

These Stones: The History of First Presbyterian Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Prepared by Owen Johnson in connection with the centennial celebration of the present church structure at 6th and Lincoln September 7, 2001

First Presbyterian Church was founded on September 25, 1819, when nine people gathered in the log cabin of Dr. and Mrs. David H. Maxwell to meet with Isaac Reed, a Presbyterian home missionary. It was his first church. It is the oldest church in Bloomington. Its building today is the oldest church building in Bloomington. It is one of sixteen churches established by Presbyterian pioneers in Indiana between 1806 and 1820.

It has always been a downtown church. Members of that first congregation held their first church service in the recently completed log Monroe County Courthouse. Maxwell's three children were the first people baptized.

The first regular pastor, David C. Proctor, joined the congregation part-time in 1822, although he stayed for only a year. In April 1825, Rev. Baynard Hall, principal of the State Seminary (which later became Indiana University), was named pastor. The church paid him not in money, but in goods, a not uncommon practice at the time. The small congregation was devoted to education and addressing social and economic inequities in the town. In 1829, after ten years of worshiping in the private homes, the courthouse, a school and the carding mill, the 34 members of the congregation moved into its first heated church building, the second brick building in Bloomington after the courthouse, at the corner of Washington and 4th Streets. The early church family included many of the wealthy and socially prominent people of Bloomington. Just over thirty years later, the rapidly-growing congregation constructed a new two-story brick building on Walnut Street, at a cost of \$7,000 on a lot purchased with money raised by the women's Sewing Society. The membership was close to 200, a number soon boosted by reunification with the Second Presbyterian Church. The reunited church called itself the "Walnut Street Presbyterian Church." As Holly Arpan noted, that church became the focal point not only for religious worship but for the church's community involvement: "No other meeting place in town was so centrally located, and the church hosted a wide and continuing variety of community and religious activities, each representing in varying degrees the concerns of the church and the personal involvement of its members." These groups ranged from the Monroe County Bible Society to the Humane Society. During the 1880s, a fire seriously damaged the building. As the church neared the end of the nineteenth century, it had more than 300 members. In 1894, the church choir was organized.

In the early morning of June 14, 1899, the church building was struck down by fire that broke out when a spark from the embers of a meat market that burned down next door lodged in the church tower. In August, church members met to consider their future. They appointed a committee of five to coordinate the work of committees of finance, site and building, made up of 28 men and 10 women. "The meeting was harmonious and enthusiastic and every member is ready to go to work to do his or her part in securing a magnificent church building," the Bloomington World reported.

The following year, under the leadership of Rev. M.A. Allison, who grew up in Canada, ground was broken for the construction of the present building. The cornerstone was laid July 9, 1900. The church was built in a popular Midwest style of the time called the "Akron Theatre [or Auditorium] Plan," where the two-tiered multi-celled Sunday school classrooms could all be opened to become part of the sanctuary, especially for large congregational assemblies. These

were usually located on a corner lot, with almost identical facades on both sides of a corner tower. This style, inspired by theater architecture, was the most popular style of church for Protestant congregations in North America from 1880 to the beginning of World War I. At the dedication on June 23, 1901, its seating capacity was listed as 1,000. Ministers from Chicago and Washington, D.C., preached at the morning and evening dedicatory services, respectively. Total cost of the church: \$27,094.34.

With the construction of the new sanctuary membership increased to 455 in 1909, then slowly edged upward to close to 500 in 1930. Internal disagreements over ministry to IU students dropped the total to 363 in 1939. After the war, during the long ministry of Joseph R. Walker, the membership steadily increased to an all-time high of 861 in 1967.

After plans to construct a new church building on East Third, south of the IU campus fell through, Walker Hall was added in 1954, in response to a growing youth membership. The sanctuary was altered, new carpeting and pews installed, and a new chapel and parlor established. Following Rev. Walker's lead, members of the congregation were active in helping integrate the Bloomington community. In 1971 the congregation voted to approve a merger with First Baptist Church and the United Church of Christ, then narrowly changed its mind. That discussion plus long talk about whether to build a new sanctuary had their effect and by 1980 the membership had dropped to 491. With the arrival of Byron Bangert in 1985 talk of expansion began anew, with a long-range planning committee set up the following year. In 1988 the congregation approved plans for the expansion. Controversy over the removal of the "Zeigler House" was resolved by its removal down the street where it now serves as part of the "Grant Street Inn." A groundbreaking service was held June 18, 1989. "The construction made life less than convenient for church members," the Bloomington Herald-Times reported. For a while the entire church had to be heated by a small boiler. When cold weather came temperatures dropped as low as 41 degrees inside. The church addition was completed and dedicated in 1990.

The first Sunday school in the church was organized by Austin Seward in 1821. It taught both reading and religion. Although Sunday school instruction was long a part of our church life, a fully departmentalized, fully-staffed church school was achieved only in 1947 with Betsy Ellson as superintendent. Mrs. George C. Johnson became the first professional director of Christian education in 1953. Sunday school expanded into Walker Hall in 1954.

Although FPC ties with Indiana University date from the university's birth, it has had a formal association with IU students since 1914 when T.R. White was appointed as the first Presbyterian student pastor. For many years this mission operated in the Westminster Inn at the corner of Kirkwood and Indiana. In 1950, it moved to the corner of 3rd and Mitchell, and joined with other church missions to become the United Campus Ministries.

Women have been elders at First Church since 1932; just two years after the General Assembly approved such elections. Mrs. B.J. Vos was the first woman on Session. Mrs. Harry Blewett and Mrs. Norma Cline were elected the first women deacons in 1953.