

HISTORY OF THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF IONIA

Today, let us imagine ourselves living in 1834. The previous spring, six families from Herkimer County, New York had arrived here. They had previously negotiated with the Indians to purchase some land. These men were industrious and looking for a better future for their families in the West. Michigan was still a Territory. The party chartered a canal boat and put all of their possessions on board on April 20, 1833, arriving in Buffalo, New York on May 7th. There they put their heavy household goods and farming implements on a sailing vessel bound for Grand Haven and went by steamer to Detroit. After the necessary preparations for the long trip, they started west, passing through Pontiac and other settlements. On the eighth day out they took a guide to lead them through the wilderness, in which they had cut their way slowly and painfully. Before they reached their destination, one of the children became ill and died. This caused a distressful time to have to bury the little one along the way. They reached the present site of Ionia on the 28th of May. The Indians had given up looking for them, so had planted corn and pumpkins and squash on their land. After some bargaining, the Indians were well satisfied, and moved on a few miles to await the next newcomers. The settlers exchanged their tents for the Indian's more permanent wigwams made of bark. Soon a group of the most able-bodied were sent to Grand Haven on flat-bottomed boats, propelled by poles and strong arms to bring back their possessions. This enabled them to begin erecting more suitable dwellings. The mosquitoes were a real discomfort to them. The corn and vegetables purchased from the Indians were the only crops they could grow that season. They had no provision to grind the corn, so had to prepare it for food like the Indians did, using hollowed out standing stumps as mortars. Later they obtained a coffee-mill to do the grinding. This bridged them over a time of sharp necessity caused by scarcity of breadstuff, which could only be obtained from Detroit by the way of Grand Haven.

The first mention of the creation of Ionia County was an act of the Legislature, approved March 2, 1831. Prior to that it had been attached, first to Oakland county, then Lenawee, later St. Joseph and then Kalamazoo. In March 1834, a second Act concerning the new territory, provided that the county of Ionia be a township by the name of Ionia. Existing laws of the territory, prohibited organization and election because there weren't enough qualified voters. In March of 1835, the law was changed and in April a township meeting was held at the house of Antoine Campau.

In June of 1834, thirteen months after the settlers arrived, a meeting was called by three families of the original group to talk about forming a church. At their invitation, Elder Loomis, an agent for the American Baptist Home Missionary Society, and Elder Slater, a missionary from Thomas Station (now Grand Rapids) attended. The families involved were the Erastus Yeomans, the Samuel Dexter's, and the Alfred Cornell's. These family names were long active in First Baptist Church history, and they were very prominent in Ionia history. This first meeting after religious services, resulted in these six adults joining in conference. On August 23, 1834, Elder Loomis returned and preached from the 2nd Chapter of Acts, part of verse 41 which says "Then they that gladly received his work were baptized". At intermission the congregation proceeded to the Grand River, where the solemn rite of baptism was performed upon W.B.

Lincoln. After the ceremonies at the river were concluded the congregation returned to the house of Erastus Yeomans, where services were resumed. For a period of nearly three years after that the church had no pastor, and maintained services at irregular and uncertain times. This was the first religious organization in Ionia. In 1837 Reverend A.C. Sangster came to be the first pastor, at a salary of \$300.00 per year. During his pastorate, the Church voted to tax each male member 12 1/2 cents and each female member 6 cents per month for "support of the Gospel". A committee was appointed to collect the same.

The first baptism was that of Dr. William B. Lincoln. He was the first school teacher in Ionia. He served most of Ionia County as physician for 40 years, going by horseback whenever called. He was the first church Clerk, serving in that capacity for ten years. In 1835 he married Anthy Arnold. This was the first wedding performed in the settlement, and was performed by Squire Samuel Dexter. Dr. Lincoln was chosen for the first clerk of the township.

The first township meeting chose Alfred Cornell as Moderator. The officers were sworn in by Samuel Dexter, Esq. The election followed: Supervisor, Erastus Yeomans, Clerk, W.B. Lincoln, and Director of the Poor, Samuel Dexter.

Samuel Dexter built the first grist mill in 1837. We are indebted to him for the land on which our Church stands. Dexter also donated the square on which the county buildings stand.

In 1845 Rev. Alfred Cornell became pastor. Cornell had come to Ionia with his father's family in 1833 and joined the Church at an early age. This was the year that the first church was built, a frame structure erected very near the present structure. In June 1868, it was voted to erect a new building. After various meetings and discussions the contract was given Mr. Ory Waterbury Sr. (Grandfather of Stanley Powell). The building was dedicated in January of 1872. Many improvements have been made over the years. In 1892 the pipe organ was installed, and in 1895 organ pumpers were hired at 50 cents a Sunday. These were usually young boys of the Church. In 1906 the balcony was added and in 1913 new hard wood floors were laid in the auditorium. In 1916 stained glass windows were installed. In 1919 a motor was purchased for the organ. The cost of the original brick structure was upwards of \$20,000.00. It had a seating capacity of 600. The membership in 1880 was 317. The Sunday School, organized directly after the formation of the Church, had an average attendance of 141 scholars and 17 teachers at this time.

We are grateful for this wonderful heritage, and to all who have built upon it over these 150 years. We pray that we may do our part, so that future generations may come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior.