

# The First Unitarian Church—Second Parish

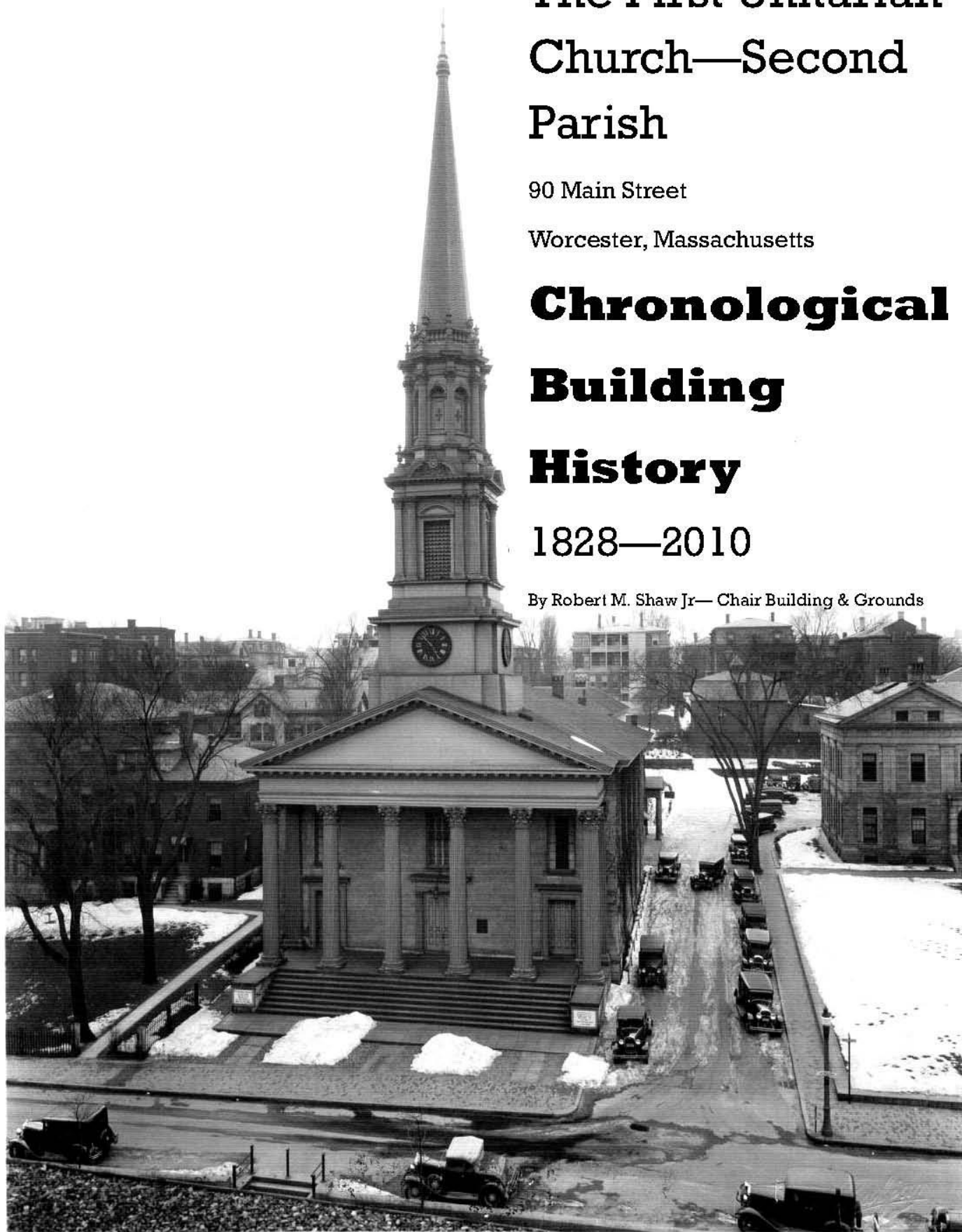
90 Main Street

Worcester, Massachusetts

## **Chronological Building History**

1828—2010

By Robert M. Shaw Jr— Chair Building & Grounds





# **Chronological Building History 1828 - 2010 The First Unitarian Church Second Parish 90 Main Street Worcester, Massachusetts Revised to 2018**

Robert M. Shaw Jr.  
Chair – Building & Grounds Committee

A Unitarian church has stood on the site at 90 Main Street since construction started in 1828. My research into its history is an ongoing task. Every once in a while some new tidbit of information surfaces that gives a clearer picture to the evolution of the buildings that have been built, added to and renovated over the last 182 years, as of this writing in 2018.

Many papers have been destroyed over the years, but I have been able to piece together a timeline of changes to the building with some gaps. I can only guess at what may have happened and hoping for that missing link of information that would fill those gaps. I have drawn a series of floor plans, showing the major changes over the years that can be used in conjunction with this written account. Construction dates are based on the starting year of the work. I have noticed a constant change in names of rooms and uses of rooms over the years. The construction drawings that the church does have show many different names for a particular space. Maybe the architects at the time were being generic in the naming of spaces or those names were the name used at the time. Some of the dates of name changes can not be verified at this time.

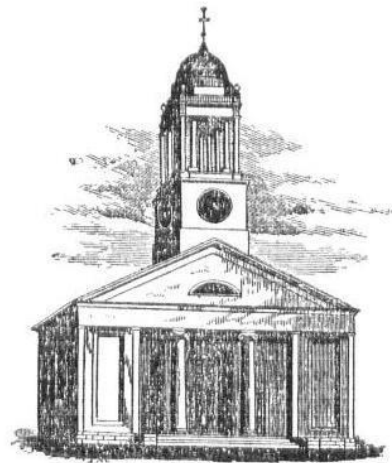
The Second Parish was formed in 1785 and was meeting in the Court House until a Meeting House was built on Summer Street in 1791. In 1798 a bell cast by Paul Revere in his Boston foundry and was installed in the steeple. The bell cracked shortly after being installed and was sent back to Boston to be recast by Revere.

## 90 Main Street – The Beginning:

The second “Meeting House”, built in 1828 on the current site, has been only described in old documents as a “brick meeting house” and in a sketch showing its exterior. I have found no architectural drawings of the church. The plans were drawn in Boston by Thomas W. Sumner under the direction of Lewis Bigelow. Elias Carter was the general contractor and Peter Kendall the mason. The land was purchased from Isaiah Thomas for \$4,000, the building erected for \$13,000 and an organ purchased for \$2,000. The corner stone was laid August 11, 1828 with the following inscription, deposited under the cornerstone of its’ foundation “This house was erected by the Unitarian Congregational Society, Worcester, for the worship of the one God, through the mediation of Jesus Christ”. A year later the building was dedicated on August 20<sup>th</sup>. The building was 68 feet wide and 75 feet deep, with a clock tower 125 feet high, with an open belfry. The price of owning a pew ranged from \$80 to \$337. A gallery clock, a gift of Isaiah Thomas, from the first Meeting House was installed in the new building along with the recast Paul Revere bell which weighed 2300 pounds. The arrangement of the 104 pews on the floor was much like that of the present building. There were galleries on three sides which had no pews. Fixed pews were built in the balcony in 1832. Two large mahogany tablets with the ten commandments applied in gold leaf flanked the pulpit.



