

Register of Old Buildings
Macon County Historical Coordinating Council

Address: 359 E. North (church) and 345 N. Jackson (manse).
Southwest corner, E. North and N. Jackson.

Legal description:

E 45' Lot 13 Block 12 North Decatur Addition now known as Allen, McReynolds and Co.'s Addition to the City of Decatur as per Plat recorded in Book G page 365, Recorder's Office of Macon County.

Date of original construction: 1887 (both church and manse)
Cornerstone -

ERBAUT
1887

Name of original owner: German Methodist Episcopal Church.
(Die Deutsche Bishoppe Methodisten Kirche)

History:

1. The following are changes of title taken only from the beginning and end of the lengthy chain of them recorded in the abstract now in the possession of the Trinity C.M.E. Church.
 - Nov. 1, 1828. U. S. of A. to David L. Allen (80 acres) by the President, Andrew Jackson, Geo. Graham, Commission General Land Office, Vandalia, Illinois.
 - March 7, 1837. David L. Allen to James McReynolds, all of lots, E. William to North, Franklin to Jackson (14 lots) Book G page 371.
 - Nov. 15, 1920. German Methodist Episcopal Church interchangeably called the Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church of Decatur (Albert C. Witzeman, Henry T. Wencke, August Kusch, Theodore Shepperd, Charles Kusch and John Kusch, Trustees) to S. L. Tucker, C. W. Taylor and Isaiah Taylor as the Trustees of Trinity Colored Methodist Episcopal Church of Decatur and their successors forever. (\$12,000)
2. City Directories include the following:
 - 1885 City Directory - German M. E. Church, 226 W. Eldorado.
 - 1888 - German M. E. Church sw corner, North and Jackson.
(Note: Not all city directories available)
 - 1917 - German M. E. Church, Rev. Frank J. Sternberg, pastor.
 - 1920 - Trinity M. E. Church, Rev. Frank J. Sternberg, pastor.

Present owner: Trinity C.M.E. Church.

(Trinity Christian Methodist Episcopal Church)

The Rev. Theodore R. Johnson, pastor.

8/12/1974.

History Continued:

2. Directory information continued.

- 1921 - Trinity C.M.E. Church, Rev. Joseph P. Davis, pastor.
(C.M.E. - Colored Methodist Episcopal)
1958 - Trinity C.M.E. Church, Rev. Theodore Johnson, pastor.
(C.M.E. - Christian Methodist Episcopal)

Note: The 1920 change of name was related to World War I, with its resulting strong anti-German feelings in the community. Just as instruction in the German language was dropped from the Decatur High School curriculum in response to anti-German sentiment, so German M.E. was replaced with Trinity M.E. in the name of this church.

The 1958 change of name from C.M.E. (the C standing for colored) to C.M.E. (the C standing for Christian) was related to 1954 civil rights activities, it requiring four years for this to become official with the C.M.E. denomination as a whole. When the C.M.E. members purchased the church in 1920, they retained the name, Trinity.

3. The following is a record of a telephone interview with Miss Frieda Moessner, 942 N. Union, Thursday, June 20, 1974:

- a. The German Methodist Episcopal Church in Decatur was an off-shoot of the St. Paul's Lutheran Church. Miss Moessner recalled that her mother, who came to this country from German at the age of 17, found the St. Paul's service unlike what she had known in Germany, a major difference relating to the greater amount of liturgy. Others who felt similarly - the Frederick Mattes family, the Conrad Ammanns, the Andrew Hartmans, the Witzemans, Glatz's, Neidermeyers, Kortums and Haupts among them - organized a church at 226 W. Eldorado. In 1887 they built the structure at 359 E. North with the parsonage just to the rear of it at 345 N. Jackson. The cornerstone reads

ERBAUT 1887

 or Built, 1887,

and over the east front door carved in stone are the words, "Die Deutsche Bishoppe Methodisten Kirche", or The German Methodist Episcopal Church. Sermons were in German, and children attended Saturday morning classes taught by the minister for two years prior to confirmation to learn to speak and read German, with emphasis on reading the Bible and learning catechism in German. The Rev. Henry Ross who was the minister in the early 1900's went on to become a district superintendent, continuing to live in Decatur with his

History Continued:

3. a. daughters, Miss Ada and Dr. Flora Ross, who later became a professor of German (and French) at Millikin University.
- b. Accompanying World War I, 1914-1918, came strong anti-German feelings in the community, sometimes expressed quite personally. One consequence was that in 1919 the church's name was changed to Trinity M.E. Church, thus eliminating the word German from the name.

In addition to anti-German sentiment, changes had occurred in the neighborhood with a livery stable having been built by Morans (undertakers) just west of the church. Also, the membership was scattering in terms of residences; hence, it was deemed best to close the church with members joining the Methodist Church of their choice. Many transferred to Grace M.E., some to First M.E., and a few to the First United Brethren.

4. The structure at present is much as it was when it was built in 1887, and it is in excellent condition.
 - There has been no modification of the exterior. Two chimneys still stand. Originally used for two stoves, one at the southeast and one at the northeast corners of the structure, the southeast one is still in use for the furnace.
 - The windows are the original ones, now covered with a transparent protective substance.
 - The pulpit rail, the pews, the choir rail and the arched, wooden ceiling with decorative wooden brackets are all original, as are the entry-ways.
 - The balcony, formerly used as a part of the sanctuary, exists as previously, but is used for church school classes.
 - Wood wainscoting remains, with all of the wood being stained elmwood, Earl White believes.

Major Changes

- Wall bracket fixtures for gas lights are gone.
- Central air conditioning has been added.
- A full basement was dug out after Trinity C.M.E. obtained it, and rest rooms were added there.
- A stair to the basement was constructed in the entry-way.

History Continued:

4.

Major Changes Continued

- Flooring of vinyl was placed in the sanctuary with strips of red carpet in the aisles.
- A large pump reed organ has been replaced with a piano.

