Each November in Michigan we are reminded of our Great Lakes heritage thanks in part to the role of Mariners’ Church in downtown Detroit.

Celebrating the 170th anniversary of its founding in 1842, Mariners’ Church is anchored in the city’s history with significant connections to many DAC members including Ivan Ludington, Jr.

The church was originally berthed at the now non-existent corner of Woodward Avenue and Woodbridge. It escaped demolition and was moved after World War II to make way for Hart Plaza. It also survived attempts by the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan to seize control and close it.

Many know of the “maritime sailors’ cathedral” thanks to Gordon Lightfoot’s “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald” ballad. For many years Mariners’ was the home of an annual memorial service for the 29 men who lost their lives when the ship sank.

Today Mariners’ Church is the oldest stone church in Michigan and the second oldest continuously operating church building in the state.

“I think we’ve survived because we’ve had a core of really dedicated people who felt the commitment to fulfill the vision that (founder) Julia Anderson had to have a refuge for sailors on the Great Lakes,” said the Rev. Richard W. Ingalls, Jr., Mariners’ rector from 2006-2012. “We also were established as an autonomous church not under any denominational control.

“We didn’t have the problem of a hierarchy deciding which churches were essential and which to close or consolidate,” he continued.

One of the members of Mariners’ congregation is Ludington, a DAC member since 1938 who served as Club president in 1988. He has regularly presented an award to long-time or retired ship captains during a ceremony to mark the official opening of the Great Lakes shipping season in March. Called the Captain Lewis Ludington Award, the honor is named after Ivan Ludington’s grandfather.

“My grandfather was a skipper on the Great Lakes,” Ludington said in a phone interview earlier this year. “His other occupations included being president of the Ludington News.

“He was a buddy of Edgar Guest (Detroit’s poet laureate and a DAC member) who was the only poet ever to work for the Detroit Free Press,” Ludington continued. “He wrote anthologies about my grandfather. Mariners’ Church is a fine establishment… and my grandfather was a great man.”
Mariners’ Church is the legacy of Julia Ann (Taylor) Anderson who died in 1842, the year now celebrated as its founding. Anderson willed that her property at Woodward and Woodbridge would be used for a stone “Mariners’ Church of Detroit.”

Instead of charging what was then a traditional pew fee, church goers could sit anywhere in Mariners’ for free.

“Julia Anderson saw sailors were turned away from other Detroit churches because they were not properly attired or they had to sit in the paupers’ pews because, in those days, the front pews were rented by members of proper society families,” Ingalls noted.

For much of its existence, Mariners’ had a cooperative relationship with the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America. However, one of the first church trustees left a deposition that Anderson wanted Mariners’ to be free of any denominalional control.

From the first days control of the church was with its board of trustees; later on it was incorporated by the Michigan legislature with Act 142 of 1848. One of those first trustees was Charles C. Trowbridge, whose vast accomplishments included being one of Detroit’s first mayors, a businessman and explorer.

Initially a wooden-framed building served as Mariners’ temporary quarters. Its permanent church building was completed in December 1849, seven years after its founding.

The stone building – known as a “Perpendicular Gothic” design – is the creation of architect Calvin N. Otis of Buffalo. It was constructed of coarse gray limestone from quarries along the Detroit River near Amherstberg, ON, Canada. Inside, its massive wooden trusses and pews are made of Michigan black walnut.

Because Julia Anderson’s assets didn’t cover the church’s construction costs plus an endowment she had wanted to leave, the Mariners’ board of trustees came up with some creative solutions.

The “house of worship” was placed on the second floor, with an entrance on Woodbridge, while the more valuable ground floor that faced Woodward was dedicated to retail space to provide income for the church. Its first tenants included the U.S. Post Office and an exchange broker. A grocer and a “peanut man” later occupied portions of the first floor.

Annex buildings were constructed on property fronting Griswold where the Detroit Savings Fund Institute, a precursor to Comerica Bank, opened for business.

Mariners’ was a stop in the Underground Railroad for escaping slaves from the south to find freedom in Canada prior to the Civil War. When the building was moved in 1954, construction workers discovered a tunnel leading from the church’s basement to the Detroit River’s edge.

Over time the church’s congregation dwindled as residents moved away from the riverfront and it became a commercial and industrial area. Also, the sailors for which it was created fell in number as steamships replaced sailing ships, reducing the need for layovers in Detroit.

In the 1920s, the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan began its Social Service Department to help young people who were moving from rural areas into the city, shut-ins and others. Mariners’ Church was transformed into part warehouse with old clothes and furniture stored inside, and part “flophouse” with homeless men frequently sleeping on the pews, noted author William F. Keefe in his 2001 history book “Created for the Ages: Mariners’ Church of Detroit.”