First Meeting House, on Summer Street  
Dedicated January 1, 1792



Second Meeting House, on Main Street  
Dedicated August 20, 1829.  
Destroyed by fire August 24, 1849

After just two decades old, the church required extensive repairs, due to poor construction. In 1849, the organ and furniture, including the large tablets and gallery clock, were removed to the old Court House and the edifice was given over to the builders, who stripped off plaster and shingles. In the evening of August 25, five days after the twentieth anniversary of its dedication, the building was totally destroyed by fire. The steeple bell fell onto the foundation and

shattered into pieces. The parish took immediate action towards rebuilding. Services were meanwhile held, first in Brinley Hall and later in Flagg's Hall, until the completion of the new meeting house.

The organ would be reinstalled in the new church. A construction fire would plague future renovations in 2000.



The 1850 Church prior to 1921



Saint Martin-in-the-Fields



Center Church on-the-Green

Construction started for the second church building in 1850. The architect, Sidney M. Stone of New Haven, Connecticut, designed the church with inspiration from the Center Church on-the-Green in New Haven, Connecticut, which was designed based on St Martin-in-the-Fields on Trafalgar Square in London. The style was called Roman Corinthian. Although I have found no architectural drawing, I did have some photographs to help and since the church was rebuilt on the same foundation after the hurricane of 1938 the basic floor plans are similar to what they were back when built in 1850. The exterior walls were brick with the exterior finish being a stucco veneer applied to the brick. The brick walls were carrying the load of the wood roof trusses and must have been quite thick to carry a two-story load. The steeple was constructed in wood too. It did not appear that the building was heated, but a decorative opening in the ceiling seemed to aid ventilation in the hot weather. The new bell was recast from what remained of the bell that was destroyed in the fire. That bell cracked again on July 4, 1853 and was again recast. A new pipe organ was needed to replace the original organ. Built by E. & G. Hook of Boston, the installation was completed in 1855. An organ, by the same builder, was installed in Mechanics Hall in 1864.



The Sanctuary prior to the hurricane

### The Vestry Additions:

When the church was built no provisions were made for a vestry or Sunday School room. Unlike today there was not a usable basement space under the Sanctuary. The necessity for them soon became apparent and in 1852 a one story vestry, 61 by 45 feet, was built in the rear, of brick covered with stucco to match the church, after plans by Elbridge Boyden of Worcester. It provided a minister's room or vestry, a ladies' parlor and a chapel, which would eventually be named the Bancroft Room. The building had a half basement. This satisfied the needs of the Parish for nearly thirty years but in 1881, the building was enlarged by the addition of a second story, which provided a hall for entertainments, a kitchen and another room for the ladies. Again, I have found no architectural drawings showing the original floor plans. Since the west wall at the Dining Room and Unity Hall had been drastically altered during the 1921

addition I have no record of location of windows and doors on that end of the building prior to the addition.

The minister's office on the second floor came into use prior to 1955 and after 1938. The 1955 renovation drawings label it as Reverend Kring's Study.

Paving of Worcester streets started in 1849 from Front Street to Exchange Street

Gas was being piped around the city in the 1850's,

In 1864 the city voted to bring water from Lynde Brook starting a public water system.

The modern toilet was not perfected until around 1885. Worcester would start to install a city sewer system in 1866, dumping it into the Blackstone River. Prior to this date buildings had their own wells and cesspools or private sewers. On the plans for the 1921 Unity Hall addition there are existing toilets shown off the Bancroft Room, to the left of where the fireplace is now, and one upstairs off the Minister's Study.

Electric street lights first appeared in Worcester in 1883. Edison invented the light bulb in 1879.

A Parsonage was built at 41 Lancaster Street at the corner of Highland Street in 1890. I have found no records indicating when it was sold. Reverend Savage was the last minister to live in the Parsonage up to 1946. I believe the church offices were located here until sometime prior to the 1955 renovations. It was designed by William Ralph Emerson, an important Boston architect and was one of those who created the so-called Shingle Style of architecture. It was demolished in 2014.

In 1919 the Church of the Unity, the South Memorial Church and this church joined together at 90 Main Street.



Unity House Cornerstone - 1921

In 1921 land was purchased in the rear and the present Unity Hall, then called "Parish House", was built. The cornerstone on the north wall calls the addition "Unity House". The construction opened the west walls of the first and second floors into a Dining Room / Sunday School on the first floor and into an Auditorium with a full stage and orchestra pit on the second floor. The auditorium would be screened off for Sunday School classrooms. The first floor opening was outfitted with a four panel pocket door arrangement. The second floor opening had a six panel pocket door arrangement. A commercial grade kitchen was off the Dining Room and theater changing rooms were located below the stage. The heating and ventilating of the new addition was a complex system of ducts and dampers that were adjusted manually to redirect air through the new addition and the Vestry Additions. This system has since been abandoned, but the ductwork remains. A stairway was integrated into the Court Street side of the Vestry Additions to allow access to the second floor auditorium. A men's toilet room was placed under the stair.

Also, in 1921, the church made arrangements with the Wetherell estate next door to add 10 feet on the south side of the church property and 40 feet deep along Main Street to State Street.

During the 1921 addition a grand fireplace was added to the "Bancroft Room" and a new boiler room was built in the basement under the Bancroft Room. A new organ was installed in 1922 with the console in the center of the balcony. The organ was built by Cassavant Freres at St. Hyacinthe, Quebec

In the early 1930's the kitchen was renovated and expanded. A storage addition was added at the first floor on the outside of the corner of Parish House and the Vestry Addition. This eliminated an entrance into the Dining Room from the exterior. The only remaining original stucco exterior of the Vestry Addition remains inside this storage room. Lockers and storage rooms were built in the theater changing room space.





Hurricane Damage - 1938

### Hurricane:

In 1938, the church was struck by a hurricane. The steeple bell tolled for 15 minutes as the steeple swayed in the wind before falling across the sanctuary. In one year, the church was rebuilt on the same design, but much stronger. The steeple bell survived and was reinstalled in the new steeple. A new steeple clock was given by the American Unitarian Association. The pipes of the organ survived the hurricane, but the console was destroyed when it fell into the sanctuary along with the steeple. The pulpit was saved, and a crack remains on the pulpit where the steeple fell. The architect for the rebuilding was G. Adolph Johnson of Worcester and the contractor was E.J. Cross of Worcester. The cornerstone was laid on New Years Day 1939. Rededication of the newly completed reconstruction took place on September 17, 1939. The new building was constructed with steel framing using columns rather than brick bearing walls. Steel was used for roof trusses and framed the steeple. The exterior walls were now brick rather than stucco. The outside wythe of brick and stucco was removed from the exterior of the Vestry Additions and replaced with a brick veneer to match the new sanctuary. The rear of the pulpit was enlarged and extended to the back of the fireplace in the Bancroft Room. New access stairs to the basement of the sanctuary were built at this time. The original basement under the 1850's sanctuary was not fully utilized since it sloped from a high point under the pulpit toward the front at Main Street. During the 1938 reconstruction the foundations were extended down, the floor was excavated, and a future

recreation room was included in the basement along with men's and women's toilet rooms. The future recreation room remained without a concrete floor until renovations in 1955. The tablets that flanked the pulpit prior to the hurricane did not survive unharmed and were not reinstalled in the reconstruction. They were stored behind the stage in Unity Hall and sold as lumber prior to the construction of the Sunday School rooms on stage.



Rebuilt – 1938 to 1940



Pre1938

Sometime during the 1950's the kitchen was renovated again. The organ console was moved from the center of the balcony to the northern side of the balcony, possibly to allow the choir full use of the space in front of the organ.

### The 1955 Renovations:

Major renovations were made in 1955 to the Vestry Additions portion of the church. The architect was Kilham, Hopkins, Greeley and Brodie of Boston. A chapel (the Robbins Chapel) was constructed at the second floor. The chapel was previously called the Garver Room. The six panel pocket doors were removed and reinstalled in the first floor dining room to divide the space. A solid wall was built in the place of the pocket doors. The chapel was outfitted with a Baldwin tube organ, choir pews and fixed pews in the chapel area. The floor under the chapel was reinforced and added support was included with the addition of a truss in the attic and steel rods extending down to a new wood beam in the ceiling of the Bancroft Room. A corridor was added outside of the chapel, reducing the size of the minister's and administrator's offices. A closet

and toilet was added to the Minister's office. The storage rooms under the stage were removed and Sunday Preschool space was added. The Recreation Room under the sanctuary, which previously had a dirt floor, was divided into Sunday School rooms with a central meeting space named Maxwell Savage Hall. Steeple lighting was installed. A security closet was built beyond the Bancroft Room near the Court Street stair.

### The Bancroft Room – A Short History:

I couldn't find a dated document that referred to naming the Bancroft Room. Construction drawings of the 1955 renovations just refer to it as the Library & Assembly Room and as the Assembly Room in the 1938 drawings.

The Bancroft Room in its current form was created through years of renovations. Many believe that it is the most original space in the church and hasn't changed much over the years. The walls that define the space are the original walls, but much has been done to the room over the years. The original room was part of a one-story addition added in 1852 to the 1851 sanctuary. A second story was added in 1882. At this time pocket doors were located on the north wall which led to a Ladies Parlor. These doors eventually were removed and filled in between 1921 and 1938. A security closet was built in that space in 1955. The Ladies Parlor eventually became filled with the stair up to Unity Hall, a Men's Toilet was built under the stair landing.

During the 1921 Unity House addition the fireplace was added to the room, an opening with the six sliding doors was cut into the wall at the Dining Room. Air ducts and chases were added in the corners of the room to tie into a new heating and cooling system.

Stairs existed behind the fireplace prior to the 1938 hurricane. A door to the left of the fireplace led to the basement and the current stairs from the State Street entrance went up to the second floor rather than down to the basement.

Renovations after the 1938 hurricane created the curved wall behind the pulpit, reconfiguring the stairs behind the fireplace with two sets of stairs leading to the basement. One of those stairs existed at the current location of the elevator. The door to the left of the fireplace was blocked up. At this time the current bookshelves were added. Renovations during 1955 included removing the ceiling and trying to stiffen the floor above.

The Bancroft Room is the hub in a traffic flow from the Sanctuary and Sunday School to the Dining Room and upstairs to Unity Hall.

### Beyond the 1950's:

In 1958 the church purchased the properties at 6 and 8 State Street and demolished the buildings for the current parking lots. An entrance door and bridge was built from the parking lot to the stairwell.



2 State Street – Wetherall Estate

In 1964 the Wetherall Estate, also known as the Girls Trade School, at 2 State Street was purchased and used briefly by the church until it was demolished in 1966 and a parking lot was built in its place. The Memorial Garden was added at this time too.



The New Memorial Garden - 1967

During the 1960's the Dining Room was renovated and the accordion partition was added along with the four door storage space near the Bancroft Room.

On November 26, 1964 the new Aeolian-Skinner 4-manual instrument organ was dedicated. The organ was a American Classic style with the console in the corner of the balcony. Seven ranks of pipes were reused from the 1922 Cassavant Freres.

During the 1970's additional rooms were added to the center of the large meeting room (Maxwell Savage Hall) in the basement.

I found a letter written in 1972 that indicated that the church was seriously considering selling the church and parking to the Worcester County Court House next door so they could demolish and use the land for court house parking.

The church wanted to provide more access for wheelchairs. In 1992 ramps were built into the raised platform in front of the pulpit leading to the doors to the Bancroft Room and Dining Room.

The Robbins Chapel was renovated in 1994. The space was opened up by removing the pulpit, organ and pews. The windows, that were blocked up in the original work in 1955, were reopened to allow the sunlight back in.

In 1998 classrooms were added to the stage in Unity Hall. The stage had not been used in years and with an expanding Sunday school population, extra space was needed.



Roof - Shortly after the 2000 Fire

### Fire:

During the replacement of the metal roof over the Sanctuary, Vestry Additions and Unity Hall with a new copper roof in 2000, fire from a soldering torch set fire to the wood below a built-in gutter which spread to the portico and base of the steeple. Although the fire was extinguished quickly the water used to put it out worked its way through the Sanctuary and into the basement destroying flooring and finishes. The resulting water damage combined with the humidity of June and July escalated into a mold problem. The mold had to be killed before finishes could be replaced. The basement and Sunday School were completely renovated. The Sanctuary flooring was replaced, some pews were modified to

allow wheelchairs. The front row of pews were removed to allow more room for choir performances in front of the pulpit. A programmed lighting system was added to the Sanctuary to provide better lighting at the choir loft and pulpit. Damage at the roof and steeple were limited to the wood and the steel framing was unaffected. The fire and water damage required the removal of the organ. The organ console was relocated back to the center of the balcony, the organ pipes and equipment were rebuilt and the facade opening to the pipes was enlarged.

For two years the Sunday service was held in Unity Hall using pianos.

It was decided during the reconstruction of the fire damage that an elevator should be built to access the basement, first and second floors allowing unassisted wheelchair access for the first time to the basement and second floor.

In 2003, to complete the wheelchair route from the elevator to Unity Hall a ramp was added in Unity Hall outside of the Chapel

The original concrete bridge to Unity Hall from the parking lot was replaced in 2004 eliminating a “weird” step into the building.

