

DESSAU LUTHERAN CHURCH *History*



Built in 1876, the Dessau Lutheran Church is endangered by encroaching commercial development and a lack of preservation options at its current site.

The Dessau Lutheran Church, constructed in 1876, was one of the earliest centers of worship in the area. Using donated land and materials, congregants built the church on a knoll just west of what was a wagon road between Austin and the small community of Dessau. Prominent families with the names of Krueger, Wieland, Nehring, Nauert, Grosskopf and Goerlitz, among others – whose descendants have remained prominent citizens in the Austin area – were members of the church and helped plant several other churches in northern Travis County in succeeding years, as well as building a parsonage and the first Dessau School adjacent to the church.

For more than half a century, the church was a center for community activities in the area – many of which perpetuated the German language and culture brought to Texas almost a century before. Services at the church were conducted in German until the 1940s. Elvis Presley is reported to have visited in the late 1950s when he sang at the nearby Dessau dance hall. By the 1960s, though, the congregation had declined in numbers and the church a decade later stood vacant – to be revived for a short time in the late 1980s with help from another nearby Lutheran church. It has now been mostly unused for the past two decades.

It also served as a landmark for the rural community in and around Dessau, in a diverse area populated in various periods during the 1800s by European transplants, native Tonkawa people, emancipated and Anglo settlers from Eastern States. It was used for services by its congregation, as a school, and as a community gathering place at the edge of what was once Texas' frontier, where settlers once built thick-walled stone houses to protect from Indian attacks. Its bell for decades was rung to deliver news to the Dessau community – for births, deaths, weddings and fires.

As one of the oldest extant churches in this area, the sanctuary typifies an iconic architectural style among rural church-builders during the 1800s – one room, tall ceiling, Gothic-style peak arched windows, wood-frame construction, significant design details of the period, and a bell tower topped with a stylized Christian cross. Most of the church appears to be the original construction, except for an addition to the front and a new belfry that were completed in the 1890s. The pews, altar, pulpit and other period furnishings remain, as do crosses, a communion service and a baptismal pitcher and bowl. Lack of proper funding for expensive, continuing maintenance has caused the building to slowly deteriorate and has endangered its future as encroaching development, vandalism and break-ins become a growing menace. Its parsonage, school and outbuildings long gone, the church is now surrounded by apartments and impending commercial development.

Pioneer Farms has agreed to relocate and restore the church so that its history, the experiences of the people who built it and worshipped there can be shared with our visitors. The church will be used as an exhibit to highlight the importance of faith in 1800s Texas, a key element of the social structure during the 19th century. It will also allow the Dessau Lutheran Cemetery Association, which currently owns the church building, to focus its limited financial resources on maintaining and protecting an adjacent historic cemetery. The association voted overwhelmingly in May 2019 to relocate the church to Pioneer Farms.