



wealth of Gothic churches make Washington Road Mt. Lebanon's "holy land"

BY CARL APONE

PHOTOS BY WILLIAM METZGER

Washington Road is Mt. Lebanon's "holy land." In a stretch of one and a half miles there are nine churches — the most concentrated and impressive cluster of church buildings in Western Pennsylvania. Yet, in the daily rush, motorists and pedestrians who use the thoroughfare may not particularly notice the architecture of churches on both sides of the road.

Mt. Lebanon's Dr. Arnold Klukas is one who does, however. Klukas wears two hats, as priest at St. Paul's Episcopal church (one of the grand Gothic churches on Washington Road) and also as acting director of architectural studies in the department of fine arts at the University of Pittsburgh. Each time he travels Washington Road, which is often, he wonders anew at the architectural splendor of its churches. And, in his lectures at Pitt, Klukas often talks about Mt. Lebanon's Gothic churches.

Says Dr. Klukas: "The concentration of churches represents the most impressive Gothic examples in Western Pennsylvania. There are other churches which are just as impressive — the East Liberty Presbyterian Church for example — but it doesn't have the neighbors to compare with what we find along Washington Road."

Those Gothic churches, in addition to his own, St. Paul's Episcopal, include Mt. Lebanon United Methodist, St. Bernard's Roman Catholic, Mt. Lebanon United Presbyterian, Beverly Heights United Presbyterian, and Southminster Presbyterian.

"Most of those churches were started in the 1920s and completed in the 1950s, after World War II. Southminster, St. Paul's and Beverly Heights, all planned in the late 1920s, were delayed because of the great market crash and the Depression, and then completed after World War II."

From the time he was 10 years old, Klukas knew he wanted to be a clergyman and architect. "My mother told me I was constantly looking at church architecture. When I was in high school, I realized I could not be an architect because I was so terrible at math. When I was ordained, I knew I wanted to be a scholar-priest. I am lucky I can do both — teach and preach — at once."

Most of Washington Road's Gothic beauties were started in the 1920s and completed in the 1950s after World War II.

Klukas did his undergraduate work at Wittenberg University in Ohio, then went to Yale, and later Oxford University in England for theology studies. After that, he went to Pitt for a Ph.D. in architectural history.

Klukas points out that two of the Gothic churches along Washington Road — St. Bernard's and Mt. Lebanon United Presbyterian — are included in the book, "Landmark Architecture of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania," by James Van Trump and Arthur Ziegler, Jr. The authors praise the architecture of both churches as "very good."

Of St. Bernard's, they write: "The congregation was formed in 1919 and occupied temporary quarters of various kinds until in January 1926 the basement of the completed school building began to be used as a church. This function was transferred to the substructure of the church building proper, which was begun in 1933 and finished in 1934. In 1942, the construction of the church superstructure was begun; it was delayed however, because of the Second World War, and the first Mass was not heard in the completed structure until 1947."

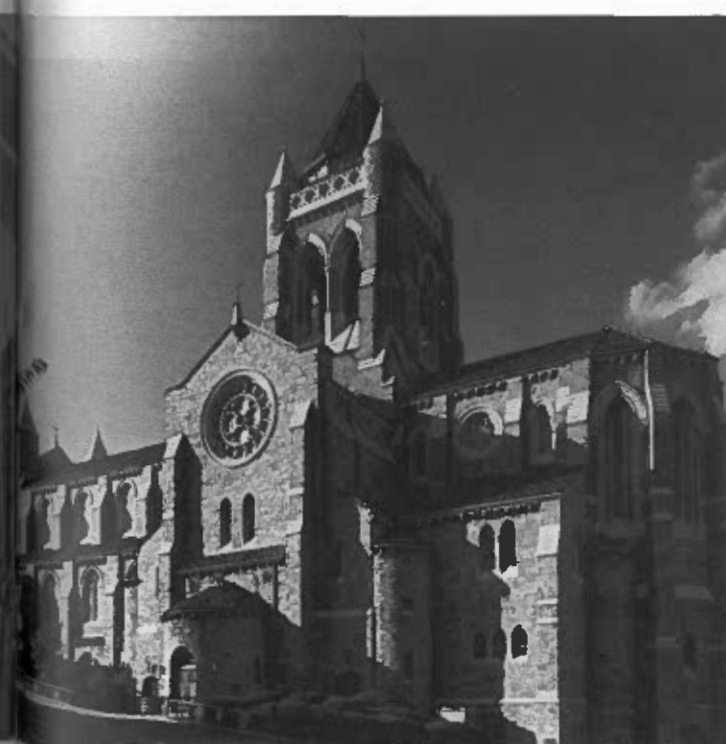
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At night, Mt. Lebanon United Presbyterian Church's "Twin Towers," can be seen all over the South Hills. Built in 1929, the Scottish Gothic church replicates York Minster Cathedral.



Southminster Presbyterian's stained glass windows, in the style of Chartres Cathedral in France, are among the best collections in the nation.



Built of granite and limestone with a Spanish tile roof, St. Bernard's Roman Catholic Church favors the early French Transitional Gothic of the 12th century.



St. Bernard's has a true Gothic vault, where the ribs of stone make a cage to provide a base for the roof. The massive interior is beautified by frescoes and carvings on the walls and ceiling, and the pan-tiled roof has gargoyles.




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"The large rugged mass of the building, which stylistically favors the early French Transitional Gothic of the 12th century, is a dominant note in the Mt. Lebanon skyline. It is definitely a design document of the 1920s. Its walls of granite and limestone and its roof of Spanish tiles abundantly reinforce its image as one of the last constructions of the Eclectic period."

If the Mt. Lebanon United Presbyterian Church, authors Van Trump and Ziegler write: "This church, with its twin English Gothic towers standing on elevated land, has for a number of years been visually a landmark in Mt. Lebanon. The form of the church illustrates an attempt, not extraordinarily successful in the present instance, to combine the Protestant auditorium church with the 19th century ritualistic chancel church. The Gothic style has also been agreeably used here, but with no great verve or originality of handling."

The concentration of such churches along Washington Road also makes a statement about the Mt. Lebanon community. Says Klukas: "Architecture is the most corporate and most effective reflection of society. A painter can paint in an attic, a novelist can write in a lonely room. But architecture, because it requires large group participation,

reflects the aspirations of the people who build the social as well as the spiritual life of the community.

"The Gothic churches show the people of Mt. Lebanon stressed the more traditional values. They yearned for the values expressed by Gothic architecture, which Ralph Adams Cram, the most famous architect of the 1920s, called the only truly religious architecture. Cram said: 'Where lasting values reside: the home, the school, the church — there only can the morality and honesty of Gothic prevail.' Notice that in addition to the Gothic churches, the most important buildings in Mt. Lebanon, including many homes, are also of Gothic or classic design. The schools are of classic design. So here, in mortar and stone, we see the permanence and stability of the community values emphasized."

In addition, even those churches that deviate from the Gothic design also reflect traditional values. "The First Church of Christ, Scientist is reminiscent of a similar favorable age — Colonial time — conveying a sense of permanence and stability. This architecture emphasizes the mind and reason of classical architecture, where

