

DESCRIPTION

With its cornerstone laid October 10, 1882 and dedication February 10, 1884, the First Universalist Church of Sharpsville is located at 131 N. Mercer Avenue, in the Borough of Sharpsville, Mercer County, Pennsylvania. Of modest dimensions (52' x 42' overall), yet richly decorated, this brick and stone church is built in the Victorian Eclectic style. Complementing its auditorium-style sanctuary, the layout follows the "Akron plan" of church design. (In its broadest sense, the Akron plan refers to creation of adaptable space by connecting Sunday school classrooms to a common auditorium and/or the sanctuary, most typically, by means of sliding or folding doors or partitions.) The building is little changed both in overall form and in architectural detailing.

The building stands near the center of the Sharpsville's commercial district, on the east side of a block once dominated by the magnificent 30-room Pierce Mansion. That brick Second Empire style mansion, completed in 1875, was razed in 1952, with public housing built in its place. The block is completed by two dwellings in addition to the church parsonage, which stands to the north of the church. The parsonage, a two-story frame dwelling with Queen Anne features, was built in 1888.¹ Urban renewal projects of the mid-1950s to mid-1970s replaced much of the commercial construction in the surrounding area. A notable relic stands across the street, eastwards, from the church: the Italianate three-story brick Iron Banking Co. building (1871). On the other hand, the stock of neighboring 19th century houses remains intact, including the Second-Empire 16-room frame Jonas Pierce House (1863, National Register), standing to the southeast of the church.

Resting on a rusticated sandstone foundation, the church is constructed of red pressed brick, vibrantly contrasted with Amherst bluestone trim. The gothic arches are constructed of alternating voussoirs of brick and stone. Stone stringcourses are used across the main body of the church as well as the steeple. Saddle-backed stone coping carved with complex geometric motifs sits atop brick pilasters while stone pillars with carved gothic capitals frame doorways and windows. A stone gable decoration is filled with dogtooth carving. The polychrome effect is continued with, according to a contemporary report, use of black and red roof slate.² Unfortunately, the slates have all been covered over by roofing compound so the pattern cannot now be discerned. The color variation is likely to have followed the alternating horizontal bands of square and bevel shingles. Crenated tin cresting is used on the roof ridges.

Two of the four chimneys are placed on opposite sides of the church along its central axis. They emerge nine-feet from the ground, where they are corbelled-out from the wall and are each pierced by a lancet window. The decorative brickwork is continued in the upper parts of all four chimneys as well as in the corbelling and serrated molding beneath the cornices of the middle and lower roofs of the steeple. A quatrefoil stone medallion, carved with the

¹ *History of Sharpsville, Pennsylvania*, (Sharpsville, Pa.: Diamond Jubilee Committee, 1949), p. 31. Occupied for many years as a rental dwelling, the parsonage lacks integrity due to extensive alterations and overall poor condition. The exterior has been covered with insulbrik, porch pillars and millwork have been removed, and several windows are boarded up in places corresponding with interior alterations.

² *The Sharon Herald*, 22 February 1884 edition, which gives a detailed description of the church overall.

church's name, appears over the doorway.

The first stage of the steeple, also brick trimmed with stone and with louvered windows in the belfry it contains, sits atop the tower base (which contains the vestibule and bell loft), separated from it on four sides by a hipped skirt roof. The wooden second stage of the steeple is painted white and employs serrated molding, two rows of nailhead bosses, and a row of gothic arches as decoration. A truncated roof with a dual-pitch—first shallow, then steep—divides the two stages. A steeply-pitched hipped roof, terminating in about a four-foot ridge, completes the steeple. Linked hip knobs of galvanized iron are placed atop this ridge.

The interior consists of a sanctuary with small chancel, a Sunday school room, and a vestibule. A staircase, in cherry, leads from the vestibule to the bell loft. The basement, originally unfinished, was remodeled after 1945 with carpeting, plywood paneling, and a few partition walls. Except for stained glass windows, the bell loft is unfinished.

A wide rectangle, beveled at the corners, forms the auditorium-style sanctuary. Entrance from the vestibule is through the diagonal wall at the south-east corner, with the organ offset on the diagonal wall at the opposite corner. Curved pews, arranged in three sections separated by two aisles, radiate from the centrally-aligned chancel. While not confined to Akron plan churches, auditorium-style sanctuaries usually accompanied such a layout. The chief characteristic of the Akron plan *per se*—the adaptable communication between the Sunday school space and the sanctuary—is shown here with the use of a large four-sectioned folding door to divide the wide passage between the sanctuary and Sunday school room.

Four-foot high wainscoting of red oak beadboard in red oak frames runs throughout the sanctuary and Sunday school room. Above the wainscoting, the walls are plastered and painted. The camp ceiling of the sanctuary is paneled in the same way, with the addition of a large heavily-carved black walnut center rosette. The windows and doorways, likewise of red oak, have very deep paneled reveals; trim is reeded and moulded with bulls-eye corner blocks. The original Eastlake brass door and window hardware is intact. The 12-foot high folding door between the sanctuary and Sunday school room, like the other interior doors, is walnut. The pews are curved, thick-dimensional black walnut with carved decoration on the end panels.

The pipe organ, built by the Pomplitz Co. of Baltimore as Opus 227, is original to the church. Its red oak casing echoes the paneling of the wainscoting and doorway reveals, with the addition of carved black walnut decorative inlays. The organ retains its original stoplist and tracker.³

Of the thirty stained glass windows (either fixed or double hung), most are composed of hammered rolled cathedral glass in patterns ranging from simple geometric designs to more complex floral motifs and Christian symbols with occasional jewels. More attention is given to the window groupings in the chancel and on its opposite wall in the Sunday school room. Here a painted gospel scene is the focus of each lancet window; within the rectangular and quarter round

³ Frank Stearns, "Mercer County's Oldest Pipe Organ," *Mercer County History* 8 (1978): pp. 14-17.

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windows which flank the lancets, opalescent glass predominates. Pride of place, however, belongs to the flashed ruby glass which makes up the two quatrefoil windows placed toward the peak of each side wall. One window is inscribed "In memory of James Pierce by his wife". The other is inscribed "In memory of Nathan Morford [who was representative for Mercer County to the Pennsylvania Legislature 1872-4] by his wife". The maker of the stained glass is not known.

Against the diagonal wall to the right of the chancel is a walk-in baptistry, which is encased in the original wainscoting (taken from the wall behind). Its welded steel tank appears to date from around the 1945 purchase of the building by the Seventh Day Adventists, though old-timers' recollections indicate this may merely have been a renovation of a baptistry installed much earlier. A passageway through the original exterior wall leads into the baptistry from a small enclosed stairwell to the basement.

The church was originally illuminated by gas, since there remain two gas light fixtures, plus, mounted on the organ case, two electric fixtures which appear to be converted gas lamps. Electric ceiling fixtures now provide illumination; the hanging lights in the sanctuary are a common 20th century ecclesiastical style.

Despite its age, the church is well preserved inside and out. The brick- and stone-work is in sound condition, with no significant discoloration. The original slate roof remains. Unfortunately, the entire roof has been coated with roofing compound (black on the main roof, silver on the steeple roofs), obscuring the bi-chrome pattern of the roofing slates. An unobtrusive 5' x 9' foot brick addition to enclose the entrance to the walk-in baptistry was constructed after 1945, and is thought to have replaced an earlier enclosure. A wooden wheelchair-access ramp, leading to the Sunday school room's exterior entrance, was added in 1997. Two of the four chimneys have been shortened by eight brick courses. Presumably to cover an opening, a white piece of plywood covers the rear side of the second stage of steeple. In all other respects, the exterior is unchanged from its original appearance.

The woodwork and church furnishings retains its original finish and shows only minor marring. All original door and window trim is intact. While the walk-in baptistry is not original, it is consonant with the layout of the sanctuary: Encased in the original wainscoting, it flanks the chancel to the east, balancing the organ placed to the chancel's west. The walls are painted white, which covers the original color of tan; it is not known whether the walls contained any painted decoration. The vestibule flooring is hexagonal tile, with wood flooring elsewhere. These floors have been painted (burnt sienna), and have since been covered with commercial-grade carpeting. The church retains its original bell, which is still rung by a rope.

