

## Early Churches of Walker County

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Adapted, by permission of *The Huntsville Item*, from several articles: "Cumberland Presbyterian: 'First Church in Walker County'"; "First Methodist Church"; "First Baptist Church"; "First Christian Church"; and "St. Stephen's Episcopal Church". *Huntsville Item*.

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### Cumberland Presbyterian and Old School Presbyterian

The religious life of Huntsville has always been strong. The first settler brought with him a belief in God and Country. The first denominations to enter Huntsville were the Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist. The first of this group to erect a building were the Presbyterians. The other denominations probably met in homes of members. From early records, there seems to have been two groups of Presbyterians: the Cumberland Presbyterian and the Old School Presbyterian.

The Cumberland church was established by Reverend Weyman Adair. Mr. Adair became the editor of the "Texas Presbyterian," a publication of the church. The publisher of this paper was Reverend A. J. McGowan.

On the northwest corner of Cedar and Burton Streets (Eleventh Street and Avenue J), now Walker County Hardware, the Cumberland Presbyterian build the first church building in Huntsville. Reverend Milton Estill was the pastor of the church in 1847, when they erected the church building. It was a small wooden structure with a steeple. Timbers from the nearby forest were probably used in the building. They used this structure until their demise after the Civil War, about 1886. The members then identified with other congregations in the city. After the demise of this congregation, the building was used for several years by the Christian congregation.

The other group of Presbyterians, the Old School, met in various locations in the city: the courthouse, the Cumberland Church building, and the Austin College building. In 1855, they purchased a lot on the northeast corner of Lamar and Main Street (Thirteenth and University), now the location of the HNB Professional Building. The church had been organized in 1848, by Moderator Reverend Peter Hunter Fullenwider. Among the charter members were Samuel A. Moore, Eliza Moore, Isabella Moore, S. D. C. Abbott, George Allen, Anna Allen, Robert Matthews, Mrs. R. Matthews, and Lucinda Cummings. The only elder was Samuel A. Moore.

It is interesting to note that the next minister was Dr. Daniel Baker, who was President of Austin College. This College was sponsored by the Presbyterian Churches of the Brazos Presbytery of the Old School Presbyterian Church.

This group built a new structure on the same location in 1899. In 1956, they moved to the southwest corner of Avenue R and Nineteenth Street.

### First Methodist

The First Methodist Church (later renamed First United Methodist) was organized in the early 1840s. In the minutes of the Texas Conference, 1842, Huntsville is reported to have 182 white and 8 colored members. The Board of Stewards was composed of Thomas Gibbs, Sanford Gibbs, Dr. J. A. Thomason, Robert Wynne, and Williamson Wynne.

The first building was constructed by William M. Barrett in 1857. It was a brick structure, 50 by 40 feet, and was placed on Jackson Street (Sam Houston Avenue), on a lot that was 100 by 500 feet. The lot was purchased from Isaac McGary in 1854 for \$500. The dedication sermon was given by Reverend Robert Alexander. The pastor was Reverend A. Davis.

This building was torn down in 1888 and replaced by a larger brick structure. There were no Sunday school rooms at that time. Under the direction of J. W. Thomason, who served as Sunday school superintendent for 26 years (1900-1926), wooden classrooms were built. This structure burned in 1911 and the auditorium was damaged. In 1912, a new brick structure was built, very similar to the present structure. In 1918, this structure was destroyed by fire. Very little damage was done to the brickwork, and the present church was reconstructed. The building was completely renovated in 1979.

Fourteen beautiful stained glass windows were placed in the auditorium and classrooms in memory of loved ones. These windows were placed between 1918 and 1919. Some of the windows are *Bethlehem*, *Good Shepherd*, *Calvary*, *Madonna and Child*, and *Gethsemane*. The *Nativity* was placed in loving remembrance of Father and Mother Sanford Gibbs (1819-1886) and Sara Smith Gibbs (1844-1918).

#### First Baptist

On September 16, 1844, at the Dean school house (located at the northwest corner of the TDC Walls Unit in downtown Huntsville), a group of people met to organize the Baptist Church in Huntsville. The group was led by Z. N. Morrell, Thomas Horsely, and Benjamin Fry. The charter members were these three plus John and Tresilla Lehr, Thomas and Mrs. Bidwell, Sarah Horsely, and O. H. P. Hill. Reverend Morrell was the first pastor. He is remembered as the author of *Flowers and Fruits in the Wilderness*.

