



## RELIGION & FUNERARY

Religion was an important aspect of life for the pioneers that came west to settle in Oregon. Having come from the East, the land of the country's Protestant forefathers, settlers held to traditional Christian faiths in the new frontier. Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, and Lutheran denominations were most common in early Eugene.<sup>1</sup> Even Judaism found its way west, though little organized practice of the religion was conducted. Jewish families tended to worship at home and observed very basic funerary practices, as a synagogue did not exist in Eugene until 1934.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the denomination, however, religion was an inspiring and strengthening institution for settlers and served to unite both the people within a community and communities themselves, which could feel connected by religion despite being relatively isolated in the landscape. When a community was founded, religion was a primary concern. Worship services were often conducted in private homes by members of the congregation, but on a periodic basis circuit riding ministers would come to town. When this happened, settlers from miles around would travel to hear services lead by an ordained minister or preacher. As towns grew, religious services were often held in courthouses or school houses. Churches often came to share the same physical building with early schools, and together religion and education became the foundation for most prosperous and respectable towns. It was not long before church facilities were built and dedicated to religious purposes alone.

### Churches

In Eugene, the County Court encouraged the establishment of churches by granting plots of land to individual congregations for a small fee. The first church building to be erected in the city belonged to the Cumberland Presbyterian Congregation. Though the congregation itself had existed since 1853, when Reverend Jacob Gillespie formally organized a group that had been meeting in a private home, it was not until 1857 that a building dedicated strictly to worship could be constructed. It was the only church building in the area for two or three years and was shared by other congregations until money was raised to build more churches.<sup>3</sup>

The Methodists had an early start in Oregon, as Jason Lee was one of the first protestant missionaries to come to the area and established a Methodist mission and settlement near Salem. In keeping with that tradition, the Methodists were one of the first dominant religious groups in Eugene. The First Methodist Church was established in 1854 in the small log home of Solomon and Nancy Zumwalt, located near the present-day intersection of Highway 99 and Roosevelt Boulevard. Initially, itinerant ministers led services. Reverend Noah Starr was the first regular minister to serve the

congregation while they met on the Zumwalt homestead.<sup>4</sup> Though the congregation established a formal church in town four years later, the early meetings were important to the establishment of the Methodist denomination in Eugene, and the group claimed the distinction of building the second church building in the city, which they used until 1886. This church was constructed by Solomon Zumwalt, himself, with the help of his son and other members of the congregation.<sup>5</sup>

To serve the large Danish population in the Danebo settlement, Bethesda Lutheran Church was established. The community and church were established largely through the efforts of Reverend P.L.C. Hansen. The church itself was officially established on December 15, 1900 and the congregation was officially named the Bethesda Danish Evangelical Lutheran Congregation. Reverend Hansen served the church until 1903 and during his tenure, donated three acres of land on Danebo Road for the construction of a church. The church was constructed by J.P. Olsen for \$1,450 on the site where Westlawn Cemetery is now located. The church was moved by rollers and winch in 1908 to a location on present day Royal Avenue, and a parsonage was built next to it. Up until 1920, church services at Bethesda Lutheran Church were conducted strictly in the Danish language. At that time, Reverend A.S. Nielsen, who was bilingual, began to gradually introduce English into his services. The total conversion to English happened in 1926. In 1928, a large fire started at a nearby barn threatened the church, but it was saved and a new church was not needed until 1941. The new church held up to 650 people, to accommodate the ever growing congregation. At this time a memorial park was also constructed adjacent to the church to honor those of the Bethesda community who had died in service.<sup>6</sup>

Irving Christian Church, originally called the United Brethren Church, was constructed in 1891 as part of a church-building boom in the late 1880s and early 1900s. It was typical of the small, wood frame churches popular at that time and had traditional Vernacular Gothic details.<sup>7</sup> It was established by members of the congregation from the Clear Lake Church located north of Eugene, near Junction City. In the 1890s, this group moved closer to Eugene and, by some accounts, brought their church building with them. An 1899 entry in the diary of Hetty McClure Bond notes that "The Brothers, Sisters and friends met at Irving on Sunday, Oct. 29, 1899 to rededicate the Christian Church at that place, and raise funds to pay costs of moving the church to that place and repairs on the same all of which was raised by popular subscription."<sup>8</sup>

