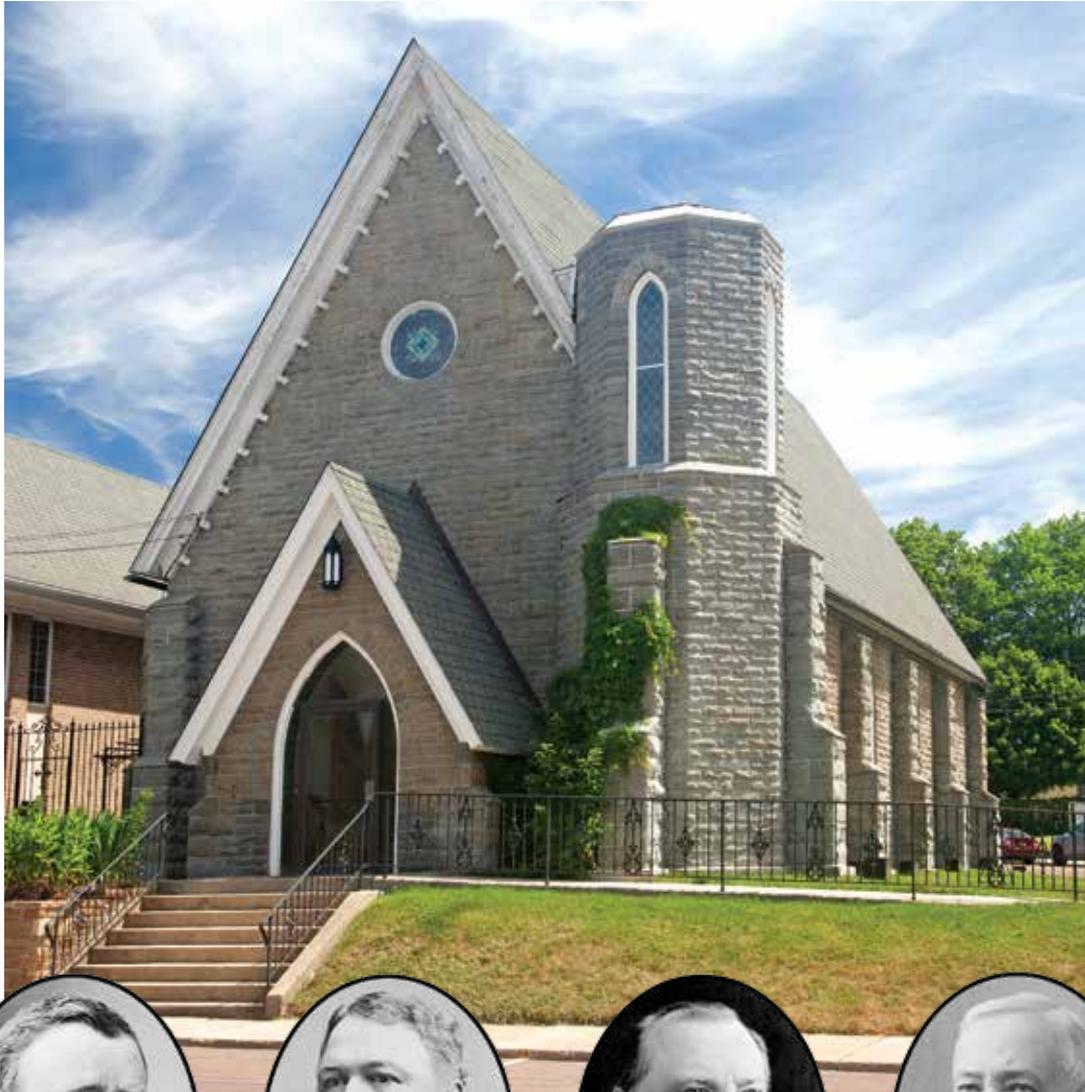


St. Matthew's Episcopal Church

"The Church of the Presidents"

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**



Ulysses S. Grant



James A. Garfield



Grover Cleveland



Benjamin Harrison

The town of Oakland, Maryland, is closely associated with the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad that arrived in the mid 19th century and there are many reminders of the steam era for visitors to view. There is also an interesting building that one would not typically associate with the railroad that has earned a historical reputation for different reasons.

The noteworthy building located on East Liberty Street in Oakland is one that has served the spiritual needs of residents for nearly as long as the railroad boarded passengers at the nearby train station. St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, built in 1869, is not just a historical monument but a present day faith community that strives to meet the needs of



At press time, the duplicate steeple has been delivered to the church awaiting final finishing before placing onto the bell tower.

Photo by Julie Hartman



Cinder block sized stones from B&O property at the Cheat River quarry supplied the building material for the original church.

Garrett County residents. The unique church also blends a remarkable secular history with its contemporary spiritual mission.

John W. Garrett, president of the B&O Railroad from 1858 through 1884, spent a considerable amount of time in Oakland and nearby resort communities. His railroad invested in equipment and rails to complete service to Garrett County, and also in hotels and amenities for wealthy visitors. Metropolitan visitors welcomed the humidity free summers on the mountain top and often stayed for extended periods of time. The list of vacationers included powerful politicians and bankers—Mr. Garrett's stays in Garrett County were often spent with notable personalities.



John W. Garrett, president of the B&O Railroad from 1858 – 1884, built the non-denominational church in Oakland as a memorial for his brother, Henry Garrett.

