

History of First Presbyterian

First Presbyterian Church of Topeka traces its beginnings to a meeting held in the home of Mr. and Mrs. John Jackson, between Fifth and Sixth Streets on Harrison, December 19, 1859. The Reverend A. T. Rankin is regarded as the congregation's founding father, having scoured Topeka and a surrounding eight or ten-mile radius to locate 17 area Presbyterians (eight men and seven women). The church was officially recognized by Highland Presbytery when the Reverend Rankin carried forth a petition signed by the original 17 charter members and minutes of their initial meeting. Two elders - J. M. Hamilton and Ephriam Herriett - were selected as First Presbyterian's initial officers.

About the same time as the church's origin, the Reverend John A. Steele traveled to "Bleeding Kansas" from a flourishing congregation he had built in Grand View, Illinois. (Steele himself was a native Virginian.) Drawn to the fledgling territory in its struggle for statehood and his intense dislike for proslavery issues, Steele came to the Kansas territory and preached in the Lecompton-Topeka Tecumseh area. Family friends lived in Lecompton, the proposed capital of the new state. However, Steele was antagonized by the proslavery factions of Lecompton and instead chose to settle in the freestate community of Topeka.

Congregational, Baptist, Methodist, and Episcopal churches were already established in the Topeka area. The pastorless Presbyterian congregation, having learned of the Reverend Steele's background, fittingly selected the newcomer as minister of First Presbyterian Church.

Originally, Presbyterian services were held in the homes of the 17 charter members. Gradually, the congregation grew to a point which necessitated joint occupation with the local Episcopal church of a hall on the third floor of a building near Sixth and Kansas Avenue. The first church building was constructed at 712 Kansas Avenue on a lot purchased by the Reverend Steele and Elder Hamilton and the structure were affectionately termed the "little brick church," in First Presbyterian history. The minister himself supervised construction while his son Robert (12 years old) helped to haul stones from a nearby quarry on Deer Creek.

Then, in 1864 Elder Hamilton moved to Leavenworth. The Reverend Steele purchased Hamilton's share in the original building and presented the structure to the congregation with stipulation that the members begin work on a church home within two years. Thus, a new church of native stone was constructed at approximately 107 East Eighth Street near Quincy. Dimensions of this building were 35 x 75 feet, on a lot 100 x 1,330 feet. The second church is recorded as having its first service October 5, 1867. It was used until the 1880s when the second congregational home was sold for \$12,000. This \$12,000 would play an important role in the financing of the present church building at 817 Harrison.

With Christ in Kansas, a 75th anniversary publication adds an interesting footnote to controversy surrounding the proposed third church building. One group hoped to modernize the Eighth Street structure by extending the front and sides of the existing building and adding a balcony. Another division desired an entirely new structure. Two congregational meetings failed to settle the issue. Finally, the opposing factions agreed to take subscriptions which would help to finance their plans. The remodeling division earned only \$2,900 whereas the new building forces drew \$17,080, which would gradually grow to \$20,725. Plans were then underway to build a

permanent home that cost \$30,000. Construction began when \$10,000 of this \$30,000 was still to be collected.

Architect George Ropes was responsible for the design of the third church building. James Cuthbert was the builder of this structure, situated directly across Harrison Street from another of the lasting edifices he had built in the Topeka area - the west wing of the Statehouse. The first service held at 817 Harrison was a prayer meeting Thursday, April 9, 1885 with 140 attending in the ladies' parlor. Then, on Sunday, April 12, the new building hosted Sunday School and formal dedication services; attendance was estimated between 1,200 to 1,500. (Note that April 12 was a blustery spring day in which the Presbyterian congregation availed itself of a new furnace. The heating device added its own distinguished touch to the service when the furnace belched enough smoke to cause a fire to be extinguished!) One of the first orders of business for the new 817 Harrison congregation was to declare that this temple be used solely for religious purposes. To this date, the early trust has not been violated.

When the church was erected in 1884, it supported a wooden steeple 160 feet high. The structure had small gables on each of its four sides; an architectural design termed a "convoluted" spire. Mrs. T. C. (Inez) Moore once stated that the tower was seriously damaged by lightning in 1888. James Cuthbert, builder of the church, recruited Horace C. Horner from St. John, Kansas to repair the steeple. Then, in 1910, lightning once again damaged the tower, and it was permanently removed by the Horner brothers.