Mechanical systems have been added. The current electrical wiring was installed in 1981, with traces of the original knob-and-tube wiring (which dates after the 1897 electrification of the Borough) remaining. Short runs of wall mounted electrical conduit appears in the Sanctuary and Sunday school room. Suspended lighting fixtures and ceiling fans have been added. A furnace was

planned shortly after the building's construction⁴, though a modern gas forced-air furnace now provides heat. A heating duct runs along the north wall of the Sunday school room, with two wall and two floor registers in the sanctuary.

The stained glass is largely intact. While one of the 30 windows has been replaced with clear glass, in the remaining windows less than 2% of the over 2500 panes have been replaced or currently show cracks. Unfortunately, only three out of eight of the ruby glass lobes of the quatrefoil windows remain (the rest replaced with ordinary red stained glass); the opalescent glass, on the other hand, is almost completely intact. Finally, the Pomplitz organ remains in excellent condition and is played regularly. Its only alteration has been replacement of the hand pump with an electrical one.⁵

In sum, modern changes and physical wear are minor and detract but little from the building's character. The Akron plan layout with auditorium-style sanctuary, as well as the late Victorian decoration, interior and exterior, are essentially unchanged from their 1884 appearance.

⁴ *The Sharon Herald*, 22 February 1884 edition.

⁵ Stearns, pp. 14-17.

SIGNIFICANCE

The First Universalist Church of Sharpsville is a locally important example of late Victorian church architecture, reflecting high-style influences and the development of new trends in the design of church interiors. Significant for these architectural merits, the building qualifies under criterion C, and meets the requirements for criteria consideration A, for religious properties.

This church, both the congregation and the building, owes its foundation to the fortune and influence of “General” James Pierce and his family; their importance to the history of Sharpsville is paramount.⁶ A native of New Hampshire, General Pierce came to the area in 1847. At that time, Sharpsville was a small village of about twelve houses with a small sawmill, gristmill, and a canal lock. By the year of Pierce’s death in 1874, Sharpsville was incorporated as a borough, and, owing principally to his enterprises, had become a leading iron producer in the nation. Pierce, and later his sons, owned seven of the town’s nine blast furnaces, as well as Sharpsville’s bank, newspaper, and railway.

Starting in 1870, James Pierce invited Universalist ministers from Erie and Crawford counties to preach occasionally at Sharpsville. Through the family’s influence, the nucleus of a congregation was gathered in a meeting-hall, Pierce Hall, and on January 31, 1875, 28 members were formally organized as a congregation. Far from the denomination’s New England center, and on the outskirts of areas populated by Universalist churches, this remained the only church of this faith in Mercer County. For over the next thirty years, sons of James Pierce would serve as lay officials of the church.⁷ The lot for the church was donated by James’ widow, Chloe, and she funded “the larger part” of its construction. Their sons funded the construction of the parsonage in 1888.⁸ Moreover, there was a close alliance with the denomination’s college at Akron, Ohio, Buchtel College (now the University of Akron), founded in 1870. The Pierces endowed a professorship there, and James was one of its original trustees.⁹ The president of Buchtel, Dr. Orello Cone, preached the sermon at the laying of the cornerstone and the dedication of the Sharpsville church.¹⁰

Never a large congregation¹¹, the church membership ultimately waned, with services ceasing about 1923.¹² No Universalist congregation has existed in the county since. Except as

⁶ The 1888 *History of Mercer County, Pennsylvania* (Chicago: Brown, Runk & Co.), p. 843 says of James: “No man has ever lived in the Shenango Valley who is more worthy of a place in the pages of history”. J.G. White’s 1909 *Twentieth Century History of Mercer County* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co.) places him at the head of the biographical sketches and praises his continuing influence over thirty years after his death.

⁷ White, v. I, p. 283.; v. II, p. 931.

⁸ *History of Mercer County* (1888), p. 454.

⁹ *History of Mercer County* (1888), p. 845.

¹⁰ *The Sharon Herald*, 6 October 1882 and 22 February 1884 editions.

