



UPPER LEFT—FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ON EAST MAIN STREET; UPPER RIGHT—ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL church, corner Kidd and Washington streets; lower left—Church of Christ on E. Washington street; lower center—Baptist church, northeast corner Main and Kidd streets; lower right—Methodist church, corner Hudson and E. Main streets.

1834

Special to The State Journal

IONIA, Jan. 31—The original settlers of Ionia county were religious, God-fearing people. Evidence of this fact is contained in the vast temples of worship constructed in their day, most of which are as yet standing and in use, silent reminders of the struggles which must have characterized the lives of the forerunners of history in Michigan.

Today in this thriving city of 10,000 population there is a cluster of religious edifices, contained in an ordinary city block, which have seen Ionia emerge from a tiny settlement in the wilderness into the throbbing, busy little town it now is. They are Baptist, the Presbyterian, the Methodist, the Episcopal, and the Church of Christ, each of which has filled an important niche in the growth of this city and the youngest of which organizations has seen 70 years roll by.

Ionia, which enjoys the distinction of being the first town to be settled in the district lying west of Pontiac and north of Jackson, also can lay claim to having the first church which was organized in this section of Michigan.

In the year 1833, Hon. Samuel Dexter, of Herkimer county, New York, a former member of the Legislature of that state, accompanied by a group of 63 persons, settled upon a placid looking stretch of land bordering Grand river which they named Ionia. A little more than a year later, on June 24, 1834, initiatory steps were taken in the formation of the First Baptist church. Rev. E. Loomis, an agent of the American Baptist Home Missionary society, and Rev. S. Slater, of Thomas mission, were present at a meeting called for the purpose of organizing, with the result that after a sermon and religious services, Samuel Dexter, Erastus Yeomans, and Alfred Cornell and their wives formed themselves into a conference. Organization was effected Aug. 23, 1834, at which time W. B. Lincoln, Ionia's first physician and school teacher, was a candidate for baptism. For a time the society flourished under the guidance of Alfred Cornell, who served as a brother. In 1845 Rev. A. C. Sangster became pastor, serving a short time when Rev. Alfred Cornell assumed the pastorate, remaining in that capacity for 17 years. It was during

his term that the first church building was erected, just east of where the present edifice stands, the latter replacing the first church in 1858 during the time Rev. Levi Parmely was rector. The parish grew with each succeeding year and is now ranked as one of the city's leading religious fraternities. Rev. Alfred Trenerry is present pastor.

The second religious sect to come into being in Ionia was the St. John's Episcopal church, founded in 1841. Rev. Melancthon Hoyt, of Grand Rapids, presiding at a meeting held at the courthouse building during which a preamble was adopted and signed. The organization was not blessed with success during its initial years, for between 1852 and 1860 the church ceased to have an active existence. However, at the later date a re-organization was effected and, although little history is available of the intervening years, to date the church, while possessing only about 125 communicants, is nevertheless very active and flourishing. Rev. Edwin G. White is the spiritual director at present.

The history of both the Presbyterian church and the Church

of Christ are inseparably linked, for it was from the former that the latter sprang. The Presbyterian church was formed in September, 1842, at Lyons by Rev. Lemayne S. Smith, a missionary, with the organization being finally completed a short time later in the courthouse at Ionia, the denomination beginning its existence with eight members. At a meeting held Oct. 29 of that year it was decided to call the organization the First Congregational church of Ionia, and the next day worship was held in S. P. Hodges' schoolroom, with Rev. L. M. S. Smith preaching. Services were held in various locations until in 1857 a church was built. Although created as a Congrega-

tional church, application for admission to the presbytery was made in 1845, but in 1848 a release from the presbytery was obtained and a union with the Grand River Valley Congregational association was effected. It severed relations with the latter in 1856, returning to the fold of the presbytery. The church was razed by fire in June, 1908, but before two years had passed the present magnificent edifice was constructed at a cost of \$30,000. For the past five years the parish has been under the guidance of Rev. Joseph H. Green, one of the outstanding Michigan clergymen, during whose pastorate the membership has enjoyed an extensive growth, more than 300 names having been filed with the general assembly the past year, 25 per cent of which have been added since Rev. Green began his work here.

