

HOLY HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE HILL OVERLOOKING ROBESONIA

LET'S GET TO WORK! – THE ROAD TO RECOVERY AFTER THE FIRE

The shock and grief resulting from the fire of December 8, 1976, were far from over, but almost immediately attention turned to the future. When Pastor Edward Cloughen ended his first sermon after the fire with the words, “Let’s get to work!” the congregation of St. Daniel’s took those words to heart. There were countless decisions to be made: where to worship, how to continue the Sunday School and other ministries, what to do with the ruins, and, most importantly, how and where to rebuild. The fire had destroyed St. Daniel’s church building, but it had not destroyed St. Daniel’s. The long work of recovery had begun.

The congregation began moving forward immediately after the fire. Within 24 hours, the Church Council had decided to rebuild. Mark Wolfskill, Council President, was appointed Chairman of the Building Committee for the new church. Additional committee members were Pastor Cloughen, Thomas Alexander, Randall Bright, Richard Faust, Richard Hassler, Robert Koch, Carl Labe, Linda Preston, Harold Ranck, and Linda Rentschler. The congregation continued choir practices and Bible study sessions. And, since the fire occurred shortly before Christmas, the congregation remained committed to holding the Sunday School Christmas program and worship services for the Christmas season. Trinity Lutheran Church and St. Paul’s UCC in Robesonia offered their facilities so St. Daniel’s schedule could continue uninterrupted.

In the days after the fire, once insurance investigators had completed their survey, church members participated in a cleanup campaign in an effort to salvage anything of value that might remain buried in the rubble. Harold Ranck, Mark Wolfskill, Richard Hassler, Carl Labe, Pastor Cloughen, and others literally dug through the ruins for anything that might be saved. The men eventually unearthed what remained of the church bell. The cornerstones of the church buildings – dated 1751-1814, 1911, and 1951 for the Sunday School building – were also retrieved. All were eventually laid in the foundation of the new [current] church building. Throughout the day of the fire and in the days that followed, members gathered at the sexton’s home across from the church to salvage books, equipment, and furniture, then cleaned soot-covered items in the parsonage yard or took them home for cleaning. The remaining debris was removed from the site.

St. Daniel’s members were not alone in the test that lay before them, but were supported by other congregations, the church at large, and the community. The Conrad Weiser School Board agreed on a rental fee of \$30 per Sunday for use of the high school starting in January 1977, which was \$10 less than the district’s regular rental fee. Elsie Shartle, St. Daniel’s

Director of Christian Education in 1976, utilized donated Bibles and Sunday School literature for classes that met in the foyer and hallways of the school. Over the next year, Lenten services and a Thanksgiving Eve service were held at Bethany Chapel at the Bethany Children's Home in Womelsdorf. Trinity Lutheran Church in Reading gave St. Daniel's a loan of \$50,000, plus choir gowns, hymnals, and other things needed for worship. Several local congregations combined efforts in a matching funds project, with the money going to St. Daniel's building fund.

To help finance the rebuilding and pay the debt, the congregation held a public sale in April 1977 of salvaged equipment as well as other items donated by the congregation. Some of the items included 115 folding chairs, banquet tables, coat racks, bookshelves, kitchen equipment, and toilets. Members also developed creative fundraising projects using materials recovered from the fire. Melted portions of the church bell were made into miniature bells, while the largest intact portion – about one-third of the original bell – was later erected in the Memorial Garden, where it still hangs. Herbert Stump, a pattern maker, created a wooden pattern for the miniature bells. Cleaver Wartluft and Richard Hassler took the metal fragments to Crescent Brass, a foundry in Reading, to be cast. The Williams Brass Company polished the castings, and Joseph Bechtel made wooden stands for them. Approximately 257 bells were produced and sold for \$25 each. In another project, Richard Faust made stained glass crosses from blue glass recovered from the windows of the Sunday School building. A testament to their enduring significance, many current members still treasure the bells and crosses they have kept for decades. One of each is included in our archives and currently on display.

The determination of the congregation to move forward and start anew resulted in the building of a new church. An architect and a builder were hired and, after discussing and debating the options, in February 1977 the congregation decided to build the new church on the site of the parsonage. The new church was dedicated on November 5, 1978, about one month short of two years from the date of the fire.

The devastation of December 8, 1976, gave way to an enduring spirit of unity and service among the members. That unity, together with the capable leadership of the Rev. Edward Cloughen and Church Council President Mark Wolfskill, strengthened the congregation throughout its recovery. The events of that day continued to shape St. Daniel's long after the ashes had cooled and the buildings had been replaced.

