

Union Church of Lavallette (Inter-denominational)  
25 Philadelphia Avenue  
Lavallette  
Ocean County  
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1147

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

UNION CHURCH OF LAVALLETTE (INTER-DENOMINATIONAL)

HABS No. NJ-1147

Location: 25 Philadelphia Avenue (at intersection of Grand Central and Philadelphia avenues), Lavallette, Ocean County, New Jersey

Significance: Constructed in 1887, the Union Church has served an important role in the municipal and ecclesiastical development of the town of Lavallette, acting both as an inter-denominational church and as Borough (Town) Hall through the early 1900s.

Description: The Union Church of Lavallette occupies a corner lot at the intersection of Grand Central and Philadelphia avenues in Lavallette. The church building originally consisted of a rectangular main block with a gable roof and a belfry topped by a four-sided steeple. In 1926, two wings were added to the north and south of the original structure, forming a cruciform-plan building oriented diagonally on the lot. The Women's Aid Society, raising funds through sales, bazaars and fashion shows, was responsible for both the wing additions and interior pews. The original building now serves as the sanctuary of the church.

The main entrance to the church, consisting of double-doors capped by a simple fanlight, is centrally placed in the symmetrical gable end, facing the intersection. On either side of the doors is a pointed-arch window. Similarly styled pointed-arch doors and windows have been incorporated into the wing additions, visually integrating the structures with the main block. Above the main entrance, slightly below the gable peak is a round window (reminiscent of a ship portal). The sanctuary and adjoining wings are covered with cedar shingle siding and roofed with asphalt shingles. The siding and roof materials, along with exterior lighting fixtures on the building, were replaced in a 1991 renovation.

The belfry atop the main sanctuary contains a historic bell and has paired pointed-arch openings on each of the four sides. The openings are covered with wide louvers. A four-sided steeple rises from the belfry, topped by a gold-leaf sprayed cross of aluminum. The cross was erected in 1992, shortly before the rededication of the church. Both the belfry and steeple are also covered in wood shingles.

History: The congregation of the Union Church began in the summer of 1883 in the home of George Bender, meeting thereafter in private cottages until a building could be erected. Utilizing a lot donated by James Magee, the Union Church of Lavallette was constructed in 1887, the same year that Lavallette became incorporated as a Borough. The church building initially served two functions: as the Town Hall of Lavallette during the week and for religious services on Sundays.

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By 1910, the congregation had grown to ninety-eight members. At this time, the congregation was formally incorporated and the building was converted to a church full-time. A constitution and by-laws were instituted, providing for the congregation to remain inter-denominational, allowing for its use by Lettish and Roman Catholic worshipers. Initially, members of the church invited ministers from other areas to conduct services at the Union Church. It was not until 1930 that a full-time minister, Rev. Elmer Finger, began services. He presided at Union Church until 1946.

The congregation continued to grow and prosper through the 1960s under the direction of Rev. Robert Schoonmaker. Beginning in the 1970s, however, the church fell into a period of decline as the population aged and financial difficulties became apparent.

In 1987, Rev. Dr. Merle Potter became the minister of the Union Church. Under his direction, new programs aimed at young children and families were instituted in order to revitalize the congregation. These efforts have assisted in increasing the congregation to 300 members. In addition, Rev. Potter has led a successful campaign to restore and maintain the church building and grounds.

The bell presently hanging in the belfry of the Union Church was cast in 1915 from two older bells, one of which is said to have swept ashore in the late nineteenth century attached to a government bell-buoy. This bell was hung in the Town Hall of Lavallette (Union Church) and used to call the people to services on Sundays. Although the government initially made an attempt to retrieve the bell, it continued to hang in the town hall until it was cracked by lightning in 1906 during a summer storm.

Sources:

Potter, Rev. Dr. Merle, "Lavallette's Historical Union Church," Union Church of Lavallette, Lavallette, New Jersey, January 1993.

Potter, Rev. Dr. Merle, telephone interview by Christine Madrid, March 10 1993, Lavallette.

Historian:

Christine Madrid, HABS Historian, April 1993

Project Information:

The project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of Sara Amy Leach, HABS historian. The project was completed during summer 1992. The project historian was Kimberly R. Sebold (University of Delaware). The photography was produced by David Ames, University of Delaware, Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering.