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The Humble History of a Grand Church

Deborah Ballam
Smith College

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Deborah Ballem
LSS 105
Professor Moga

The Humble History of a Grand Church

*“The church was given not only to the parish and the college but to the whole city. May each citizen as he looks at the church feel the benediction and inspiration of her presence and thank God for George Bliss”
–Roland Cotton Smith at the memorial service for George Bliss.*

St. John’s Episcopal Church is not technically part of Smith College, but it occupies a significant part of the campus landscape. This historical church adjoins the Smith campus at its northern end and is flanked by college houses and buildings on all sides. The unique location has provided St. John’s the opportunity to connect spiritual goals to the needs of Smith students and the Northampton community by focusing on charitable endeavors rather than religious doctrine. While the parish is to be commended for their service to Smith College students, the placement of the building raises the question of how a church was able to integrate itself within a tightknit private college campus.

The numerous houses and buildings that comprise the Smith College campus creates a densely packed community of eclectic architectural styles. Many houses feature large porches and yards that are reminiscent of the homesteads that were once its dominating landscape feature. While the overall sense of the campus conveys the feeling of a small New England village, the bold granite edifice of St. John’s Episcopal Church is reminiscent of ancient times. A church, chapel, parlors, and pastor’s residence comprise this imposing yet welcoming building. The Romanesque Revival architecture – complete with a square tower that features a balustrade, hooded observatory, and gargoyles that stretch from all four corners – is strikingly juxtaposed against the 17th and 18th century homes and buildings that surround it. The many detailed descriptions of St. John’s after its consecration in 1893 suggest an extraordinary and lavish

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structure. But while no expense appears to have been spared in its construction, St. John's Episcopal Church and its benefactor both arose from humble beginnings.

The history of St. John's began in 1826, when a small group of people of the Episcopalian faith began congregating at Northampton Town Hall. A few years later, the congregation moved to a church on Bridge Street where it remained for many years, but not without considerable challenges. The church had such extreme financial difficulties that pews were rented or sold and there were periods of time where no services could be held. But despite economic struggles, by 1890 the congregation had grown to exceed the number of seats available in the modest church. It was at this time that private conversations about plans for a new church were taking place between Reverend Washburn and a man named George Bliss without the knowledge of the vestry. After paying an outstanding debt on the parish house of St. John's, George Bliss surprised the reverend by offering to build a brand new church.¹

George Bliss was born and raised in Northampton and had been a member of St. John's Church since the congregation held their first meetings at Town Hall. He grew up in a family of eleven children, two of which died in infancy. His father worked as a carpenter and builder, but he succumbed to mental illness when George was about 7 years old and was confined in an institution for the rest of his life. As a boy, George and his younger brother were responsible for tending the gardens, milking the cows, feeding the pigs, chopping wood, and fetching water from the Mill River. When George was 16, he moved to New Haven where he worked as a store clerk

¹ Springfield Republican

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and was quickly promoted to manager. After marrying the daughter of the store owner, he moved to New York City where he created a prosperous merchant business. He later became business partners with Levi Morton (the 22nd Vice President of the United States) and established the investment bank of Morton, Bliss and Company.² Although he had become a successful merchant and banker in New York City, he remained loyal to his hometown of Northampton.

George Bliss bought the land to build a new church from a fellow Northampton native, John T. Stoddard, who was a physics professor at Smith College. Aside from authoring many physics books, Stoddard is recognized for inventing the test tube clamp, which remains in use today and is called a “Stoddard” clamp. Notable members of John Stoddard’s family were highly educated and fervently religious. His grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, was a respected and influential Puritan preacher in Northampton in the late 1600’s. John Stoddard’s cousin, Jonathan Edwards, inherited the pulpit from their grandfather. Edwards later became an influential figure in the Great Awakening religious movement of the 1700’s.³

In 1884, John Stoddard inherited his father’s homestead which is described in the deed as “land of Smith College” for the exchange of “one dollar and other good and valuable considerations”. In 1891, Stoddard sold the parcel of land at 48 Elm Street to George Bliss for the exchange of “one dollar and other valuable considerations”.⁴ In the transaction between Stoddard and Bliss, the valuable considerations was an unpaid debt on the property totaling

² Persis Putnam

³ Historic Northampton

⁴ Massachusetts Land Records, Registry of Deeds

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\$5,500 plus interest⁵, which translates to nearly \$150,000 today. George Bliss, in turn, deeded the land to St. John's Episcopal Church for the exchange of one dollar. George Bliss donated an additional \$100,000 for the construction of a new church and selected the architect and builder.⁶ It is important to note that the amount of \$100,000 in the year 1893 is equivalent to over 2.5 million dollars today.

