

Grace Episcopal Church

Spring Hill Historic Commission Documentation

STORY

Grace Episcopal Church is built in the picturesque Gothic Revival Style and is one of the few remaining examples of the "Carpenter" Gothic Revival style church architecture in the state of Tennessee. Construction on the church started in 1875 and was consecrated in 1878. Grace Episcopal is one of several outstanding architectural landmarks in the City of Spring Hill (est. 1809). It features a "High Victoria Style" design and features both Norman and Gothic Elements. This is very uncommon.

Grace Episcopal was designed by an architect named P. J. Williamson (1826-1907), an immigrant who came to the United States from Holland and established practice in Nashville as early as 1867. The Spring Hill Church is one of the eight remaining examples of his work. His best-known work is the old Vanderbilt University Gymnasium in Nashville, which is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It is one of three university buildings he designed in the 1880s whose construction was supplemented by a \$150,000 grant donated by patron, William H. Vanderbilt.

Building funds for Grace Episcopal Church were raised by members and supporters of the church. The total construction costs were \$1,800. The prominent corner lot that had formerly graced the community as the McKissack Family flower garden was selected for its scenic beauty and donated to the church by Orville McKissack. The church was consecrated on May 15, 1878, by Bishop Charles Todd Quintard. The first confirmation of Sam Warren took place in 1875; the first wedding of Nannie Campbell and James McKay, in 1877; the first baptisms of Allen, Colin, and Argyle Campbell in 1879; and the first burial of a child, Campbell Polk, in 1893.

Some say the chapel is called Grace because several of the founding members had fought in the Civil War and found grace upon their return home. Grace Church held the first Catholic Mass in Spring Hill. Two Episcopal ministers assisted in the service which was nurtured by Gus Prados, Mayor of Spring Hill, and member of St Catherine's Catholic Church in Columbia.

In the 1870's, Beechcroft Road was a dirt track. For much of the Grace's history, the congregation would park on Nashville Highway/U.S.31/Main Street in front of the church. The population of the village of Spring Hill was about 400, and there were four Episcopal churches in Maury County. Two remain: Grace Episcopal Church in Spring Hill and St Peter's Episcopal Church in Columbia. Main Street was a dirt road and was the primary road between Tennessee and Alabama. Along this same route, decisive Civil War battles were staged and fought just a single decade before Grace was built.

For most of its life, Grace Episcopal Church left its doors open around the clock. That is, until Mary Polk Mitchum, while preparing the communion, noticed the communion wine was disappearing and that there would be a mess in the sacristy. She sent her son, Bud Mitchum, to the church one evening to set up a trip wire with noisemakers in front of the steps to the altar. The thief arrived, tripped the wires, and then Bud walked him south on Main Street to McLemore Avenue to the City Hall jail cell. Thereafter, the church doors were locked.

When one of two fires raged down the west side of Main Street in the 1930s, the organist, Mrs. Will Odil, gave her daughter, Ethel, an axe and told her that if the church was threatened by the fire, she was to cut the altar rail out to save it. Even today there are some of the original bulbs in the flower garden which still come up mostly lilies and peonies. Children used to sell bundles of daffodils at Odil's store to raise money for the church.

NOW

The church has never closed its doors and recently celebrated its 140th year of service. There are descendants of some of the original founders still in attendance. The structure has been carefully preserved and maintained over the past 140-year period. The church was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1976 and added to the Spring Hill Historic Commission list of "Historically Significant Properties" in 2015. Faith Hall, the community space, was added in 2004.

The church has historically held a community event and fundraiser once a year and is the meeting place for community groups such as AA, OA, and Scouts. In addition, Grace Church also participates in the Art Walk and in the Maury County Christmas Tour.

SERVICES INFORMATION

Holy Eucharist, Rite II with no music, Sundays at 8 a.m.

Holy Eucharist, Rite II with music, Sundays at 10 a.m.

Children's Sunday School – Sunday at 10 a.m.

Nursery Provided

Holy Eucharist, Rite II with no music, Wednesdays at noon

OTHER INFORMATION

<http://graceepiscopalspringhill.org/>

5291 N. Main St.
Spring Hill, TN 37174
(931) 486-3223

Staff & Council

Office Manager: Susan Browning

Music Director: Deanie Moore

Mission Council: *Vicar:* Fr. Joe Davis, *Senior Warden:* John Harvey, *Junior Warden:* Bill Rieger,

Parish Life: Jessica Farmer, *Christian Ed,* Ken Scibetta

Community Outreach: Richard Hawarah

Communication: Kala Fawbush

Treasurer: Ed Strong

Secretary: Susan Austin

ARCHITECTURE

Grace Episcopal Church is located in the center of the Spring Hill community, adjacent to Main Street and Beechcroft Road, which winds its way through historic Maury County in Middle Tennessee. Along this same route, decisive Civil War battles were staged and fought, a single decade before construction. Entering the property, the tree-shaded churchyard surrounded by the original wrought iron fence, mounted to the stone retaining wall, divides the church lot from the road grade below. An entrance vestibule is attached to the rectangular shape nave to the right of the main facade. The opposite end of the nave terminates in a raised sanctuary wing and the cruciform plan is affected by two attached vestry rooms opposite the crossing section. The chancel bench and organ are located to the right side of the aisle and below the pulpit stage and bishop's chair. Following the traditions established in Northern Europe and then in England, the design for the church is similar to the ancient stave church. Structural members of the roof construction are exposed in the ceiling. The diagonal angles of the exposed trusses and scissor braces serve to highlight the perpendicular movement, emphasized by the steeply pitched roof line and verticality of the mass form. Emphasis on perpendicular elements is furthered by the vertical board and overlay pattern of the slender wood battens which have been cut to accent the shape of the narrow lancet windows and Gothic head doorways of the attached vestry and vestibule.