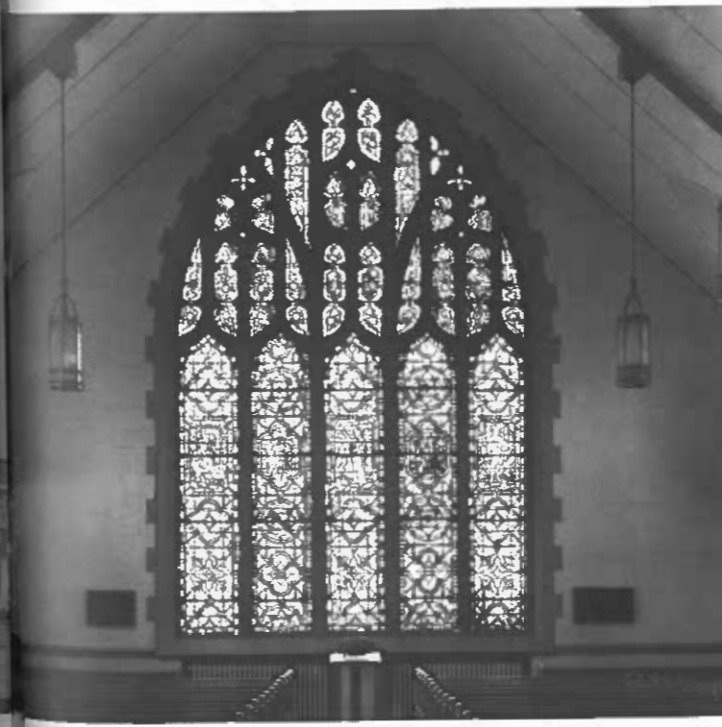


The architecture of the 1912 Mt. Lebanon Methodist Church, like that of the other Gothic churches on Washington Road, reflects the early community's traditional values.



In his lectures at Pitt, where he's acting head of the department of architectural studies, Dr. Arnold Klukas of St. Paul's Episcopal Church (above) often talks about Mt. Lebanon Gothic churches.

the natural light, order and proportion appeal to the mind." The church was organized in 1912 by a group of Christian Scientists, and soon after was recognized as a branch of the Mother Church of Christ, Scientist in Boston. The first services were held in the present building in 1939.



The stained glass window that faces Washington Road was brought to Beverly Heights Presbyterian Church from an old church on Pittsburgh's North Side.

The impressive brick and mortar of the churches remind us that from its earliest days (Mt. Lebanon became a legal township in 1912), the community had lofty ambitions. Says Klukas: "Coming into Mt. Lebanon from Dormont, it was, as the Scripture phrase has it, 'the city on the hill,' a place beyond the dirt — physical and metaphysical — of Pittsburgh, a place where education and morality would dominate."

Here are some observations Klukas has about Washington Road churches:

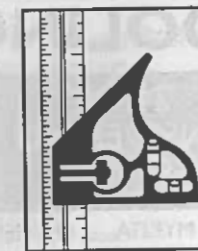
Southminster Presbyterian

"It would be impossible to price the stained glass windows in the church. They are priceless — one of the best stained glass collections in the nation. It is worth a trip to the church to see those windows. The windows are in the style of Chartres Cathedral in France."

Southminster dates back to 1924, when the first service was held on Sunday, November 9, in the auditorium of the school, with an attendance of 84. The building was under roof in time to hold a service on Thanksgiving Day in 1928. The total cost of the building, property and furnishings was counted as \$197,242.42. Dr. John Calvin Reid, who served the church from 1945 to 1957, was the driving force behind the stained glass treasures. Among them: the Chancel window, which reflects the Magnetic Christ, the Repentance Window, the Faith Window, the Courage Window, and the Love Window. The general theme of the

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chapel windows is "Christ is the wisdom of God." Windows portrayed there include Christ's birth, baptism, crucifixion and resurrection, and there is special emphasis on the Beatitudes. Southminster has 1750 members.

St. Bernard's

"The church is so correct that architecturally it could be set down in the south of France and would not look out of place. It has incredible frescoes and carvings on the walls and ceilings, and the pan-tiled roof has many carved gargoyles. The church is interesting structurally, as well as symbolically, a real Gothic vault, where the ribs of stone make a cage of stone to provide a base for the fireproof roof. There is a soaring transcendence which emphasizes the otherness of God — a God beyond human comprehension."

St. Bernard's pastor, Rev. George A. Wilt, is always delighted to have Klukas visit. "He loves the church and has asked for the original architectural plans, which we intend to provide."