Now, fifty years later, as St. Daniel's celebrates its 275th anniversary, the events of 1976 stand as a powerful reminder of the resilience of this congregation. The fire destroyed nearly everything within the church and Sunday School buildings, yet it did not end the

story of St. Daniel's. Perhaps just as extraordinary is how much of that story survived. Photographs, documents, records, newspaper clippings, and other pieces of our history endured and have been preserved through the decades, allowing us today to tell not only the story of the fire, but so many chapters of St. Daniel's long and storied history.

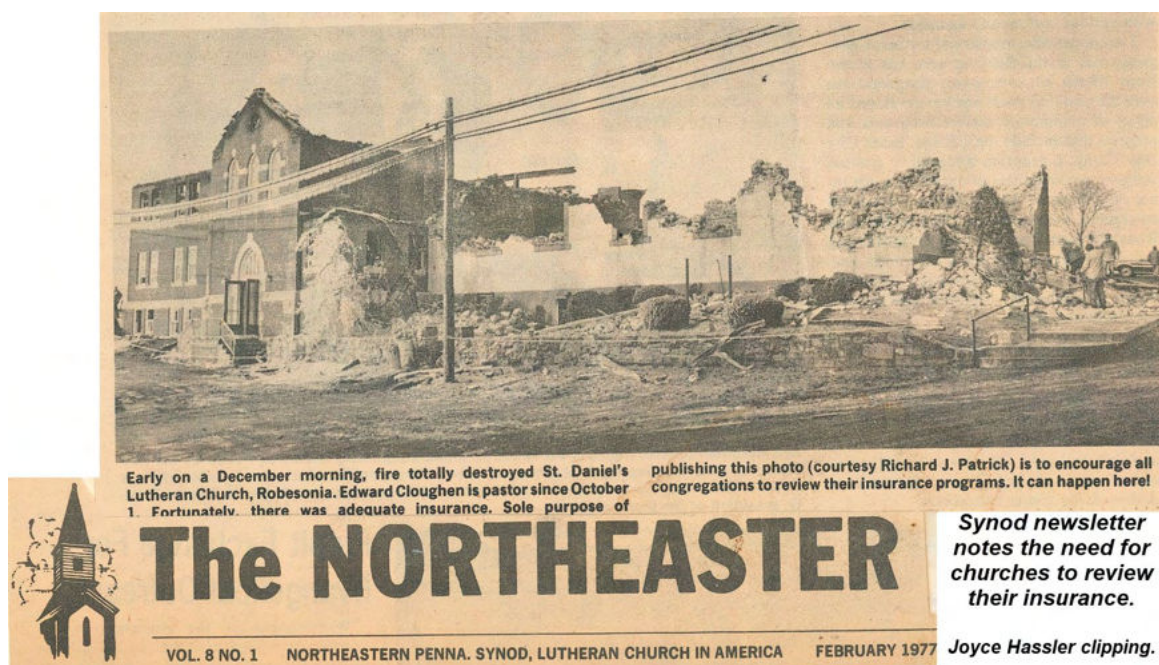
The buildings were lost, but the "Church with a capital C" – and remarkably, so much of its story – survived.

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. Additional details from member interviews for the 250th anniversary and from 2026 conversations with Joyce Hassler and Nancy Wolfskill. The majority of photos and newspaper clippings are from albums owned by Margie Baerncopf, Joyce Hassler, and Nancy Wolfskill. Remaining photos from St. Daniel's archives or as noted.

**#StDaniels #StDanielsLutheranChurch #EckKirche #CornerChurch
#OnTheHillOverlookingRobesonia #RobesoniaPA #1751StDaniels2026 #275thAnniversary
#HolyHighlights #History #OurHistory #ChurchFire #8December1976
#ReverendEdwardCloughen #LetsGetToWork #Rebuild #MiniBells #StainedGlassCrosses
#ChurchWithACapitalC #ALotHappensIn275Years**





Recovering the church bell from the ruins.
Photos above and below courtesy Nancy Wolfskill



Pastor Cloughen watches as the bell is pulled from the rubble



Richard Hassler, Harold Ranck, Mark Wolfskill



Photo from St. Daniel's archives



Bell in Mark Wolfskill's truck - Joyce Hassler photo

THE READING EAGLE

Volume 9, No. 34

Dec. 11, 1976

This Week's News in Review



FLAMES DESTROY CHURCH — The above photo of St. Daniel's (Corner) Lutheran Church in Heidelberg Township, north of Robesonia, as it appeared before a fire reduced the historic structure and its Sunday school building to rubble, as is evidenced by the photo below. Organized in 1751, the church celebrated its 225th anniversary in September. — Eagle Photo.



