

Safety Harbor Church: A Brief Introduction

History of Site before Structure was Built

- Safety Harbor, once known as Green Springs, represented an early settlement site along the Pinellas Peninsula, near the Odet Philippe homestead and the Bay View community
- Early services in the area were held at Sylvan Abbey Methodist Episcopal Church by 1886, but gatherings ended at the Abbey after 1900. The 1888 pulpit was brought from the Abbey to this structure.

Construction Information

- Built in 1905 as a one-room structure.
- Wood for the church came from E. H. Coachman's sawmill, once located on a site within present-day Philippe Park.

History of Use

- Church had four names over the years: Green Springs Methodist Episcopal Church, South (1905-1917); Safety Harbor Methodist Episcopal Church, South (1917-1939); Safety Harbor Methodist Church (1939-1968); and First United Methodist Church of Safety Harbor (1968-2002). Suffering from declining membership, the church closed its doors in mid-2002. During its ninety-seven year tenure, the church had forty-two pastors and (only) five organists.
- The 1921 hurricane blew this structure off its foundation. Church members shored up the structure with bricks. They moved the structure to an adjacent block in 1926 and constructed a new Sunday school annex.
- This building suffered extensive damage (including a blown-off roof) during the 1935 hurricane.

Significant Events/Activities at the Structure and in the Surrounding Community

- Excellent records of church activities found in the archival materials donated by the church to Heritage Village. Regular articles in the *Safety Harbor Herald* also document events at the church, including Methodist coffee hours and summer school programs.
- Many early families of the region worshipped at the church and participated in its many social and educational activities. O. W. Booth and Dr. Byrd M. McMullen served as early superintendents of the Sunday school.
- Records kept by church members describe the contributions of many pastors. One pastor, Rev. O. C. Howell, led the flock during the repairs after the 1935 hurricane. Howell later served as a chaplain in the European theatre during World War II.
- With the construction of a new sanctuary in 1960, church members used the 1905 structure for Sunday school classes and other meeting areas. Drywall partitions and other structural modifications changed the interior layout (and later invited termite infestation). The 1905 structure was often referred to as the Fellowship Hall.
- The church launched a \$15,000 fund drive to help build the new sanctuary.

Moving of the Structure to Heritage Village

- In June 1976, Historical Commission members discussed the possibility of moving the church from its perch in Safety Harbor.
- During discussions in early 1977 about the possibility of moving the church, park officials expressed concern with the building's construction and the fact that it is "loaded with termites."
- By late 1977, crews removed the stairs from the 1905 structure in preparation for its move to Heritage Village.
- Roesch Housemovers took the roof off the structure before moving it in two pieces from Safety Harbor to Heritage Village.
- The church has served as a venue for many gatherings, including wedding ceremonies, at Heritage Village over the years.

Safety Harbor Church

Overview

The 1905 Safety Harbor Church once stood on the corner of Second Street and Fourth Avenue North in Green Springs, now Safety Harbor. Some members of the original congregation previously met in an early church at Sylvan Abbey, but “discontinued” their religious gatherings there by 1905. Parishioners salvaged the pulpit and altar rails from the old church before abandoning it. The lumber to build the “newer” sanctuary came from E. H. Coachman’s sawmill at Philippe Hammock, now part of Philippe Park. The simple one-room, wood frame structure has windows on all four sides, and resembles many early churches built along the Pinellas Peninsula and Florida during the late 1800s and early 1900s.

The Safety Harbor Church building survived through almost a century of complications. Strong winds from the October 1921 hurricane lifted the church and moved it sideways. Members of the congregation left it standing that way until 1926. At that point, they moved the church to an adjacent lot on the same block. The 1935 hurricane tore off the roof and damaged the interior. Once again, church members came to the rescue of their beloved sanctuary. Besides surviving these hurricanes, the church also has endured arson attempts and vandalism.

