

Historic Redeemer Episcopal Church, Greensboro, Georgia

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The historic Redeemer Episcopal Church in Greensboro, Georgia this year celebrated its sesquicentennial on June 14, 2018, the date of the consecration of the historic church building. This lovely gothic revival church is well known in Greene County for its continual worship from the day it opened, until the present time.

The creation and existence of this little church is even more remarkable when one considers the forces that intertwined to instigate its formation. The first influence in forming the parish was the changing fortunes of the Episcopal Church in Georgia from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War. The second force was the wave of evangelism known as The Second Great Awakening that inspired an exceptional leader whose goal as Bishop of Georgia was to form new Episcopal Churches in Georgia.

The existence of the greater Episcopal Church in America began with the founding of the colonies which later formed the United States of America. The Episcopal Church is a part of the Anglican Communion that is worldwide. The Anglican Church (Church of England) helped form the colony of Georgia and then became the largest and most powerful denomination in Georgia. However, it is no surprise that after the Revolutionary War the British influences on the colonies were diminished. The loss of influence caused the Episcopalian parishes to fall into a period of dormancy leaving only the Christ Church in Savannah, the oldest and largest congregation in Georgia (Cooksey, 2006). In the rest of the state, dedicated Episcopalians worked hard to increase their membership to its previous numbers. In 1823, the first diocese in Georgia was formed.

Soon, the whole developed world was swept into the Second Great Awakening of evangelism (the First Great Awakening having occurred during the mid 19th Century). This spreading inter-denominational religious fervor began to increase the number of Protestant believers who formed new churches. This religious environment set the scene in Georgia for an important Episcopal leader, Stephen Elliot to appear.

Stephen Elliot was actually born and lived his early life in Beaufort, South Carolina. After a year's study at Harvard, Stephen returned home and finished college at South Carolina College (later known as the University of South Carolina) in 1825. He began to practice law in Charleston, and taught religion classes at South Carolina College. On hearing an evangelical sermon given at his home church in Beaufort, Stephen Elliot had a religious conversion in 1833. Changing his career path to that of the clergy, Stephen was ordained to the priesthood in 1836. Very soon his talents were recognized by his peers, and he was chosen and consecrated to be the First Bishop of Georgia in 1841 (Cooksey, 2006). During Elliot's years as Bishop, he often traveled the state of Georgia founding new missions, parishes, and schools for religious education. His goal was to return the Episcopal Church to its previous stature. He often went into communities where the Episcopal Church was hardly known, found places for worship, and confirmed people to the church (Pennington, 1950). By the time of his death in 1866, Stephen Elliot had increased the number of parishes in Georgia from 6 to 28, and increased the number of communicants from 300 to 2000, which made the Episcopal Church the fifth-largest denomination in Georgia. (Cooksey, 2006)

One of Stephen Elliot's newly founded parishes was the Redeemer Church in the small town of Greensboro, Georgia (Rice, 1979, p.122).

As the path of Bishop Elliot led to the small, Middle Georgia town of Greensboro, he was welcomed by a group of some local families who wished to form an Episcopal church. The town was also serving as a haven for women and ailing Confederate soldiers who were escaping the war zones in Savannah and Charleston (Slay, 2011). The female refugees joined the local families to form the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer which was blessed by the Right Reverend Stephen Elliott as 18 congregants gathered in the home of Phillip Clayton on September 21, 1863 (Rice, 1979, p 121) Bishop Elliott died suddenly in 1866.

The Redeemer group of communicants first met in local homes, then, as attendance grew, they rented the Town Hall for worship services (Lewis, 1937, para.1). The first donation made towards building a physical Episcopal Church in Greensboro was made by Miss Elizabeth Gilby, an English governess in the home of Mr. Phillip Poullain, one of the founding families. Miss Gilby wanted a church especially for the large number of children in the Poullain family that she served. The purchase in 1867 of the plot of land on which the church still stands was made possible by the initial donation of \$100 by Miss Gilby (Rice, 1979, p. 121).

The actual church building was constructed during the year 1868 by J. G. Barnwell, builder and architect of Rome, Georgia. The new church was dedicated on June 14, 1868 by the Second Bishop of Georgia, the Right Reverend John Beckwith. The first rector of the consecrated church was a local man, Rev. Joshua Knowles. He led the church for nineteen years, and after he died was buried with his wife in the church yard (Lewis, 1937, para. 3-4).

The architectural significance of the Redeemer Church is that it is an authentic example of Gothic Revival styling. Although many churches in the mid-nineteenth century were built in the Gothic Revival style, it was rare to find one in a small Southern town (National Register, #2,

part II). Examples of the Gothic style characteristics which are found in Redeemer Episcopal Church are the vertical board-and-batten siding, (Gothic-style vertical emphasis) the central rectangular tower with a circular stained-glass window, and the slender, pyramid-shaped steeple.

Many older churches are renovated as needs of the parish change. However, the Church of the Redeemer is unusual in that it has survived largely intact as it was built. The only addition is a small sacristy which was added in the 1960s on the south side of the building (National Registry, #2, part II). During a renovation in 1990, the then-white exterior of the building was repainted to match the original color: an oxblood and buttermilk paint used in 1868. The original oil chandeliers remain in place, now converted to electrical current. The large arched window behind the altar is fitted with diamond-shaped, handmade stained glass panes of red, yellow, and blue (Seals & Hart, 2013, para. 2)

Even though the sanctuary remained intact, the present footprint of the Redeemer Church property includes added buildings. The Knowles Parish house, named for the late rector, was erected on the north side of the church. Reverend Knowles' grave and stone marker are at the head of a Remembrance Garden which receives the ashes of deceased parishioners whose names are affixed on the bronze tablet which is attached to the North wall of the garden.

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The National Registry of Historic Places nomination of the church points out that the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer is also distinctive as it was the **first**, and has always been the **only** Episcopal church for the Greensboro, Georgia Community. Episcopal Church parishes have historically been in the minority in Georgia, and are rarely found in small Southern towns. The presence of Redeemer Church has added to the range of religious sects found amidst the mostly Baptist or Methodist worshipers in Greene County and the surrounding area (National Registry, #2, part IV).

The small Episcopal Church of the Redeemer parish has persisted against the odds through the years since 1863, when Bishop Stephen Elliott helped to create it. The parishioners were sometimes small in number, but the worship services have continued without fail during the years since 1868. When a priest was not available, local lay readers led the service, and the church was sometimes yoked with an Episcopal church in the next county. Even though the membership of the church declined in the middle 19th century period, the church parish never gave up having regular services. After Lake Oconee was filled near Greensboro in 1980, a large resort and retirement community began to increase population in Greene County, and the church again started to grow. In 2003 the vestry called a full-time priest for the first time in 20 years. (Taylor, 2006). The Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta has a continuous record of clergy assigned to the parish from 1865 until the present (McElmore, 2004). Although there are older churches in Greene County, the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer is “the oldest continuously-worshiping parish among all of the many churches in Greene County” (Seals & Hart, 2013, para 3). A small group of local and war refugee believers formed the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer which still exists today. The church is distinctive in several ways:

- It was begun on the impetus of a group of mostly women who wanted a church for the town’s children
- It is a rare and intact example of pure Gothic revival architecture
- It added to diversity of sects in a small town of the South whose churches are predominately Baptist or Methodist
- It made a priority of outreach in money and services to the surrounding community
- It has existed for 150 years without ever closing its doors

The modern Episcopal Church of the Redeemer continues Reaching Out to aid those in the local community, and Reaching In to be inspired from those who created the historic church that has persisted for 150 years.

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