

THE STORY OF
TRINITY OLD LUTHERAN CHURCH
150 YEARS UNDER GOD'S GUIDANCE

1839 - 1989

3445 Sheridan Drive
Egbertsville, New York

FOREWORD

*I remember the days of old; I meditate on all that
Thou hast done; I muse on what Thy hands have
wrought. Ps. 143:5 RSV*

With this verse in mind, we have attempted to gather a brief history of our congregation, Trinity Old Lutheran Church, as we celebrate 150 years of service to the Triune God we love and worship.

We are indebted for much of the information to the late Andrew Grabau, a great grandson of the founder, who compiled a history of the congregation in 1939; to Albert Schroer who translated for us a history written in German by the late Prof. W. Grabau for the 60th anniversary of the congregation in 1899; and to Eugene Camann who has done extensive research into the background of the Lutheran Emigration to America and especially to Western New York.

150th Anniversary Committee
Richard Barbour
Earlene Crocker
Linda Czekaj
Dolores Gordon
Donald Grabau
Arthur Menge
Evelyn Menge
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BEGINNINGS IN GERMANY

The year 1817 should have been a year of celebration for the Lutherans of Germany for it marked the 300th anniversary of the Reformation. Instead it began two decades of turmoil and persecution. At that time there were two main church bodies in Germany: the Lutherans and the Reformed Church. King Frederick William III of Prussia decided that it would be much better to have one state church, and ordered the two to merge. Some complied; others in good conscience refused to compromise their Lutheran beliefs. Such a one was Johannes A. A. Grabau, the young pastor of St. Andrew's Lutheran Church in Erfurt.

Repeated appeals for permission to continue ministry in the old Lutheran manner were turned down. When the civil authorities forbade him to preach, Pastor Grabau held services in private homes and was eventually imprisoned, and many of his congregation were fined or arrested.

Conditions became so oppressive that the decision was finally made to leave their homeland and go to America where they could worship in freedom. There were many others from surrounding areas who joined them. Arrangements were made with an English transportation company, Becket & Son, and about 1000 people from various places in Germany gathered in Hamburg where Pastor Grabau and his family were allowed to join them.

It was at Hamburg that the seeds of future troubles took root. Among those awaiting passage out of the country was a group of Silesians whose leader had made inquiries about booking passage to Australia, only to discover they did not have sufficient funds for such a long journey. When they attempted to join Pastor Grabau, he rebuffed them, insisting they should follow through on their plans to go to Australia. When they persisted in their demands to accompany him, he placed them under a church ban (a form of excommunication) because he felt they were reneging on a "commitment" made by their leader. A small group then found passage to America on their own, but the rest became a part of the German pilgrims who crossed over to Hull, England, and then on to Liverpool where five sailing vessels took them to America.

Pastor Grabau was on the last boat to leave Liverpool on August 14, 1839. Over a month later, after a very stormy voyage, they arrived in New York City on September 18. Eight days later they went by steamboat up the Hudson River to Albany where they boarded canal boats for the trip through the Erie Barge Canal to Buffalo.

They arrived on Saturday, October 5, 1839, and the following day held a thanksgiving service in an upper story hall of a building on the southwest corner of Main and Eagle Streets. (This space had been used for some months by a small group under a Pastor L. Krause who, on his way back to Germany, had met Pastor Grabau in New York, entrusting his flock to him).

A number of the Silesians had accompanied Pastor Grabau from Hamburg, but when they got to Buffalo, Grabau refused to commune them because of the ban. Repeated attempts at reconciliation were fruitless and at length the group withdrew and became the nucleus of First Trinity Lutheran Church.

After two rented quarters on Main St. proved to be too small to accommodate the congregation, the use of an old Episcopal church building on South Division St. near Washington was procured. However, on a stormy night in February, 1840, this church was destroyed by fire along with many valuable books and other property.

Several other places were used and the congregation was near despair when Pastor Grabau received a letter, along with \$300, from the people of Hull, England, who had been impressed by the plight of the Lutheran emigrants. Since by this time everyone was gainfully employed, it was decided to apply the money toward the building of their own church.

FIRST CHURCH BUILT

On February 27, 1840, land was purchased on the northwest corner of Goodell and Maple Streets. A 40' x 60' modest frame structure was built, resting on a stone basement which was to house the parochial school. Construction of the basement was begun in March, 1840, and by June 7 (Pentecost) they were able to hold their first service. Interestingly, this was the same day on which their persecutor, King Frederick William, died.

The furnishings were quite simple: rough wooden benches with no backrests, and a choir loft at the west end with room for the trombone and clarinet players who accompanied the congregational singing along with the little reed organ which had been brought from Magdeburg, Germany.