The church got its name from its first pastor, Rev. Thomas Bryson, who had a Ph.D. in philosophy and a strong admiration for St. Bernard, the Abbott of Clairvaux, France in 1153, who founded 68 monasteries and was such a super-salesman he took his five brothers and one sister — the entire family — into the religious life with him.

The first Mass at the site, August 31, 1919, was in a carriage house, and church rolls included 180 families. Today the church has 10,000 members. Father Bryson liked to tell early parishioners: "We began our life in a stable, just as our Lord did." Of the church structure, Father Wilt says it is unlikely that the physical plan will ever be duplicated. The trend is toward more modern, simplified construction and air-conditioning. "The cost of the St. Bernard complex is over \$3 million, and the replacement cost today would run well over \$10 million."

Mt. Lebanon United Presbyterian

"The church would look quite believable in England beside the York Minster Cathedral. The inside of the church is interesting because of the unified attitude of the architecture," says Klukas.

The senior pastor, Bernard Johnson, knows why there is such a strong similarity to York Minster. "The church was built to be a duplicate of York Minster Cathedral." Johnson has a lithograph of York Minster in his office, and the cathedral and his church are obviously identical twins.

Rev. Johnson, who calls his church a "classic piece of Scottish Gothic," says the church is so well-constructed "it has only settled about three-quarters of an inch since 1929."

Four different houses of worship have been erected over the present site. Indians fought where the church stands, and in its cemetery the heroes of six wars, starting with the Revolutionary War, are buried. In 1804, when the first pastor was installed, the "church" consisted of a tent-like covering for the minister, who preached the gospel using a tree stump as a pulpit. The parishioners sat on log benches or the grass. In 1818, there were 275 communicants. Today there are 1,100. The present church was dedicated in 1929.

St. Paul's Episcopal

"The design emphasizes the sacramental life, using stained glass windows to reflect that imagery. Its outward and visible signs reflect the inward and spiritual grace. The glorious music and rich art at St. Paul's are meant to reflect the spiritual and to appeal to all the senses. When St. Paul's began, Calvary Episcopal Church in Shadyside provided seed money for the church, just as the Presbytery in Pittsburgh did for the Mt. Lebanon United Presbyterian Church. When St. Paul's was under construction there were plans for a huge bell tower, but that was scaled back, just as the larger plans for the Beverly Heights United Presbyterian Church were scaled back because of financial difficulties." St. Paul's has 1,000 members.

Beverly Heights United Presbyterian Church

Built in 1929, it has an attractive stained glass window facing Washington Road. The window was brought there from an old church on the North Side. Beverly Heights has 800 members.

Mt. Lebanon United Methodist Church

"This church has wonderful Tiffany-like windows."

The original chapel was built in 1912, and the main church, built at a cost of \$213,000, was dedicated on November 23, 1924. During the middle 1960s, the church interior was beautified by rebuilding and moving the Resurrection Window into the West Liberty Avenue wall, and the Parable Window, Praise Window and Prayer Window were installed. The church has 750 members.

Mt. Lebanon United Lutheran

"When the church was constructed, it was considered quite avant-garde for the time. Although modern in style, the values conveyed here are identical to the earlier Gothic buildings."

The modern church, which was dedicated in 1958, has an aluminum spire, reaching 110 feet into the sky. This produces a fitting crest in a modern material for a contemporary building. The great concrete arches of the nave form the structural framework of the building. Because of these arches, the nave is symbolic of the "ship of the church." There are no cross bracings to obstruct vision inside the church. As a result of this height, the worshiper is given a lift that is meant to be spiritual in quality. The church has 859 members.

Unitarian Universalist Church of the South Hills

"This house of worship was once a home, and it remains homey and domestic in quality. The roof shingles are meant to look like a thatch roof, and the building itself is meant to concern itself with the intimate fellowship the Unitarians have in their worship." There are 139 members.

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