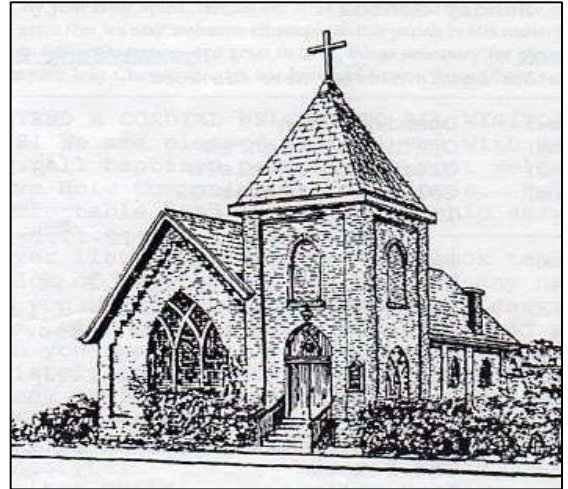




## A Short History of St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in the Borough of Canonsburg and Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Antebellum America was a place of change. Pittsburgh's first bishop, the Rt. Rev. John Barrett Kerfoot, arrived in a western Pennsylvania facing post-war questions. For Canonsburg, it meant losing Jefferson College. The 1866 consolidation creating a unified Washington & Jefferson College in Washington was such a blow to Canonsburg that leaders didn't acquiesce until losing before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Jefferson College lost its independence the same year that Canonsburg gained an Episcopal mission. Episcopalians gathered for worship under the leadership of the Rev. James A. Brown from Washington. One year later, on May 22, 1867, Bishop Kerfoot visited the congregation and named the mission for St. Thomas the Apostle. The new mission relied on lay leadership and priests visiting from the former Trinity Episcopal Church in Washington. While Washington maintained full-time clergy at Trinity Church and Episcopalian Trinity Hall School for Boys (the present site and namesake of Trinity High), Canonsburgers relied on clergy interest from the county seat.



The 1888 arrival of the Rev. Frederick C. Cowper at Trinity Church was a boon for Canonsburg. Cowper visited Canonsburg frequently as did Trinity's next rector, the Rev. Christian M. Young. Young helped the mission establish worship space in a large second floor room at the Odd Fellows' Hall on East Pike Street. Members equipped the space for worship by adding an altar, altar rails, and pews. Bishop Whitehead supported their efforts by donating a baptismal font, likely the one still in use. During an April 1898 visit, the Rt. Rev. Cortlandt Whitehead appointed Daniel Day, George Colwell, William Bowers, James McFarland, and Edward M. Stremmell as trustees. These men, later joined by Adelbert Sheldon Sr. and Dr. Louis D. Donaldson, were active in the business and civic affairs of Canonsburg. Day even served as Burgess of Canonsburg, a precursor to the separate modern roles of borough council president and district judge.

Lay ministry has always been important at St. Thomas' Church. Worship continued at the Odd Fellows' Hall from 1897 until 1901, with the Rev. Young leading services on alternating Sundays when he wasn't at the former St. George's Episcopal Church in Waynesburg. Laymen, especially Adelbert Sheldon Sr., led services in his absence. It was also laity who led the construction of the current building in 1901, for a reported total cost of \$5,000. Parishioners today would recognize the basic building outline, cornerstone, and brickwork. But, the stained-glass windows, cross atop the steeple, and paved sub-basement had to wait. Bishop Whitehead blessed the new building in November 1901.

Clerical independence came on July 4, 1908, with the arrival of the Rev. Thomas L. Joseph. Canonsburg no longer relied on Washington. However, the early twentieth century brought ups and downs for St. Thomas' as the Chartiers Valley shifted from small market towns and farming to industry. When the congregation hit financial hardship in 1915, Sr. Warden E.H. Beazell, Esq., and Vestrymen Fred Gray, Kiddie, and Townrow gathered with representatives of key families to sort church finances. However, recurring ups and downs continued throughout World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II. After the vicar moved in February 1922, the vestry arranged Sunday afternoon services using KDKA radio sermons broadcast from Calvary Church, East Liberty. Parishioners gathered around a Victrola horn for three months. They struggled with volume as the radio would get quiet, then suddenly loud. One trustee hid behind a curtain to constantly adjust the volume. The 1930s Great Depression proved even more challenging as attendance waned and giving plummeted. This prompted the vestry to eliminate passing collection plates during services after Easter 1931, to prevent impoverished worshippers from feeling embarrassed. Also, clerical independence won in 1908 was sacrificed as Canonsburg shared priests with neighboring parishes including Trinity, Washington; St. George's, Waynesburg; and Atonement, Carnegie.