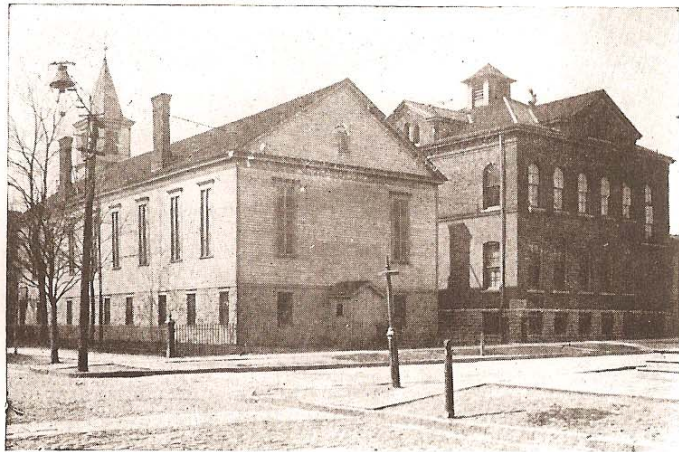
Regular morning and afternoon services in the new church were well attended. For the few evening services held during the holy-day season, church members provided their own illumination with lanterns and candles. During the following two years the interior of the church was completed and permanent pews were installed. Dedication of the *German Lutheran Trinity Church of Buffalo* took place on October 6, 1843, just four years after the landing of the congregation. The church was legally incorporated, however, under the name *Old Lutheran Church* and some years later the two names were combined into *Trinity Old Lutheran*.

In 1852 the church was enlarged with the addition of another 40 feet, a pipe organ was purchased for \$1000, and the church was redecorated.

Many who had migrated earlier to America became members and other groups continued to arrive from Germany. Some went on to establish churches in Bergholz, Walmore and Martinsville and one group went to Wisconsin. There were other "splinter" groups who caused dissension and from time-to-time left to establish their own congregations. In spite of this, the congregation numbered 1500 souls.

In 1858 a group of parishioners living on the "east side of Buffalo" formed a second congregation with the help of Trinity. This was St. Andrew's Church on Sherman and Peckham Streets which together with T.O.L. established in 1859 "*Holy Rest Cemetery*" at the corner of Pine Ridge Rd. and Delavan Ave. in Cheektowaga. St. Andrew's later became a member of the Missouri Synod and has since disbanded, although a legal remnant still operates the cemetery together with Trinity Old Lutheran.

At Christmas 1860 a 2021 lb. bell was purchased for \$340 with member contributions. (A rumor was spread that it was a gift of a rich politician, but a list of donors was published from church records). This bell still hangs in the belfry of the Lutheran Church of Our Savior on Brunswick Blvd.



TRINITY OLD LUTHERAN'S FIRST CHURCH
Maple and Goodell

TROUBLES EXPERIENCED

On January 11, 1864, at 4 a.m. the pastor's residence on the southeast corner of Goodell and Maple was set on fire and destroyed. Subsequently the remaining land on Goodell St. between the church and Michigan Ave. was purchased and a brick parsonage was erected on the corner.

A few years later a fire of incendiary origin was discovered by Teacher Stiemke in one of the school rooms under the church. By ringing the church bell, an alarm was sounded and with God's help the fire was extinguished before it did much damage.

A greater tragedy occurred in 1866 when dissension arose in the Buffalo Synod. Pastor J. A. A. Grabau was a very authoritarian leader who believed in the old European system of pastoral hierarchy. There were those, however, who felt the congregation should have the final authority. This led to a showdown in 1866 when half the congregation left. (Interestingly, in later years the Buffalo Synod's thinking also shifted toward congregational autonomy).

For a time it was feared that the church property would be lost also, but the entire group of church officials remained loyal to their pastor and with the passing of the crisis, the church once more flourished with God's blessing.

Those who left at that time joined First Trinity Lutheran Church, a founding congregation of the Missouri Synod. They subsequently erected a house of worship on Michigan Ave. south of Genesee St. Today First Trinity is situated on Niagara Falls Blvd. and Glenalby Rd. in the Town of Tonawanda.

In 1881 the interior of the church was redecorated and stained glass replaced the plain glass windows. In 1895 a modern warm air heating system took the place of the old coal stoves and later remedial work resulted in the old gas chandeliers being replaced by new electric fixtures.

BUFFALO SYNOD ORGANIZED

In 1845 the Buffalo Synod was formed under the guidance of Pastor Grabau. Originally known as the "Synod of the Lutheran Churches which Emigrated from Prussia," it consisted of those congregations which had come to America for the same reason as T.O.L. -- to be able to worship God in the "old Lutheran" tradition.