¹¹ Available membership numbers available are: 28 (1875), 30 (1876), 33 (1877)—per Samuel W. Durant, *History of Mercer County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: L.H. Everts & Co., 1877), p. 120; and 49 (1888)—per *History of Mercer County* (1888), p. 454.

¹² *History of Sharpsville*, p. 31. Note this mirrored the decline in Universalists nationwide, when “several hundred churches were abandoned before 1940”. (See Nelson R. Burr, *A Critical Bibliography of Religion in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), v. 4, p. 217.)

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a temporary home for the Presbyterians in 1929 and as a USO hall during World War II, the church building lay vacant until 1945 when it was purchased by a Seventh-Day Adventist congregation.¹³ In 2000, the building was sold to the Sharpsville Area Historical Society.

As a solid example of the distinctive characteristics of Victorian Eclectic architecture, the First Universalist Church of Sharpsville is a well developed expression of 19th century church architecture within its locality, the Shenango Valley. Even in its day, the church was recognized as a showpiece. The 1888 *History of Mercer County* called it “a handsome structure, probably second to none in the county”.¹⁴

The building bears witness to the ornamental exuberance that marked High Victorian architecture. Most striking is the polychrome decoration, in the voussoirs of the arches, the stone stringcourses, and in the black and red roof slates. Ruskinian Gothic influence is likewise reflected in the use of a steeply-pitched hip roof to cap the steeple. Exterior details contribute to the ornamental effect: the stone carving—in the pilaster coping, the capitals, and the gable decoration; and the brickwork—in the corbelling beneath the cornice of the steeple stages and at the chimney bases and tops. The exterior decorative scheme is completed by the roof ornaments.

Decoration is continued inside with a liberal use of stained glass. This also represents an early use of opalescent glass, during its first wave of popularity, following its patent in 1880. Generous use of woodwork is shown in the wainscot and ceiling paneling, door and window framing, and the curved pews. The curved pews also help define the auditorium-style sanctuary, a feature that rose to prominence in the 1870s and 80s.¹⁵

Aspirations to a high-style building are shown by the pipe organ as well. It likely the second organ built in Mercer County, and is certainly its oldest surviving instrument. A fine example of the work of an important nineteenth-century builder, the Pomplitz organ is listed on the registry of the Organ Historical Society. It also represents a personal connection with the Pierces, since their son James had married in 1880 Albertine Pomplitz, daughter of the firm's owner. Moreover, a plaque affixed to the organ dedicates it to the memory of Abida Holbrook Boles, sister of Chloe Pierce.¹⁶

The special attention given to the building is likewise shown by the use of gas lighting which pre-dated the introduction of municipal gas service by nearly twenty years.¹⁷ By this time, electricity was used for illumination. Recollections of the adjacent Pierce mansion,

¹³ *History of Sharpsville*, p. 31.

¹⁴ *History of Mercer County* (1888), p. 454.

¹⁵ Jeanne Halgren Kilde, “Spiritual Armories: A Social and Architectural History of Neo-Medieval Auditorium Churches in the U.S., 1869-1910.” (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1991), p. 100, and Kenneth E. Rowe, “Redesigning Methodist Churches: Auditorium-Style Sanctuaries and Akron Plan Sunday Schools in Romanesque Costume 1875-1925,” in *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission and Identity*, Russell Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, & William B. Lawrence, eds. (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1997), pp. 121-3, 127-8.

¹⁶ Stearns, pp. 14-17.

¹⁷ *History of Sharpsville*, p. 24.

though, indicate it had gas lighting—apparently by means of an artificial gas machine on site.¹⁸ The church presumably had its own gas machine or tapped into the mansion's.