359 East North



Photo, Margaret M. Meyer, 1974

359 E. North Street and 345 N. Jackson Street



Pictures taken by Margaret M. Meyer, June 23, 1974



359 E. North St., Trinity C.M.E. Church



ERBAUT 1887

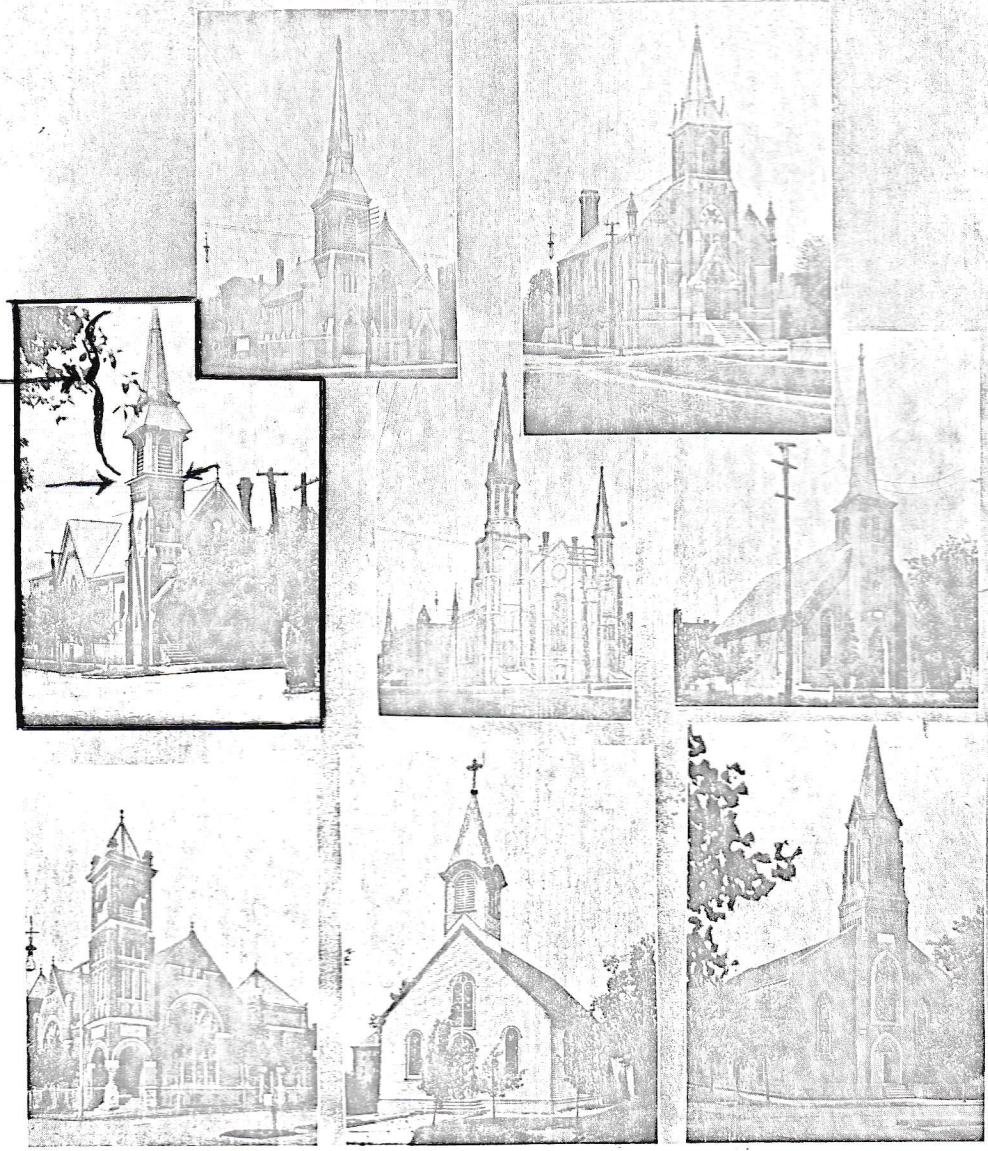
Cornerstone

BUILT 1887



In stone above the portico:
Die Deutsche Bishoppe
Methodisten Kirche
or
The German Methodist Episcopal Church

The portion
in brackets is
gone.



German Methodist
Cumberland Presbyterian

English Lutheran

St. Johannes German Lutheran
First Methodist
St. James German Catholic

St. Paul's German Lutheran
St. Patrick's Catholic

From Progressive Decatur, published by Review Printing and Stationery Co., Decatur, Illinois. No date given. Estimate: 1899-1901.

NOTE: The German Methodist Church pictured above is the only one of the churches pictured that still stands in 1974, as shown above. The St. Johannes Lutheran Church is ^{minus steeple} without the steeples shown. Its cornerstone reads, EV. LUTH. ST. JOHANNIS KIRCHE, UAC, 1892. REBUILT - 1928. All other structures pictured above have been demolished. (1974)

'We've Faced This Before,' Pastor Says

Decatur Sun. & A.M.
June 19, 1977

Trinity CME Prepares Itself for Wrecker Ball

By Jan Gilarski

It's easy not to notice the small red brick church, sandwiched between a vacant clothing factory and a bank drive-up facility on the eastern fringes of downtown Decatur.

Standing in the shadow of its Catholic counterpart one block to the north, Trinity C.M.E. Church and parsonage, 345 N. Jackson St., is one of several buildings slated to be razed to make way for a parking lot for the proposed civic center.

Those plans have drawn fire from the Macon County Historical Society and the Decatur Historical and Architectural Sites Commission. Those two groups would like to see the church preserved.

The church, built in 1887 by Decatur's German Methodist settlers, is the oldest church in continuous use downtown.

After the German Methodist congregation began to dwindle, the church was sold in 1920 to the Colored (now Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church.

Rev. T. R. Johnson, pastor of Trinity C.M.E. for the past 16 years, remembers visiting the church shortly after it was bought.

He speaks easily of its history and proudly of the way in which the congregation has pulled together to finance several remodeling projects — a new roof, tuckpointing, new floor and air conditioning.

The modernizations do not detract from the rich darkness of the wooden pews and the altar rail, remnants of the first congregation which inscribed "Erbaut (built in) 1887" on the cornerstone.

"I feel good about seeing people wanting to save historic buildings — whether this church or other buildings," Rev. Johnson says.

Behind The News

He is not resentful toward the civic center project — in fact he says Decatur needs one.

"People call me and ask me 'Am I for the civic center?' I'm always for improvements in the city where I live."

"The taxpayers should be willing to support it," he said. "I've seen too many downtowns decay and die."

Rev. Johnson and his wife Katheryn note that proposals to tear down the church have come and gone over the past 16 years.

When the Johnsons came to Decatur, there was a proposal to raze the church to make way for a rerouted U.S. 36. Then there were plans to build an assembly hall for Stephen Decatur High School, followed by talk that the Sears Roebuck Co. store would take the location.

"I don't feel we've been picked on," Rev. Johnson said, although he noted a number of churches have "remained very comfortably" downtown.

"We have faced this situation in other cities," he said. "We have churches elsewhere that have had to move because of highways."

In those other cities, he said. "They always got a new church."

That is what Rev. Johnson would like to see in Decatur.

"I don't think it would be of any great value to sell this unless we get a new church and a new parsonage," he said.

A firm offer of compensation has not yet been made to the 255-person congregation, he said, and when it is made it will have to be reviewed by the

church trustees and the area bishop.

Rev. Johnson estimated the church needs about \$10,000 worth of rehabilitation work.

Local historical preservation experts say that unless a person or group comes up with a viable alternate use for the

church, backed by financial support, the small red brick church will face the wrecker's ball.

"If the majority of the trustees and the members of the church see fit to accept an offer, I wouldn't stand in the way of it," Rev. Johnson said.



Rev. Johnson stands before the 90-year-old church.

Staff photo by Ron Ernst