

January 1960

## "Society" church preceded Palm Beach's wealthy Hampton Dunn collection

Hampton Dunn

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### Recommended Citation

Dunn, Hampton, ""Society" church preceded Palm Beach's wealthy Hampton Dunn collection" (1960). *Hampton Dunn Phototouring Florida Collection*. 173. [https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/dunn\\_phototouring/173](https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/dunn_phototouring/173)

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# Photouring Florida

By HAMPTON DUNN



## "SOCIETY" CHURCH PRECEDED PALM BEACH'S WEALTHY

By HAMPTON DUNN

PALM BEACH --- The Church of Bethesda-by-the-Sea, the popular house of worship for America's top society folk, had an humble beginning back when there was a sparse number of white people in southeast Florida.

In 1889 there was no church structure in all of Dade County, and there was no "Palm Beach" either. Site of the present wealthy community was then Lake Worth and this area was part of Dade County, which stretched from St. Lucie River on the north to the Florida Keys. Its population in 1880 was 257 and by 1889 a "population explosion" had doubled the head count to 600 for the county.

The Rev. Joseph N. Mulford, Rector of Christ Church in Troy, N.Y., volunteered to come to this wilderness area to start a mission. He began holding services in the District School House, first school house in the county which is now preserved in Phipps Park. It was Mrs. Mulford who gave the congregation its name. "We go to Saratoga Springs in the summer for health and recreation," she observed, "and we attend Bethesda Church there. Now, we are coming here to Florida in winter for health and recreation. Let us name this Church 'Bethesda-by-the-Sea,' which means "The House of Healing-by-the-Sea."

One of the first contributors to the first church building was Capt. E. N. Dimmich, from a first family of Palm Beach and first Mayor of the city. The first church building of Bethesda was indeed the first Protestant church in southeast Florida and it cost a fabulous \$600.

Developer Henry Flagler brought this railroad here in 1892-93, and the community began to grow. By the spring of 1895 a new edifice was erected. This picturesque building served until the present structure was opened in 1927. The present building was the dream of Canon James Townsend Russell who envisioned the beauty of a Spanish Gothic church placed in the midst of trees and flowers.

An art historian has said "Gothic architecture is the one clearest flame of the Christian spirit. It symbolizes the nobility and aspiration of the soul, the mystery of Christian worship, the sense of eminence of the Divine."