Dr. Joseph Redden and his wife, Emma, are discussed in greater detail in the Redden Chapel section. It is interesting to note, however, that Dr. Redden enjoyed an active career at First Presbyterian as chairman of its building committee, elder, and Sunday School superintendent. During these early years nearly all Topeka churches instituted a pew rental system as a major fund raiser. Nevertheless, in the spring of 1886, Dr. Redden was instrumental in persuading the church administration to allow free pew arrangements on Sunday evenings. Then, beginning November 14, 1890, Dr. Redden instituted a system of weekly offerings which would entirely do away with the pew rentals. The newer fund raising source proved successful in that it netted \$250 more revenue per quarter. (During the latter part of the 19th century various attempts were made to retire the \$10,000 building debt.)

In 1889, during the ministry of Dr. E. C. Ray, a manse was built on the site of First Presbyterian's current chapel. The large, comfortable home was constructed at a seemingly unheard-of price of \$6,087.49!

The 1890s brought a major depression which resulted in serious cutbacks in church programs. Largely the congregation blamed the administration, an act which resulted in the resignation of the minister, Dr. Samuel B. Alderson. Dr. John D. Counterline (Beatrice, Nebraska) succeeded to the pulpit in May, 1897. He is credited with liquidating the remaining \$9,000 of the \$10,000 mortgage. Thus, after the March 27, 1899 congregational meeting the document was burned in an official ceremony. (Mr. James Cuthbert, builder of the 817 Harrison structure, represented the Board of Trustees at the ceremony.)

Between 1904 to 1929 existed the longest pastorate First Presbyterian Church has known to this present time. Dr. Stephen S. Estey, D.D., received a call to the Topeka pulpit while serving at a Salina church. (Dr. Estey himself was a native of Calais, Maine.) His years at First Presbyterian

were marked by a strong emphasis on education which was shared by both the minister and his wife. (Later sections will discuss Dr. Estey's added programs to church school education and Mrs. Estey's interests in the young marrieds' program.)

One of Dr. Estey's first projects was the remodeling of the church auditorium and Sunday School, prompted mainly by Mrs. Jane C. Stormont's \$4,000 gift for a new pipe organ. Originally, in the old auditorium the pulpit faced a diagonal aisle in the northwest corner which extended to a southeast vestibule. A choir loft proceeded along the north wall and a hand-pumped pipe organ was west of the northeast vestibule. The prayer meeting room was used for Sunday School classrooms and could be converted into a large auditorium or sanctuary by raising large wooden roller curtains.

The depression of 1907 somewhat delayed Sunday School expansion until new quarters were completed in 1910. It is noteworthy that Sunday School attendance reached record high levels during Dr. Estey's administration, particularly in 1915; of a total 1,362 membership, 1,219 were attending Sunday School.

A notable memorial contribution during these founding years was Mrs. Jonathan (Josephine B.) Thomas' gift of the sanctuary Tiffany windows, which were dedicated October 1, 1911. The purchase price is recorded as \$14,000. Louis C. Tiffany, designer of the memorial windows, designed the decorative Fravile glass in Europe and later made it popular in the United States. Today, during the anniversary year portraits of these early benefactors hang in the church parlor; the artist of the portraits is unknown.

Another interesting sanctuary window is the Stormont Memorial "Christ Blessing Little Children," which is in three panels. Also dedicated October 1, 1911, this window was provided through a legacy of Mrs. Jane Stormont, wife of a local physician. Dr. Stormont played an important role as an elder whose fund raising projects were instrumental in procuring First Presbyterian's permanent building site on Harrison Street.

During the 1920s and 1930s First Presbyterian continued with dramatic increases in the educational programs during pastorates of Dr. Estey and Dr. George William Allison. Redden Chapel, started in 1914, became an integral part of the church's city mission work. (The educational thrust of the church rapidly grew during these two decades.) Finally, the remodeled sanctuary, Moeller organ (from the Payne legacy), and Mrs. C. F. Menninger memorial rose window were dedicated in 1935.