Recognizing the need to train men for the ministry, Pastor Grabau had since 1840 been holding private instructions to that end. This work was taken over by the Synod in 1845 with the establishment of *Martin Luther College and Seminary* on Maple St. Pastors of T.O.L. were active participants in the teaching program of the college which continued to operate until 1929 when its faculty and student body were transferred to the divinity school at *Capital University in Columbus, Ohio*, just prior to the merger of the Buffalo, Ohio, and Iowa Synods into the American Lutheran Church, which occurred in 1930. The old college building on Maple St. near Virginia has only recently been dismantled.

ASSISTANTS CALLED

Because of the amount of work involved with caring for a congregation of 1500 souls together with overseeing the parochial school and teaching at Martin Luther Seminary, an assistant pastor was called in 1856. Pastor L. Habel remained only a year and accepted a call to a church in Wisconsin. He was replaced by Pastor Christian Hochstetter who left at the time of the congregational split in 1866. In 1869 Pastor Martin Burk was called as assistant and he worked faithfully with Pastor Grabau for ten years. After Pastor Grabau's death in June of 1879, Rev. Burk was named pastor of T.O.L. He served the congregation faithfully until his death in 1893.

After a year's vacancy Trinity Old Lutheran called the Rev. John N. Grabau, a grandson of the founder, to be their pastor. He served the church for 46 years until his retirement and death in 1940. *So for the first hundred years of its existence, Trinity Old Lutheran had the distinction of having only three pastors!*

WORSHIP AND COMMUNION

For many years morning and afternoon worship services were held regularly each Sunday. During the period of pastoral vacancy 1893-4 evening services were substituted for the former afternoon services for the convenience of supply pastors. This practice continued into the 1940's when evening services were discontinued due to lack of participation.

In addition to festive worship on holy days, "second" Christmas and "second" Easter days were also observed into the late 1930's. During Holy Week there were morning as well as evening services. Often there were two services, one in English and one in German. These "old Lutheran" pastors certainly were a special breed to keep up such a preaching schedule in addition to teaching, visiting their flock, and attending to other administrative duties!

Until the year 1909 German had been used exclusively in the worship services. Since a growing number of young people were unable to fully understand German, there was a gradual changeover to English until in the 1930's German services were held only biweekly following English services and by 1940 German was dropped entirely.

Up until 1894 private confession was the exclusive form of preparation for Holy Communion. However during the 1893-4 vacancy, public confession was used for the convenience of supply pastors. Thereafter both forms were used. It was evidently customary to give an offering to the church when attending private confession, and one of our senior members recalls the feeling of having to "pay" for absolution.

Confessional services were conducted Saturday evening until in the 1940's it was decided to hold them a half hour before worship on Sunday morning. At the time of the 1960 merger this separate confessional service was blended into the congregational worship and today our services usually begin with the "*Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness.*"

NEW CHURCH BUILT

As early as 1915 the building of a new church had been discussed since the wooden structure was in constant need of repair. A site was purchased on Brunswick Blvd. near Jefferson Ave. On September 9, 1923, ground was broken, and the cornerstone was laid on November 25. The new building was dedicated with much rejoicing on October 19, 1924.

The new Gothic style church was built of buff brick with gracefully arched ceiling and beautiful stained glass windows. The basement of the church was arranged for Sunday School, and an adjoining Parish Hall contained an assembly room and stage, with kitchen and dining facilities on the lower level. The church and adjacent parsonage cost \$150,000. The congregation at this time numbered about 600 souls.

The old church property was sold to the Buffalo Association for the Blind which put it to good use for many years. Today the property is occupied by St. John Baptist Church.

In 1938 the Rev. Herman C. Damm was called to assist Pastor Grabau. Following Pastor Grabau's retirement in 1940, Rev. Damm became our fourth pastor and remained with us until 1947. His pastorate saw the beginning of the printed Sunday bulletin (previously oral announcements had been made) and the publishing of the "*T.O.L. Trumpeter*" to keep in touch with our 56 men and women in the armed forces during World War II. The congregation continued to prosper under God's guidance and blessing and was the largest American Lutheran Church in the area.

Pastor Damm accepted a call to Daykin, Neb. in June, 1947, and Rev. Martin J. Alpers was called to lead T.O.L.



In the late 1950's it was becoming increasingly evident that many of our members were moving to the suburbs. Efforts to attract people from our racially changing neighborhood were not meeting with success. The question of moving again was brought up. At this time one of our mission congregations, Sheridan Drive Lutheran Church, was struggling to make ends meet and welcomed talk of merging with Trinity Old Lutheran. Following much prayerful discussion, a blending of the two congregations was formally accomplished in July of 1960.

