

Lansing's First Church

Painting Ten

The montage features the three church structures which have housed the First Presbyterian's congregation. The frame structure at Genesee Street and Washington Avenue was built in 1852; the stone structure at Capitol Avenue and Allegan Street was completed in 1889; and the colonial edifice at Ottawa and Chestnut Streets was first used for worship services in 1948. The Rev. W.W. Atterbury was the first pastor.

THERE was barely an inch of crusty snow on the ground, but dark clouds had piled up on the horizon west of the "Town of Michigan" on that blustery evening in November 1847, a hint that winter was on its way.

A few dry leaves that hadn't blown up against the log cabins and rail fences—or into the Grand River—tumbled across the snow as the cloaked figure stamped his feet in front of the wooden schoolhouse on North Cedar Street, then fumbled with the door latch and finally entered the building, shutting the door behind him.

Presently, there was a dim glow in the schoolhouse that could be seen from outside as the Rev. Calvin Clark, a missionary agent for the American Home Mission Society for Michigan, lit first one, then the other whale oil lamp to illuminate the one-room school.

A few minutes later, a lone man arrived at the school and went inside; then a man and a woman together; and finally an older woman, with a shawl pulled over her dark coat, opened the schoolhouse door and entered.

When they left the little building less than two hours later, the quartet, with Clark's help, had organized the First Presbyterian Church of the Town of Michigan. A month later, the group met at the school again—on December 17, 1847—and formalized the action, adopting the Confession of Faith and Covenant of the Marshall Presbytery by which the founding group had been recognized.

Thus, two weeks before Michigan's seat of government was moved from Detroit to the wilderness Town of Michigan, First Presbyterian became the first congregation in town to affiliate, officially, with a major denomination.

The founding members were James Seymour, a prosperous merchant-financier; Aaron and Louise Norris; and "a Mrs. Randall." Clark served as moderator.

Clark had been sent specifically to organize the church. Earlier in the year, another Presbyterian—the Rev. Benjamin Millard—was in the Town of Michigan under the auspices of the Connecticut Home Mission Society to preside over the organization of a Congregational church. Since the national headquarters of both churches were working together on frontier church organization, Millard's assignment raised no eyebrows. Besides, several of the seven members who formed the Congregationalist group were former Presbyterians.

But the congregation soon split up. The most prominent Congregationalist leaders moved out of town, and when Millard went east on a money-raising journey, he recommended that a Presbyterian congregation be established and that the Congregationalist group be "disregarded."

One of the first items of business facing the new First Presbyterian Church of the Town of Michigan was to change the designation to "Lansing" after legislators balked at calling the capital "Michigan, Michigan" and forced the town's name change.

Later in 1848, the church called its first pastor, the Rev. William W. Atterbury, a stated supply minister commissioned by the Board of Home Missions at a salary of \$400 per year.

Sunday services were held initially in the House of Representatives chamber in the new wooden Capitol. Then, for about three months the Presbyterian faithful met in a back room of the Ohio House, an inn on Washtenaw Street, where an upturned flour barrel—according to accounts passed down by church members for generations—served as a pulpit.

Later, morning services were again held in the Capitol, and afternoon sessions alternately in "God's Barn" on Cedar Street or at the old schoolhouse.

It appears membership in the First Presbyterian Church remained at four during the first year, but in January 1849 increased to 10. One of the new joiners—Shubael R. Green—was to make a marked impact on the church during its first four decades.

Two months after joining the church, Green became one of the first elders. He also accepted appointment as superintendent of the fledgling Sunday School and acted in that capacity "most of the time until 1854."

Green and his construction business partner and fellow Presbyterian, "Capt." John R. Price, were awarded the contract to build for the congregation the first church structure in Lansing. That was in March 1852.

The Green-Price bid must have included an enormous benevolence factor. They agreed in April to build a 38 by 53-foot frame structure, with a steeple, and have it ready for occupancy by the end of that year. The contract price was \$3,700. The building was dedicated on the last Wednesday of December 1852. By this time, First Presbyterian had 46 members.

Building pledges, totaling \$2,200, came from church members and Atterbury solicited the remaining \$1,500 in New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, the nearby towns of Detroit, Marshall and "other places," according to some historical reflections of one of his successors.

The cost of the building site at Washington Avenue and Genesee Street was "dirt cheap"—a total of \$105, according to church records. Five dollars of that was apparently a registering fee for an original church lot at the northeast corner of Capitol and Ottawa that had been granted by the State of Michigan in 1850. It was quickly exchanged for the lot where the first church was erected and today is the site of Lansing Community College's student services building.

Atterbury remained with the church for more than five years, finally accepting a call to a church at Madison, Indiana in May 1854.

The second pastor, the Rev. Benjamin Franklin, remained for one and one-half years. After he left in November 1855 the church was without a pastor for seven months. During this time, Elder Shubael Green often led the Sunday service.

The next July, Chester S. Armstrong, a recent theological seminary graduate, was ordained and installed as pastor. He remained until 1864, when he took an appointment as a chaplain in the Union Army. During his tenure, 230 members joined the church. An in his final year, 50 left to form Franklin Avenue (North) Presbyterian and 30 to form a Congregational Church.