The significance of the First Universalist's architecture can be gauged against other churches of the era within the Shenango Valley (Sharpsville, Sharon, Farrell, Hermitage, Wheatland, West Middlesex, and the townships of Shenango and South Pymatuning). Here, the earliest churches, built during the first half of the 19th century, were either log or simply-fashioned frame buildings.¹⁹ None still stand. During the second half of the century, as the area's wealth increased and population grew, these pioneer congregations were able to build more suitable churches. Population increase also brought with it additional denominations and Welsh and German congregations of existing denominations. Local historic context is provided by the nine remaining 19th century churches within the Shenango Valley.²⁰

The earliest extant church in the Shenango Valley, the West Middlesex Methodist Episcopal (1861), was one of the first of the more permanent and church-like buildings. Measuring 45' x 70', this brick church has a rather shallow pitched roof and a somewhat squat steeple. Besides its Gothic-arched windows, the only ornamentation is the corbie-stepped brick frieze. An organ and stained glass were 20th century additions; a two-story brick educational wing was added in 1957.

More common were frame churches, such as the First Baptist of Sharpsville (1872) and St. Paul's German Reformed (1874) in Sharon. These were clapboarded with simple steeples placed at the front and center of a rectangular plan and little ornamentation except for Gothic-arched windows. Both have had two-story additions in the rear; the Baptist church's dating from 1915. The First Baptist is now vinyl-sided and the central steeple replaced with a corner tower; St. Paul's has since lost its spire.

Sharpsville's First Presbyterian (1882), First Methodist Episcopal (1886), and Grace Reformed (1890) churches were more complex frame buildings, each with a cross-gable plan, corner entry, and multi-stage steeples, as well as greater use of Gothic-revival elements. The First Presbyterian has since been converted to a flat-roofed, four-unit apartment building and is now unrecognizable as a church. The First Methodist has been bricked over, had its steeples shortened and an educational wing added; the Grace Reformed has a large two-story brick addition from 1929 and has lost its spire. On the other hand, the Sharpsville Free Methodist (1888) hearkened back to the humble churches of earlier years; it is a simple gabled building without steeple or

¹⁸ John J. Morrison, "The Pierce Family," *Mercer Co. History* 13 (1987): p. 30.

¹⁹ These buildings are poorly documented but *History of Mercer County* (1888) and White contain several references to log churches, a church referred to as "the barn", one church later sold as a storehouse, and one sold as a dwelling. In addition, several early congregations met in schoolhouses, rectories or other denomination's churches prior to being able to build their own house of worship.

²⁰ A list of 19th century churches in the Shenango Valley was compiled from Durant; *History of Mercer County* (1888); White; Roscoe C. Wilson, comp., *One Hundred and Fifty Years of Methodism* [1959]; and the 1901 T.M. Fowler birds'-eye views of Sharpsville and Sharon. These were checked against, and an exterior inspection made of, the 106 present-day churches compiled from telephone-, city-, and newspaper church service directories.

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ornamentation. It was moved in 1904 and has since been converted to apartments.

The nearest comparison with the First Universalist is the First Baptist of Sharon (1884), a handsome High Victorian brick Gothic Revival church with a pointed spire, completed just five months after the Sharpsville church.²¹ It, too, contrasts stone with brick, in alternating voussoirs and plain beveled pilaster coping, but lacks the stringcourses and is on the whole more restrained, owing to its greater expanses of plain brick. Except for a gable decoration, carved stone ornament is lacking; decorative brickwork is likewise minimal. The amount of stained glass, three rose windows and six side windows, rivals the Universalist. No organ was originally included. The church does have a diagonally-oriented auditorium-style sanctuary fitted into the original nave. This was a later addition as evidenced by a sloping floor which overlays the original floor.²² There is no Akron plan Sunday school room. A large modern educational wing is attached.

The cost of the First Universalist is perhaps the most objective measure of the architectural ambitions that Sharpsville's prosperity enabled. Of the sixteen local 19th century churches for which costs are known, only two exceeded \$11,000 to build.²³ Of these two, the First Baptist of Sharon had an original cost per square foot of \$3.39 (\$15,000/4,426 s.f. ground floor area) compared to an \$8.76 cost (\$16,000/1,826 s.f.) for the Sharpsville church.