Pastor Alpers had retired in January of that year because of poor health and Rev. Robert Kelley, pastor of Sheridan Drive Lutheran Church during the merger negotiations, accepted another call. Pastor Theodore Pretzlaff D.D. was called to lead the new congregation. Because of its historic significance, Trinity Old Lutheran was chosen as the name of the new congregation. The property on Brunswick Blvd. was sold to the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church of Our Savior, a racially integrated congregation which had been working out of a small chapel in the neighborhood.

SHERIDAN DRIVE LUTHERAN CHURCH

The Western New York Conference of the American Lutheran Church, feeling the need to expand the kingdom of God in our area, had formed a Mission and Extension Society in 1931 for the express purpose of establishing new congregations. So it was in November of 1949 that ground was broken for a new parish at the corner of Sheridan Dr. and Larch Rd. in Eggertsville. The cornerstone was laid in March of the following year. Built at a cost of \$12,380 with much carpenter and painting labor donated, *Sheridan Drive Lutheran Church* was dedicated on September 10, 1950. Trinity Old Lutheran Church gave a full set of chancel furnishings, and many hours of labor were donated by several of her members, especially Conrad Leupold who was treasurer of the Mission and Extension Society at that time.

Sheridan Drive Lutheran Church was officially organized June 10, 1951, with a charter membership of 23 communing and 50 baptized members by the end of the year. Twenty four Sunday School pupils were instructed by four teachers. Rev. Edward Schultz, pastor of South Park Lutheran Church, served as interim pastor from September, 1950, through March of 1951 when the Rev. Donald Rice was installed.



SHERIDAN DRIVE LUTHERAN CHURCH
Sheridan at Larch Rd.

By the spring of 1955 confirmed membership had grown to 100. A parsonage at 11 Buckeye Rd. was dedicated in June of 1953. In September, 1951, the Lydia circle had been organized and subsequently a Couples Club was formed.

Following Pastor Rice's departure, the church was served for a year by Intern Robert Powers. From 1954-7 Pastor Jay D. Stratton served the parish. He was succeeded by Pastor Robert Kelley from 1957 until the merging with Trinity Old Lutheran in 1960. It is interesting to note that Pastor Kelley is at present Bishop of the Northeast Ohio Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

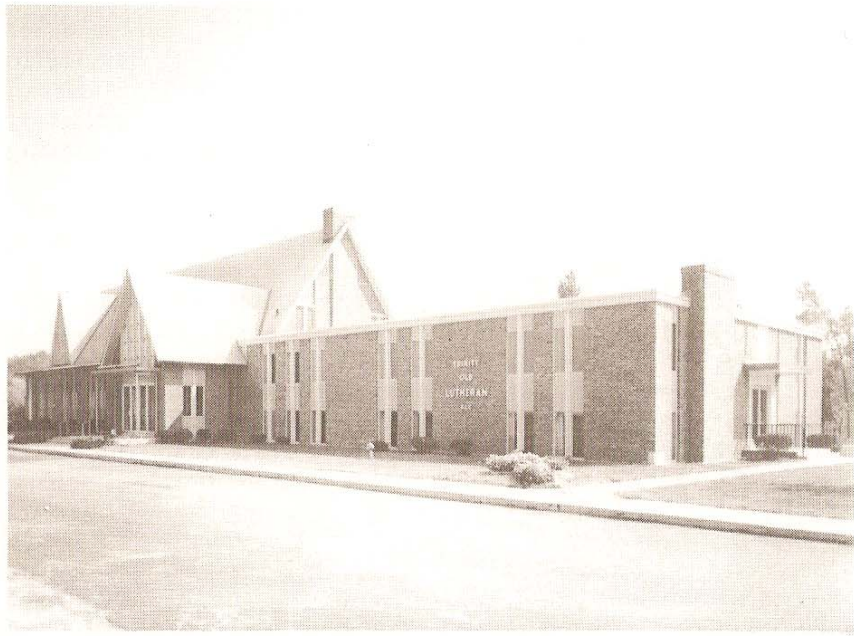
T.O.L. MOVES TO THE SUBURBS

Although an attempt had been made to find another site for our new house of worship, it was finally decided to build on the property owned by Sheridan Drive Lutheran Church at Sheridan and Larch. The house and property adjacent to the chapel were purchased and a connecting walkway was built between the two.

