the late Jeff Bosworth organized the Restoration Committee of the Lower Cape to raise money for the project. The committee includes church members and other Provincetown residents dedicated to preserving Wendte's unique trompe-l'oeil, a French term that means "fool the eye."

A young immigrant, the artist died shortly after the church was completed, having done the interiors of only two or three churches in this country.

Restoration of his murals began with a project in the summer of 1978, when the walls in the sanctuary proper were cleaned with rubber erasers and areas showing

severe water damage were painted over to match the original.

Although Tucker developed the initial proposal for the trompe-l'oeil restoration, she did not directly supervise the work that summer.

She liked the church so much, however, that she chose it for her wedding later that year, said Roslyn Garfield, a member of the restoration committee.

Tucker was brought back to the project last February when the committee asked her to make a proposal for restoring the back ceiling and wall.

The ceiling shows severe water damage, and the back wall, which is structurally related to support of the steeple, has generations of cracks and partial repairs.

The wall had also been completely repainted sometime

near the turn of the century, possibly as late as the 1920's, and the texture and color of the overpainting were wrong.

To leave the wall and ceiling as they were, Tucker said would have destroyed the unity of the whole design.

Initially, Tucker did testing on the wall to determine the best method for removing the overpainting. Fortunately, the overpainting had been done in a water-soluble paint, and scrubbing with natural sponges and warm water proved the best method for taking it off.

Underneath, Tucker found a substantial amount of the