This structure served as the First United Methodist Church’s main sanctuary from 1905 until the end of 1960. Fundraising activities for a new sanctuary gained momentum by February 1960, with construction of the new building beginning by that summer on the original site at the corner of Fourth Avenue and Second Street. During the early 1960s, crews divided the one room wooden church into smaller areas for use as an annex, nursery, and Sunday school classrooms. Heritage Village acquired the Safety Harbor Methodist Church in the fall of 1977. After the Pinellas County Historical Society moved and restored the building, it opened to the public. Over the years, many couples and organizations have rented the church for weddings and other gatherings. When the congregation decided to close its newer sanctuary and disband in May 2002, the archives at Heritage Village became the repository for many records associated with the church’s ninety-seven year history.

Abandoning the Abbey, and Constructing the Church

Residents of the upper Pinellas Peninsula near present-day Safety Harbor organized the Sylvan Abbey Methodist Episcopal Church in 1886. From the late 1880s until 1905, the handful of settlers in the area worshipped at the Sylvan Abbey Church. This church took its name from the first school on the peninsula, a log cabin erected in 1853-1854 on land south of Sunset Point/Main Street and east of US Highway 19. Commonly known as the “McMullen Log School,” members of the McMullen family also called this structure “Sylvan Abbey.” In the early 1850s, Captain James Parramore McMullen completed his log home. By that time, he and wife Elizabeth Campbell McMullen has started a family. With four children born by 1852 (Bethel, Margaret Nancy, Sara Jane “Sally,” and Daniel Campbell), the McMullens hoped to provide formal education for their growing family. According to history passed down from the McMullen family, during a trip to deliver some of his citrus outside of the state “Captain Jim” searched for a schoolteacher who wanted to come to Florida. He brought this teacher and her daughter to the family’s log house, and crafted a desk for her and benches for the pupils. The teacher soon conducted classes for the children in the attic of Captain Jim’s sugarhouse, a log structure originally assembled as a place to cultivate syrup from sugar cane. Within a short while, Captain Jim recruited other family members and Dick Booth to help him construct a one-room log school with a chimney and fireplace on land east of his cabin at Coachman. Nancy Meador, granddaughter of Captain Jim, told a reporter in a 1967 interview that upwards of thirty children attended class in this structure. According to an account written by Nancy Meador in 1949, James P. McMullen planned to name the school after the first girl who took classes at the cabin. That child turned out to be the teacher’s daughter, a girl named Sylvan Abbey.¹

The area around the school soon became known as Sylvan Abbey. The original school soon became “inadequate” and the McMullens constructed a second school closer to the present-day site of the Abbey cemetery on Main Street. By the 1880s, settlers

¹ Patricia Perez Constini, ed., *A Tradition of Excellence, Pinellas County Schools: 1912-1987* (Clearwater: Pinellas County School Board, 1987), 11; Pinellas County, Board of Public Instruction, *The Golden Anniversary of Pinellas Schools, Celebrating 50 Years of Educational Progress: Superintendent’s Semi-*

helped the McMullen family construct an arbor shelter out of pine and palm leaves for camp gatherings and religious services. In time, they improved the facility and called it Sylvan Abbey First Methodist. Few documents or records from this church exist, except for occasional and fragmented recollections appearing in newspaper clippings or other secondary sources. The church sat on a path about halfway between Captain Jim's homestead and the area of Green Springs (now Safety Harbor). Members of the McMullen and Booth families regularly attended services. Irene Campbell McElveen Mitchell, an 1883 native of Green Springs and daughter of George Campbell, attended school in the Sylvan Abbey log cabin and took Sunday school classes at the Sylvan Abbey church. During the early 1890s, McElveen remembered that only a couple of houses occupied present-day Safety Harbor; citrus groves covered much of the present downtown area. Services continued at Sylvan Abbey until 1905, when either the Florida Methodist Conference or parishioners "discontinued" sermons and approximately nine to twelve members of the Abbey launched a new church in the small settlement of Green Springs. Most other members of the former Abbey church attended services at a "Friendship" church near H. W. Sever's home. The groups divided the furnishings, with the Green Springs church receiving the pulpit built in 1888 from timber donated by De Joinville Booth and cut by William M. Goode at a mill near Abbey Lake. According to a typewritten "short sketch" of the Safety Harbor church's history, G. W. (George Ward) McMullen purchased the Sylvan Abbey church building to use as his home. Other accounts claim that members dismantled the original Abbey church and sold the lumber.²

A Place for the Holy Spirit, by "Espiritu Santo" Bay

The 1905 church occupied two lots at the northwest corner of Second Street and Fourth Avenue in Green Springs. The building sat at 401 Second Street North, on land platted in 1905 as Block 5 of Green Springs. Records kept by the church indicate that nine members of the Abbey became charter members of the new church. De Joinville

centennial Report, 1912-1962 (St. Petersburg: Modern Printing & Publishing, 1962), 10; *Clearwater Sun*, 18 December 1949; *St. Petersburg Times*, 13 August 1967.

