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Foundations

Yorkminster Presbyterian Church
Yorktown, Virginia
By Jennifer Walker-Journey

Yorktown, Virginia, has earned its place in history. As one of the eight original settlements in colonial Virginia in 1634, it is most known as the site where General Cornwallis surrendered to George Washington in 1781.

Historic landmarks are as precious as fine antiques here in the Historic Triangle, which consists of Yorktown, Jamestown, and Williamsburg. It is no wonder that the community works to ensure new structures are built to respect the traditional style of the area.

For several years, Yorkminster Presbyterian Church, situated on Route 17 leading into the historic community of Yorktown, had served the York County community. As it approached its 40th anniversary in 1997, church leaders decided it was time for some long-range planning. Membership had grown stagnant, and leaders began to see the need to expand its campus in order to lure new visitors. A Campus Improvement Committee was formed, and for a year, its members studied its challenges and opportunities, and then decided that a fellowship hall was in order.

The committee hired a local architect, drew up its wish list, and reviewed several different plans, ultimately deciding on a fairly large fellowship hall, said committee co-chairman Bruce Jackson. Since the hall was so large and had to be designed to conform to the historical community's stringent standards, the price tag was quite high, ringing in at about \$7 million.

"After several years of trying to raise the money for the project, and with the rising cost of construction working against us, we decided the plan just wasn't feasible," Jackson said.

By this time, the church already had hired O.K. James Construction out of Williamsburg, who turned to the disappointed committee and offered a glimmer of hope. He suggested consulting with an architect out of Richmond who specialized in church design and construction. He thought that perhaps William Henry "Harry" Harris, president of William Henry Harris & Associates, Inc., could devise a plan that would fit within the church's tight budget.

Harris, a Virginia native, came into church design projects by chance early in his career, and founded his firm in 1983 with a mission to assist the religious community in order to accomplish its missions and ministries throughout the region with aesthetically pleasing and cost-effective design. Since its beginning, the firm has worked on more than 200 church or church-related projects.

Harris took the Yorkminster Presbyterian plan and essentially went back to the drawing board.

"We put a master plan in place and revised the whole approach to fit into the church's limited budget," Harris said.

The first idea was making the fellowship hall slightly smaller while still incorporating the elements the church wanted to keep, such as a large gymnasium, a sizeable commercial kitchen, and a separate, more formal gathering area. Classrooms, bathrooms, and a stage also were included in the plan. Clever design elements were added, such as vinyl flooring with a wood appearance in the gymnasium that made the room more versatile. Chandeliers and tray ceilings gave the gathering area a more formal feel for receptions and fellowship meetings.

The second idea was to use a pre-engineered design that would reduce the cost of building supplies and speed up construction.

"We just didn't appreciate what that meant," Jackson said. "It sounded like a warehouse shell to me, but Harry added enough custom design that it did not look like a metal building."

The "metal building" exterior was cloaked in brick so that it would conform to the historic color palate of the community, meet the stringent requirements of the town, and tie into the existing sanctuary.

The revised plan, at 16,000 square feet, came out to about half the cost of the original estimate. Ground was broken in November 2005, and the project was completed in time for the church's 50th anniversary in 2007.

"We're just tickled pink," Jackson said. "Harry even said, 'I can't believe it turned out this well.'"

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The new fellowship hall has proven beneficial for the 700 members of Yorkminster Presbyterian Church. Though membership is holding steady, Jackson said many new people have come to visit.

“We trust our church will start growing shortly,” he said.

William Harry Harris & Associates, Inc., Architects & Planners, in Richmond, Virginia, was founded in 1983 to serve the churches in central and Tidewater Virginia. It offers complete design services for planning requirements, ranging from programming and master planning through complete project design and construction contract administration, www.harrisarchitects.org.

In a Nutshell

Church: Yorkminster Presbyterian Church

Location: Yorktown, Virginia

Congregation Size: 700

Project Goal: Build a fellowship hall for its congregation with a goal of luring new members

Size: 16,000 square feet

Cost: \$3.2 million

Challenge: Designing a building that conformed to the stringent historical guidelines of the colonial community while staying within the church’s limited budget

Solution: Revised an existing plan by reducing square footage, using pre-engineered products to reduce building costs and speed up construction time, and adding design elements to complement the historical palate of the community