

# KEEPING THE CHARGE OF PRESERVING HISTORY

BY ELIZABETH TERRY



I set down my cell phone and looked around. Seriously? That much money for just three books? I looked at the shelves of the archives without really seeing them, feeling the weight of nearly 175 years pressing down on my shoulders. Taking care of a church's historical documents and objects is an honor, but it is also a huge responsibility, and I had to get this right.

Salem United Methodist Church doesn't appear to be old. In fact, it's really not. Its chapel was first built in 1958 and the building's latest addition was completed in 2005. It has the feel of a modern house of worship, including colorful rooms for preschoolers and

youth, a fully equipped choir room, multiple kitchens, a gorgeous pipe organ, a gym, and mission-oriented parishioners. But Salem's neatly pointed brick exterior belies the church's real history—a timeline begun in 1841 and ending here, in Salem's most recent church building. In a little room in the basement, that history lives.

In the past few years of archiving, I've more than once whispered into the quiet, "Who had the foresight to save these things?" I've pondered over the careful notes of the first Sunday school, founded in the 1840s and written in German. I'm grateful for the fragile 1905 blueprint of Salem's fourth church

building. Cool pieces include trophies from Salem's 1920s athletic teams and even a chunk of concrete from the adjacent highway, pilfered a few years ago from a construction zone. In my mind, those men and women who saved these important pieces of Salem's history are just as treasured as the objects themselves.

And now, mold. I first discovered it when the HVAC system was updated. That discovery deflated me, just when I was rejoicing having climate control, at last, in the basement room with four 1950s era ground-level windows. It took creative thinking and a couple good guesses to figure out who I might possibly call for mold re-mediation for the covers of three books whose contents are so historically precious to our church. When I finally slid the mold-free books back into place on their shelves, I felt enormous relief. My role as the church's archivist is to simply continue down the trail already blazed by those before me: the early founders whose fingerprints remain on the pages of their now-yellowed notes, those gritty church members who kept the doors from closing during the depths of the Great Depression, and the longtime church historian who preceded me, detailing the church's history within the bindings of a book.

Today, Salem's archives is open to all for genealogical research. The church posts historical images on Salem's Facebook page on Throw-Back-Thursdays. Event photos, Sunday bulletins, and administrative meeting notes are continually added to the collection, to remind us of how we started and how far we've come. Salem's historic documents might be housed in the archives, but the heart of our church's past extends far beyond the walls of the little basement room.