St. Thomas' improved dramatically during the post-World War II era. In the 1950s, American Christendom was synonymous with patriotism. During this period, St. Thomas' adopted a decidedly High Church approach to worship in keeping with national Episcopalian trends and the affinities of the Rt. Rev. Austin Pardue, IV Bishop of Pittsburgh. The development of suburbs led the diocese to push St. Thomas' to consider relocating from North Jefferson Avenue. The vestry investigated, debated, then said no. Parishioners remained in town and enhanced the current building. Stained glass windows designed by Pittsburgh Stained Glass Studios were added to the vestibule, nave, and chancel. The largest window honors the patron saint of the parish while the majority of windows are part of a series depicting the chronological life of Christ using symbols and Scriptural references.

The 1960s brought another period of lay leadership. However, 25-year-old seminarian Robert G. Mitchell helped rejuvenate parish life. The church hosted many fellowship opportunities like Seabury Club Square Dance. Church members also supported Episcopalian St. Margaret's Memorial Hospital in Pittsburgh (UPMC St. Margaret). Meanwhile, growing suburbs along Rt. 19 again led the diocese and vestry to consider relocation. After another round of investigation, the church recommitted to Canonsburg. The congregation experienced ongoing clergy transitions until the 1970 appointment of David Kinsey as Lay Reader-in-Charge.

Kinsey's 25-year tenure brought stability. During his ministry, he moved through Holy Orders and the parish adapted to the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* while also making significant renovations. Sunday School grew, there was an annual men's breakfast, and Women of St. Thomas' was very active. Automobiles also changed local pedestrian culture with the opening of Interstate 79 and South Hills Village Mall. On a larger scale, the congregation navigated disparate theological views between evangelical and progressive Christians. While the Diocese of Pittsburgh became more conservative theologically, St. Thomas' remained decidedly Broad Church in both its worship and theology. Kinsey's sermons favored more evangelical views while Janet Shaw, a Lay Reader, favored more progressive positions as she became the first woman to preach at St. Thomas'. This Broad Church hallmark continued after Kinsey's departure in 1994. This broad spectrum was further demonstrated in 1997 when the Rev. Rosalind Brown became the first female priest and the first member of a religious order to serve St. Thomas'. Brown was succeeded by two more female priests.

During the early 2000s, St. Thomas' received a significant bequest—\$955,433—from William Cartright, a former Sr. Warden. The vestry tithed the gift by making contributions to global work in Honduras and Rwanda as well as local work, such as Meals on Wheels, Canonsburg Fire Department, and Washington City Mission. Amidst this gracious plenty, the church continued to navigate growing theological division within the Episcopal Church. In June 2003, the Rev. Cn. Gene Robinson became Bishop-elect of New Hampshire. His status as an openly gay man sparked global controversy within the Anglican Communion. Pittsburgh's bishop, Robert Duncan, became global leader among traditionalists. Under the leadership of Fr. Chuck Weiss, St. Thomas' attempted to create space for all to share the Common Cup and break bread together. Sadly, in October 2008 the majority of theological conservatives in the Diocese of Pittsburgh voted for schism. For a brief time, St. Thomas' remained the only Episcopal Church in Washington, Greene, and Fayette Counties. Nevertheless, ministry continued.

"Social distancing" became the global watchword in 2020. It was also a divisive flashpoint. The Rev. Cn. Cathy Brall and Sr. Warden Michelle Lucarelli led rapid adaptations to ensure the safety of vulnerable parishioners during this period. Suddenly, St. Thomas' offered church online! It was a period of drastic change for a small parish. There was a temporary pew reservation system to ensure all could attend church in-person monthly, an Ash Wednesday drive-thru liturgy, and Rita Senay organized numerous outreach projects to support schoolteachers, healthcare professionals, and residents of Canon House. With Covid-19 mostly in the past, St. Thomas' launched its Blessing Box ministry in 2021. This provides dry goods to neighbors in need under the rule "Take what you need. Leave what you can." In 2022, Washington County Episcopalians held a successful "Let's Be a Blessing" fundraising campaign that forgave \$1.68M in medical debt for neighbors in western PA, eastern Ohio, and northern West Virginia.