The first structure was built about 1852, on lots purchased from James McGowan and R. B. Martin. This plot was located on the corner of Burton and Lamar Streets (Avenue J and Thirteenth Street). Reverend J.W. D. Creath was the pastor when the building was completed. The dedication sermon was given by Reverend Rufus C. Burleson, then President of Baylor University. Forty years later, 1891, Reverend Burleson gave the dedication for a new building. He used the same text for both sermons: "Remove not the ancient landmark which your fathers have set" (Proverbs 22:38).

In 1924, this second structure was torn away and a three-story building was erected. This was used until January 24, 1954, when fire destroyed the building. The walls were structurally safe, and this building was redesigned as an educational building. A new sanctuary was built just north of this older building. All four structures—1852, 1891, 1924, and 1954—have all been at the same location.

On five occasions—1850, 1853, 1857, 1861, and 1864—the Baptist State Convention met in this church. The 1873 convention, scheduled to meet here, was transferred because of an outbreak of yellow fever.

The Texas Historical Commission placed a historical marker in 1977 to commemorate the history of the First Baptist Church.

#### First Christian

The First Christian Church was organized on New Year's Day, 1854, by Joseph Addison Clark and Randolph Clark. The group, composed of the Bush, Birdwell, Crabb, Jergins, Grant, and Banton families, first met in homes of the members. It is reported that they also met in the courthouse. The Clarks later were the founders of Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas.

In 1866, the group purchased the building of the Cumberland Presbyterian, located in block 8, lot 31, at the corner of Eleventh Street and Avenue J, now the location of Walker County Hardware. In 1901, a new building was constructed at this location. In 1931, new brick was added and a major remodeling effort was made to that building. The congregation remained at this site until 1963, when they built at the corner of Nineteenth Street and Avenue R. The new building used the lovely stained glass windows that had been placed in the previous building as memorials to deceased members.

The first resident minister was Reverend Benton Sweeney. He began his ministry on January 1, 1863. Other ministers over the years have been W. T. Fuller, John T. Poe, Sam Brown, Edwin D. Hammer, Gus Ramage, Edwin C. Boynton, and Ron Sumter.

Lay leaders of the church through the years have been many. J. Lyle Smith, Dr. Joseph Baldwin, H. C. Wright, and James Hansford Smith were just a few.

A Texas Historical marker was placed at the location in 1984.

#### St. Stephen's Episcopal

As early as 1858, a group of citizens had formed a small congregation of Episcopal worshippers. They met in various places until after the Civil War. It is reported they met in the courthouse, the Cumberland Presbyterian building, the Austin College building, and in homes. About 1855, the group secured lot 18, block 5, at the corner of Sam Houston Avenue and Thirteenth Street. This was to be the future home of the congregation. In 1868, the cornerstone was set and the congregation had a meeting place, with the Reverend W. R. Richardson as Rector.

The first vestrymen were Dr. J. P. Nixon, Dr. Thomas M. Markham, and Mr. Joe Bates. Early members included Miss Lizzie Rome, Mr. Walter Rome, Jude and Mrs. James Smither, A. M. Hooks, the George Robinson family, the Brown family, and the D. F. Thornton family.

The congregation remained small, and sometimes did not have a resident priest. Many times a lay reader led services. J. P. Nixon and A. L. McDonald were among the lay readers.

By 1900, the group had grown in numbers, and a new building was planned. The site remained the same and a new structure was dedicated in 1904. Prominent members at this time were Drs. C. O. Stewart and James G. Gee of Sam Houston State Teachers College, and Miss Beatrice W. Craig, College Librarian.

The congregation remained in this location until 1948, when a new structure was dedicated at the corner of Avenue M and Fifteenth Street, lot 419, block 46. In 1959, the congregation moved to lot 313, block 37, at the corner of Sixteenth Street and Avenue J.

The ladies of the Episcopal Church began a community service in 1968. Volunteers of the church led an activities program for the youth, until the city of Huntsville took charge. HEAP, Huntsville Enrichment Activities Program, is an outgrowth of this summer activity.