

HOLY HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE HILL OVERLOOKING ROBESONIA

1951 SUNDAY SCHOOL BUILDING ADDITION – MAKING ROOM FOR FAITH

As we previously learned, the Pavilion, a one-story frame building diagonally across the street from the church, had been serving as an educational building since shortly after the Sunday School was founded in 1920. For years – decades, in fact – the goal was to have a dedicated space. The first meeting of the Improvement Committee took place in January 1948. By 1950, Sunday School attendance had grown to approximately 250, and Superintendent Calvin Brown believed that with the right space, that number could double. With the program continuing to outgrow its available facilities, in 1950 the St. Daniel's congregation voted to build a Christian Education Building at a cost of about \$90,000 and to renovate the church interior at a cost of about \$30,000. Approximately 1/3 of the cost of construction was available before it began, thanks to proceeds from the Reading Fair Stand, the Building Fund, and the Sunday School's fundraising efforts. The contractor allowed volunteer work to be done to lower costs, and – as always – St. Daniel's members stepped up for that effort, including (among other things) moving bricks, digging lines for water pipes, lifting girders into place, and completing carpentry work for the installation of wooden ceilings and staircases.

Before it came to fruition, there was much discussion and debate over the construction activities, what exactly would be included, and for how much. The Improvement Committee, including Rev. Elmer Leisey, defined options which were discussed with an architect, Mr. Howard Eiler, which were then further refined, with several iterations of this process. Questionnaires (750 of them!) were distributed to the congregation for input regarding their wants and needs as it related to both the church remodel and the proposed Sunday School building. A big consideration for both construction requirements and associated costs was whether the Sunday School building would be a completely separate building (more expensive) or an addition to the existing church building. There were a lot of discussions about having an actual gymnasium in the Sunday School building which would even include a regulation basketball floor; after much discussion, this was dropped in February 1949. There was concern over disturbing the old graveyard, which would have legal ramifications; something Rev. Leisey really wanted to avoid. Constructing a new building next to the Sexton's house, updating the Pavilion, and tying all 3 together with a shared heating system was yet another idea. And in July 1949, a discussion was held with the Church Council of Trinity Lutheran Church in Robesonia to consider merging and constructing a new building for the combined churches; neither congregation chose to pursue the idea. The magnitude and associated cost went up and down and up and down

with several rounds of architectural drawings, but eventually it settled on a less grandiose project with a lower cost that was deemed realistically possible.

Although the congregation had hoped to avoid it, the construction project ultimately required the relocation of 19 bodies from their graves. This was necessary before excavation for the new Sunday School building could begin. Obtaining authorization was a lengthy process that took several years. Approval by the congregation on July 30, 1950, paved the way and legal permission through the Berks County Court was obtained on October 20, 1950. Tom Alexander and the Daughters of the American Revolution traced the relatives. Recommitment services were conducted on Sunday, May 6, 1951, following the regular church service, with a firing squad from the Bernville Post of the American Legion participating in honoring the Revolutionary War dead with a proper salute and the playing of Taps.

The cornerstone was laid on August 19, 1951, for the new addition to the west end of the church building, concluding the 200th Anniversary celebration of St. Daniel's founding. In an interview for the 250th anniversary, Elsie Shartle recalled that she had the honor of placing an item in the cornerstone in 1951. The Sunday School building was used for the first time on June 29, 1952. Long desiring such a space, the new building filled with students was Sunday School founder Calvin Brown's "dream come true."

The two-story brick building with a full basement could be entered indoors from the chancel of the church, from an outside entrance on St. Daniel's Road, or via a basement "tunnel" from the stairs near the church's front door. With the Sunday School building connected to the church, the large, round stained glass window depicting Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane remained visible from both sides – above the altar in the church and above the stage in the Sunday School building. Rev. David Wartluft, son of the congregation, and Robert Koch described the Sunday School building as being based conceptually on the "Akron Plan" – a popular design approach for churches and Sunday School facilities that originated in Akron, Ohio, in the late 1860s. The Sunday School building had hardwood floors and blue stained glass windows. The main floor housed the Pastor's study, church office and library, music room, stage, and a large nave, with pews for the adult classes and for openings and closings of the Sunday School at large. Nursery and Primary classes surrounded the nave and were separated from it by chalkboard partitions that could be opened to expand the entire first floor, which was especially useful for Vacation Bible School and Sunday School programs with large attendance. The ceiling of the nave was open to the second floor, with a visible balcony that wrapped around this floor. This was sectioned with additional classrooms for high school students. The

basement had space for the Junior Department classes as well as a Fellowship Hall and kitchen. Taking the place of the old Pavilion, social events and dinners are just some of the activities that took place in the Fellowship Hall, as well as bell choir and other music rehearsals.

The basement tunnel seems to have left quite an impression! Sue Ellefson recently shared that, "It always felt like a secret passageway!" Susie Zerbe added, "After choir practice and after Sunday School we would use the tunnel to go to the church. There was another short hallway that went out a door to St. Daniel's Road on the south side. You could duck in there and wait for the next people to come and jump out to scare them. If the lights were off, it was pitch black and like a dungeon with stone walls." In interviews for St. Daniel's 250th anniversary, members of the Junior Choir and others shared memories of running through the tunnel, and frequently having the lights turned off on them while they were in the tunnel. Choir member Linda Rentschler recalls being scared in the tunnel (perhaps by Susie?!).

Fun fact: there were no bathrooms in the church until renovations were made to the church at the same time as the building of the Sunday School addition. Prior to that there were outhouses located near the Pavilion (across the street!).

Later growth resulted in remodeling of the Sunday School building in the 1960s, which substantially increased the space available by converting the basement into additional classrooms. Sue Ellefson recalls it being a treat when the adults would allow the kids to help push/pull the heavy folding wall curtains that hung from ceiling tracks to section off different areas for classrooms.

The Sunday School addition was a spacious building that bustled with activity under the pastorates of Rev. Elmer Leisey and Rev. James Miller. How devastating that this long-desired facility was lost along with the church itself during the fire of December 8, 1976! Although we are fortunate to have a wealth of archival material from our 275-year history, we do not appear to have any photographs of the Sunday School building's interior, or perhaps they were lost in the fire. If you have any interior photos, we would be grateful if you would share them.

What an amazing and enduring history we share!

Follow this space throughout the year for snippets of St. Daniel's history from 1751 to 2026.

Historical details taken from the 'St. Daniel's Evangelical Lutheran Church "Eck Kirche" 1751-2001' church history book written by the St. Daniel's History Committee in

celebration of the 250th anniversary. More details regarding this topic are found in Chapter 2 – The Church Grows – Construction of the Second Church, 1814-1817 and Chapter 4 – Ministry – Sunday School and Christian Education. Additional details from Parish Records from the applicable years, Improvement Committee and Church Council meeting minutes, the Sunday School 75th Anniversary 1920-1995 booklet, and member interviews for the 250th anniversary. Personal memories provided by Sue Ellefson and Susie Zerbe. Photos from St. Daniel's archives or as noted.

**#StDaniels #StDanielsLutheranChurch #EckKirche #CornerChurch
#OnTheHillOverlookingRobesonia #RobesoniaPA #1751StDaniels2026 #275thAnniversary
#HolyHighlights #History #OurHistory #SundaySchoolBuilding #EducationalBuilding
#ChristianEducationBuilding #1951Cornerstone #SundaySchool #ReverendElmerLeisey #Fire
#ALotHappensIn275Years**

SUNDAY SCHOOL BUILDING FUND

Realizing that before very long more adequate quarters will be needed for its work, the Bible School of St. Daniel's has started a Building Fund. The only purpose of the members is to have on hand, when it is time to go ahead with this project, a sum of money sufficient to cover a large part of the expense. The Primary and Junior departments are handicapped by their quarters in the Pavillion and, if they continue to grow, must have more room. Accordingly, the school is putting aside a portion of its income for this worthy purpose and showing the growth of the fund on a chart on one of our bulletin boards.

From the 1937 Parish Record.

From the 1953 Parish Record.
View of the Sunday School building attached to the rear (west) end of the church building. Photo taken from the south side (from what is currently Heidelberg Cemetery property).



St. Daniel's - 1953



Cornerstone laying – August 19, 1951. Rev. Elmer Leisey on the right.
Photo by Owen C. Stout.



Cornerstone laying – August 19, 1951. Photo by Owen C. Stout.

ST. DANIEL'S LUTHERAN CHURCH
ROBESONIA, PENNA.

April 2nd, 1952

To Whom It May Concern:

Having received permission from the Court of the County of Berks, Judge Mays, President, to remove 19 bodies from their graves at St. Daniel's Lutheran Church, we hereby make our report.

On April 26th, 1951, the work of excavation began under the direction of the Contractor's, Daniel F. Wenger & Son of Annville, Pa.

As the operation approached each grave, the Pastor, Rev. E. L. Leisey and Supt. Calvin E. Brown, personally supervised the removal of the remains which in most cases was a black streak of earth or an occasional skull or bone. The remains were carefully placed in small coffins and buried in a row of graves as near as possible to their original location.

On May 6th, 1951, after the regular service in the church, the congregation proceeded in a body to the cemetery, where a recommitment service was conducted by the Pastor. Because some of the bodies were the Mortal Remains of Revolutionary Heroes, a firing squad of the American Legion of the Bernville Post fired the proper salute over the graves and taps was sounded by the bugler.