BELL RECOVERED — A 1911 bell has been recovered at St. Daniel's (Corner) Lutheran Church which was destroyed by fire in early December. An inscription on the bell says: "This bell was erected 1911, St. Daniel's Lutheran Church, Heidelberg Township, Pa. In December A.D. 1911, To the greater glory of God to come, let us worship. Rev. O. E. Plueger, pastor; Jonathan Sturm, building committee treasurer."

Worship Continues

Cornerstones Opened

The congregation of St. Daniel's (Corner) Lutheran Church in Heidelberg Township didn't have a church this Christmas, but services were still held Christmas Eve at the Conrad Weiser High School auditorium.

The congregation's church was destroyed by fire in early December. The exact cause of the fire is still under investigation.

After the Christmas Eve service, members of the congregation witnessed the opening and removal of contents from a box in a 1951 church school cornerstone.

Because the box was not sealed, many of the items inside the box had disintegrated. However, two copies of the Reading Eagle, dated

Aug. 15, 1951, and Aug. 20, 1951, were still in fair condition.

Another lead box from the church cornerstone which had the dates 1751, 1814 and 1911 was also opened. Many of the items had partially disintegrated, but they were in better

condition than the items in the 1951 cornerstone.

According to records, the items were better preserved because when they were placed inside the box in 1911 the box was sealed.

A copy of the Reading Eagle, dated April 29, 1911,

was in the box in fair condition.

Also, on display at the service was the church bell which toppled through the roof of the church during the fire.

The bell was erected in 1911 and was the first bell of the church.

Reading Eagle article, December 27, 1976.
Joyce Hassler clipping.



Continued cleanup of the site. Joyce Hassler photos.



Members sift through the rubble.



The former church site has been cleared.

Photos from St. Daniel's archives.



Reading Eagle article - February 21, 1977
Joyce Hassler clipping



Reading Eagle article - February 10, 1977
Joyce Hassler clipping



Reading Eagle article - June 1, 1977
Joyce Hassler clipping



The public sale was held on the parking lot facing N. Church Street that is now a grassy area at the base of the Heidelberg Cemetery property. The church was located where the flat area of dirt is in the upper left of the photo.



Joyce Hassler photos.

Need a toilet or 4?



Joyce Hassler works the sale.



PUBLIC SALE
Saturday, April 16, 1977
10:00 A.M.

LOCATED 2 MILE NORTH OF ROBESONIA, ON NORTH CHURCH STREET, ON ST. DANIEL'S LUTHERAN CHURCH PARKING LOT.

115 Metal Folding Chairs; 11 Banquet Tables (96" x 36"), Badly Damaged; 84 Small Wooden Chairs With Padded Seats; 9 Round Formica Topped Tables; 1 Wall Mirror (22" x 28"); 1 Wall Mirror (36" x 50"); 1 Toy Chest/Bookcase; 3 Metal Hat/Coat Racks (Wall Mounted); 2 Metal Chair Carriers (50 Chair Capacity); Bookshelves (3 Shelf), Two 42", One 60", Two 72"; 1 Table, 48" Long, 24" Wide, 18" High; 2 Metal Window Ventilators; Miscellaneous Books; 1 Homemade Bench, 9 1/4'; Assorted Christmas Decorations; 1 End Table; 1 Baby Jump Seat; 1 Wheelchair; 2 Wooden Nail Barrels; 1 Steam Iron; 1 Six Volt Car Sweeper; 1 Light Duty Craftsman Vibrator Sander; 1 York Safe, 70" High, 28" Deep, 31" Wide; 4 White Aluminum Storm Windows (32" x 60"); 12 Hot Water Convector (Various Sizes From 20" To 32"); 1 Banquet Table Carrier; 16 Solid Exterior/Interior Doors, Many With Hydraulic Closers And Hardware (30" x 84"); 1 Easel; 5 Wooden Folding Chairs; 1 24" Exhaust Fan With Stainless Steel Hood, 92"; 1 Electric Water Cooler; 5 Glass Globe Lights (Ceiling); 9 Flush Ceiling Lights (Good Condition); 8 Flush Ceiling Lights (Fire Damaged); 6 Heavy-duty Reading Door Closers; Lot Of Brass Hinges; 1 Condensation Pump (1 1/4 Years Old); 285 Gallon Underground Gas Tank; 5 Wooden Handrails, Various Sizes From 46" To 8'6"; 1 14-breaker Square Diamond Electric Switch Box; 1 China Washbowl; 4 China Commodes With Water Tanks; 1 36" Wall-mounted Fluorescent Light; 1 Porcelain Janitor Sink; 2 Radios; 2 Children's Snow Sleds; 1 Stepladder; 1 Girl's Schwinn Bicycle With Training Wheels; 1 Royal Manual Typewriter With Long Carriage; 1 RCA Black & White TV, Like New; 1 Gincio Hot Water Boiler - Burnham Oil Burner, Water Circulator, 3 Or 4 Cast-iron Radiators & Pipe Connections; Matching Kitchen Cabinets - Top: One 4', One 5', One 56" . Base Cabinets: One 3', One 6', One 9'; Assorted Picture Frames; Assorted Dishes; 1 Aluminum Storm Door With Screens, Pre-hung, 78" x 32"; 2 Film Strip Projectors; 1 4' x 4' Christmas Tree Platform; 1 30-gallon Molasses Barrel (Wooden); 1 Myers Jet 1/2 Horsepower 110/220 Volt Water Pump.