#### **90 Main Street Timeline - Outline List:**

**1828 – Construction started for first church on site.**

**1829 – Church Dedicated.**

**1832 – Pews added to North and South side of Balcony**

**1849 – Fire during renovations to building destroys building. Pews and organ had been removed prior to fire.**

**1850 – Construction started for second church building. Designed based on Center Church on-the-Green in New Haven, CT, which was designed based on St Martin-in-the-Fields, Trafalgar Square, London.**

**1852 – One story 61’ x 45’ Vestry addition containing a Minister’s Room, a Ladies’ Parlor and Chapel added to pulpit end of church.**

**1881 – Second floor added to the Vestry, containing an Entertainment Hall, Kitchen and another Ladies’ Room.**

**1890 – Parsonage built at 41 Lancaster Street but sold sometime after 1936 (last record found)**

**1921 – Parish House addition built at West/rear of Vestry. The addition included an auditorium (now called Unity Hall), stage, kitchen, dining/school space. Fireplace added to Bancroft Room. New Boiler Room and ductwork added to basement.**

**1930's – Storage Rooms added at Stage Mezzanine level.**

**1931 – Kitchen renovated. Yard Storage added at First Floor off Unity Hall/Entrance.**

**1938 – Sanctuary destroyed by hurricane and rebuilt. Basement is excavated to add a Recreation Room and new toilets. New stairs to the first floor added under pulpit.**

**1950's – Kitchen renovated.**

**1955 – Robbins Chapel built. Corridor, Minister closet, Office Toilet added. Pocket doors moved to Dining Room. Security closet built on first floor. Sunday School rooms added in Sanctuary basement. Storage rooms removed at stage mezzanine and walls added to make Pre-Nursery rooms. Steeple lighting added.**

**1958 – 6 & 8 State Street purchased and demolished for parking lots.**

**1960's – Accordion partition and storage closet added in Dining Room.**

**1964 – The Wetherall Estate at 2 State Street purchased. Organ console moved to the northeast corner of the Sanctuary balcony with the installation of the Aeolian-Skinner 4-manual instrument.**

**1966 – Wetherall building demolished. Parking lot and Memorial Garden built.**

**1970's – Two rooms added to Maxwell Savage Room in the Sunday School.**

**1972 – Church considered selling to Court House so they could demolish for parking.**

**1992 – Unity Hall stucco repair. Wheelchair ramps added to Sanctuary.**

**1994 – Robbins Chapel renovated – windows reopened and pews removed.**

**1998 – Rooms added to stage in Unity Hall.**

**2000 – Fire in roof & steeple. Water damages Sanctuary and Sunday School. Organ console and chamber rebuilt and modernized. Console moved back to center of balcony. New copper roofing.**

**2000 – Elevator installed.**

**2003 – Wheelchair ramp added to Unity Hall. Sunday School Community Hall was dedicated as the Landers Room.**

**2004 – New entrance bridge from upper parking lot to Unity Hall stair.**

**2005 – Steam pipes replaced under Dining Room. New floor tile.**

**2006 – Sunday School Classroom #1 was dedicated as the Diane Mirick Classroom. Replace two leaking boiler sections.**

**2007 – Steam piping reconfigured in Boiler Room.**

**2009 – Replace leaking steam pipe in Front Narthex Stair on Court Street Side.**

**2010 – Boiler converted to dual fuel burner. Install new gas line to building.**

**2011 – New electric range and microwave in kitchen. Emergency light maintenance.**

**2012 – Time clock added to Sunday School exhaust fan.**

**2013 – Start repaving parking lots at State Street, Replace boiler condensate tank and pumps.**

**2014 - Finish repaving of State Street Parking lots. Repair and paint Bancroft Room ceiling. Build new bathrooms at 1st Floor.**

**2015 - Install recessed LED lighting in Bancroft Room.**

**2016 - Paint walls & ceiling in Bancroft Room & rehang portraits.**

**2017 - Robbins Chapel dedicated as the Barbara Merritt Gallery. Boiler replaced.**

**2017 – Repair Steeple Windows**



References:

- 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary (On Main Street) Order of Service – March 21<sup>st</sup> 1926
- Worcester Sunday Telegram – September 17<sup>th</sup> 1939
- A Detailed History - First Unitarian Church of Worcester by Clifford O. Griffith, revised 11/93
- The Fruits of Our Labor by Walter Donald Kring, 1985
- History of Worcester Massachusetts by William Lincoln 1837
- The Story of Worcester Massachusetts by Thomas F. O'Flynn, B.S. 1910

Past Construction Drawings:

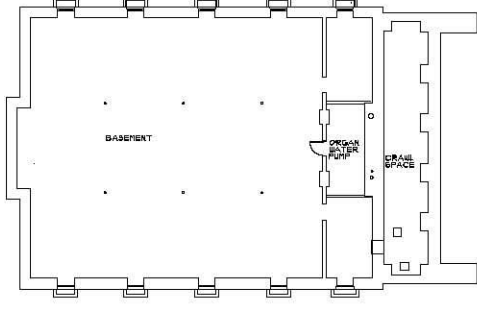
- 1938 Hurricane rebuild.
- 1922 Unity House Addition.
- 1955 Renovations.
- 1931 Kitchen Renovations

**Attached Building Floor Plans:**

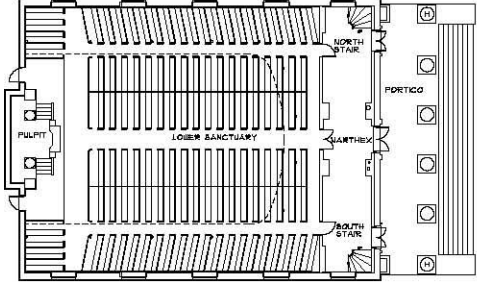
The following building floor plans are in chronological order from the earliest building to the most current.

Plans were drawn at major building construction events such as additions, hurricane and fire reconstruction projects.

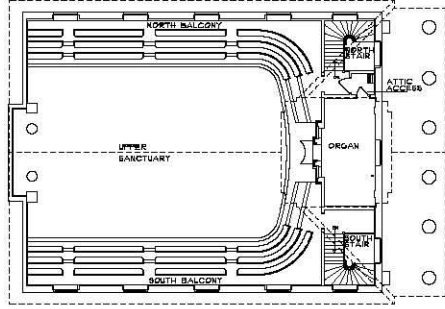
Notes on the drawings are changes that took place to the building between the previous dated plan up to the date of a plan.