When Dr. Orlo Choguill (pastor from 1945 to 1955) came to the First Presbyterian pulpit in 1945, he found the remnants of an aristocratic church emerging into a new post-war era. Forbes Air Base provided major support to the growing community and men were returning home from the battlefields. In addition, there was speculation that state offices and properties would soon expand, causing building tenants of the Capitol Plaza to worry about the future of their land. Dr. Choguill saw a need to preserve the downtown church in midst of progress. More specifically, the historical First Presbyterian Church belonged on the Avenue of Churches Harrison Street was marked by a church of major denomination on nearly every street corner. Other buildings in the square block bounded by Harrison, Ninth Street, Topeka Boulevard, and Eighth Street included the Woman's Club, Topeka Board of Education building, an apartment building, and the old Topeka high school. Of these buildings, the church, Woman's Club, and school board building

would be off city tax rolls and a likely target for state expansion. To the building tenants, however, the only logical move was their preservation of historical sites and the demolition of a row of older homes one block south (where the Kansas State Office Building now stands.)

Dr. Choguill and Warren Shaw, then State Building Commissioner, both recall the years when First Presbyterian began its expansion program. The old pastoral manse had not been used for living quarters since Dr. Estey's retirement as pastor. (Dr. Choguill lived in a new manse at 1028 Polk.) Now the yellow wooden-framed house was used for office space, classrooms, and a janitor's apartment. It seemed only logical that this outmoded building be replaced with a modern addition to the present church, with renovation of the outdated classroom arrangement.

Another event which, according to Dr. Choguill, really prompted the entire renovation project was the addition of Willard Hall. Mrs. Willard, a resident of Scarsdale, New York, had two sisters residing in the Topeka area where Mrs. Willard herself had formerly lived. Because of close family Presbyterian ties, Mrs. Willard's son Frank, who was a New York stockbroker, made a gift of \$15,000 (a handsome sum in post-war days) with stipulation that this amount be matched in a fund raising campaign by the church trustees, for a total of \$30,000. Willard Hall was to become a dining room/social area which would seat 400 people. This launched a building campaign in which contributions of \$140,000 were to be raised in 20 months to construct a new chapel, Sunday School meeting rooms, and office space.

The building improvements were to occur in three stages:

1. Construction of a chapel;
2. Renovation of the basement to include what is now "Willard Hall"; and
3. Construction of the lounge/ parlor area on the main floor.

A contract was first let for the chapel project; however, the other two followed in such immediate succession that all three were simultaneously in progress. Dr. Choguill recalls the constant shifting around of classroom and office spaces. The Sunday School classes were mainly conducted in the old YWCA classrooms, Seventh and Van Buren.

Mr. Shaw remembers the nonstop schedule as bulldozers hollowed out the basement area for Willard Hall, previously only the site of a solitary furnace room. He recalls well when the chapel walls were erected. The stone had to undergo a weathering process to match the stone walls of the original building. However, no furnishings were inside the new chapel; it remained only a shell until Kelsey Petro spearheaded a committee to furnish the new building. Various individuals responded by their donations which went to purchase the reredos (partition walls behind the altar), pews, and carpeting. Bronze plaques in the chapel indicate those who so generously helped to provide for the accoutrements.

Of particular note in Mr. Shaw's memory was the selection of chapel windows. A committee chaired by Mrs. C. A. Wolf (former owner of Topeka's Wolf Jewelers and now deceased) took bids from three respective chapel window manufacturers, with Jacobies of St. Louis being awarded the bid. One artist, Mr. Andrews of Kansas City, recommended that the window committee tour various area churches to determine the respective needs of this Capitol City church. For many months a subcommittee of Mrs. Wolf, Dr. Choguill, and Mr. Shaw toured Midwestern churches to determine exactly what they would require; both gentlemen credit Mrs.

Wolf's extreme good taste to the current chapel windows which depict the Four Evangelists, Moses, and Isaiah. The Mrs. C. A. Wolf commemorative window, depicting the nativity, was photographed by Hallmark Cards in 1982.

Dr. Choguill recalls these years as a period of growth in church tradition and community extension as well. At Redden Chapel services were conducted every Sunday afternoon by First Church staff members. In 1951 Life magazine picked the 817 Harrison Street church as one of 12 in the United States which had experienced a major growth rate in recent years. Under leadership of Dr. Will Menninger, the church's Boy Scout troop received national recognition.

Trinity Presbyterian was organized by six elders, five of whom were from First Church. Westminster remembered a long outstanding debt to First Presbyterian and also became instrumental in Trinity's organization. (Many years prior to this occasion Westminster faced such a serious debt that the Christian Scientist church was about to buy Westminster's building. First Presbyterian had received a considerable legacy from the Payne family for purchase of a new organ; funds from this legacy were used to retire Westminster's debt and the Christian Scientists erected their own building at 1239 S.W. Western. To repay this kindness, Westminster helped provide funding for the new Trinity Presbyterian Church located in southwest Topeka.)