Today, St. Thomas' maintains a Broad Church *via media* (middle way) between Protestant and Catholic Christianity. Parishioners live out their Baptismal Covenants to gather for worship, resist evil, proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, serve Christ in all persons by loving our neighbors as ourselves, and striving for justice and peace among all people (BCP, 305). The congregation works and learns together while making sense of our world using Anglican theologian Richard Hooker's "three-legged stool" of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason.





St. Thomas' Episcopal Church is part of the Anglican Communion. Anglican-Episcopalian Christians include ~85 million souls in 165 countries under the titular leadership of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

This short history was prepared as part of the church's 160<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2026. For a more detailed history, look for a copy of Samuel J. Richards' book *The Middle Holds: A History of St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, Canonsburg, and the Community it Serves* (Closson Press, 2016).

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## A Quick Guide to Our Worship Space

(continued from page 4)

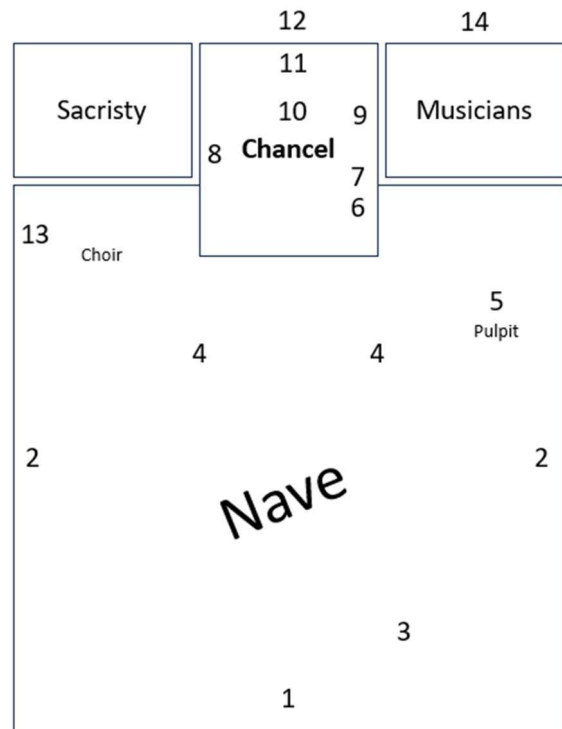
5. Many liturgical churches feature a separate pulpit and lectern. This was true of St. Thomas' Church until renovations during the 1970s. Due to the small space, the **pulpit** is used for both Scripture readings and preaching. It is normally adorned by a parament indicating the liturgical season of the church year.
6. The wooden **altar rail** is a common feature of Anglican-Episcopal Churches. During the Eucharist, it is where most communicants kneel to receive the elements. Traditionally, the altar rail and an accompanying **chancel arch** separated the nave and chancel. Prior to renovations in the 1970s, the altar rail was in line with the chancel arch. **Can you see where the altar rail was originally located?**
7. The **chancel arch** is a traditional part of ecclesiastical architecture used to separate the nave (pews) from the chancel where the altar is located. Historically, large churches, such as European cathedrals, used the nave for public secular events (markets, town meetings, etc.) while the chancel always remained set aside for the sacred. During the 1970s, the small chancel at St. Thomas' was extended beyond the chancel arch to make space for a new altar. This was in keeping with ecumenical changes as many Christians—including Roman Catholics—began celebrating communion with priests facing the congregation rather than an altar against the wall.
8. A **Sanctus Light**, or presence lamp, hangs to the left of the altar. It reminds us that we are in a holy place. When lit, it indicates reserved Sacrament is in the aumbry. Anglicans believe there is a "real presence" in the Eucharist. At different times in the history of St. Thomas' the Sanctus Light has been suspended from the center of the chancel arch and from the back left of the chancel. **Can you find the ceiling pulley used for the Sanctus Lamp prior to the 1970s?**
9. Anglican churches often feature a **credence table**. The small side table holds vessels and elements used during the Eucharist. In some churches, credence tables are used for elaborate ceremonies. In others, they are used more simply.
10. The current free-standing **altar** was installed in the 1970s. It allows the celebrant and acolytes to face the congregation during the Eucharist. An **aumbry** is built into the altar. This allows for consecrated bread and wine to be reserved for those unable to be with us during Sunday worship. Lay Eucharistic Visitors (LEVs) are able to visit them at home during the week.
11. A **bishop's chair** sits behind the altar reminding us of the church catholic. The Episcopal Church is considered a "bridge church" that is both Reformed (Protestant) and Catholic. Our name Episcopal comes from the Greek word *Epískopos* (overseer, ἐπίσκοπος), the term for bishops in New Testament Greek.
12. The **lancet window** is rich in Anglo-Catholic symbolism. It depicts Our Lord robed as High Priest and crowned as king above the Eucharistic prayer "Lift up your hearts." The seven stars in the blue firmament represent the gifts of the Holy Spirit depicted in Isaiah 11:2-2. They are wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, fortitude, piety, and wonder/awe of the Lord (wonder or awe). Three of the stars below remind worshippers of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. The remaining four represent the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance (self-control), and courage adapted from antiquity by early doctors of the church Ambrose and Augustine of Hippo. Since the mid-2000s, the window has been flanked by **worship banners** designed by Pittsburgh artist Jenny Gallo. She worked with then-rector Rev. Martha Eilertsen and children of the congregation to design the seasonal banners. They include symbols parish kids associated with baptism, communion, and eternity. Banners represent Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. In 2024, several new liturgical banners designed and sewn by Rita Senay were dedicated as part of the St. Thomas' Altar Guild's collection.
13. The **Townrow processional cross** is rarely used due to its heavy weight. It is emblazoned with "IHS" (an early Greek abbreviation of IHΣΥΣ or Jesus) and is engraved with the words "For all Thy Saints at Rest." The cross was presented to St. Thomas' Church on Easter 1914 by longtime vestry member F.W. Townrow Jr. **Take a moment to remember a saint at rest.**
14. Anglican tradition often marks the start of worship with processions. This **banner** is used to represent our church at diocesan events. The current banner was designed and made by parishioner Ann Celento in preparation for the Rt. Rev. Dorsey McConnell's 2012 consecration and ordination as VIII Bishop of Pittsburgh. **Can you see connections between the banner and any of the windows?**



