Hendricks Memorial Chapel was the gift to Syracuse University of Senator Francis Hendricks in memory and honor of his wife, Eliza Jane. Senator Hendricks had served as president of the Board of Trustees of the University and was greatly interested in its affairs. Born in Kingston, New York, on November 23, 1834, he came to Syracuse in 1861 to establish himself in the business of photographic supplies. During his life in the city he developed widely diversified interests in both banking and government. Hendricks held a variety of posts in both local and state government, including those of mayor of the City of Syracuse in 1880-81 and senator in the New York State legislature between 1886 and 1891.

Francis Hendricks was a trustee of Syracuse University from 1902 until the time of his death in 1920. He was also a trustee of the State College of Forestry beginning in 1915. In 1919, he gave Syracuse University a five-acre tract of land located at the corner of Raynor and Irving avenues, which came to be known as Hendricks Field. He also gave generously to the College of Medicine, which was at that time part of Syracuse University.

Senator Hendricks had a summer home in the Berkshires, not far from Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts. As Marjorie O. Bronner ’31 reported in “The Story of the Religious Program at Syracuse University,” in the February 1934 Syracuse University Alumni News, Hendricks “had formed the habit of quiet meditation in the beautiful little chapel of Williams College. Leaving the chapel one afternoon, he turned to his niece and said quietly that it was his purpose to provide in his will a similar opportunity for Syracuse students in memory of Mrs. Hendricks.” His great interest in Syracuse University,
combined with his commitment to its religious heritage, gave him the determination that it, too, should have a chapel. In his will Hendricks set aside $500,000 for that purpose. That actual construction did not begin until nine years after his death was a source of some concern to many in the community. A change in leadership and the development of a master plan for the campus were responsible for the delay.

When Charles Wesley Flint came to Syracuse University as Chancellor in 1922, the provisions of Senator Hendricks's will were made known to him. One of Flint's first concerns was to find a proper setting for the building of a new chapel. Before Flint's term, Syracuse University had built new buildings as needed, without any overall campus design. As a result, its campus sported a variety of architectural styles. To remedy this, Chancellor Flint resolved to initiate a complete design for the total University, with Hendricks Chapel as its center. At the December 1922 meeting of the Board of Trustees, he asked for a "general plan for the Development of Syracuse University." While the location of the chapel would be central to the plan, Chancellor Flint also had in mind the locations of other buildings that he knew would be needed as the University grew. John Russell Pope was given the responsibility of developing this plan, and in June 1927, four and one-half years later, a plan was presented to the Board of Trustees at its spring meeting and adopted. Key to the total design was the central placement planned for Hendricks Chapel, at the west end of what was then called the Old Oval.

Once the plan was adopted, the building of the chapel got under way. Plans were drawn, the site cleared, test borings made for the foundations, and the contracts awarded. I came to Syracuse University as a freshman in 1928 and therefore witnessed the early stages of this process. The building then occupying the site planned for the chapel was the women's gym; to make way for the erection of the chapel, it was lifted up on blocks and moved south in the direction of the stadium, where it remained for some years until it was finally torn down.

Plans for the new chapel, designed in the Georgian colonial style, were executed by John Russell Pope and his associate Dwight James Baum ’09. The contract for its building was awarded to the A.E. Stephens Company of Springfield, Massachusetts, for the sum of $596,539, the lowest of nine bids. The company was known in the community, for it had recently completed the construction of the Syracuse Memorial Hospital, located not far from campus on Irving Avenue.

At some point during the construction it was discovered that no provision had been made for offices or rooms for student activities. A number of years later, looking back, Dean Charles Noble made a wry comment about this fact in a letter. ..."When Hendricks Chapel was built, the architect was more interested in the outside of the building and in the main room for worship than he was in the other rooms which were to be provided. In fact, he apparently gave no thought at all in the original plans for office space for the staff and the lounge rooms where the students might hold group activities." Fortunately, Hendricks Chapel Dean William Powers, who was on campus for most of the time during construction, caught this omission and called it to the attention of a foreman. The lower floor was hastily redesigned; however, it had to be done within some rather severe limitations that might not have existed had the architect been more aware of the breadth of the chapel program. Even within the main room there were problems. Whitney Trousdale, who had come to be Powers's assistant, later recalled his discovery that no provision had been made for seating a choir in the worship area. A hasty consultation with Chancellor Flint, who in turn conferred with the architects, resulted in the designing of curved choir stalls around the organ console, allowing seating for a 60-voice choir. Long afterward, at the instigation of Dean Jack McCombe, the downstairs area of the chapel was redesigned to provide additional usable space.