² Undated church history, possibly by Russell Couch, Safety Harbor Methodist Church Papers, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo (hereafter known as SHMC Papers); "History of the Safety Harbor Methodist Church [Short Sketch]," SHMC Papers; *Clearwater Sun*, 18 December 1949; Katherine C.

Booth (grandson of Odet Philippi) and his wife, Lucy Marian McMullen Booth (daughter of Captain Jim), were joined by Mr. and Mrs. H. W. Poole, Mr. and Mrs. R. T. Youngblood, Mr. and Mrs. A. N. Prichard, and Eugenia Youngblood as organizing members. Others, including Irene McElveen, also transferred to the new parish. Under the stewardship of Rev. J. W. (Robert J.) Wells, the church secured the two parcels without cost. One lot came from Captain Charles Wharton Johnson of Largo and the other from Jesse A. and Henrietta Boyd. Builders Charles Smith and A. R. Brittle oversaw construction of the one-room wood frame structure. They acquired lumber for the church from Edwin Horace Coachman's sawmill located at Philippe Hammock, now part of Philippe Park. The building, then known as the Green Springs Methodist Episcopal Church, South, offered its first services in 1905.³

Leading members of the church assisted the preachers by serving as officers. De Joinville Booth, R. T. Youngblood, and H. W. Poole became original Trustees of the church. O. W. (Odett William) Booth, popular known as "Uncle Keeter" by members of the church, volunteered as the first superintendent of the Sunday school for about six years. After Uncle Keeter stepped down, Dr. Byrd McMullen—son of Dr. Bethel McMullen, the area's first academically trained dentist and a young dentist himself at the time—took over duties as director of the Sunday school for two years. Other early administrators of the Sunday school included H. L. Mitchell, R. A. Babcock, and A. E. Shower. While the church had forty-two pastors during its ninety-seven years of operation, Shower's wife had a notable tenure as organist at the church from 1914 until 1955. In fact, the church had only four other organists during its ninety-seven year tenure: Doris Roddenberry (1955-1975), Margaret Gutermuth (1975-1992), Lou Vogelsang (1992-1997), and Elsie Ruble (through 2002).⁴

Early pastors at the Safety Harbor church rode the circuit to serve other nearby congregations. However, poor roadways along the Pinellas Peninsula must have made short distances seem more like arduous adventures. In 1905, J. W. Wells split his

Downs, *My Memories of Safety Harbor, Florida (December 1835 to February 1896)* (N.p.: n.p., 1986), 88-89.

³ Undated church history, possibly by Russell Couch, SHMC Papers; "History of the Safety Harbor Methodist Church,": SHMC Papers; Downs, *My Memories of Safety Harbor*, 88.

⁴ "Pastors Who Served First United Methodist Church of Safety Harbor," manuscript created in 2002, SHMC Papers; "History of the Safety Harbor Methodist Church," SHMC Papers.

pastoral duties between Green Springs, Bay View, and Largo. The following year, Rev. George W. Mitchell covered both the Green Springs church and one in Clearwater. Finley Patterson arrived in 1907, and spent much of his time crossing Tampa Bay by boat as he served flocks at both Green Springs and Port Tampa, a settlement on the Interbay Peninsula near present-day Mac Dill Air Force Base. Reverends B. K. Thrower and Paul Fletcher alternated between Green Springs and Sutherland (now Palm Harbor) from 1908 until 1910. In 1911, Rev. J. E. Lewis became the first recorded preacher to serve only the Green Springs church.⁵