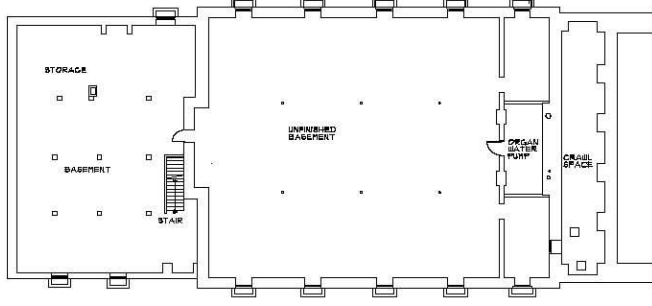
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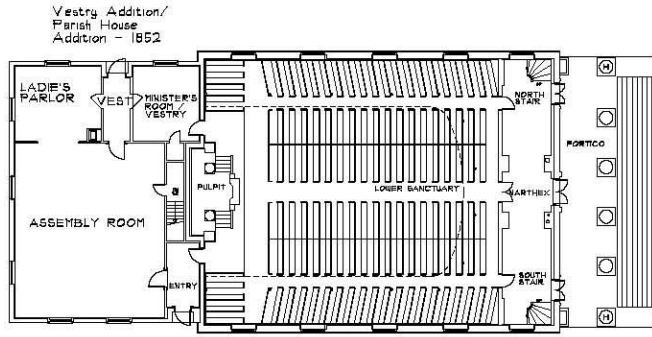
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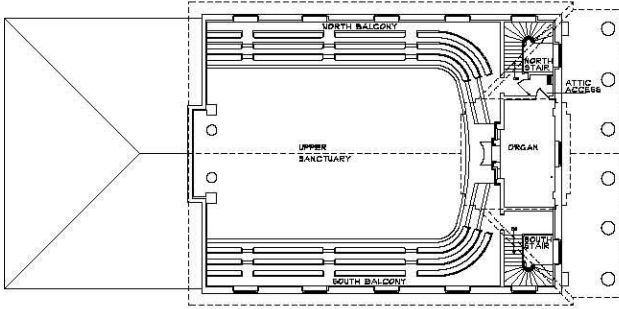
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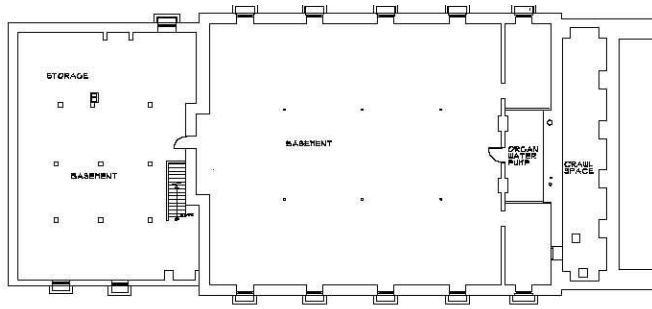
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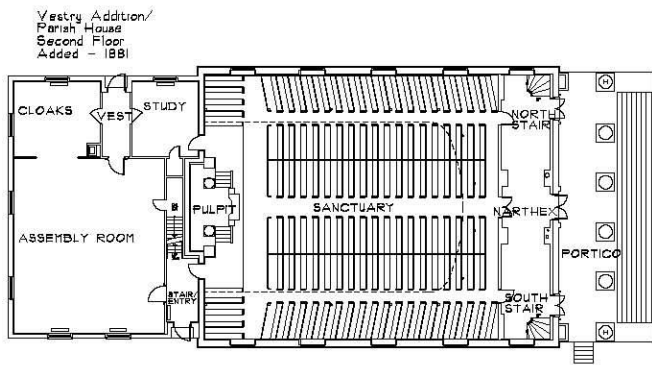
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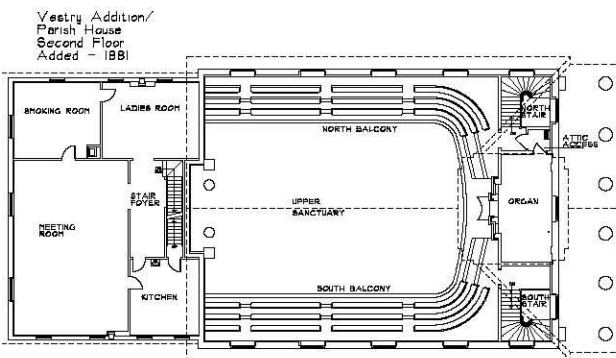
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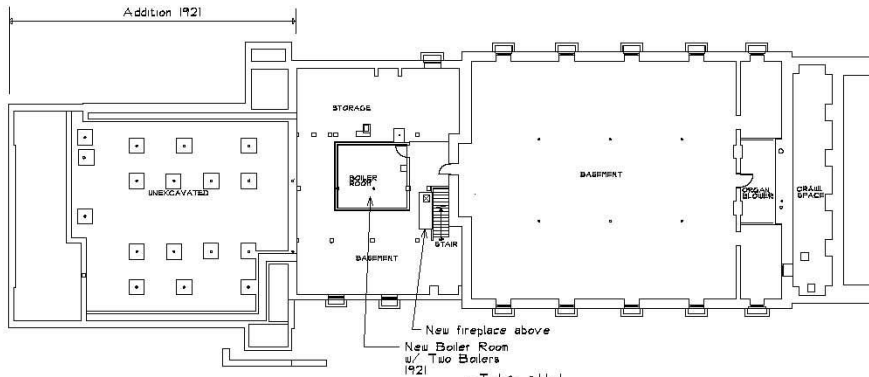
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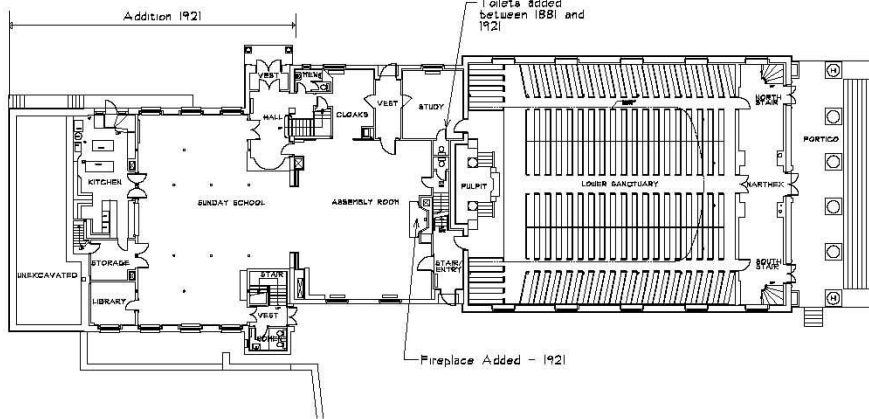
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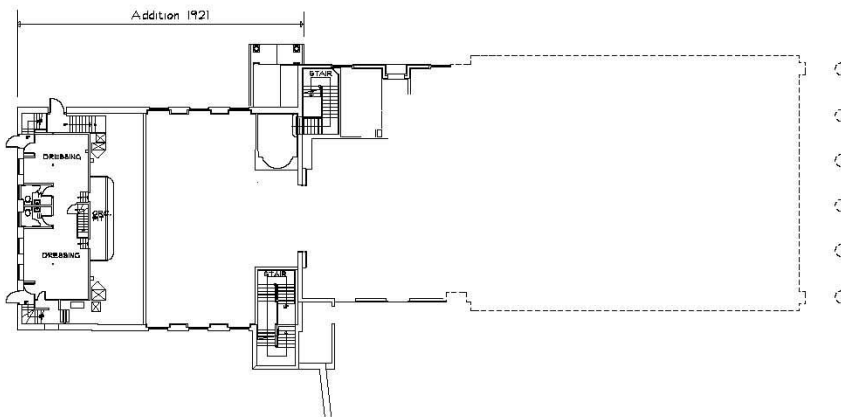
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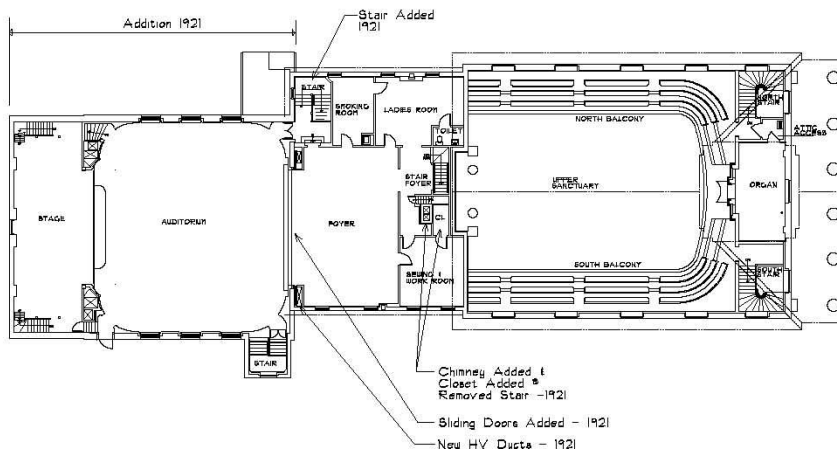
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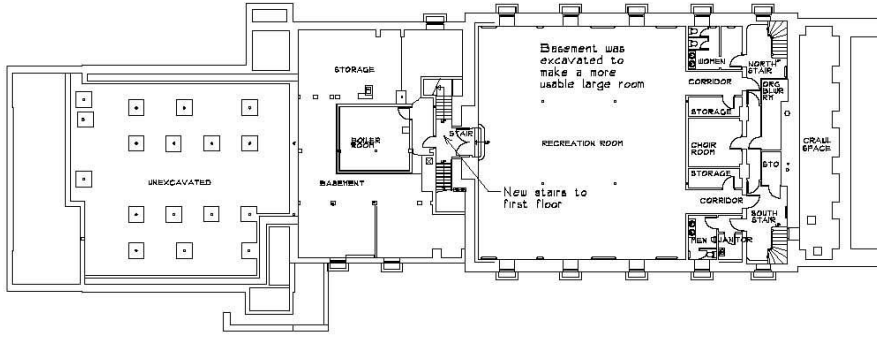
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1921