First building plans called for an ultra-modern sanctuary which proved to be too expensive for the congregation's budget. A conservative contemporary style red brick building was ultimately approved and erected. Before and during the construction of the new sanctuary, Sunday services were held for two years in rented quarters - the Masonic Hall on Sweet Home Rd. - where each Sunday a "chair brigade" was utilized to bring seats from the lower dining level to the worship area. A portable altar was set up. Following worship the procedure was reversed. Evening services were held in the Sheridan Drive chapel. Sunday School classes were held in the Chapel and in the Masonic Hall. A fund had been set up for bus service to bring older members still living in the Jefferson St. area to Sunday worship services. This continued for the next ten years.

Ground was broken for our new church building on March 18, 1962, and it was with great joy and thanksgiving to God that our new \$225,000 house of worship was dedicated on January 20, 1963. The new facilities consist of seating for about 400. In the undercroft are kitchen and dining areas with a fellowship hall which can be divided with folding partitions into eight classrooms.

After attempts to find a buyer for the Sheridan Drive Chapel proved futile, the Western New York Assemblies of God organization agreed to remove it and fill in the basement hole. The chapel was subsequently used by them on a site outside Hamburg.



OUR PRESENT CHURCH

Under Pastor Pretzlaff's guidance the congregation flourished. A cherub and a junior choir were started and the Sunday School grew until it became evident that expansion of our educational facilities was necessary. Following Pastor Pretzlaff's departure in 1965, Rev. J. Herman Bassler was called and our education wing was built at a cost of \$150,000 and dedicated on June 15, 1969. This added nine classrooms, offices for pastor and secretary, and a parlor with kitchenette.

Pastor Bassler received another call in 1974 and in October of that year we welcomed Pastor James E. Hanson. During his pastorate the congregation for the first time turned to hired secretarial help. Pastor Hanson was succeeded in 1980 by our present pastor, the Rev. Richard B. Barbour. T.O.L. entered the computer age with the purchase of a system in 1987 and we are presently in the process of keeping congregational records electronically.

Since this document was written, the Rev. Dr. Richard B. Barbour accepted another call in 1999. The Reverend Robert Busch served as T.O.L.'s Interim pastor until 2000. From 2000 until 2007, Trinity Old Lutheran Church was pastored by the Rev. Dr. John Ferrie.

TRINITY OLD LUTHERAN AND THE CHURCH-AT-LARGE

Pastor J.A.A. Grabau was founder and for many years president of the old Buffalo Synod. In 1842 he compiled a German language hymnal which was printed in nine editions and used extensively by Buffalo Synod churches. He also laid the foundation for, and taught in, Martin Luther College and Seminary which, as noted previously, was disbanded at the time of the 1930 formation of the American Lutheran Church. In addition to the publishing of numerous religious pamphlets, Pastor Grabau edited the church paper *Kirchliches Informatorium* (Church Information) which was succeeded by *Die Wachende Kirche* (The Watchful Church).

Pastors of T.O.L. have always been active in conference activities, several of them serving as presidents. In 1930 T.O.L. hosted the first Eastern District convention of the American Lutheran Church and for many years it was the site of the Western New York Luther League Conference's annual winter social.

The Niagara Lutheran Council, an organization of all Lutheran congregations of various synodical backgrounds, was formed and met regularly in our church building on Brunswick. It was here that plans were made for the Niagara Lutheran Home on Hager St. which serves the needs of the elderly infirm. The Women's Guild of the Home met for many years in our Parish Hall.

The Buffalo Mission and Extension Society which was responsible for the establishment of several area parishes always had many active supporters at T.O.L., several of whom contributed many man-hours as well as financial assistance.

As the "mother church of the Buffalo Synod," T.O.L. has always been active in church-wide activities. Rev. John N. Grabau was a vice-president of the American Lutheran Church. One of our members, Marion Teigler, was for many years a leader in youth activities both in the conference and at district levels. Another of our flock was a member of the team which laid the groundwork for the new Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) Upstate New York Synod, and Trinity Old Lutheran was the site of the organizational meeting for the Niagara Frontier Conference of the ELCA. The ELCA, a union of the American Lutheran Church, The Lutheran Church in America, and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, began operation in January, 1988.

Trinity Old Lutheran Church has in the past sponsored two German and one Laotian refugee families and is presently engaged in a mission partnership with newly-organized Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Fulton, N.Y.

Although accurate records are not available to give a complete list of names, many members of T.O.L. have entered the Lutheran ministry including the following:

Herbert Leupold
Alfred Goehle
Sherwood Schroer
John Moebius
Randolph Hahn

Kenneth Alpers
Ronald Wolter
Robert Schneck
Charles Erzkus