

The Door That Leads to Nowhere

As the church nears its 175th anniversary celebration, many stories, both factual and anecdotal will be shared and remembered by the congregation, for it is precisely this sharing in which a congregation forms and continues to hold the ties of its fellowship together.

This story is about a particular door inside the church building, one that some in the church have wondered about. The church's architect was a man named Samuel Inman Cooper, who will forever be remembered in architectural history as the one who developed what came to be known as the "Neo-Greek Revival Style." In this particular style of architecture, the traditional and classical lines of both Greek architecture and its revival were "contemporized" (i.e. spread out linearly) and was often emphasized by broad and expansive entablature. This particular motif was spread out often in frieze-work as well as in wainscoat. He and his junior partner, Jesse Woodbury, went on to design many of the buildings on the Berry campus, including Hermann Hall, Lemley Hall, Krannert Center as well as the Martha Berry Museum. They also designed the interior of the First Presbyterian Church and its chapel. First Baptist holds the distinction in that was the first church designed in this particular style.

Earlier in his career, Cooper was a junior partner with Ezra Poundstone, another prominent Georgia architect who was a contemporary of Neil Reid and Philip Schutze. Together Poundstone and Cooper designed the first public housing complexes in Rome (located on 14th street off of Maple Road and what came to be known as DeSoto Homes) as well as Rodeph Shalom Synagogue.

When one enters the Narthex of the church from the front, if you take the stairs to the lower level to your right, you will encounter a door when reaching the landing. The door is marked "not an exit," and its existence and purpose have often been questioned. To the outside of this door, there were never any landing or steps built, and the door is now blocked from outside view by a large magnolia tree and other shrubbery.

In developing the Master Site Plan for the church, the architects envisioned the sanctuary being flanked by two educational wings, both to the north and to the south. The north wing was built in 1964, but the south wing was never built. The old office/educational building stood there for many years, only to be replaced a few years ago by the current structure. Cooper's original design had placed glass doors leading off from the fellowship hall onto either a sunken garden with fountain or an amphitheatre with a small stage with tiered seating placed along the slope of the hill leading up to Fourth Avenue. It was proposed that this could be used for plays, outdoor worship services or other events.

In the architectural plans, a door was to be located off of this particular landing so to give access to the audience seated in the tiered seats to the restroom and kitchen facilities located on the lower level. In 1975 the sunken garden with its fountain was finally completed, but the plans for the amphitheatre never materialized.

And so that door has been and will be forever, the door that leads to nowhere.

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