First Presbyterian was, in fact, the parent organization of most other churches of this denomination; one exception was Central Presbyterian which was of another religious branch.

During his pastorate, Dr. Choguill found the relationships among congregational members to be the main contributing factor to successful church projects. In a period when the local community experienced great post-war growth, the interest, enthusiasm, and loyalty of the people themselves developed the surging spirit of pride and unification among First Church's family. (One Easter afternoon 36 couples had their infants baptized and on one particular weekend, five weddings were performed.)

During the 1950s First Presbyterian added air conditioning, repainted the structure's exterior, and added a parking lot. One of the last and major additions to First Presbyterian was its acquisition of the Community House in 1970.

Originally the home of Topeka attorney Hiram P. Dillon, the Community House was built in 1915 at a cost of \$90,000. At that time the three-story residence contained ten bedrooms, six baths, two libraries, large reception room, sun parlor, music room, extra-large kitchen, and auxiliary rooms. In addition, there were six fireplaces. All rooms in this tremendous home were connected by an in-house telephone system. Most imposing on the outside were two stone lion statues which today still guard either side of the front doorway. The lions were transported from the Far Hills, New Jersey estate of Dillon's father, Judge John Forrest Dillon.

Dillon's personal law library was on the third floor, opposite servants' quarters. The large family library was on the first floor; in this room an impressive fireplace bears the legend "My library was dukedom large enough." (From Shakespeare's Tempest) Another fireplace in the front reception area is inscribed with a statement typical of the Dillon family hospitality: "None come too early. None stay too late."

Other outstanding features of this early residence include stained glass windows with the likenesses of Dillon's favorite literary characters. A yellow-brick garage once held a turntable which rotated the Dillon family Packard outward. Three generations of the Dillon family lived in the dwelling until 1941 when it became the home office of American Home Life Insurance Company. The insurance company closed off several fireplaces and renovated the building into office space. Central air conditioning was added.

Then, in 1969 American Home decided to erect a new office building at 400 Kansas Avenue. First Presbyterian Church bought the structure in 1970 at a cost of \$225,000. (An interesting footnote to this purchase indicates that Dillon heirs originally offered the family home to First Presbyterian in 1925 at a price of \$50,000. Paul Moser, chairman of the purchasing committee, was able to negotiate a price of \$19,500. Although the congregation supported this acquisition, First Church's pastor and two members opposed the transaction. Their logic was that there simply was not enough use for the site!) In 2000 the State of Kansas took over ownership of the Dillon House.

In memory of his wife, Mary Shipman Baldry, William Earnest Baldry presented three cast bells and an elaborate chiming system to First Presbyterian Church; the bells were dedicated in 1968. Schulmerich Carillons, Inc., of Sellersville, Pennsylvania were the manufacturers of the Baldry bells. Two representatives of the Holland casting foundry, Leon Van Der Aa and Jan Oosting, personally supervised the chime system's mounting at the top of the church tower. Spacing between each bell is of the utmost importance. The largest bell (weighing 1,995 pounds) requires 40 inches from its center to the adjoining bell. (The second bell weighs 992 pounds, and the smallest bell is 592 pounds.) Each bell has its own "clapper" which is operated by an electric magnet and the clapper weighs approximately 13 pounds. The bells are elevated above supporting masonry walls to permit tonal quality to spread in all directions with uniformity in keeping with Mrs. Baldry's "outreach" efforts in the church community. A Presbyterian Vitamin, bell dedication brochure, states that this peal of the bells is a 46 vitamin for those who hear - a reminder amidst the care of the day that God is not dead."

Upon reviewing the history of First Presbyterian Church in Topeka, one common thread runs throughout its entire 125-year history - the indomitable spirit and faith of its leadership and congregation. Early pastors faced the perils of Bleeding Kansas to establish a permanent church home for faithful Presbyterians in the Capitol City. During the church's lifespan countless persons have unselfishly given of their talents to education and community ministries; their spirits linger on in the many church memorials and advancements in programs. Space limitation prohibits the listing of those many individuals who have so dedicatedly contributed to this community of faith since 1859. However, this brief glance at early church history may well evoke a spark of revitalization which will build a new era of dedication at First Presbyterian.