Beginning in the fall of 1856, First Presbyterian was "heard from" daily in Lansing, thanks to a brass bell placed in its tower. Women of the church Ladies' Society earned \$400 through bake sales and bazaars—an amount equal to the pastor's annual salary—to purchase the bell. Since it was the only bell in town, it was rung every weekday at 6 a.m., noon and 9 p.m. as a service to the citizens. That bell was also rung to alert volunteer firefighters.

In 1868, a 16-foot addition was constructed and a basement room added, with contractor Green again supervising the work. The church was again lengthened in 1874 and an \$1,800 pipe organ installed, largely through funds raised by the ladies.

In the next 20 years, First Presbyterian continued its leadership role in Lansing's downtown churches. Several ministers came and went during an eight-year period until the congregation called the Rev. Dr. George Duffield to the pulpit in December 1876, the year of the nation's centennial.

Duffield was the son of a famous Detroit Presbyterian minister—an earlier George Duffield. "Our" Dr. Duffield already had gained some fame eight years before he arrived in Lansing by penning the words to the hymn "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus!" Curiously, he refrained from asking the Presbytery to install him as pastor "for reasons best known to himself," as one church history put it.

Duffield helped supervise a temperance campaign during this time in Lansing. It climaxed with a packed audience at Baird's Opera House and mass signing of temperance pledges.

But perhaps his greatest achievement outside the pulpit was in using his religious music talents to supervise the musical program for the January 1, 1879 dedication of Michigan's new Capitol. He also wrote an "Ode to the New Michigan Capitol," sung by a massed choir at the opening ceremony in the House of Representatives chamber.

The serious illness of Mrs. Duffield caused him to return the pulpit call on April 19, 1879. Five years later, he surfaced as pastor of Detroit's Westminster Presbyterian Church.

Perhaps the first member of First Presbyterian to pursue a career in the ministry was Louis F. Esselstyn, who completed his seminary work and returned to be ordained in his "home" church at Washington and Genesee. Another attraction for the young minister was Mary Huston, whose family had been active in the early years of the Franklin Avenue Presbyterian Church. They were married in the summer of 1887 and their honeymoon trip, it developed, was a journey to Persia, where Esselstyn had accepted a missionary appointment to Teheran. Members of both churches gathered at "First" on a memorable August 27th Sabbath for a reception and farewell to the popular young couple on the eve of their departure.

In an isolated corner of what is now Iran, the Esselstyns opened an outpost mission that featured a soup kitchen catering, eventually, to 4,000 souls a day. In a 30-year ministry, Louis and Mary Esselstyn returned to America only once. He died in 1918 of disease, fatigue and poor nutrition and Mary returned to America.

A large, red cover lectern Bible was presented to the First Presbyterian Church in 1985 by members of the Esselstyn-Huston families who were still members of the church. It honored the missionary efforts begun 98 years before that were once termed the most important piece of social service ministry in the first 100 years of Presbyterian activity in Persia.

Talk of need for a new, larger church building—at a new location—was heard at congregational meetings as early as 1874. During the next decade, there was a vote taken by the congregation to remain at Genesee and Washington and another to move and build a larger church.

Finally, at a meeting on March 24, 1884, the congregation decided by a 91 to 47 vote to construct a new church, according to some historical notes written by the Rev. George A. Beattie. The notes, incidentally, were penned on the reverse sides of some lined note paper bearing the legend "First Presbyterian Church, Lansing, Mich.—Pastor's Study, 309 Capitol Avenue, 1887." The yellowed pages are still (1986) in the church archives 99 years after they were written on the eve of the cornerstone laying for the "new" church at Capitol Avenue and Allegan Street.

Beattie had answered the pastoral call on September 12, 1886, just as the church had purchased the building site for \$5,000, scarcely a block from the center of downtown Lansing and across from the Capitol. A building plan submitted by S.B. Volk, a New York architect, was chosen and the construction contract for the edifice of Lake Superior red sandstone was let to Claire Allen of Ionia for \$27,000.

Allen, recalled Beattie, promised to have the building enclosed and the lecture room ready for occupancy "by the middle of December." The entire structure was to be completed a year later.

An estimated 1,000 showed up on Halloween afternoon for the cornerstone laying according to that day's State Republican. And who manned the silver trowel to smooth the mortar? Elder Shubael R. Green—after he had delivered one of the dedicatory addresses.

The State Republican completed its story by printing Beattie's remarks in toto, except for his closing sentence, undoubtedly deemed too ecclesiastical for a news column. Concluded Beattie:

"Standing under the vaulted dome of this October day, surrounded by the rising walls of the new structure, with hearts full of gratitude for the past and hope for the future, we thank God—and take courage."

Back at the old wooden church, the congregation marked its 40th anniversary on December 17, 1887, starting with what The State Republican described as a "feast" from "tables laden with a bounteous spread." It was apparently the reporter's first experience with a Presbyterian carry-in supper.

Sadly, Beattie—still grieving over his wife's death—resigned his pastorate on November 1, 1888, only a few weeks before completion of the new church. In a little more than two years of Beattie's shepherding, 116 new members had joined the First Presbyterian fold.