All Items To Be Donated For Sale Will Be Received On Friday, April 15, 1977, From 4:30 P.M. Until Dark And On Saturday, April 16, 1977, From 7 A.M. Until Sale Time.
 SALE TIME: 10:30 A.M.

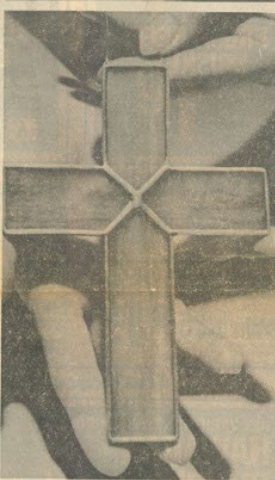
Conditions By:
PROPERTY COMMITTEE

Bixler & Kramer, Auctioneers
 Lunch By L.C.W.
 Not Responsible For Accidents.



Mementos Created

Members of St. Daniel's Lutheran Church, Robesonia R.D. 1, are using material salvaged from the church building, which was destroyed by fire in December 1976, to produce mementos of the structure. Above, Herbert J. Stump of Church Road, Wernersville, displays a pattern he made for a small bell. The inscription is, "Eck Kirche 1751-1976 St. Daniel's." At right, Richard Hassler, a building committee member, holds a piece of the former large bell, a section of which will be placed in a memorial kiosk at the former church site. The cross, below, was made by Richard Foust, 127 Wernersville Blvd., Wernersville, from glass of windows in the Christian education building. — Eagle Photos by Owen C. Stout.



Reading Eagle photo
Joyce Hassler clipping



Church Makes Miniature Bells

Mr. and Mrs. Richard Hassler, Robesonia, examine more than 200 miniature bells that were made from the metal of the original church bell partially destroyed in the fire in December 1976 in St. Daniel's Lutheran Church, Robesonia R.D. Packed with each bell is a printed story of the history of the former bell. — Eagle Photo by Owen C. Stout.

Reading Eagle photo – October 16, 1978
Joyce Hassler clipping



Photos by Kim Henning



Posted to Facebook by Kim Henning
September 10, 2026

This bell is a replica of the church bell which was in use at St. Daniel's from the time it was installed in December 1911 until it was destroyed on December 8, 1976, when the tower collapsed and the bell fell into the burning church. When the bell was recovered, one-third was found intact, and this portion is hanging in the kiosk at the memorial site where the old church stood. The remaining two-thirds of the bell was a mass of melted metal from which 257 such replicas were made. The pattern for these replicas was designed and constructed by Herbert J. Stumpf, a member of the congregation, and a descendant of Jonathan Stumpf.

The church bell was purchased from Menelly and Company, Waterveleit, New York. The price of the bell was 31 cents per pound and the weight 1,800 pounds. There was a charge of \$80.00 for mounting and a 10% discount on the entire bill. The total cost of the bell was \$574.20.

The inscription on the bell was as follows:
"This bell was erected 1911, St. Daniel's Lutheran Church, Heidelberg Township, Pa. In December A. D. 1911, To the greater glory of God to come, let us worship. Rev. O. E. Pfeuger, pastor, Jonathan Stumpf, building committee treasurer."



Artifact: A piece of melted and twisted glass from a stained glass window. From the Ranck family.

Artifacts salvaged from the ruins – these are displayed in the cabinet in the Narthex.

Photos by Kim Henning



Mangled Communion tray. There appears to be a glass melted in the tray – look at the bottom center of the photo.



2 offering plates melted together



Hymnal with water and fire damage



Medallion; uncertain of its source



Bible stand missing the platform