Circuit riding resumed in 1912, the year Pinellas County gained its independence from Hillsborough. During 1912 and 1913, R. F. Hodnett covered Green Springs and Sutherland. J. E. Lewis returned between 1914 and 1916. While he remained at Green Springs exclusively the first two years, he also covered services at Friendship in 1916. By that year, the church claimed eighty-two members. Lewis also helped to establish a troop for Boy Scouts in the community during the 1910s. While Rev. R. E. L. Folsom preached at this church and the one at Friendship, the community took on a new name. In 1917, the settlement abandoned its earlier name of Green Springs and officially incorporated as the City of Safety Harbor. This measure prevented any confusion between the growing municipality along Old Tampa Bay and Green Cove Springs along the St. Johns River in Clay County. Between 1917 and 1939, the church became known as Safety Harbor Methodist Episcopal Church, South.⁶

The incorporation of Safety Harbor coincided with a growth in church membership and new challenges for the congregation. By 1918 Rev. E. H. Lantz balanced the rigorous demands of serving nearly 180 members at Safety Harbor while also visiting three additional churches at Ozona, Curlew, and Friendship. Jesse B. Reid took over this busy regimen from Lantz by 1919, and faced an additional challenge in October 1921: A devastating hurricane with winds approaching one-hundred miles per hour caused substantial damage throughout the Pinellas Peninsula. Wind gusts blew the Safety Harbor Church from its foundation and turned the building sideways. Rather than return the structure to its original location, members decided to place blocks under the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

church's new location where "the winds let it go." While some parishioners repaired the main building, others began to construct a parsonage that opened in 1922 on the adjacent lot just west of the church. The Women's Missionary Society assisted with this project, as did many members of the Safety Harbor community. Rev. C. W. Alford shared duties at Safety Harbor and Friendship from 1923 through 1925; one member of the congregation claimed that "(n)ever was the genuine old brotherly love so much in our church as it was at this time." By 1926, Rev. John P. Gaines oversaw the purchase of a plot of land directly north of the original parcels donated in 1905. Gaines and church leaders coordinated the move of the 1905 building to this new parcel in 1926, allowing most of the original two lots (except for a portion occupied by the parsonage) to become open space. While records do not indicate a reason for this move, the open land on the corner might have allowed the church to provide additional parking spaces for members who drove from distant homes in the growing community. At about the same time, members watched the construction of a Sunday school annex on the newly acquired lot, behind the recently moved 1905 church building. T. W. Carlton assumed the pulpit in 1928 and encouraged members to purchase new pews (at a cost of \$13.75 each) in 1929.⁷

The congregation weathered financial obstacles and a nasty storm during the 1930s. Many communities in Florida suffered as the Great Depression built upon the woes that began with the collapse of the land boom. To shepherd church members during this time of austerity, Rev. J. E. Lewis returned to Safety Harbor from 1930 through 1933. During this time, he also performed ministerial duties at Odessa in Pasco County, as well as at Keystone and Friendship. Membership had dropped from a high of approximately 190 members in the early 1920s, to about 125 members by the early 1930s. Fewer seasonal residents and the poor economic circumstances probably contributed to this downturn. Those who remained at the church, however, showed their support and strengthened their resolve. For example, R. J. Robinson and members of the church planted many trees and shrubs around the property during the spring of 1933. After George C. Powell's one-year tenure in 1934, the Methodist conference sent Rev. O. C. Howell to the Safety Harbor Church in 1935. A newlywed, Howell had married the former Myrtle Maxwell Plumb in August 1934. The Plumbs represented one of the

⁷ Ibid.

pioneer families of the region. Howell's greatest challenge came in September 1935, when hurricane force winds tore the roof off the 1905 church and rainfall inundated its interior. While members attended church services in the Sunday school annex, Howell led efforts to repair the structure with assistance from C. S. Rosier and William G. "Bill" Weagraff, a new church member that would continue to serve the flock as the church's volunteer custodian for nearly fifty years. Weagraff's wife, Blanche, also became involved with the church, working as Sunday school superintendent and participating in other church-sponsored groups. According to one account, Rosier and Weagraff repaired the church in thirty-six days. Another church history claimed that Howell led the faithful as they resealed the interior, installed new lights, and reopened the sanctuary by early December as part of the church's annual Homecoming program, a special sermon and gathering held in each fall beginning in the early 1930s.⁸