Little is known about the building's architect, Samuel W. Foulk.²⁴ He practiced outside of the Shenango Valley, in the nearby town of Greenville, Pa., where stands the only other church he is known to have designed—the Zion's Reformed. While lacking a polychrome exterior, this 1886 brick Gothic revival building possesses similarities to the Sharpsville church, in the corbelling and serrated patterns of the brickwork, stained glass motifs, and quatrefoil windows. However, the Zion's Reformed does not share the Sharpsville church's auditorium-style sanctuary or Akron plan Sunday school. Unlike other architects of early Akron plan churches, Foulk does not seem to have pursued the design further.

Indeed, the development of the Akron plan provides a second historic context for the significance of the First Universalist's architecture. In its broadest sense, the Akron plan refers to creation of adaptable space by connecting Sunday school classrooms to a common auditorium and/or the sanctuary, most typically, by means of sliding or folding doors or partitions. First conceived by Lewis Miller, an engineer and manufacturer, who, assisted by Akron, Ohio builder and architect Jacob Snyder, used it for the 1870 Sunday school building of the First Methodist Episcopal of Akron. It was in his non-professional capacity as Sunday school superintendent that led Miller to devise the Akron plan for his parish. Sunday schools had, since the Civil War, become increasingly central to the mission of Protestant churches in America. Burgeoning enrollment and

²¹ *The Sharon Herald*, 4 July 1884 edition, which gives a detailed description of the church.

²² Based on the description of the church at its dedication (*The Sharon Herald*, 4 July 1884) and a May 2001 interview with the present church pastor.

²³ As given in White, *History of Mercer County* (1888), Durant, and Wilson.

²⁴ Private communication from Rod Alexander, August 3, 2001, citing a notice in a ca. 1882 edition of the Greenville, Pa. *Advance Argus* that construction of the Sharpsville Universalist church is "under the supervision of the architect S.W. Foulk of this place". The records of the Greenville Historical Society show Foulk had offices in Greenville and designed several buildings there.

professionalized religious instruction led to the separation of pupils into grades. With separate grades, Sunday schools could no longer make-do with existing church spaces and called out for efficiently arranged classrooms and assembly rooms. In response to this need, Lewis Miller devised the Akron plan.²⁵ The plan, in various forms, reached widespread popularity among all Protestant denominations from the late 1880s to about 1910.²⁶ In this original conception, two tiers of several classrooms opened onto a semi-circular auditorium of a separate Sunday school building. Other early uses of the plan (such as in Bruce Price's 1876 First M.E. of Wilkes-Barre) used the same arrangement but attached to the church, though not communicating with the sanctuary. (It should be noted that while the term 'Akron plan' is independent of an auditorium-style sanctuary, the two features are very much connected and sometimes confused. Auditorium-style sanctuaries pre-dated development of the Akron plan and frequently did not include it; conversely, Akron plan Sunday school space usually went hand-in-hand with the auditorium sanctuary.)

The Akron plan developed to be what architect George W. Kramer called the 'Combination Church'—the plan's standard configuration during its years of popularity. From 1879 Kramer was affiliated first with Jacob Snyder in Akron, and after Snyder's death in 1885, with Frank Weary, before moving to New York in 1894. Kramer is considered the great popularizer of the Akron plan.²⁷ He saw the Akron plan could be employed to create not just adaptable Sunday school space but also adaptable sanctuary space. Hence, his creation of the Combination Church featured the Sunday school space opening onto the sanctuary itself, by means of the hallmark sliding or folding doors. Such a configuration not only allowed the children to join the rest of the service, by opening the doorway to the sanctuary once the Sunday school lesson was completed, it also permitted an expansion of sanctuary space for holidays and other events. It was an extremely adaptable plan, as shown by the eighteen "typical plans" given in Kramer's *The What, How and Why of Church Building*.²⁸

Configured as a Combination Church, the First Universalist Church of Sharpsville stands as an important example of the Akron plan's development because it is one of the few documented examples of the Akron plan built before 1885. Moreover, the compelling influence of the Combination Church, even during this early period of the Akron plan's development, is shown by the Sharpsville church's adaptation of the design typically employed in much larger churches with graded Sunday school classrooms.²⁹ The Combination Church plan found at Sharpsville—joining a single Sunday school room to the sanctuary—was necessary for a small church that would hardly

²⁵ Kilde, pp. 184-6; Rowe, pp. 123-5.