Once the land was cleared and the foundations laid, the time came to lay the cornerstone. This event occurred late in the afternoon of June 9, 1929, one year and one day before the date of dedication. It was also nine years and one day following the death of the donor, Senator Francis Hendricks. Dwight James Baum, of Pope and Baum, the architects, served as master of ceremonies, while Bishop Adna Wright Leonard, resident bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church,
William H. Powers, left, served as the first dean of Hendricks Chapel (1930-44). He was succeeded by Charles C. Noble, right, who led the chapel from 1965 to 1967.

spoke at the event. Chancellor Flint filled the copper box that was to go into the cornerstone with appropriate mementos, many of which concerned the University. These included a program of the ceremony of the day; a Bible; a copy of the Daily Orange, the student newspaper; newspapers from the city; views of Syracuse University and the area as it was then; and the design of plans for the future. One special memento was a set of three test tubes from the Department of Bacteriology marked “From the past to the present, Pax Vobiscum.” Chancellor Flint and Kathryn Hendricks, niece of the donor, spread the mortar with a special ceremonial trowel, and masons slid the large cornerstone into place, thus enclosing the hermetically sealed copper box. In his remarks, Bishop Leonard outlined the purpose of the chapel: “It is the plan of the Chancellor and trustees to erect here a chapel whose architecture shall speak of the eternal, and whose throbbing life within shall be an authority in the spiritual realm interpreting life in spiritual terms.” By the end of the summer of 1929 the shape of the chapel could be seen; by the following spring the building was enclosed and the roof was on, signaling that the chapel would be ready for dedication by June 1930.

During construction, Chancellor Flint gave his attention to the kind of leadership that the chapel would require to fulfill the expressed purpose of its donor, Senator Hendricks. To reinforce his own judgment, Flint conferred with a wide variety of church leaders and formed a student committee for consultation so that the man selected for the leadership position would be well qualified. Certain necessary characteristics became evident immediately: Someone with a genuine ability to relate well to students was important, as was the almost paradoxical requirement that the new leader have both youthful vigor and mature experience. Along with those requirements he must have both a broad understanding of religion and firm convictions of personal faith. As Bishop Leonard had suggested at the ceremony of the laying of the cornerstone, “It is fitting that whoever shall have charge of this chapel shall have spiritual as well as intellectual insight, that his words shall be words of religious authority.”

There seems to have been no question that, because of the nature of its religious founding and its continuing relationship with the Methodist Episcopal Church, the leader selected for the chapel program would be chosen from the personnel of that denomination. How the selection process was carried out, however, and who was included in the list of candidates, is not known.

Suffice it to say that on August 15, 1929, the Reverend William Harrison Powers, D.D., a Methodist minister then serving as the superintendent of the Syracuse East District of the Central New York Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, became the “chaplain” of Syracuse University. All Methodist ministers are appointed to a position by their bishops, and this appointment was no exception; even though he would be employed by the University and the announcement came from the University, Powers was granted this ministerial assignment as a special appointment from his denomination. ....

When Powers—an alumnus of Syracuse University’s Class of 1914 and the recipient of an honorary doctorate of divinity from his alma mater in 1925—was appointed chaplain of Syracuse University in 1929, Chancellor Flint assigned him three broad areas of responsibility. First, he was to serve as the pastor of Hendricks Memorial Chapel (when completed)—the church of the University—ministering to all students and faculty as their religious interests allowed. Second, he was to serve as the administrator of religious programs on campus, centered in the chapel and developed campus-wide. And third, he was to serve as the University’s religious representative in its relationships with religious bodies within the community and beyond. It is noteworthy that Powers soon came to the deep conviction that was to direct and ultimately mark his work at Syracuse University: that if the programs were to develop properly, the chapel must have general status. Powers was determined to prevent the chapel from becoming a kind of stepchild, with second-class standing among other organizations on campus. He was committed to the idea that just as this new building was located geographically at the center of campus, so the programs located within its walls should include top-level leadership of students, faculty, and administration. As a corollary to this conviction, Powers believed that the leader of Hendricks Chapel should have a level of authority, responsibility, and status equal to that of other administrative officials. As at many other universities, he asserted, the leader of Syracuse University’s religion programs should be granted the title of dean. Although this goal was yet to be realized, in keeping with Powers’s reputation, the Syracuse University Alumni News of October 1929 reported: “Since he had been distinctively successful in inspiring and guiding students in self-expression as it relates to social and religious work, it is felt that students at Syracuse University have a real friend and counselor who will inspire and encourage them to develop on the campus of Syracuse University one of the strongest programs in the country.”

The late Reverend Donald G. Wright was, for many years, senior minister at the University Methodist Church (later the University United Methodist Church). He attended Hendricks Chapel as an SU student from 1929 into the 1930s and also served on its board, beginning as a student representative on the first chapel board formed after the chapel officially opened in 1930.