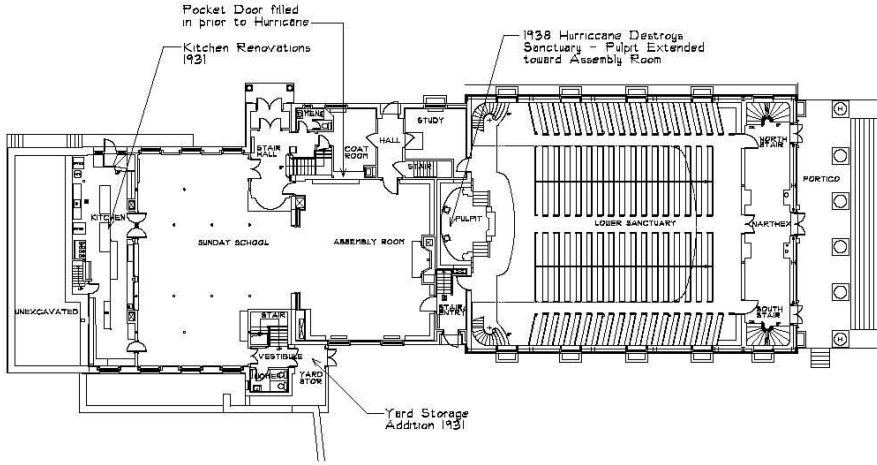
Mezzanine Plan  
1921



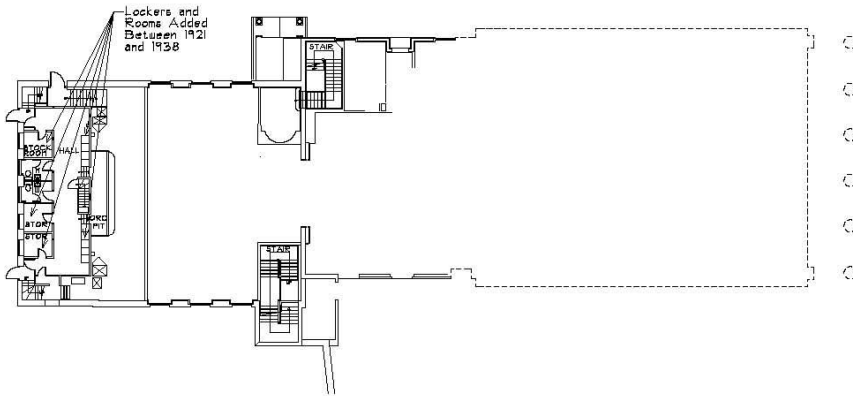
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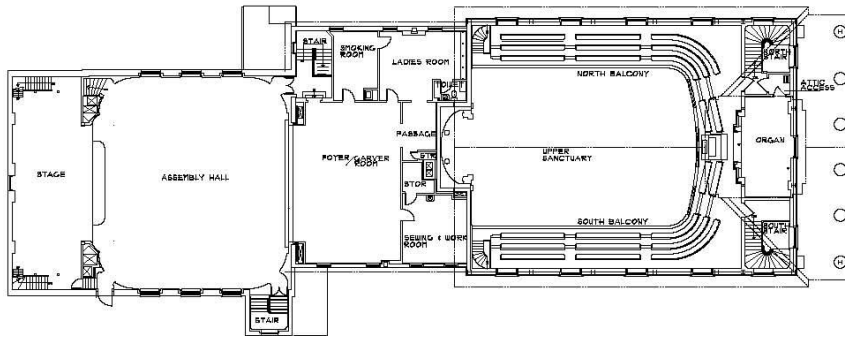
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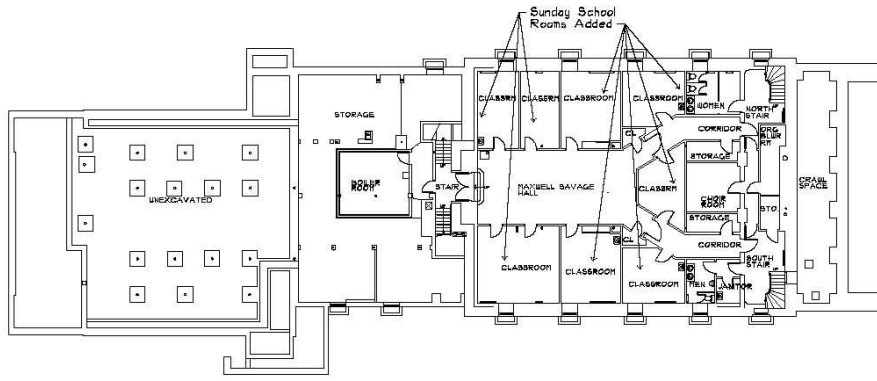
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1938