The succession of pastors continued on an annual basis until the mid-1940s. After O. C. Howell's departure, N. A. Darling served briefly during part of 1936 and Harry Mc Donnell encouraged improved programs for children in the community during his tenure in 1937. W. O. McMullen served in 1938 and early 1939; his wife battled with illness during much of his time here. A June 1939 issue of the *Safety Harbor Herald* announced McMullen's replacement and the locations of other former pastors who had served the church. At their meeting in Tampa, leaders of the Methodist conference selected Rev. W. J. Nease as the church's next pastor. Nease, who led flocks in Pensacola and at White Springs in north central Florida for the previous eight years, also struggled with poor health. Though doctors had just discharged him from an Atlanta hospital, he mustered his energy and delivered "cheerful" and impressive sermons from "his feeble body" while tending to an ill wife. During the summer of 1939, a pioneer resident and member of the Safety Harbor congregation passed away: De Joinville Booth, affiliated with the local church since its days at Sylvan Abbey, died on September 18. He had married Lucy McMullen in November 1886, the year the Abbey Church first offered formal services. J. E. Lewis, former Safety Harbor pastor then at Seminole, conducted the funeral services at the Booth home. Also during 1939, the congregation changed its name to "Safety Harbor

⁸ Ibid.; *St. Petersburg Times*, 16 April 1933; Undated church history, possibly by Russell Couch, SHMC Papers; "History of the Safety Harbor Methodist Church," SHMC Papers.

Methodist Church” and Rev. McMullen moved to Homeland and Alturas, small Polk County settlements near Bartow. Other former Safety Harbor pastors also moved to new venues in 1939, such as G. C. Powell who arrived in Clermont, John P. Gaines in Williston, O. C. Howell in Key West, and T. W. Carlton in Ellenton and Oneco in Manatee County. Carlton returned to Safety Harbor in October to deliver a sermon as part of the seventh annual Homecoming program. Reverends R. Hiller, J. Hartsfield, C. G. Bell, N. A. Darling, and Earl I. Prosser served full or partial terms between 1940 and 1944.⁹

A former pastor’s leadership at Safety Harbor prepared him for the difficulties of overseas duty during World War II. In the aftermath of the 1935 hurricane, O. C. Howell had brought the Safety Harbor congregation together at a difficult time and led the reconstruction of the damaged church. As a chaplain in the United States Army, Capt. O. C. Howell sent letters to his wife in Clearwater after he reached Normandy in June 1944. Howell had crossed the English Channel into France a little more than a week after the D-Day invasion began. He reported to a hospital and comforted those in pain. On June 18, he wrote: “We have first-hand knowledge of the results of war, and it is not a Sunday picnic. . . . I do pray that I can be of help to these boys. I have prayed with a number of them in the wards, and they seem so appreciative. We have not had warm meals, altogether.”¹⁰ In a June 23 letter, he described the tragedy of battle:

I have met with some sad cases. Only today I had the privilege of trying to help a poor fellow to face the future bravely; he had lost a leg. Another will be blind completely. I feel that here is where I can do some of my most-needed work. . . . Some worry about what their folks will think when they learn they are wounded and in the hospital. All feel they have been fortunate not to have been killed. Here is where I plead God’s goodness and help them to trust our Lord in all of life.¹¹

⁹ “Pastors Who Served First United Methodist Church of Safety Harbor,” manuscript created in 2002, SHMC Papers; “History of the Safety Harbor Methodist Church,” SHMC Papers; *Safety Harbor Herald*, 16 June 1939, 23 June 1939, 22 September 1939; *St. Petersburg Times*, 19 September 1939, 29 October 1939; *Clearwater Sun*, 19 September 1939.