Thanks to a detailed advance story in The State Republican, huge throngs turned out on Sunday, June 9, 1889 for all three dedication services in the new church, which had a sanctuary seating capacity of 450.

The story was headlined "Elegant Temple" and said the new place of worship "stands forth an ornament to the city." It described the building in detail and mentioned that the \$27,000 construction contract had been increased "by committee changes" to about \$30,000.

Of special interest to the story's writer was a ventilation and heating system "entirely controlled by the janitor." Said the newspaper article: "From his position near the main entrance, he can open or close all or any of the ventilators or windows by means of a system of wires and levers which are invisible."

The day after the dedication, The State Republican noted the attendance of "hundreds of well-dressed people" at the services, reporting "carriages rolled up to the curb by the dozens" and standing room only crowds. One of the addresses was given by Gov. Cyrus Luce on "the power of the pulpit in the land."

As a result of an appeal for building fund contributions by the Rev. W.K. Spencer of Adrian, a former First Presbyterian pastor, approximately \$4,000 in cash and pledges was realized. Former Lansing City Mayor Orlando M. Barnes, also a Lansing financier and chairman of the church building committee, promptly pledged an additional \$5,000 if the entire building debt were cleared within a year. Another \$200 was raised at the afternoon dedication, the newspaper reported, "and the indebtedness was still further reduced" at the evening dedication.

Concluded that report: "With one of the most beautiful modern churches in the state, a light debt, and an energetic, talented and earnest pastor, the First Presbyterian Church of Lansing has every reason for self-congratulation upon its prosperity."

Alas, within 35 years, members of First Presbyterian were again talking of building a bigger, better church.

When the Allegan-Capitol structure was completed, Lansing's population was 13,102. But during that next decade something happened that was to change forever Lansing from being "just" the state's capital city. Ransom Eli Olds put a gasoline engine in the back of a buggy, called it an "Oldsmobile"—and set Lansing to growing at a breathless pace.

By 1900—11 years after the "new" church was built—the census counted 16,485 in Lansing. It nearly doubled in the next decade, reaching 31,229 by 1910. By 1920, the count was 57,327—and still increasing.

By mid-decade, despite the addition of electrical wiring and modern plumbing, the church was bulging. Basement Sunday School rooms were small, dank in the winter and musty in the warmer months. Early in 1930, the congregation decided to sell the building, purchase a new site and construct a third house of worship in less than 80 years.

On May 23, 1930—in the depths of the Great Depression—the Ruling Elders announced the building was for sale. A Lansing State Journal news item the next day said the purchase price would be \$150,000 and that plans call for building "a \$350,000 edifice" at a site optioned in 1929 at Chestnut and Ottawa Streets.

But in the depression climate, there were no takers. And church finances—the same as those of church families—suffered during the next decade. About the only thing that increased were the populations of Lansing (78,397 by 1940) and of the church, which became more crowded.

Just as the economy started to improve and members of First Presbyterian again began thinking of resuming their building project, war clouds started to form over Europe. Building materials and construction labor were both funneled toward the war effort and the church plans were again shelved.

But as soon as World War II was over and materials again became available, the project was revived. By now, Lansing was a bustling community

of more than 90,000 and the city's first denomination-recognized congregation was desperately in need of more space.

When First Presbyterian presented a December 1947 pageant marking its centennial, the production—according to a review in *The State Journal*—had to be presented on two nights to accommodate everyone. The previous summer, the congregation had decided to erect the present colonial style church with an exterior of varigated Brian Hill sandstone in a random ashlar pattern, with wooden portico and cornices, and a seating capacity of 750 including the balcony.

It was designed by O.J. Munson, an architect and member of the church. The general contract was let to the Reniger Construction Company for \$250,000 which covered the original excavation, footings, foundations, basement walls, ceiling and necessary utility provisions. The understanding was that the remaining superstructure, including the tower-steeple and sanctuary, would cost another \$175,000.

When it appeared that a recession in the late 1940s would again forestall construction, the church made a decision that was at least partly responsible for the successful completion of the structure. The contractor was instructed to proceed and the church started another building drive. But first, the congregation had the basement of the structure completed and capped with a temporary roof. First Presbyterians worshipped in that basement beginning in the autumn of 1948.

More than four years later, the main superstructure and steeple were completed. The dedication of the new sanctuary was held on October 11, 1953. The final phase of the Christian Education wing was added two years later—at a cost of \$90,000, increasing the total spent for construction to \$515,000.

At the end of 1955, an appraiser figured the total church value, including appreciation and the price of the land purchased for the site 26 years earlier, at \$712,305. Certainly that figure would have been beyond the comprehension of those original building fund donors who invested in the city's first little wooden church constructed in 1852 for \$3,700.

The finishing touch came with the completion and dedication on January 8, 1984 of the Molly Grove Chapel, financed by a bequest of over \$3,000,000 from the estate of Nancy Wood Holmes, a third generation member of a pioneer Lansing family. The designer of the addition was MJK Architect Engineers Planners and The Christman Company was the construction manager-builder. Both are Lansing firms.