The church interior looks much the same as it did in 1849. The stained glass windows and lighting, however, came much later.
DAC NEWS NOVEMBER 2012

Stark, who along with being a DAC member was Detroit’s historian, pounded out a column and created the Friends of Mariners’ Church which lobbied the city and raised money to save and move the historic structure.

The Mariners’ trustees sent out letters to oppose the demolition plans and made Stark a member of its board.

In 1954, with the backing of Mayor Albert Cobo, the Detroit City Council narrowly approved a plan to move the church.

The lion selected, adjacent to the entrance to the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel, is deeply connected to the history of the city. It was there that stood the Indian Council House, which was used for meetings with Native Americans, worship and later the first Masonic meetings. To honor the 1,000th anniversary of the foundation of Freemasonry, in 1966 Detroit Masons dedicated the George Washington Memorial Statue on the north lawn of Mariners’ Church.

Additionally, the site is where Col. John Anderson, the husband of Mariners’ founder Julia Anderson, established an office for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the 1800s.

The work to move the church began in late 1954 and by January 1955 the 3,000-ton structure was hoisted on 600 jacks. The building was set on four I-beams that were placed on rollers. Two diesel winches slowly pulled the building along a track of 24 steel rails 880 feet across Woodward Avenue.

The move was detailed in the April 1955 issue of Life magazine. It took three months, costing $250,000 plus another $75,000 to renovate the structure.

The church reopened in April 1957. As part of the deal made with the city, Mariners’ no longer had retail space to rely on for income yet the Mariners’ trustees – who at times included DAC members attorney Donald N. Sweeny and architect Ralph R. Calder plus Henry Scripps Booth, an architect and son of DAC member George Booth – began planning for a series of renovations that would make the building a jewel in the Civic Center.

DAC members rallied to help improve the church. The 61-foot-tall Bell Tower thanks to a donation from the William C. Rands Family Foundation. Rands, a DAC member, was an early automotive supplier.

Other improvements included new windows – such as the Jefferies Window, which included DAC members Judge Edward Jeffries and his son Edward Jeffries, Jr., depicting the prophet Abraham on one pane and Elijah ascending into heaven on another.

In 1965 the Mariners’ trustees picked then Rev. Richard W. Ingalls, Sr. to be the church’s new rector. A native of Iowa and World War II veteran, Ingalls began building up the church’s congregation while the building underwent additional exterior and interior renovations.

In the 1960s, Rev. Ingalls, Sr. began the first annual Blessing of the Fleet in March plus the Great Lakes Memorial Service in November that brought in a number of lakes-related organizations such as the U.S. Coast Guard, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, International Ship Masters Association, and others.

Early in the morning on Nov. 10, 1975, Dossin Great Lakes Museum Curator Robert E. Lee informed Rev. Ingalls, Sr. that the ore carrier SS Edmund Fitzgerald had been lost in a storm. The rector proceeded alone to the church to ring the bell 29 times, once for each member of the crew. Detroit’s press quickly picked up on the story and Mariners’ soon became internationally known.

For years Mariners’ Church became the site of a memorial service for the Fitzgeralds’ crew. After the Canadian government declared the wreck to be a gravesite, the church reverted back
to its older tradition of memorializing all who died on the lakes and the St. Lawrence Seaway.

When the Episcopal Church of the United States attempted to claim ownership of Mariners’ Church, the trustees and Rev. Ingalls, Sr. decided to defend their independence. Mariners’ successfully fended off a lawsuit by the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan.

By 1994, for the 30th anniversary of the Great Lakes Memorial Service and the 20th anniversary of the Fitzgerald’s sinking, Mariners’ Church began presenting the Capt. Lewis Ludington Award to ship captains with Ivan Ludington, Jr., DAC president in 1988, participating.

Later, the award was presented during the springtime Blessing of the Fleet ceremony.

Ingalls, Sr., who became a bishop, died in 2006. One of his sons, Rev. Richard W. Ingalls, Jr. was appointed Mariners’ new rector in 2006.

Rev. Ingalls, Jr. had been a member of the congregation since 1965. He retired in January of 2012 becoming rector emeritus. The acting rector is Rev. Paul Innes.

One of the most recent developments was the dedication of the new pipe organ in memory of Ingalls, Sr. The installation of the new organ was made possible thanks to a $1 million donation by the late Grosse Pointe businessman Robert Valk.

“We have no neighborhood to draw from, but I think we’ve survived because we’ve had a core of really dedicated people who felt the commitment to fulfill the vision that Julia Anderson had to have a refuge for sailors on the Great Lakes,” Rev. Ingalls, Jr. said earlier this year. “This church is unlike any other because it was built for that specific purpose.”

Mariners’ Church remains a Detroit institution, dedicated to serving not just sailors, but the spiritual needs of the community at large.