As time progressed, the number of churches in Eugene grew and were built farther from the downtown core. These new constructions responded both to the lack of available land downtown and the growth of residential areas on the outskirts. By locating in areas such as this, churches were more accessible to their congregations and helped to unite the community despite its growth. As congregations grew, older churches became obsolete. If they were not physically expanded, they were often used as auxiliary buildings for a new church built nearby, or disposed of altogether. Many were sold to smaller congregations of various denominations, or secularized for use as school houses or meeting halls. An account of the First Methodist Church, built by the Zumwalts, tells how it was sold off and moved, then used as a school, later as a stable, and eventually torn down and given to University of Oregon students to burn at a

football rally.<sup>9</sup> In this common cycle, old churches made way for new, which were typically more high style and architecturally significant.

This trend continued to the present, resulting in churches designed by noteworthy local architects. For example, architects John Stafford, Kenneth Morin and James Longwood designed the Peace Presbyterian Church on River Road. This round house of worship was responsible for the firm winning an award from the Southwest Oregon Chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 1962.<sup>10</sup>



*River Road Baptist Church (c.1950) at 1105 River Road. Photo by Caitlin Harvey.*

The 1950s and 60s saw a boom of church development in the River Road area. In 1951, an African-American congregation known as the Church of God, relocated from the Glenwood area to an industrial area just south of River Road. This showed the diversity of both cultural groups and religious practices that were perhaps more generally accepted outside the city boundaries in areas such as the River Road neighborhood. Other congregations and denominations also sprang up, at least three using the traditional “Bethel” name and others using “River Road”, “Irving” and “Danebo” within the names of their churches.<sup>11</sup>

Trinity United Methodist Church began to coalesce in 1948. The first Sunday School and worship meetings were held in that year at the old River Road School. Construction for church buildings at 440 Maxwell Road began with the church school and chapel on September 11, 1949. The chapel was completed in 1950, and services began to be held there. Two years later, in 1952, the parsonage was completed. Construction resumed in 1956, with the ground breaking for the Sanctuary, in which the first Easter services were celebrated on April 21, 1957. In 1964 additional buildings, the Parish Hall and a Church school wing, were completed.<sup>12</sup>



*Trinity United Methodist Church (1949) at 440 Maxwell Road. Photo by Caitlin Harvey.*

The Lutheran Church of our Redeemer at 255 Maxwell Road was organized in 1951. It is one of twelve Lutheran congregations in the Eugene area. The church was

established to serve the rapidly growing population of north Eugene, however, it has seen a decline in attendance in the last seven years.<sup>13</sup>

Like other churches in the River Road area, St. Peter's Catholic Church was established in the post-World War II period to accommodate the rapid population growth of north Eugene. The Catholic Church acquired ten acres of land from the Pennington Estate along Maxwell Road in 1954. In 1956, a four-room combination church-school building was erected. The Catholic School, staffed by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Wichita, Kansas, opened its doors to 57 students in four grades on September 4, 1956. An all-purpose hall church, which also served as a gym, was constructed in 1958. Additional construction in 1960 resulted in a southwest wing for the school and a parish rectory.<sup>14</sup> By 1960, the school's enrollment had grown to over 200 students spread across eight grades. However, a decline in the number of students, as well as a shortage of nuns, forced the school to close in 1970. The former school rooms were converted for parish use. In the 1990s, the disused school grounds were cleaned up for use as a neighborhood baseball field.<sup>15</sup>

## Cemeteries

Eugene broke with tradition to some extent when it came to funerary practices. In most rural areas, it was common for a cemetery to be located in close proximity to a church, however Eugene's first cemetery was not associated with any church, but with the Masonic Order and was an entity of its own. Established in 1859, the cemetery was used not only by the Masons, but became the burial place of many of Eugene's founding fathers. The first cemetery located within city boundaries was the Pioneer Cemetery, now located contiguous to the University of Oregon campus. It was established in 1873 by the Independent Order of Odd Fellows.<sup>16</sup>

The fact that fraternal organizations were responsible for founding the first cemeteries in Eugene supports the ethnic and religious diversity that is common in most cemeteries in the area. The mixture of Protestant faiths that were first practiced in the days of early settlement are the same found together in any of Eugene's historic cemeteries. In fact, little denominational symbolism is present on most local grave markers. The cross is not readily seen and may denote the relatively small number of Catholics in Eugene. Very early funerary monuments generally consisted of simple stone tablets, and after the 1860s became larger and more ornate. By 1890, the tall obelisk form was common and then more modern simple tablets evolved in the early 1900s.<sup>17</sup>