We have tried to comply in every way with the order of the court and submit this report in the hope that it meet with the Court's opinion.

Respectfully submitted,

ST. DANIEL'S LUTHERAN CHURCH

Robert F. Koch, Secretary

Documentation of the process that was legally required for moving graves.



A truly amazing Aerial Survey photo of the church and Sunday School building.



Sunday School Primary Department, 1952.

Sunday School Primary Department outside the Sunday School building, 1952.

ST. DANIEL'S EDUCATIONAL BUILDING EXPENSES:

Telephone	\$ 113.09
Heating and Plumbing	7,248.71
Calcite Quarry (concrete)	2,273.65
Saylor & Sons (rough lumber)	15,510.40
Glen-Gery (bricks)	1,282.72
Stohler (brick-laying)	5,984.41
Barry (excavation)	837.50
Kurtz Bros. (cement blocks)	656.05
Modern Iron Works (steel)	3,083.66
J. Minnich (equipment rental)	244.91
Mr. Wenger (contractor's fee)	2,000.00
Mr. Wenger (equipment rental)	100.00
Mr. Wenger (labor)	20,642.33
Mr. Wenger (material)	772.40
Shugart Roofing	500.00
J. M. Kase (glass)	1,206.60
Shepp (plastering)	2,575.00
Keath Planing Mill (finished lumber)	3,424.50
Wert (cast stone)	1,717.00
Merritt Lumber Yards (hardware)	1,514.00
Alvin Harting (tinsmith)	79.30
Sheeler & Son (painting)	3,197.99
Arnold (sanding)	200.00
Richards (iron grates)	261.00
Zollinger (curtains)	1,051.00
Spouting	72.43
Paint	263.98
Rockwool	336.79
Tile	624.00
Sash Balancers	108.00
Electrical Material	2,796.24
Electrical Labor	768.63
Miscellaneous Materials	168.60
	\$ 81,614.89

EXTRAS:

Keath Planing Mill (pews)	\$ 2,877.40
Mr. Eiler, architect	5,580.00
Stationery and Supplies	65.37
Dedication Program Expense	76.00
Cesspool	117.00
Water Supply	250.00
E. L. Murdough (paving walks)	285.00
Materials (miscellaneous)	100.00
Movie Screen	139.78
Interest on Bank Notes	428.33
	\$ 9,918.88

PRE-BUILDING:

Title Search	\$ 65.00
Legal Expense in Removal of Graves	55.97
Removal of 3 Poles at Church	445.00
Robeson Bank Check Book	3.71
	\$ 569.68

ST. DANIEL'S CHURCH RENOVATION EXPENSE:

Repairs to Organ Motor	\$ 15.95
C. C. Matthew (heating system)	4,600.00
Stationery and Supplies	65.37
Cesspool	117.00
Water Supply	250.00
Roy Fritz (heating and plumbing, including valve)	307.22
Calcite Quarry (concrete)	500.00
Saylor & Sons (rough lumber)	955.86
Kurtz Bros. (cement blocks)	50.00
Mr. Wenger, Contractor (materials)	161.89
Mr. Wenger, Contractor (labor)	4,662.16
J. M. Kase (glass)	800.00
Shepp (plastering)	482.81
Keath Planing Mill (chancel and choir panel)	1,741.20
Merritt Lumber Yards (hardware)	148.00
Alvin Harting (tinsmith)	12.90
Sheeler & Son (painter)	3,514.21
A. C. Klopp (cement)	32.62
Rockwool	100.00
Tile	332.80
Modern Iron	150.00
Electrical Labor	972.50
Electrical Material	1,977.71
Miscellaneous Material	99.86

