A BRIEF HISTORY of TRINITY CHURCH

Welcome to historic Trinity Church. This is our congregation's fourth building. Its cornerstone was laid in 1892. Inspired by Durham Cathedral in England it was designed by architect Arthur Page Brown who, some eighteen months later, designed the iconic San Francisco Ferry Building. Trinity was built on bedrock with (then) innovative structural steel, and was thus able to withstand the Great Earthquake of 1906 and, much later, the Loma Prieta Earthquake of 1989.

Our parish, incorporated on July 22, 1849 (predating the incorporation of San Francisco), was first organized as The Church of the Holy Trinity and was later given the designation of Mother Church of the Pacific Coast, the first Episcopal parish on the West Coast.

Our first rector, The Rev. Flavel S. Mines, was the first Episcopal clergyman to settle in California. Services were first held in a parishioner's home during the four weeks needed to erect our first building, a simple rectangular structure of wood at the southwest corner of Powell and Jackson Streets which was named Holy Trinity Church. The first service was held in October of 1849 and the plate collection, offered exclusively in gold coin, exceeded $6,000 (the smallest coin being $5).

The congregation having grown quite rapidly, the first building was sold and a second church was built on Pine Street at the corner of Kearny and Montgomery Streets in 1852 and the name of the congregation was changed to Trinity Church. Covered with corrugated metal, the church was terribly hot in summer and was also becoming too small for the ever-expanding congregation. The building was sold and a third church was built at what is now Union Square.

The third Trinity Church building, consecrated in 1867, was significantly more substantial in construction, befitting a congregation which had continued to grow in size and stature. The sand upon which the third church (and most of San Francisco) was built, however, proved too unstable to support the weight of the church building and its bell tower began to list. Disappointed, the congregation decided to build its fourth church, our current structure, upon the stable bedrock of Pacific Heights. The pews and several stained glass windows from the third church were moved to our current building, and the bell was moved to this church's bell tower in 1894. The bell continues to be rung every Sunday morning at the beginning of the 11:00 service.
Trinity Church has two Bishop’s Chairs, one made for The Rt. Rev. William Kip, the first Bishop of the Diocese of California. The other was made for Bishop William Nichols, the second Bishop and first to lead the newly created second diocese of California.

The ladies’ auxiliary (St. Mary’s Guild) presented the gold altar cross which is atop the high altar. The cross is set with rubies, opals, amethysts, topazes and crystals, taken from hat pins of women in the parish, in 1894.

The middle window of the north transept (at right angles to the entrance to the choir stalls) was designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany and depicts the three women astonished at Christ’s Tomb. It was originally created for St. Luke’s Church, where it was kept in storage until a suitable place for it could be found. St. Luke’s, however, was destroyed by the Great Earthquake of 1906 and the Tiffany window was retrieved for installation in this building.

The Pope Family dedicated seven of our stained glass windows, the most ever given by any single benefactor.

Our landmark E. M. Skinner organ, the sister instrument to the organ at the Palace of the Legion of Honor, was installed in 1924. The organ, together with its case, front pipes and the construction of the chambers to house it, cost a total of approximately $45,000. The old organ was sold for $2,500. In the decades that followed, Trinity Church became known for its fine music, as well as being a recognized venue for instrumental and choral concerts.

More recent years saw the parish's emergence as a spiritual home for the marginalized and for those who were not welcome at most churches during the AIDS crisis that began in 1981. It was during this time that Ruth Brinker founded Project Open Hand in the Trinity Church kitchen in 1985. "Home-made" meals were delivered to persons with AIDS and Ruth’s ministry eventually expanded to serve people with other chronic illnesses. Fr. Thomas Flowers continued to minister to the hungry by administering the Loaves and Fishes program, a group of volunteers who prepared soup and sandwiches in the Trinity kitchen and fed people who gathered at the edge of a nearby park. Trinity’s congregation was also the first in San Francisco to volunteer its space for the newly formed Interfaith Homeless Shelter.
Diocesan concerns regarding seismic safety resulted in their 2009 mandate that Trinity shutter the main Church and move its services to St. Mary’s Chapel. The congregation began a campaign to raise the $80,000 needed for a seismic study to confirm the presence of structural steel in the main church building, as no blueprints remained. It was during the following year that first thoughts began to form regarding Trinity’s possible coupling with St. Peter’s Episcopal Church, whose historic San Francisco building had suffered the worst damage in the Diocese during the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake. Trinity’s campaign to raise $80,000 for the structural study was still $13,000 from its goal. The vestry of St. Peter’s generously offered Trinity the final $13,000 needed to pay for the structural study, the result of which determined Trinity Church to have a “robust” steel infrastructure that “rivals the Golden Gate Bridge.”

St. Peter’s, also a historic parish, was first incorporated in 1867 when several parishioners of Grace Church left in anger after the vestry abolished the men’s and boys’ choir. Looking outward towards the poor even from its inception, the compassionate congregation of St. Peter’s organized the first charity in the diocese in 1869, a home to care for Episcopal women who were poor, aged or infirm, or who were seeking employment. Thus began St. Peter’s long and distinguished history of service to the marginalized. When St. Peter’s Church was badly damaged in the 1989 earthquake, the parish made the painful decision to have its church demolished. Long years of discernment and a deep desire to be of service led to St. Peter’s successful 2010 ground-breaking for St. Peter’s Place, a residence with nineteen apartments for adults living with developmental disabilities, built upon the site where St. Peter’s church had stood. St. Peter’s has since been designated one of the 200 most important Protestant congregations in the nation.

Two historic, progressive and passionate Episcopal congregations have now united to become Trinity † St. Peter’s Episcopal Church. The congregation of St. Peter’s came to Trinity in July of 2012 and Bishop Marc Andrus celebrated our first joint Eucharist on July 22, exactly one hundred sixty-three years since the incorporation of The Church of the Holy Trinity in 1849.