

Scenes from the Past...



Northminster Presbyterian Church as it appeared before being destroyed by fire in 1935.

photo—courtesy, Washingtoniana Division, MLK Library.

Logan Circle residents who find themselves washing their cars religiously at the car wash and laundromat on the southwest corner of 11th Street and Rhode Island Avenue may experience a sense of déjà vu, as it was once the site of the elegant Northminster Presbyterian Church. The building featured a corner entrance facing the intersection, with a shortened square tower and large balustrades above. It was built at a cost of \$75,000 following a building permit that was issued on October 1, 1907.

With the address of 1103 Rhode Island Avenue, the church was formally dedicated in the spring of 1908, when it had 209 members. The congregation was organized in 1906 as a result of a merger of the old North and the Assembly Presbyterian congregation. The Northminster church facility would have ties to a home on the same block, at 1120 Rhode Island Avenue, until the church building suffered a disastrous fire in 1935. That home was built in 1895 for Dr. Frederic Maxcy, an employee of the Marine Hospital on Capitol Hill, who also had a practice at the house until his death about 1908. It was purchased in 1920 by Frank M. and Ella M. Thompson; she having been a teacher at the Northminster Church Sunday school since its opening in 1908.

Mrs. Thompson had succeeded her husband as the president of the Iowa Circle Citizen's Association in 1921 (later known as the Logan Circle Citizens Association). At the time of her election, she was the first woman in the city to hold such an office, according to a newspaper account that appeared in *The Washington Star* on May 30, 1949. Quotes attributed to her in the article could have been pulled from reports in *The InTowner* today on contemporary neighborhood issues, such as "delinquent parents" that allow their children to roam free, suggesting an 11 p.m. curfew, and that "the parks should be preserved and the slum houses cleaned up."

Apparently her axiom struck a chord with area residents, and she was elected to 30 consecutive terms, serving from 1921 to 1951! Among myriad civic duties and involvement, she was a founder of the idea to restore the Decatur House on Lafayette Square.



newspaper microfilm—courtesy, Washingtoniana Division, MLK Library.

The Washington Post headline of January 7, 1935 informed readers that "Most of District's Firefighters Battled Stubborn Sabbath Blaze in Northminster Church" from the previous day's devastating fire of the elegant structure.



The site as it appears today.

photo—Paul K. Williams, July 2002.

She also opened up her house at 1120 Rhode Island Avenue beginning in 1921 to board the pastor of the Northminster Presbyterian Church, Reverend Hugh Kerr Fulton. He remained there until 1930, when he was replaced by Reverend Robert C. Simmons.

Just five years later, on Sunday morning, January 6, 1935, 27-year-old church janitor Benjamin Jackson, who was working that morning, noticed smoke emanating from the floor, ran to Mrs. Thompson's house to sound an alarm, having first brought two children outside who had been the first to show up for Sunday school class, taught by Mrs. Thompson. Just 20 minutes later, the fire had grown so intense that the roof collapsed, trapping three firemen—Frank Bailik, William Fielder, and Volnay Burnett—inside. They were pulled alive but injured from the rubble by fellow firemen. In all, five alarms had been called, bringing about 20 pieces of fire-fighting equipment to the scene.

With an estimated \$35,000 in damage to the structure, the Northminster congregation decided to meet at the nearby Thompson home for the next several months. In fact, they worshipped there while the fire department was fighting the blaze on the same block on that fateful January day. In addition, two families that had been living in the adjacent home at 1110 Rhode Island Avenue were forced to flee their residence during and following the disaster. The fire had started in the boiler room of the church, and large trees on the site had hampered the efforts of firemen to raise ladders to fight the flames.

The Washington Times of May 4, 1935 carried a photograph and caption indicating that the shell of the church was being torn down. By November 6, 1938, the Northminster Presbyterian Church congregation was able to lay a cornerstone for their new structure at 7720 Alaska Avenue, at the corner of Kalmia Road, NW, on land it had owned and operated as a mission since 1926, where it remains to this day. Their former site at 11th and Rhode Island remained vacant for some time, until a corner store, car wash and laundromat were established by the 1960s.

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