¹⁰ “Chaplain’s Life At War Explained By Floridian,” undated clipping circa late June 1944, probably from *St. Petersburg Times*, appearing in building files, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Howell took his first hot shower about ten days after he arrived in the Normandy hospital. On a Saturday evening, he reassured his wife in a letter that he kept healthy, had sufficient rations, and ate “nourishing and satisfying” meals. He told her of his priorities: “Tomorrow is Sunday, but I have had little time to prepare my messages; my contacts with patients in the hospital come first.” The next day, he delivered three sermons and visited the sick before retiring to bed. Howell, who had served his Methodist flocks at Safety Harbor, Clearwater, Crescent City, Key West, and western Florida, also thought about his loved ones at home: He had enlisted in June 1943, leaving wife Myrtle behind in Clearwater. In late 1943, Myrtle gave birth to a beautiful red-haired daughter, Twila Grace Howell.¹²

New Programs and a New Sanctuary

The First Methodist Church of Safety Harbor sponsored many events between the 1940s and 1960s. The *Safety Harbor Herald* regularly mentioned social events such as the Methodist Coffee Hour and the Women’s Society of Christian Service (WSCS) in its issues. Minnie Yant, a native of Canada, came to the area by the 1940s and launched a weekly coffee hour where members came together for devotional reading, fellowship, refreshments, and occasional entertainment. A clipping from the *Herald* described events at a typical Methodist Coffee Hour: In January 1963, forty-nine members gathered for the program coordinated by Yant. After opening prayers and a salute to the flag, attendees sang songs, greeted new members and visitors, ate “a delicious luncheon,” enjoyed a formal program, sang more songs, and heard a piano duet. Shortly after Yant’s death in 1963 or 1964, parishioners renamed the gatherings the “Minnie Yant Coffee Hour” and Doris Roddenberry became the president of this group during the mid- and late 1960s. WSCS circles offered venues for women members of the church to gather and discuss important projects. By 1951, members of Circle No. 1, WSCS, held regular meetings in the church annex. On 12 July 1956, eleven churchwomen met at the home of Gladys Tucker and formed an active WSCS circle named the Sylvia Stewart Circle in honor of the wife of former Pastor Paul Stewart. The original eleven members of this circle included Tucker, Yant, and Mrs. H. D. Cowan, wife of the current pastor at that time.

¹² Ibid.

Blanche Weagraff joined soon thereafter. During this period, church members also enjoyed morning and evening worship services on Sunday, an excellent Sunday school program for their children, a “vibrant” Methodist Youth Fellowship, and a variety of other programs. Events such as the Methodist Homecoming and the Annual Bazaar became yearly traditions that brought many residents of Safety Harbor to the bustling church.¹³

Longtime residents and descendants of early settlers continued to embrace the church and its programs. For example, the presence of many members of the McMullen family at gatherings illustrated their support for the Safety Harbor Church. Robert McMullen regularly served in the Methodist Adult Fellowship during the postwar years. Younger members participated in youth fellowship activities. In July 1951 Bill Weagraff, John Rountree, and Rev. Paul Stewart escorted some of the youngsters for a week-long camp and retreat at Leesburg. Those in attendance included Sandra McMullen and Donna McMullen. Meanwhile, Betty Jo McMullen regularly participated in the council meetings of the Methodist Youth Fellowship. Summertime trips also included a church-sponsored outing for younger members of the church to Indian Rocks, where Rev. Stewart and other chaperones provided a hearty picnic of sandwiches, baked beans, potato salad, watermelon, and cold drinks to the children after their swim. Indeed, during the summer of 1951—and during other summers of that era—the Methodist Vacation School became an important place for children aged three to sixteen to enjoy games and strengthen their faith.¹⁴

Plans for an expanded sanctuary began in the late 1950s. By Easter 1952, members had modified the interior of the 1905 building by adding plywood. While a clipping from the period claimed the plywood offered a “most pleasing” effect, over the next two decades termites began to live between the original boards and plywood, causing damage that required treatment when the structure arrived at Heritage Village. The various events sponsored by the church required additional space, and the original wooden building could not accommodate all of the programs. By one account,

¹³ “The History of the First United Methodist Church of Safety Harbor . . .,” Unpublished document located in SHMC Papers; *Safety Harbor Herald*, 6 July, 1951, 19 October 1951, 26 October 1951, 30 November 1951, 25 January 1963; Undated church history, possibly by Russell Couch, SHMC Papers.