# A Quick Guide to Our Worship Space

- The **largest window** in the nave was dedicated in 1951 on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the building. It honors the patron saint of our parish, Thomas the Apostle (Didymus, the twin). Features in the window summarize the life of St. Thomas. **Can you spot key features in the window?**

- **Place names** include India, Media (Azerbaijan), Persia and Parthia (Iran). Traditionally, Thomas is believed to be the earliest Christian missionary to India and the east.
- **“My Lord and My God.”** – According to the Gospel of St. John 20:24-29, Thomas was absent from the Upper Room when Jesus first appeared to the apostles after his death. As a result, Thomas questioned the event saying: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Jesus later appeared to him and Thomas acknowledged Christ with the words: “My Lord and My God!”
- **“Fear Not Thomas.”** – The apocryphal text *Acts of the Holy Apostle Thomas* reports that St. Thomas initially declared he would not go to India. The text recounts: “The savior appeared to him through the night, and said to him: Fear not, Thomas; go away to India, and proclaim the word; for my grace shall be with thee.”
- **Shield:** Our patron is symbolically depicted with a carpenter’s square and spear. These represent his role as the patron saint of builders and architects and the belief that he was killed in 72AD by a spear while praying on a hill in Mylapur near Madras (Chennai), India. **Can you spot this symbol in other places in the church?**



- The series of **stained-glass windows** in the nave, sacristy, and vestibule were installed in 1952 by Pittsburgh Stained Glass Studios. They depict Christ’s life chronologically. Each panel bears a Biblical reference and pictorial representations. Depictions include the: Annunciation, Nativity, Flight into Egypt, Boy Christ in the Temple, Baptism, Miracles, Parables, Ash Wednesday or Temptation, Entry into Jerusalem, Last Supper, Calvary, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, and Eternal Presence.
- The **baptismal font** is a constant reminder of where we started our Christian journey by accepting the baptismal covenant with the renunciation of evil and promises to proclaim by word and example the Good News, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, and to strive for justice and peace among all people (BCP, 304-305). This font is likely the one given in 1900 by the Rt. Rev. Cortlandt Whitehead, second Bishop of Pittsburgh, and first used when St. Thomas’ Mission worshiped in the Odd Fellows’ Hall on East Pike Street. Fonts are typically located toward the entryway representing our beginning as Christians as we journey toward the altar. **Where is the baptismal font located today?**
- Prie-dieu** (French: "Pray to God") are prayer desks. At St. Thomas', there are two placed at the front of our nave so worship leaders can be close to the congregation during the confession and prayers.

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