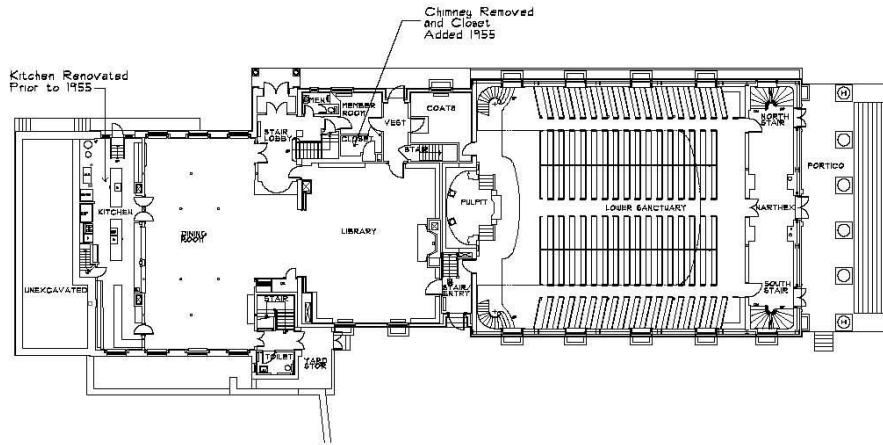
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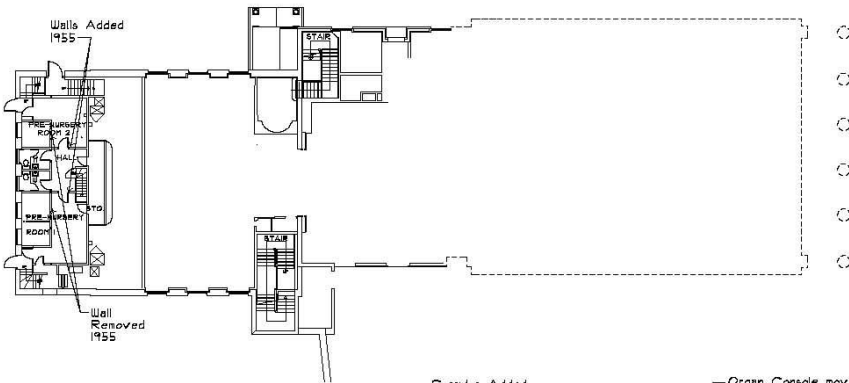
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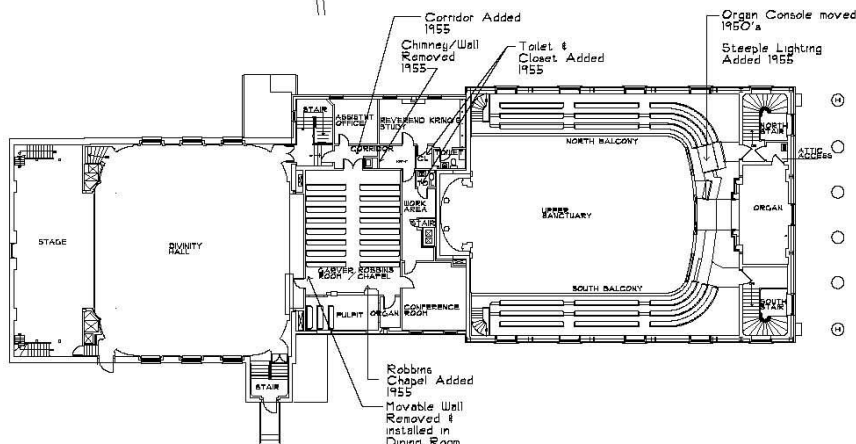
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**1955**



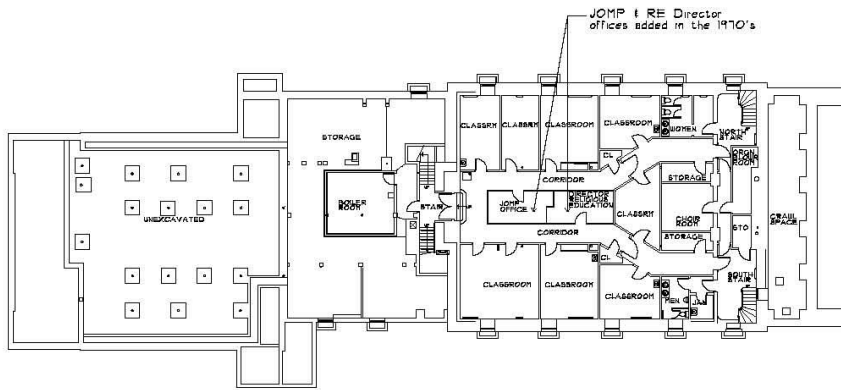
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**1955**



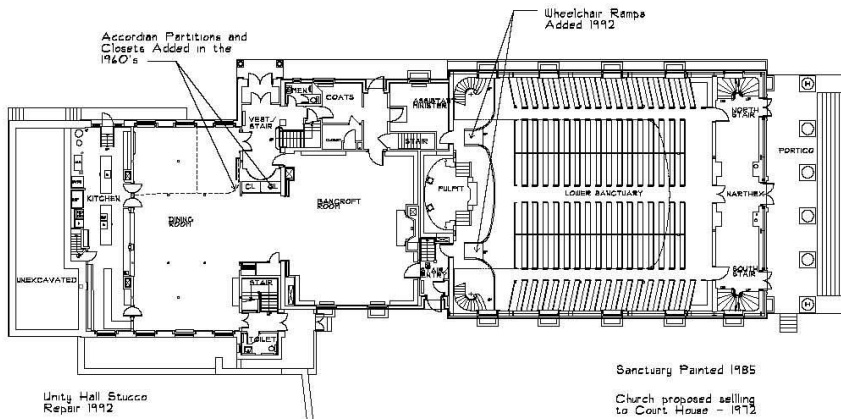
**Mezzanine Plan**  
**1955**



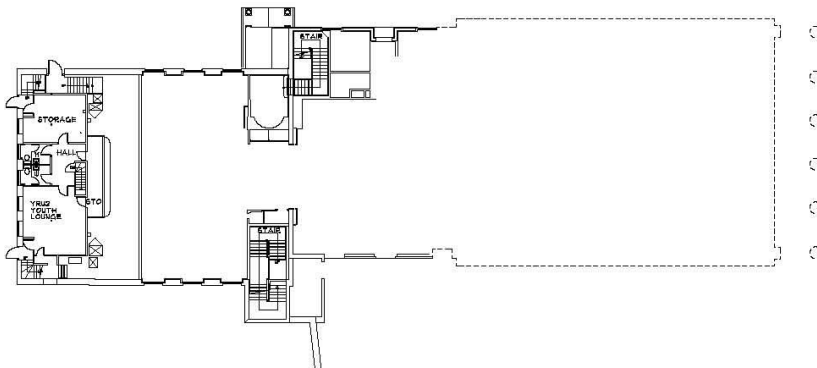
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**1955**



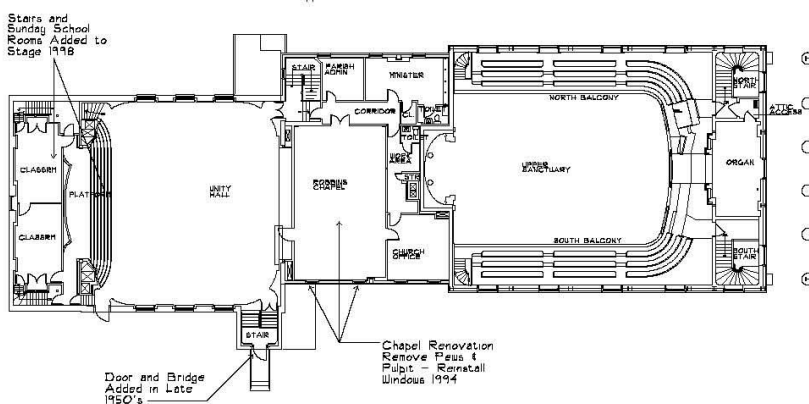
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**1999**



**First Floor Plan**  
**1999**

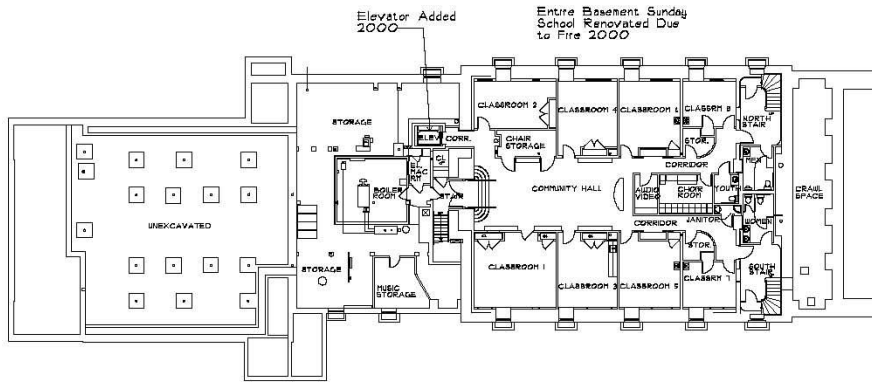


**Mezzanine Plan**  
**1999**

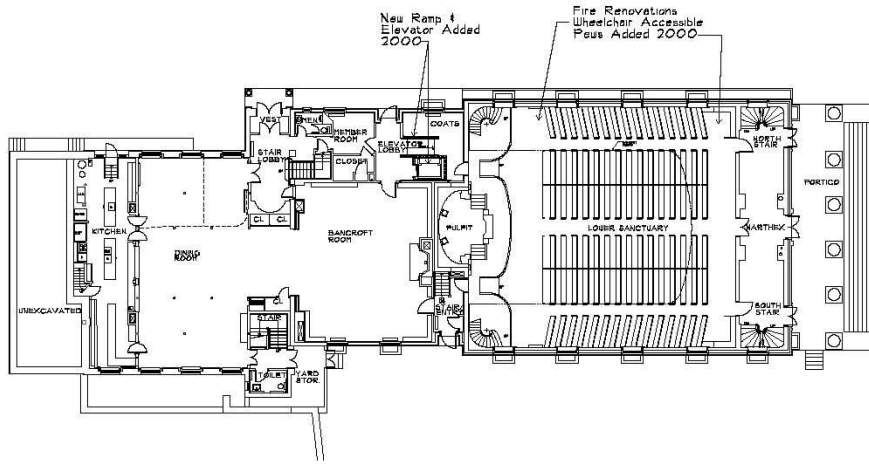


**Second Floor Plan**  
**1999**

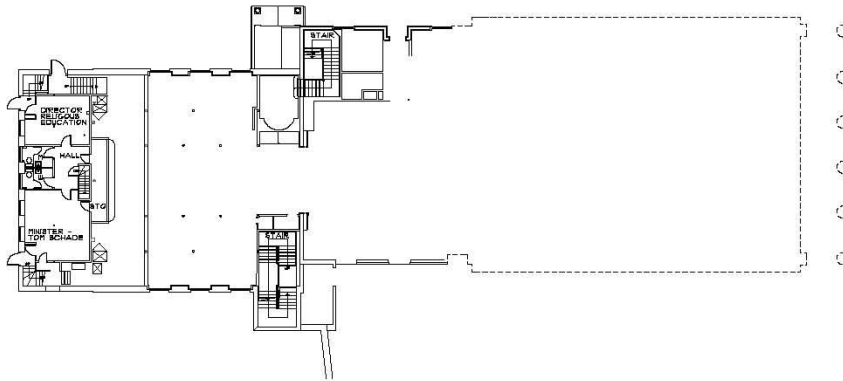




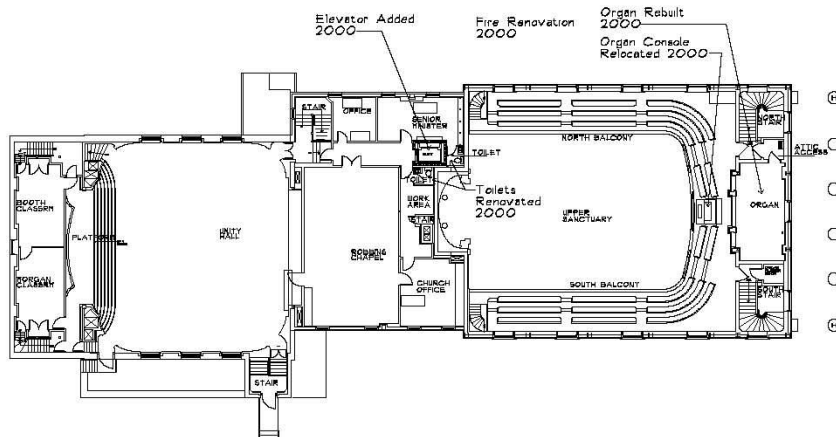
Basement Plan  
2000



First Floor Plan  
2000



Mezzanine Plan  
2000



Second Floor Plan  
2000