²⁶ Kilde, pp. 186-192; Rowe, p. 128; George W. Kramer, *The What, How and Why of Church Building*. (New York: 1897), pp. xii-xiv, 219.

²⁷ Rowe, p. 127, and Kramer, p. 225, with his claim that "a resumé of my experience and that of my predecessor is practically a history of the modern [i.e., Akron plan] church."

²⁸ Kramer, pp. 227-233. Six traditional church plans and three Sunday school building plans are given in addition to eighteen Combination Church plans.

²⁹ Rowe, p. 128. Also, Kramer, pp. 227-233, where his "typical plans" show designs oriented toward larger churches. While dimensions are not provided, the sizes can be compared by the number of rows of pews: these range from nine to twenty-four, while the Sharpsville church only had seven.

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have sufficient pupils to fill graded classrooms. Nonetheless, the essential feature of the Combination Church is its creation of adaptable space by connecting the Sunday school space to the sanctuary with folding doors. This is clearly shown by the layout of the Sharpsville church.

The First Universalist's place in the development of the Akron plan can be compared with examples found in the most comprehensive survey of this architecture,³⁰ by Jean Halgren Kilde. It lists 57 Akron plan churches, but only the following, besides the original Akron church, completed before 1885: Bruce Price's First M.E. of Wilkes-Barre (1876); two plans (by A. Vinal and L.B. Valk, respectively, each dated 1878, and possibly unrealized) for a Baptist Church at Bennington, Vt.; 1883 plans, probably unrealized, for the Fifth Ave. Presbyterian in New York; and T.P. Chandler's 1884 Presbyterian Church at Fox Chase, Pa. Kilde, furthermore, dates the Combination Church from the "mid-eighties".³¹ While the first appearance of the Combination Church was more likely earlier in that decade—since by 1886 Kramer had already designed numerous Akron plan churches³²—the construction of the Sharpsville church was clearly during the nascence of the plan's development. On the other hand, Akron plan churches built after the mid-eighties are relatively common. Its popularity exploded after its promotion by the leader of the Sunday school movement, John Heyl Vincent, in his *Sunday School Journal* and 1887 *The Modern Sunday-School*. Standard church building books and denominational catalogues included the Akron plan soon after and influential churches with Akron plan features, such as Stanford White's 1887 Lovely Lane M. E., were widely emulated.³³

In conclusion, the wealth generated by Sharpsville's importance as a center of iron-making was embodied in the architecture of its First Universalist Church. Among local churches of the 19th century, the First Universalist's Victorian Eclectic architecture is the most fully developed expression of high-style features. A liveliness of decoration, characteristic of the style, is shown in the polychrome contrasts, brickwork and stonework, and roof cresting. The style of the era can also be read in features such as the steeply-pitched hipped roof and an auditorium-style sanctuary. Distinctive woodwork and stained glass continues the ornamental scheme inside, with the church's architectural ambitions likewise illustrated by the pipe organ and gas lighting. The building, moreover, may be seen as an important example in the development of the Akron plan of church design. As an early expression of a Combination Church, the First Universalist Church of Sharpsville shows how—even during the formative period of the Akron plan—its compelling influence reached and was adapted to even small churches. Finally, by escaping subsequent modernizing, the building largely retains its original design, materials, workmanship, and feeling.

³⁰ Kilde, pp. 230-1, with her survey based mainly on NR data sheets and plans published in five late 19th century architectural journals, principally *The American Architect and Building News*.

³¹ Kilde, p. 189

³² Kramer, p. 225.

³³ Rowe, p. 126

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GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Verbal Boundary: The nominated property corresponds to tax parcel 72-029460 of the Borough of Sharpsville, Mercer County, Pennsylvania.

Boundary Justification: The boundary consists of the original lot of the First Universalist Church of Sharpsville. The neighboring parsonage has been excluded because it was built four years later than the church and does not relate to the church in architectural style. Moreover, it lacks integrity due to extensive alterations and overall poor condition: namely, the exterior has been covered with insulbrik, porch pillars and millwork have been removed, and several windows are boarded up in places corresponding with interior alterations.