

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
209 UNION STREET
SCHENECTADY, NY

A BRIEF HISTORY

Presbyterians began meeting in Schenectady sometime before 1760, with some evidence of the beginnings of a society as early as 1735. For a time in the 1760's, the Episcopal and Presbyterian congregations shared the St. George's Episcopal Church building, with each group using different entrances to the building and different internal seating arrangements. In 1769, eight members of the Presbyterian society united and bought a lot and set out to build a wooden church building on the site of Mekeel Hall. The form of this building, with its steeple, is preserved in the church seal.

The Rev. Alexander Miller arrived in 1771 as the first settled pastor. Pastorates were short in the early years, with long periods of supply preachers and vacant pulpits. The early years were also frequently ones of dissension in the church, with two distinctly different parties. The one, styled "formalists" in the language of the day, stressed the forms and styles of worship, as they had been known in Scotland. The other, the "evangelicals," stressed a religion of the heart and was greatly affected by the revivals that swept the area, under the preaching of men such as Asahel Nettleton. A later pastor, Dr. Jonathan Trumbull Backus, said in 1869 that "the beneficial effects of these revivals are still being felt in the church."

A sense of missionary outreach was felt in the church at an early date. John Blair Smith, president of Union College (1795-1799) and a participant in revivals in his earlier college work in the South, supplied the pulpit in 1795 and it was as a result of a discussion between him and a later Union College president, Eliphalet Nott (who was then on a missionary journey to the frontier), that the "Plan of Union" of 1801 was developed which united Presbyterians and Congregationalists in the evangelization of the frontier (west of Utica).

The first three decades of the 1800's were generally times of friction between the two elements in the church with but short interludes such as the 1809-1815 pastorate of Alexander Monteith. It was in his time that the present church building was begun. Patterned after the Ranstead Court Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, the church was distinguished by a balcony that went all the way around the oval interior. The balcony was depressed toward the main floor at the front, and on it was the pulpit from where the minister preached. Union College commencements were held in the church, with students walking around the balcony to receive their diplomas in the front. Graduation addresses by Dr. Nott, president of Union College from 1804-1866, were Christian orations, stressing the need for the young men to live for the Lord Jesus Christ. The portion of the church from the back wall to the wings dates from this time, and something of the oval interior can still be seen in the back balcony.

The original church (1809) had white interior walls and blue woodwork. An addition was made in 1834 and the transepts were added in 1859. Clear windowpanes gave way to stained glass and the square pews were changed to those rounded on the ends as at the present time. Numerous remodeling occurred over the years as styles changed, with the simple giving way to the ornate and then back to simple again.

Spiritually, the church was placed on a firm foundation by the forty-year pastorate of Jonathan Trumbull Backus, D.D. The church grew and prospered, and in 1869 established the East Avenue Church (now State Street Presbyterian Church). Dr. Backus attained national recognition and was elected moderator of the 1870 General Assembly. Involvement in the work of the General Assembly goes back to its earliest years with participation of elders Alexander Kelly and Nehemiah Bassett on the Bills and Overtures Committee.

The first Sunday School was conducted in 1817. Through the century other Sunday Schools were established, some of which grew into fully self-supporting churches. Communion services were preceded by a Friday evening preparatory lecture, and Sabbath breaking was a sin of major consequence. Church music was a subject of discussion throughout the 1880's, with choirs being organized and disbanded and the organ being moved from place to place. The organ itself was an innovation, having replaced the precentor and his pitch pipe. The singing of psalms gave way to hymns, and at times a cornet was used for accompaniment.

As the 1900's dawned, the church was involved in outreach and growth. The Union Presbyterian Church was established in 1900 when 81 members of First Presbyterian Church became charter members. In 1903, an Italian mission was established to evangelize the increasing number of immigrants. This became Trinity Presbyterian Church. However, the winds of change were blowing and new ways were entering the church. Spiritual zeal cooled. The Sunday evening service was discontinued and a certain spiritual apathy settled over the church.

In 1937, the Rev. Herbert S. Mekeel (minister 1937-1979) was called to the church, and like Dr. Backus a century earlier, started it on the road to spiritual vitality once again. In 1942, six young people appeared before the session to share their decision to enter Christian service and a long line of volunteers followed. New outreaches were initiated. A mission Sunday School became the East Glenville Community Church. Another mission became Hope Church in Ballston Spa. Other churches established during these years were Christ Community of Carman, Loudonville Presbyterian, Loudonville Community, and Grace Congregational in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Closed churches were reopened and the gospel went forth in a way not seen in the area for many years.

In 1976, First Presbyterian Church founded Schenectady Christian School. The original classes were held in Turnbull House, but the school soon bought the former Scotia High school and moved there.

Once again, change was in the air. In 1967, the United Presbyterian denomination adopted the "Confession of 1967", which is a revision of the Westminster Standards' view of the authority of Scripture. Form was becoming of more importance than spirit in the life of the denomination. Increased demands were made on the local church and on denominational participation in causes not supported by the church. In 1975, it was decided to petition the Presbytery of Albany for transfer to another Presbyterian denomination. The request was rejected and a period of struggle culminated in January 1977, when the congregation voted to dissolve all relationships with the Presbytery of Albany. This led to a legal question over ownership of the church property. A state law was discovered concerning churches incorporated before 1828 which, in effect, allows them the right to change affiliation without impact on their property. Because First

Presbyterian Church was incorporated in 1809, this was finally settled in December 1984 in favor of the church. With the denominational separation, the church progressed on an independent basis until joining the Presbyterian Church in America in 1989.

In 1979, Mr. Michael Alford was installed as senior pastor. He, like Dr. Mekeel, had a long and fruitful term at First Presbyterian Church, retiring in December of 2001. He was followed by Mr. L. Charles Stoker who served from January of 2002 until his resignation in January of 2007. From then until October 2007 when he was called to full-time interim ministry, Mr. E. Wesley O'Neill, Associate Pastor since 1996, provided leadership to the congregation. In 2006 First Presbyterian Church had the privilege of ordaining two Assistant Pastors, Mr. Kenneth McHeard and Mr. Jeremy Coenen.