

McKean County

Mormons' Gothic Chapel Pays Tribute to Kane's Founder

Text by Ann Borger

Photograph by Barrie Borger

HALFWAY BETWEEN THE COUNTY SEATS of Warren and Smethport in northwestern Pennsylvania, the borough of Kane sits perched atop the Allegheny Plateau in McKean County. Here, in an 1878 Presbyterian chapel maintained today by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints lies the body of Gen. Thomas L. Kane, a humanitarian and Civil War commander who founded the borough of Kane.

The melding of two religions in this Gothic-style stone chapel is the perfect tribute to a Presbyterian who risked his life to save the Mormons.

Born in Philadelphia in 1822, Thomas Leiper Kane practiced law like his father, a distinguished federal judge and confidant of President Andrew Jackson, but he preferred the outdoor life. As an agent for the McKean and Elk Land and Improvement Company, he rode on horseback through the 513,000 acres now preserved as Allegheny National Forest. His humanitarian zeal found outlets in many causes of the time: the abolishment of slavery, higher education for women, and housing for underprivileged children.

"I have not lived in vain if I can guard one individual from outrage or one heart from anxiety," he wrote to his father.

After learning of the Latter-Day Saints at a lecture in Philadelphia, he decided to visit the Mormons' frontier city of Nauvoo, Ill., but arrived shortly after its 12,000 inhabitants had been driven into the Iowa wilderness. He found tools lying on workbenches in the deserted town and tidy houses, fully furnished but empty. Across the Mississippi River, he met up with the exiled community, whose members were starving in makeshift tents, and was introduced to Mormon leader Brigham Young. A lifelong friendship between the two men was formed.

Seven years later, upon hearing that the federal government had sent an army to Utah to put down what was rumored to be a Mormon rebellion, Kane set out to help his old friend. He traveled by water from New York to Panama, crossed the Isthmus to board a ship for San Francisco, and rode 1,000 miles overland

to arrive, exhausted, at Mormon headquarters.

"The Lord sent you here," said Brigham Young, "and he will not let you die. I want to have your name live in all eternity."

All that winter, Kane traveled on horseback between Salt Lake City and Fort Bridger, Wyo., to negotiate between the Mormons and the U.S. Army. As a result of his efforts, tension was diffused, and investigators and the new federally appointed governor found the rebellion charges unfounded.

Until his death in 1883, Kane spoke for the Mormons in Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia. To show gratitude for Kane's devotion to their cause, the Latter-Day Saints restored the small church on the mountain, known as Kane Chapel.

Visitors to the chapel begin their tour by watching a 15-minute video describing the friendship between Thomas Kane and Brigham Young. Around three sides of the sanctuary, glass display cases hold historic documents and personal items of Kane. Downstairs, in the Family History Center, visitors may conduct computerized record searches for ancestral information, including the Kane genealogy. The center is a satellite office of the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, which has more than two million rolls of microfilm of family records from around the world.

To visit Kane Chapel, drive into Kane and follow the blue signs. From the east, head straight where Rt. 6 turns left, cross the railroad tracks, and drive behind the bowling alley to the chapel, located at 30 Chestnut St. For more information, call 800-473-9370. 🍷

Ann Borger lives in Allentown with her photographer husband, Barrie. This is her first article for *Pennsylvania Magazine*.



This Gothic chapel in Kane is maintained by the Mormons as a tribute to the friendship of Thomas Leiper Kane and Mormons founder Brigham Young. Visitors will also find a satellite office of the Mormons Family History Library, which is located in Salt Lake City, Utah.