Many Eugene cemeteries are located on high points of land, because hilltops had Judeo-Christian symbolism, were safe from flooding, and were least agriculturally useful. Of the historic cemeteries around the River Road area, only the Luper Cemetery is located on flat land. Typically, Eugene cemeteries are laid out in a grid plan, much like city streets. The oldest grave markers are usually clustered at the center of the cemetery, with newer graves spreading out from that point.<sup>18</sup>

The Luper Cemetery is located north of the survey area in the Irving neighborhood. It was established in 1859 and may have been used as early as 1857. It was established

on land that was part of the Baker family's Donation Land Claim. The cemetery is located in a rural setting on land that is flat with an overgrown landscape.<sup>19</sup>

Westlawn Cemetery, also called the Danish cemetery, was founded in 1901. It is located west of the River Road area and served the Danebo community. It appears to be one of the few cemeteries in Eugene to be associated with a specific church (the original 1901 Bethesda Lutheran Church), though the church was later moved.<sup>20</sup> Many of the names found on markers in the cemetery are Danish, including some notables like Bertelsen (landowner and founding member of the Bethesda Church), Davis (Donation Land Claim holder), and N.H. Holm (first president of the of the Bethesda Church congregation), among others. The cemetery was developed according to the conventions of the lawn cemetery and is sited in the midst of large tracts of agricultural land. In 1926, the cemetery was donated to the International Order of the Oddfellows, with the agreement that the Oddfellows would continue to maintain the Danish/Bethesda section of the cemetery. Lots were sold into the 1970s and in the 1980s the cemetery was closed to further burials.<sup>21</sup>

The Oak Hill Cemetery, also located west of the River Road area, was established in 1853. It may have once been associated with the Oak Hill Church, a small cabin used as a church meeting house.<sup>22</sup> The graves of the Bailey family, Thomas McCabe, and the Zumwalt family are located in this cemetery. All were holders of Donation Land Claims in the River Road area and the Zumwalts were responsible for the founding of the First Methodist Congregation.

## Religion Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Carter, Elizabeth and Michelle Dennis. *Eugene Area Historic Context Statement*, (City of Eugene Planning & Development, 1997), 28.

<sup>2</sup>Wright, Sally and David Pinyerd. *Eugene Modernism, 1935-65*. (City of Eugene Planning & Development, 2003), 12.1.

<sup>3</sup>Carter, 28.

<sup>4</sup>Moore, Lucia, Nina McCornack, and Gladys McCreedy. *The Story of Eugene*, 34.

<sup>5</sup>Carter, 28-29.

<sup>6</sup>Jernberg, Judy L. *History of Bethesda Lutheran Church, 1900-2000*.

<sup>7</sup>Carter, 68.

<sup>8</sup>Dailey, Charles. "Pioneer History: Churches of Christ and Christian Churches in the Pacific Northwest," available at <http://ncbible.org/nwh/OrLaneWest.html>.

<sup>9</sup>Moore, 34.

<sup>10</sup>Wright, 12.3.

<sup>11</sup>Wright, 12.2-12.3.

<sup>12</sup>Unknown. "Trinity United Methodist Church."

<sup>13</sup>Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. "Trend Report for Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer," available at <http://www.elca.org/ScriptLib/RE/Trendnet/cdsTrendNet.asp?congrno=12847>.

<sup>14</sup>Unknown. "A Brief History of St. Peter Catholic Church," correspondence, March 4, 1991.

<sup>15</sup>Various. "St. Peter's Catholic Church, Established 1955, Celebrating 50 years of service in the Catholic community." Pamphlet printed 2005.

<sup>16</sup>Carter, 29.

<sup>17</sup>Carter, 115.

<sup>18</sup>Carter, 116.

<sup>19</sup>City of Eugene Planning Website. "Landscape Identification," available at <http://www.ci.eugene.or.us/PDD/planning/eugenehistoric/idenland.htm>.

<sup>20</sup>Carter, 164.

<sup>21</sup>Jernberg, Judy L. *History of Bethesda Lutheran Church, 1900-2000*, 3.

<sup>22</sup>Dailey.