

Grace Episcopal Church

Spring Hill, Tennessee

Text and photos by Dan Hardison

Sitting on Main Street in the heart of this small Tennessee town, historic Grace Episcopal Church has long been a symbol of fine craftsmanship and Southern charm. One of its best-known features is an altar rail carved from solid walnut by a local schoolteacher. So what better place for this beautiful carving than in a church of “Carpenter Gothic” architecture.

Built in 1877 on land that was once the formal garden for a large antebellum home, Grace Church is a beautiful example of the Carpenter Gothic style characterized by the use of sawn wood details that traditionally would have been created in stone. The Gothic style originated in Europe where wood is scarce, but here in this country the style could be executed in wood with a charm all its own. This craftsmanship in wood was carried through to the inside of Grace Church with its interior of walnut and the carved Altar and altar rail.



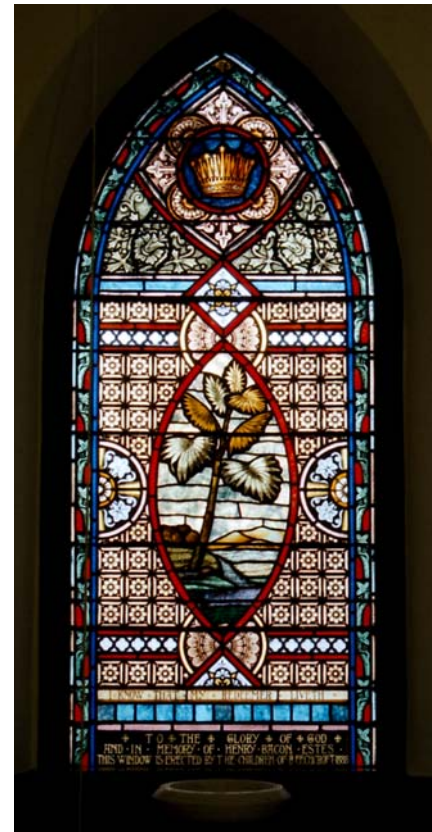
Rev. Johannes Oertel, minister and artist-in-residence at Columbia Institute – once an Episcopal girl’s school in neighboring Columbia – carved the Altar with its cluster of grapes, the words “I Am the Bread of Life”, and the Greek symbol for Jesus “IHS”. T. S. Morton, a teacher at the local Branham and Hughes Academy – now part of the Tennessee Children’s Home – carved the altar rail. The wood for the railing came from a single walnut tree that stood on a nearby farm. The railing consists of grapevines, leaves and clusters of grapes, and is one of the church’s most prized possessions.

When a fire raged down Main Street in the late 1930’s and threatened the church, a member sent her daughter to the church with a hatchet and instructions to cut out the railing and get it to safety should the church catch fire. Fortunately the railing and the church were spared.

Grace Church still retains many of its original furnishings including the pews, an 1839 bell, and a rare Pilcher organ. The church organist who was also a teacher at Beechcroft, a nearby Episcopal school, donated the organ. Originally the organ had to be pumped by someone standing on the outside of the church. When it was time for a hymn, a member would bang on the wall as a signal to start pumping the organ. A requirement no longer needed today.

Middle Tennessee has a long history of providing excellent educational institutions. In the early years of Grace Church, the services were filled with young students from the boarding schools of Branham and Hughes Academy and Beechcroft. It has been said that Grace Church once had more communicants than any other church in the community due to the students of the schools. It was the students from Beechcroft that donated the stained glass window in the front of the church as a memorial to a school founder in 1888.

Although the schools have long since closed, Grace Episcopal Church continues today served by a small congregation dedicated to preserving this historic treasure with its fine craftsmanship, Southern charm, and connection with educational excellence of the past. ☩



Grace Episcopal Church
PO Box 637
Main Street
Spring Hill, Tennessee 37174
(931) 486-3223

