

A PITTSBURGH BENEFACTOR

by Rev. Richard W. Davies



When a visitor enters Old St. Luke's Church today and admires the architecture, and the stone walls in particular, it is impossible to identify who first gave what in 1852 to make the building possible. One benefactor was John H. Shoenberger, an early industrialist and philanthropist in Pittsburgh.

John's father was Peter Shoenberger, M.D., (1762-1823) called the "Iron King" even though he was a physician, because he was a leader in the industrial development in southwestern Pennsylvania. "Peter was to the iron industry what I later would become to the steel" said Andrew Carnegie. Peter started the Juniata Iron Works at 14th street, facing the Allegheny River. The company in 1901 became part of the United States Steel Corp.

John was born in 1809 He graduated in 1832 from Jefferson College (later Washington & Jefferson College, Washington, Pa.). He soon married Margaret Cust and they built their first home at 435 Penn Avenue (today's Gateway Center). The home escaped the great fire in 1845. Their next and larger home, Linden, was built in Collinstown (Lawrenceville).



John and Margaret were members of Trinity Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, the 1805 "Round Church" which stood in the triangle at Sixth, Wood and Liberty Avenues. This unique church contained the 1823 pipe organ, which is now in Old St. Luke's Church. In 1825, a larger Trinity Church was built on Sixth Avenue, on the tract given by the heirs of William Penn.

John served for five decades on the Vestry of Trinity Church. Margaret served as president of the Episcopal Church Home, Lawrenceville, which was the first incorporated charity in Pittsburgh.

The rector of Trinity Church was the Rev. Theodore B. Lyman. The growth of the congregation was so great that either the building would have to be rebuilt, or another church added. The choice was to sponsor another church, and in 1851 St. Peter's Church was erected at the corner of Grant Street and Diamond Alley. It was to be a "chapel of ease" for the overflow Trinity congregation.

In 1852, Trinity also began the construction of (Old) St. Luke's Church, Chartiers (Woodville), to replace the frame building built in 1790. John Shoenberger gave financial support for the new stone church. Trinity Church also presented their 1823 Joseph Harvey pipe organ to (Old) St. Luke's Church.

As the Civil War ended, John was senior warden of Trinity Church. The building needed extensive repairs. The \$1.25 increase of quarter year pew rents that begun in 1857 still was not sufficient to pay for maintenance. It was decided to divide the Diocese of Pennsylvania, to begin the Diocese of Pittsburgh, and for the first time to have a Bishop of Pittsburgh. In 1869 the new Trinity church was begun and to designate it as a cathedral. John also served as the treasurer of the diocese and he contributed half of the \$200,000 cost of the new building. He also purchased a house on Penn Avenue for \$15,000, to be the residence for the bishop, the Rt. Rev. John B. Kerfoot.

After forty years of childless marriage, Margaret died of breast cancer on August 30, 1878. John died on November 12, 1889. When his will was read, he left \$800,000 to build and maintain a hospital, which he named St. Margaret Memorial Hospital, to be built in Lawrenceville, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

End Notes:

"The Story of St. Margaret" by Mary Brignano, UPMC St. Margaret, 1998

"Trinity & Pittsburgh" by Helen L. Harriss, Trinity Cathedral, 1999.

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