¹⁴ *Safety Harbor Herald*, 15 June 1951, 6 July 1951, 14 September 1951.

parishioners broke ground for a new sanctuary building in 1954, but fund raising became an important mission of the flock by the late 1950s and the early months of 1960. Rev. James W. Powell launched a five-day, \$15,000 building fund campaign in mid-February 1960. At a supper meeting on February 5, Rev. John T. Adams—a campaign director for the project who previously assisted with church building fundraisers in Stuart, Boynton Beach, Grace, and Sanford—delivered a speech with the theme, “The Temple of God.” Campaign work continued during the weekend and over the next few weeks. Adams and John Rountree, a longtime church member who served as general fundraising chair, planned to speak at a “Forward Step” banquet sponsored by the Safety Harbor Women’s Club and coordinated by Blanche Weagraff. Church members selected Don Williams, a local architect, to develop a new sanctuary that harmonized with the other structures on the campus, including the 1905 building.¹⁵

The new sanctuary opened by the fall of 1960. Members of the Building Committee—a group that included Bill Weagraff, John Rountree, and Hurley Rountree—donated countless hours throughout the winter and spring of 1960 to raise funds for the project. Architects Wakeling and Levison began construction in July 1960 and finished the building in time for December services. The new building sat at the corner of Second Street and Fourth Avenue, at the prominent location where the original 1905 building once rested. Outer walls of the new building included Ocala block and Roman brick brought from Miami. Redwood and mahogany highlighted the interior, with pews of Appalachian oak adorning the structure. While the 1905 building could accommodate only about 100 persons at a time, the new sanctuary seated approximately 250, and included a church office, choir room, sanctuary, narthex, and a glass-enclosed “cry room” for baby-boomer families with small children. By 1961, the opening of the new sanctuary allowed members to redesign and partition the 1905 structure, which became the location

¹⁵ “On Which Side of Easter Do You Live? Asks Pastor of Safety Harbor Methodist,” undated clipping circa April 1952, probably from *Clearwater Sun*, appearing in building files, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo; Undated church history, possibly by Russell Couch, SHMC Papers; *Safety Harbor Herald*, 5 February 1960, 12 February 1960.

of a nursery and served as the educational building. By 1968, the flock changed the church's name to the First United Methodist Church of Safety Harbor.¹⁶

A New Place for the House of Worship, and the New Worship House Closes

The Pinellas County Historical Commission (PCHC) first discussed the possibility of relocating the Safety Harbor Church at its 16 June 1976 meeting. Commissioners decided to create a subcommittee to evaluate the costs and possibility of moving the building to Heritage Village as a way to “round out the community” of structures at the park. Pastor W. Joseph Hamic invited Commission members to look over the building and architect Don Williams approached Director Kendrick Ford to discuss the potential move. By this time, church members hoped to construct a fellowship hall on the plot occupied by the older sanctuary. Some PCHC members had concerns after hearing reports about the “poor construction” of the 1905 structure, a building “loaded with termites.” Commissioner David R. Carr told colleagues that they should select potential structures for placement at Heritage Village based upon educational significance rather than availability. Concerned that County funds could not cover the move, PCHC members wondered whether the Safety Harbor Church, the city's historical society, or an alliance of religious organizations (such as the Ecumenical Council) might fund this project. At their 20 April 1977 meeting, the Commissioners decided to meet with Rev. Hamic and Don Williams and further discuss the possible acquisition of the church. Williams called Ford in mid-July to say that another temporary and less expensive possibility may be to move the 1905 building to a vacant lot next to church property in Safety Harbor.¹⁷

Funds to move the Safety Harbor Church appeared in the 1977-1978 budget. Pinellas County Commissioners had appropriated \$20,000 for building preservation and relocation, and Chair Jeanne Malchon sent PCHC members a memorandum approving the use of \$10,030.65 of that allocation to bring the building to Heritage Village. By mid-September, employees of the Park Department began to fill the site of the structure's new

¹⁶ “The History of the First United Methodist Church of Safety Harbor . . .,” unpublished document located in SHMC Papers; “Oldest Pinellas Church Replaced,” undated clipping from December 1960, originally from *Clearwater Sun*, appearing in building files, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo.

home along Walsingham Road with dirt to prevent drainage problems. Park staff and building movers planned to transport the building in two pieces, removing the roof to avoid the additional costs of temporarily relocating power lines. Bill and Blanche Weagraff, longtime members of the Safety Harbor flock, watched as workers prepared the building for its journey. Bill's early efforts to rebuild the roof after the 1935 hurricane marked the beginning of his long involvement with the congregation. By the late 1970s, Blanche served as church historian. Church members gathered at around midnight on 28 September 1977 to see Roesch Housemovers of Pinellas Park take the old sanctuary from its prominent perch in downtown Safety Harbor. The proposed path for the move took the building to Bayshore Boulevard by the Safety Harbor Spa, south to State Road 60 (Gulf-to-Bay Boulevard), west to U.S. Highway 19, then to Ulmerton, and finally to its location along Walsingham Road. Though the Board of County Commissioners had allocated funds to move the church, the Pinellas County Historical Society helped with the restoration costs after the building arrived in the fall of 1977.¹⁸

While park staff restored the 1905 structure at its new home, the First United Methodist Church continued its activities in Safety Harbor. Workers removed the paneling from the interior of the old sanctuary, killed the termites, and installed new flooring and siding. To accommodate those with disabilities, laborers constructed a ramp along the left side of the building that leads to the side entrance. Before opening to the public, the building also received a fresh coat of paint. With the original church at a new and safe location, Rev. Hamic and the congregation established a new Building Committee to plan for a 6,800-square-foot fellowship hall. This committee included Hamic's wife, Ruth, and longtime member Jennie Campbell. When the new hall opened, many members and guests flocked to the building to enjoy the church's legendary chicken dinners that included biscuits cooked with Jennie Campbell's family recipe. The annual arrival of winter residents led to dinners that required two or three seatings, while church membership reached a peak of nearly 300 parishioners by the 1980s. Expanded

¹⁷ Records of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, Heritage Village Library and Archives, Largo, 16 June 1976, 20 April 1977, 18 May 1977, 20 July 1977.

¹⁸ Records of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, 21 September 1977, 10 October 1977; Undated *Clearwater Sun* clipping, probably late September or early October 1977, located in SHMC Papers; Undated church history, possibly by Russell Couch, SHMC Papers; *Safety Harbor Herald*, 29 September 1977.

programs included Scout meetings, daycare programs, Alcoholics Anonymous groups, and other social outreach programs.¹⁹

Unfortunately, church membership declined by the 1990s. The chicken-and-biscuit dinners ended, elderly members passed away, new churches opened, and urban sprawl blurred lines between Safety Harbor and other nearby areas that had once created a sense of community. By the time Rev. John C. Hubbard retired and Hollis Boardman assumed the pulpit in 2001, attendance had dwindled from fifty-two and under twenty patrons. On 13 February 2002—Ash Wednesday of that year, Pastor Holly Boardman, District Superintendent Kevin M. James, and eighteen members attended a special conference to discuss the fate of their church. While members entertained a motion to keep the church open with a part-time minister, the ensuing discussion led most to believe that such an action would merely delay the inevitability that the church must close. During a painful vote, five opted for a part-time pastor, two abstained, and ten elected to close the church. After ninety-seven years, the church offered its final service on Mother’s Day of 2002. Only ten people attended Boardman’s sermon, where she opened with a litany of thanksgiving and encouraged those in the sanctuary to join another Methodist church.²⁰ During her greeting, Boardman proclaimed:

The purpose of the organized church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. The church is called to teach, to preach, to heal, and to baptize. The church may be a great place to make friends and to hold profitable rummage sales and chicken dinners, but if such things have become our focus, then we’ve strayed from our center, and it is time to return to the center.²¹

Although the church closed its doors, members had the foresight and concern for preserving their sanctuary’s history when they donated their institutional records to the Heritage Village Library and Archives. The 1905 building lives on as a popular venue for weddings and other events.

¹⁹ Records of the Pinellas County Historical Commission, 16 November 1977, 19 April 1978, 16 August 1978; “The History of the First United Methodist Church of Safety Harbor . . .,” unpublished document located in SHMC Papers; *St. Petersburg Times*, 14 May 2002.

²⁰ Minutes of Church Conference, 13 February 2002, SHMC Papers; *St. Petersburg Times*, 14 May 2002.

²¹ *St. Petersburg Times*, 14 May 2002.