

A view of
the Muskego Church,
taken in 1961

muskego church



ON THE CAMPUS of St. Paul's Luther Theological Seminary at Como Avenue and Luther Place stands what appears to be an ordinary, two-story frame building. Unpretentious though it is, this structure played a significant role in the nation's religious history. Curiously, however, it is not a Minnesota historic site.

Norwegian immigrants who in 1839–40 had settled at Muskego, Wisconsin, near Milwaukee, began the co-operative construction of this building in 1843. It was completed the following year, and on March 13, 1845, it was dedicated as the first Norwegian

Lutheran church in the United States. For more than twenty years Muskego Church served its pioneer congregation of some 270 persons. Standing atop an eminence called "Indian Hill," the little log meeting house became a landmark in the area.¹

By 1869 the congregation had outgrown the church and it was moved down the hill to make way for a new structure. A farmer purchased the old building and used it for a barn. Early in the twentieth century a plan was evolved to salvage the church as a memorial and historic shrine. In 1904 it was purchased by the United Norwegian Lutheran Church in America, dismantled, and

THIS SKETCH is one of many compiled by members of the Minnesota Historical Society's editorial staff in the course of a recent state-wide survey of historic sites. The accompanying photographs were taken by Eugene D. Becker.

¹ For more information on this Norwegian colony, see A. O. Barton, "The Old Muskego Settlement," in *The North Star*, 3:339–361 (November–December, 1921), and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, February 9, 1930.

shipped piece by piece to St. Paul, there to be reconstructed on a slight rise of ground reminiscent of its original location.²

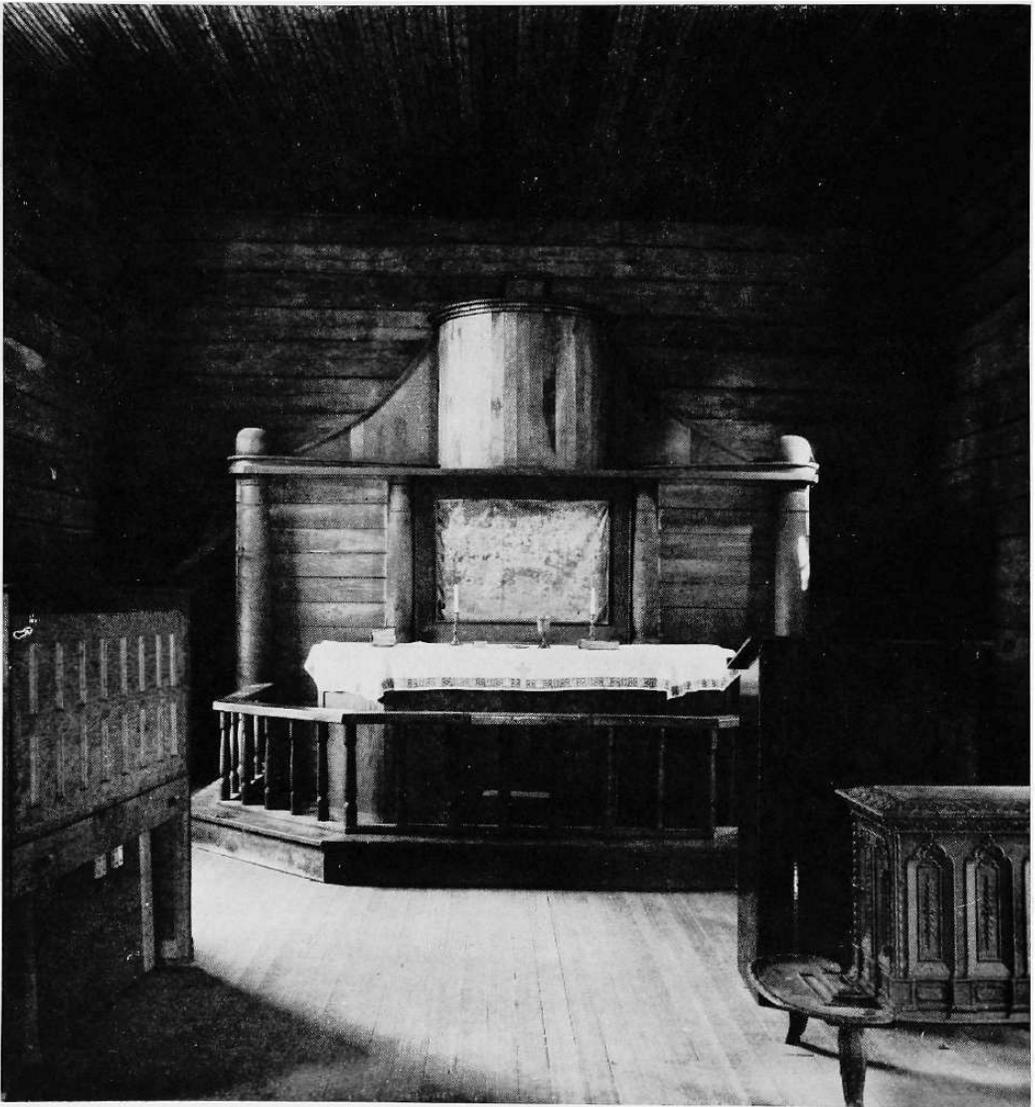
The structure consists of two parts — the main room, measuring 34 by 24 feet, and the chancel, which is 24 by 16 feet. Although the exterior has been covered by modern-looking lap siding, the interior has been restored to its original appearance. None of the wood inside has been painted, and the marks left by adz and plane testify to the hard labor that went into the church's con-

struction. The walls are formed by huge red oak logs fitted tightly together and planed almost smooth. On the exposed ends of the logs are numbers indicating each one's position. These timbers were marked at the time the church was dismantled.

A gallery, supported by six pillars hand carved from solid black walnut, runs across the back of the church and half way along each side. On the upper level, reached by

² *Pioneer Press*, February 9, 1930.

THE altar and pulpit, showing the organ at left and the stove to the right





THE rear of the church as seen from the pulpit

stairs at the left of the entrance, are several rows of seats made of planks over sawhorses. These makeshift benches and fourteen straight-backed pews on the main floor accommodated nearly three hundred persons.

In the chancel the dominating features are the altar, complete with articles used in services, and the pulpit above it. Both are of walnut, as is the altar rail in front. The pulpit, which resembles the front of a chariot, is reached by stairs at the left of the altar. A faded painting at the altar represents the Last Supper.

On either side of the chancel is a box-like pew used by the officiating minister and the precentor, who was a lay assistant in the liturgical and musical worship. In the early days the precentor had no instrumental accompaniment; now an old pump organ is used for the infrequent services. Near the

box pew on the left side is the baptismal font — a plain white washbasin on a walnut pedestal.

An antique wood-burning stove, probably installed in the late 1840s, stands on the right side of the chancel. The long stovepipe stretching along the entire underside of the gallery is no longer in use, but it stands as a reminder of the method once used to circulate heat through the church.

Portraits of persons important in the founding and growth of Muskego Church hang in the chancel and gallery. Among them are likenesses of Claus L. Clausen, the congregation's first pastor; Hans A. Stub, his successor; and Elling Eielsen, a well-known lay preacher and circuit rider in the Muskego area.

Services are still held in the building from time to time, and it is open to the public on special occasions.



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