A square-shaped, two-stage, inset bell tower is located above the gable end. The tower bell was manufactured in England and stamped 1839. Some have suggested that the students at Beechcroft contributed the bell, others that the Orville McKissack family did so. The linear shape of the tower transcends the main facade wall. It is punctuated by a wheel window of tiny, colored glass lights and a lancet-shaped memorial window. There are several memorial windows. Entering the narthex, there is a stained glass window just to the right of the door. This window – called the Mitchum Window – was donated in June 1995 by the Fitts Family to honor the memory of Mary Polk Mitchum and Millard Mitchum. The Mitchums were long-time members and supporters of Grace. Mary Polk Mitchum was baptized, confirmed, married and buried at age 83 at Grace Church, as was her mother, Mary Louise Campbell Polk. Millard was confirmed, married and buried at age 104 at Grace. Their daughter, Alice Ann Mitchum Fitts, was an active member until her death in 2017 and was buried at Grace Church at age 87. The design at the bottom of the window shows wheat for the communion bread and grapes for the communion wine. At the top is the English Rose, and in the center, the Iris – Tennessee's state flower, which is from the lily family and represents purity. The vine border is similar to that of another of the memorial windows. Stepping a bit farther into the nave, there is a large stained glass window at the back of the church. This window, called the Estes Window, was donated in 1888 by the children of Beechcroft School and was given in memory of Henry Bacon Estes. Mr. Estes was one of the founders of the Beechcroft School. This window contains the crown which represents a symbol of royal authority, and is often used as a symbol for Christ, the King of Kings. It may also be used as a "crown of life," the eternal reward of the faithful. The palm tree, in the center, is most often used as a symbol of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the event that heralded His coming Passion and crucifixion. Used by the Romans as a symbol of victory, palms have been used by the church as a symbol of Christ's ultimate victory over sin, or of the saints' victory over death. High above the Estes Window is a circular window with a descending dove. The dove is the Christian symbol for peace and for the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. This window and the window on the southeast wall are called the Rawlings Windows. These windows were donated in 1986 by Libby Dalton Rawlings in memory of her husband, Lenox D. Rawlings. The windows were designed and made by Margie Stratton, an accomplished artist from neighboring Franklin, Tennessee. The larger of the two incorporates a number of Christian symbols as well. In the upper portion an empty cross appears representing the risen Christ

surrounded by the vine which represents first fruits. In the bottom portion there are violets for humility; the crown and cross, symbols for the promise of life after death; and the Greek letters Alpha and Omega – the beginning and the end. The tower roof features a carved wood Gothic cross. The wood exterior is painted monochrome white, the roof covering is grey. The front door for most of the life of the church was painted green. It was painted red several years ago to symbolize sanctuary as the color red has done historically. The interior is shaped like an upside down ship, a traditional design reminding us that early Christians often worshipped under ships for safety from persecution and that God is always a refuge in stormy times.

The interior of the church is finished in walnut. Walls are constructed of lath and finished with plaster applied to canvas panels above the wood wainscoting. A graceful leaf and grapevine motif is featured in the hand-carved altar and communion rail. The rail is solid walnut, which came from trees located on the historic Ewell Farm. The wood for the rail was carved by Professor F. S. Morton, who taught at the Beechcroft School, a private girls' school formerly located in Spring Hill. All of the narrow, tall lancet-shaped windows are double-hung sash type, with dark walnut colored wood frames. The alter was carved by the Rev Johannes Oertel, a minister and artist in residence at the Columbia Institute, another girls school in Columbia. It was a gift from Major Campbell Brown, son of Lizinka Campbell Brown of Ewell Farm. Major Campbell Brown, along with his cousins and neighbors, including Dr Hardin, was also instrumental in the establishment of Grace Chapel. The alter rail was carved out of a single tree from the Campbell/Ewell Farm at the end of Depot Street.

The wide lancet windows are located at either end of the church and these are memorial windows. The "1888" window is the largest. The memorial windows are delightfully patterned in symbolic mosaic designs of vibrant-colored, leaded glass and punctuated by bright red jewel lights. The original brass oil lamps have been replaced by electric light fixtures, suspended on chains above the center aisle. The carved-wood church pews are original as well as the hardwood flooring. The Pilcher organ was purchased by the congregation with funds raised by a former member of the congregation, the organist and music teacher at Beechcroft School. The organ has been electrified. It was formerly operated by a billows housed in the vestry vestibule behind the organ chamber.

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