



L-R: The interior of Hanson Chapel holds many articles that have been donated in memory of various local family members. Charleston's Hanson Chapel continues to be the site for worship on Sunday evenings each summer. (Pictures courtesy of Athens Historical Society)

CHARLESTON'S HANSON CHURCH: Preserved by Community Spirit and Vision

by Sally Smid

Summertime at Charleston Lake has always meant the opening of the iconic Hanson Memorial Chapel, also affectionately known by many as "The Little White Church on the Hill". The church was constructed in the late 1920s by Mrs. Walter Hansen in honour of her late husband. The wealthy Hansen family of New York first came to the Lake in 1889 during what was referred to by many as the beginning of "The Golden Age" for the area. They had a cottage constructed on the south end of Long Island and were among the first Americans to build on the Lake. It was a time when the Charleston Lake was being discovered as a beautiful tourist destination. Mr. Hanson was very active in local affairs and was involved in getting the lake stocked and also helped in building the village dock. Historian Edna Chant tells about him owning a fine horse and carriage and a "powerful motor car". She also recalled his expertise in handling one of the best sailboats on the lake named the St. Lawrence. He organized the early regattas,

donating the silver cups and prizes. He built a large cottage on Derbyshire Point in 1911.

Unfortunately, he did not live long enough to really enjoy it, as he died in a tragic accident in New York the following year. His widow and her son, Walter L. Hanson, continued to visit Charleston for many years and their large cottage was often filled with guests each season. There are reports of the lavish parties that she hosted. In the late 20's, Mrs. Hanson decided to give her beloved community the gift of a fully furnished church in memory of her late husband. In 1930, she donated the bell for the tower, which is still operable and can be heard for miles around. In 1933, she had the church redecorated and on July 23rd of that year at 3 pm the church was dedicated with a full congregation. This turned out to be Mrs. Hanson's last trip to Charleston. Services took place for many years and there was even a Sunday School.

It continues to be a nondenominational place of worship each Sunday evening in the summer months. A variety of ministers help in conducting the services. The chapel has been the site of a variety of funerals, weddings and baptisms over the years. While it was not used for a period and did fall into some disrepair, a group of dedicated volunteers rallied together and took on the administration and maintenance of the building. There have been a variety of in-memorial donations made, including various stained-glass windows. Trustees of the historic chapel have concerns about sufficient funds being available to maintain this very special piece of Charleston's heritage. "Many monetary contributions and donated labour over the years have allowed the church to continue in operation," declared committee member Flo Fraser. There are a lot of operating costs including insurance, lawn and building maintenance, painting, minister fees and more, which are not always realized. Despite offerings, bake sales, donations, and other fund raisers, the group struggles to meet expenses. The trustees are considering other ways for funds to be raised. They welcome rentals of the church for use as a venue for weddings, baptisms, renewal of marriage vows or more. It has a seating capacity of about 70, but without heating can only be used seasonally. The quaint chapel has a wonderful rural setting and overlooks Charleston Lake. **LH**

The historic chapel holds many valuable memories and the trustees hope that it can continue to be a place of community worship for many more years to come.

The group welcomes inquiries by emailing charlestonlittlewhitechurch@gmail.com Donations may be sent to Box 22 Athens, Ontario. K0E 1B0