The architect chosen to design the new church was R.W Gibson who was based in New York City. Gibson designed many churches, including an Episcopalian church in Manhattan that was also constructed in the Romanesque Revival style.⁷ At the consecration of St. John's in which 625 people were in attendance, George Bliss sat solemnly in the second pew next to his business partner, Levi P. Morton. Bliss reportedly had the quiet composure "of an interested listener" rather than a proud businessman who had donated a magnificent gift."⁸ The architecture of the new church was described by the *Springfield Republican*:

"The structure...is of Milford granite, and has an imposing front, with a square tower to the left of the main entrance and a parish house extending beyond, adding symmetry to the appearance. The arched doorway, and the rose window over three arched windows makes a pleasing affect. A vestibule runs the entire width of the auditorium. The red sandstone pillars which divide the transepts are novel for interior work, and their effect is made still more striking by red sandstone layers in the wall about the height of a low wainscoting. Abundant light is provided, so that lamps need never be used for day services."⁹

⁵ Massachusetts Land Records, Registry of Deeds

⁶ Persis Putnam

⁷ Wikipedia

⁸ Hampshire Gazette

⁹ Springfield Republican

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The *Springfield Republican* also elucidated the advantageous location of the church:

“The church occupies a commanding position on Elm street, overlooking the meadows toward Amherst. There are ample grounds in front and rear, the latter affording an excellent opportunity for children’s gatherings in the summer. A path in the rear leads to the Smith college grounds, so the students going to church need not go out on the street.”¹⁰

As evidenced by a hand drawn map of the property, the borders of the land were an awkward shape. However, the boundaries were straightened by an exchange of property with Smith College in 1918.¹¹

In 1891, the houses and buildings that comprised Smith College were easily accessible from or directly located on Elm Street.¹² What Reverend Washburn and George Bliss may have anticipated at the time was that Smith College would grow to be a prominent and permanent fixture in the Northampton community. In consideration of the vast number of churches in Boston that were being moved or abandoned at the time¹³, having Smith College as a neighbor guaranteed the stability of the church and assuaged fears of relocation. Instructions within the deed stipulated that the land was to be used exclusively for Episcopal worship, which further secured the preservation of the church. George Bliss ensured that no mortgage could ever be placed on the property at 48 Elm Street and any violation of the terms of the deed would revert ownership of the land to the Bliss family:

“For the purpose of maintaining the worship of *Almighty God*,

¹⁰ Springfield Republican

¹¹ Persis Putnam

¹² Smith College Buildings

¹³ Boston’s “Changeful Times”

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Father, Son and Holy Ghost, according to the Doctrine, Liturgy and Discipline of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States: for the exercise and instruction of the Sunday School and for Parish purposes, and for all purposes german [sic] thereto and not inconsistent therewith: that neither the grantee nor their successor or assigns shall mortgage the whole or any part of the premises herein conveyed. The violation of the aforesaid conditions shall work a forfeiture of said premises and the estate hereby conveyed shall there-upon revert to my heir at law in fee.”¹⁴

Carved over the arched front door of St. John’s are the words; “Given to Hospitality” and the church epitomizes this credo. In addition to its support of Smith students and the Northampton community, the vestry also embraces the marginalized segments of society. In the 1960’s, during the tense political backdrop of the Vietnam War, many young activists took to the streets in protest. In Northampton, these crowds of young people became disruptive and unwelcome in the local community. In order to reach out to this group who were deemed undesirable, St. John’s opened a café in the church to provide “a warm, friendly place for young people between the ages of 20 and 30 to gather” one night a week. According to *A Historical Pamphlet* published by the church in 1976:

“...for years the doors of the main church were never locked. Twenty-four hours a day the church was open hours a day for prayer, meditation, refuge from the weather, and a place where the homeless could sleep on cold nights. Many a young man, visiting a girl at Smith College, spent the night asleep on a pew. Bordering on the campus of Smith College, there was an active ministry to the entire college community. We have a lounge for the girls, an active student chapter, and our clergy have always had active ministries with the students at Smith. Many members of the parish provide homes away from homes for the girls. Many a

¹⁴ A House of Prayer for All People

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‘Smithie’ longing for home cooking would use the church kitchen to bake or cook a favorite dish.”¹⁵

St. John’s continues to be of service to Smith College and the community in a myriad of ways, including hosting a midnight breakfast for students during the week of final exams, and providing hot meals for the homeless every Monday throughout the year. The progressive and charitable acts of St. John’s Church continue to exemplify the altruistic nature of their benefactor, George Bliss.