Henry Garrett, brother to John W. Garrett, also enjoyed the town of Oakland and planned to build a church on a site that he selected. When Henry's death in 1867 preceded construction of the building, John followed through on the plan and built a memorial non-denominational church on East Liberty Street. Cinder block sized stones quarried from B&O property in nearby West Virginia supplied the basic building material for the rectangular structure featuring recessed stained glass windows. Named the Garrett Memorial Church, local worshippers and out of town visitors have benefitted from Garrett's gift for more than a century and a half. Garrett Memorial's noteworthy worshippers included United States Presidents Grant, Garfield, Cleveland and Harrison, providing it with the name "Church of the Presidents."

The church remained non-denominational until 1903 when it joined the Presbyterian community. In subsequent years the Presbyterian congregation dwindled, so a decision was made in 1936 to deed the building to the Episcopal congregation. In keeping with Garrett's wishes that the church be open to all worshippers, St. Matthews extended a welcome to other denominations as the needs arose. According to Reverend Dr. Chip Lee of St. Matthews, "John Garrett built the church for anyone who wanted to use it, and the Presbyterians started using it with that caveat. The Episcopalian community has also adhered to the principle over the years."

Reverend Lee recalled the church exterior underwent renovations in 1966, a prelude to more recent work started in 2020 that is intended to correct problems with the bell tower and steeple. It was decided to remove the steeple to a nearby location where it could be repaired. On



Left: Interior of the remodeled St. Matthews Episcopal Church. Above: "Nearly New" Thrift Shop located at the church. *Photos by Julie Hartman*

August 19, 2020, a large crane transported the structure to a parking lot where it unexpectedly collapsed during the night.

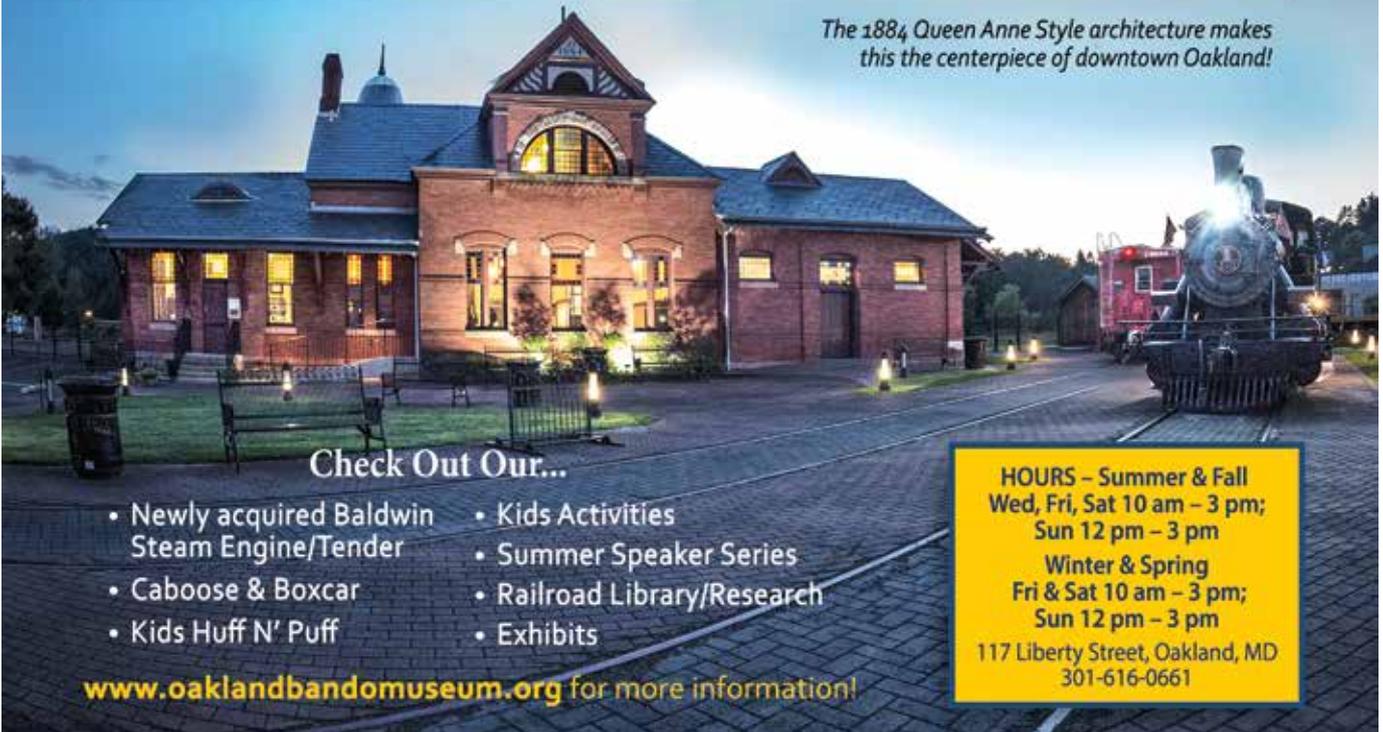
According to Revered Lee, there was nothing salvageable from the wreckage, so work is continuing on duplicating the steeple with durable materials."

Historic St. Matthews continues to serve in a number of ways, including weekend backpack lunches for students, the "Nearly New" thrift shop that supports the community outreach of the Episcopal Church in Garrett County, You Tube live streaming of services, morning podcasts, and a welcoming church environment.

St. Matthews Episcopal Church is located at 126 East Liberty Street in downtown Oakland, Maryland.

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