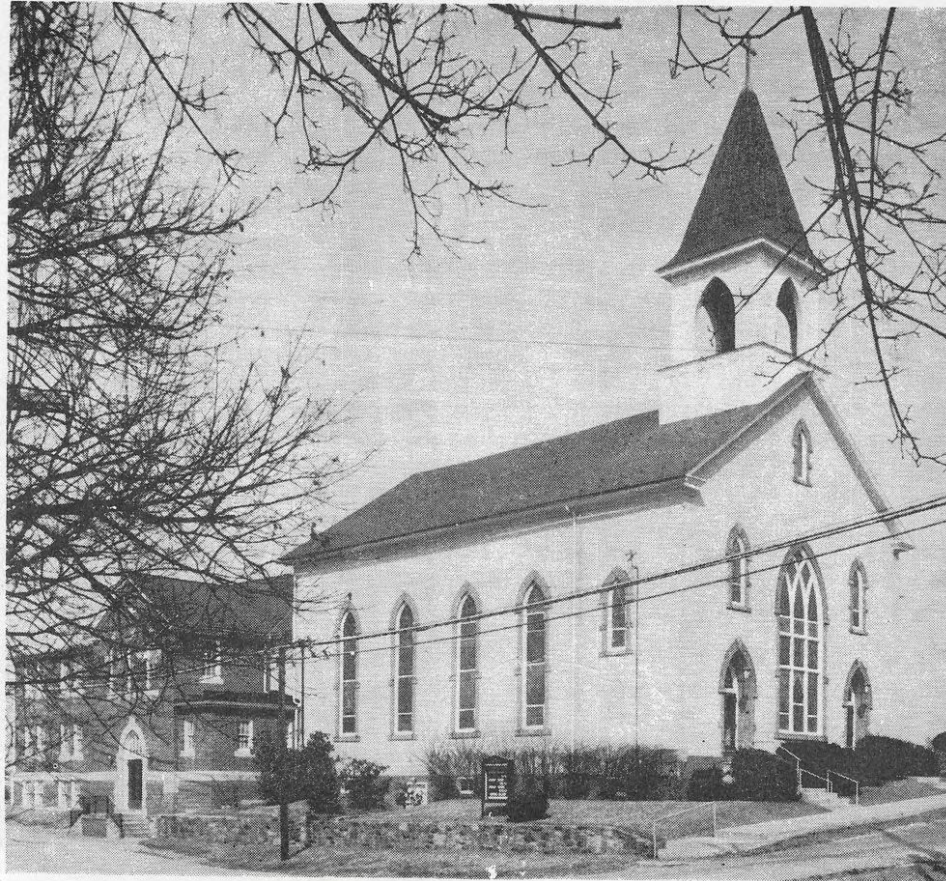
GRAND TOTAL \$ 22,050.06
\$114,153.51

ADAM F. SPOHN, JR.,
Bldg. Fund. Treasurer

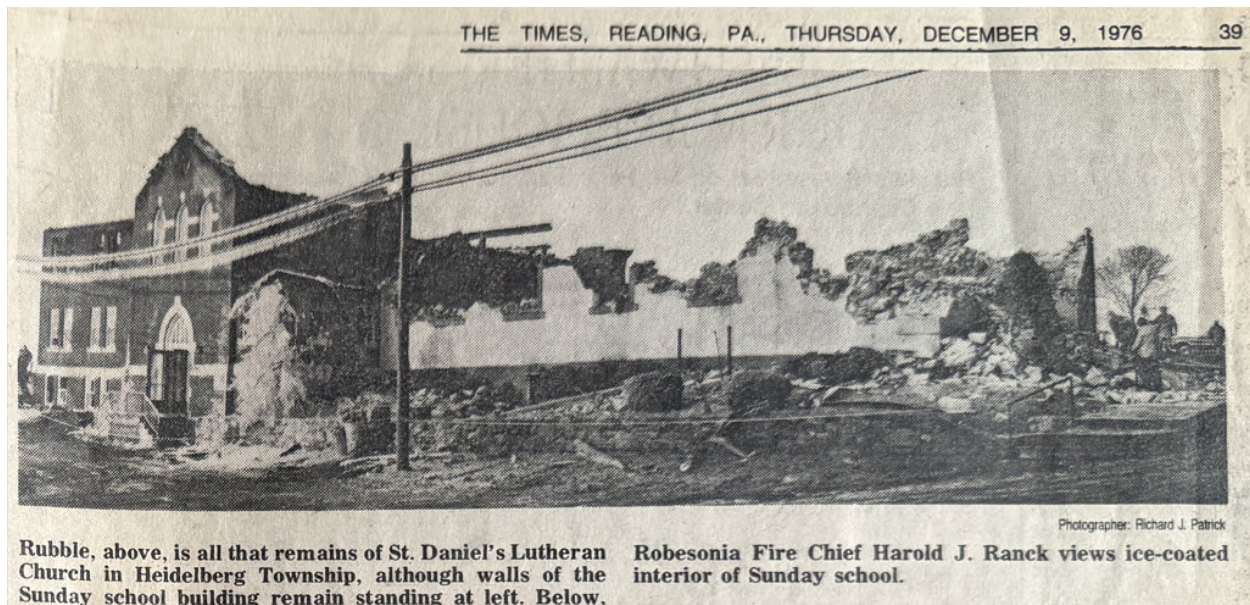
From the 1953 Parish Record.



Interior of the 2nd church building after 1964 remodeling. Note the circular stained glass window over the altar depicting Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. This was visible from the opposite side as well, in the nave of the Sunday School building. Photo by B.F. Reber Sept 24, 1964.



The church and Sunday School addition.



Reading Times photo from December 9, 1976, one day after the fire that destroyed both buildings.



The Sunday School Cornerstone was recovered from the burned church and installed near the front entrance to the current church

Photos by Kim Henning.



The time capsule box was also recovered after the fire, with some surviving contents such as newspaper articles.