BAS 103 Episcopal Church

Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Ash Wednesday, 1919, was a tragic and ironic day for St. John’s Episcopal Church, when fire reduced much of its interior to ashes.

St. John’s is the oldest church standing in Butte, predating the current St. Patrick’s by about a year. Right Reverend Leigh Brewer laid the cornerstone in June 1881 and the first service was held the following November 13.

The church at Broadway and Idaho is constructed of Butte granite, which allowed the structure to survive the fire March 5, 1919, which was caused by an overheated furnace. The altar, chancel, and pulpit were destroyed, although most of the altar artifacts were saved by church officials. Despite some damage, firemen saved the stained glass windows, including the triptych behind the altar that was executed by Pompeo Bertini, stained-glass artist for the Cathedral of Milan, Italy.

St. John’s was William Clark’s church, just a block south of his mansion. He and his wife Kate commissioned Bertini to create the triptych in memory of their daughter, Jessie, who died at Deer Lodge in 1878 just three weeks before her third birthday. The window was damaged by the 1919 fire, and W.A. Clark, Jr., and Jessie’s twin sister Katherine Clark Morris of New York had it dismantled and shipped to New York for a year-long repair in 1930-31, after which it was re-installed in the church.

Another Clark connection is in the 10-by-20-foot window at the east end of the church. W.A. Clark, Jr., donated it in memory of his wife, Mabel Foster Clark. They had been married less than two years when she died in 1903 shortly after giving birth to William A. Clark III, known as “Tertius”. It took J.R. Lamb Studios of New York (now based in New Jersey) more than a year to complete the window, and it was dedicated November 5, 1905. Lamb Studios is the oldest stained-glass decorative arts studio in continuous operation in the United States.

Other stained glass windows at St. John’s point to the connections between the secular world of Butte and the church. The window with a miner, hard hat, and carbide lamp in stained glass is dedicated to Francis Andrew Thompson (1879-1951), a member of St. John’s who was also President of the Montana School of Mines from 1928 until his death in 1951.

Another window contains the insignia of the armed forces, the U.S. Army, Navy, and Marines, together with a battleship in stained glass. It was dedicated to Thomas Ashworth, Jr., a naval aviator who died at sea October 21, 1941, when his aircraft crashed while attempting to land on a carrier. He had come to America from England with his family when he was two months old in 1910, and his father was rector of St. John’s in Butte from 1929 to 1951.

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.