During the 19th century, there was an expectation of people who became successful to give back to their hometown communities and to their faith.¹⁶ Moreover, benevolent deeds represented American values as well as core Christian principles.¹⁷ However, it is evident by multiple accounts that George Bliss was a genuinely kind person and not boastful or self-congratulatory about his philanthropic endeavors. In fact, he “responded liberally whenever his help was solicited”¹⁸ and was exceptionally modest. Aside from selecting and paying for the land, architect and builder of St. John’s Episcopal Church, George Bliss was “exceedingly deferential” to the wishes of the reverend and parish in regards to the details of construction. T.G. Spaulding, the lawyer who consulted with George Bliss regarding the terms of the deed, was reportedly overcome with emotion in response to his generosity and humble nature. In his

¹⁵ A Historical Pamphlet

¹⁶ Early Days of St. John’s Episcopal Church

¹⁷ Elise Bernier-Feeley

¹⁸ Persis Putnam

December 15, 2016

Deborah Ballem
LSS 105
Professor Moga

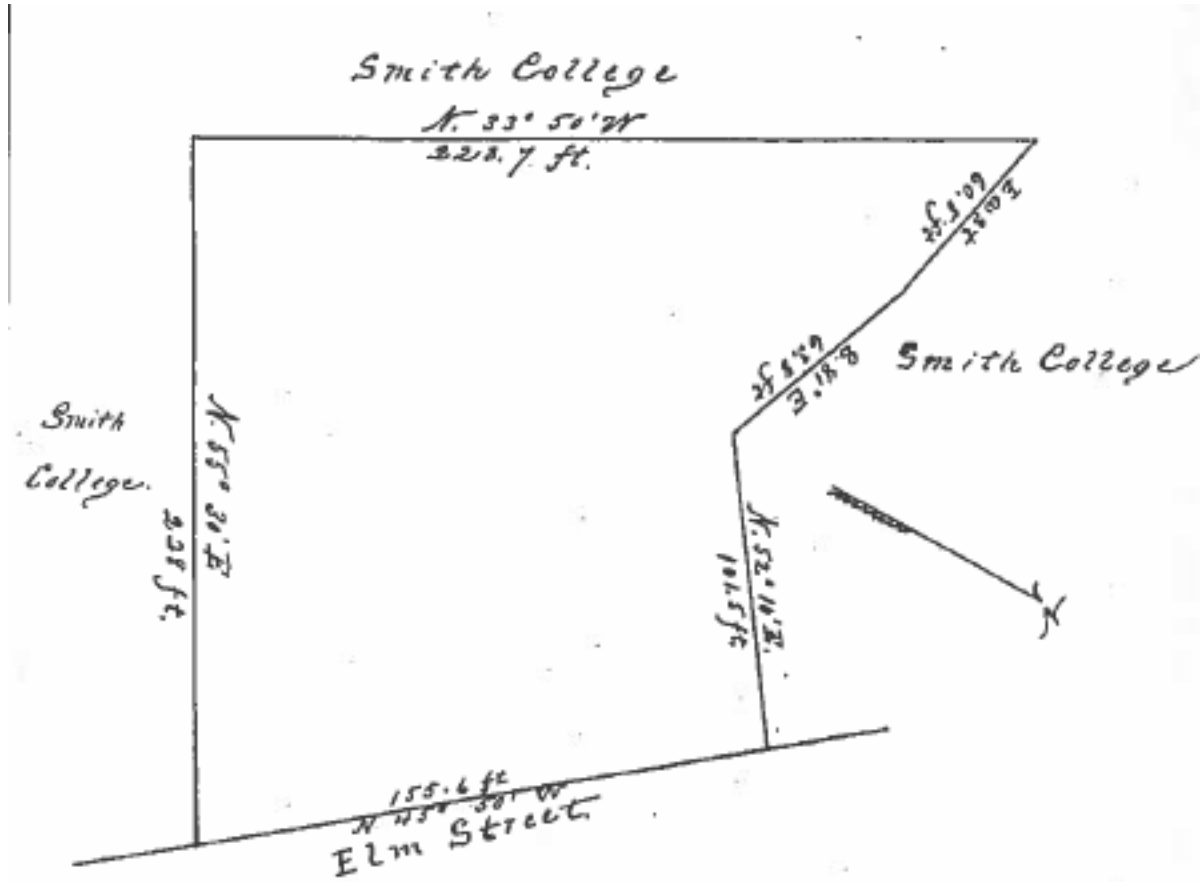
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amazement, Spaulding remarked to the reverend, “Mr. Washburn, I don’t believe we shall ever have such an experience again.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Springfield Republican

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Plan of
Episcopal Church Lot,
Elm Street,
Northampton, Mass.

Scale 40 feet to an inch.

September, 1831.

W. H. Spring Bird Engineer.

December 15, 2016

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