As mentioned above, the Church of Christ theoretically is an offspring of the Presbyterian church. History has it that in the year 1858 Elder Isaac Erret, then pastor of the Muir Church of Christ, exchanged pulpits with Elder Landis, Presbyterian pastor here. The former conducted a series of meetings here in the fall of that year, setting forth doctrines that apparently differed somewhat from the Presbyterian faith. He is said to have preached the gospel from the old Jerusalem standpoint as he understood it, his teachings causing Presbyterian leaders considerable alarm at what they considered the heresy of his doctrine and the manifest disposition of some of their best members to accept his conclusions. The result was the inauguration of what is now known as the Church of Christ, or Disciple church, as it is sometimes spoken of. Meetings were held in halls about the town for several years. In 1868 the present building was begun, the basement at first being completed and made usable for services. It was brought to completion in 1873 under the direction of Rev. L. R. Gault. That the congregation has succeeded and prospered is readily shown by the enrollment to date, which is between 700 and 800. Rev. Herbert G. Hurrell has been its pastor for about two years.

The Arnold family, among the first pioneers, were the ones who introduced Methodism into Ionia, services being held from house to house in the early days until in 1854 the first organization was created. A lot on Washington street was bought and erection of a temple begun. Lack of funds delayed its completion. Revivals aided in the constant enlargement of the society and in 1869 the stone foundation of the present edifice was laid, plans calling for the structure to be the largest and finest in Michigan at that

time. The project had the backing of such sturdy pioneers as H. E. Sessions, James M. Kidd, N. M. Lewis, and many others prominently identified with the early history of both Ionia and the state. The church was dedicated May 4, 1873 at a total cost of \$63,000, with Rev. T. F. Hildreth filling the pulpit. Rev. W. F. Kendrick is the incumbent rector.

Why the five temples of worship were erected topographically within a stone's throw of each other, no one can say. Other denominations are scattered about the city. The Church of Christ is on the north side of Washington street, facing south across Library park, on the opposite side of which, on the south side of E. Main street are the Presbyterian and Methodist structures. A short ways west in the same block are located the Baptist and Episcopal churches, the latter on the southeast corner of Washington and Kidd streets and the former on the northeast corner of Kidd and Main streets.

Ionia Arranges for Centennial Celebration Will Be a Homecoming

IONIA, March 5—Residents of Ionia are shaping a program for a week of homecoming entertainment, probably in the latter part of May or early in June. The Ionia Ministerial Association is sponsoring a religious-historical gathering in honor of those who founded the City 100 years ago.

Mrs. Olive McGannon, of the Daughters of the American Revolution, is general chairman of the committee. Lieut. Gov. Allen E. Stebbins and Hiram Darling, acting mayor, also are on the general committee.

The committee of judges, which will choose a script for the pageant, includes John Grace, chairman; Mrs. Leonard Duval, Gene Yarnall, Mrs. Fred S. Howard and Lloyd T. Smith.

Indians held undisputed possession of the portion of the then Territory of Michigan now comprising Ionia County until the early 1830's. In 1831, the County was organized by the Territorial Legislature.

In 1832, Samuel Dexter, of Herkimer County, N. Y., visited the territory and purchased at the United States Land Office at White Pigeon lands lying north of Grand River, which now is the central part of the City of Ionia.

April 25, 1833, a company of immigrants, including Samuel Dexter, Erastus Yeomans, Oliver Arnold, Darius Winsor, Joel Guild and Edward Guild and their families and Dr. William B. Lincoln, Zenas Winsor, Patrick M. Fox and M. Decker, 63 in all, left German Flats, Herkimer County, to settle on the land purchased by Dexter. The party arrived in Detroit May 10 and at Ionia May 28.

Oliver Arnold settled on the south side of the river, now known as South Ionia. Samuel Dexter was a farmer. Erastus Yeomans had been a boatman on the Erie Canal. Arnold was a blacksmith. All were industrious, energetic and determined to make a success of their venture. Dexter had been a member of the New York State Legislature and others had experience in public life.

The first log houses were erected by Dexter, Yeomans and Joel Guild. Dexter's was built on the south side of what now is Main St. immediately adjoining the site of the armory. Yeoman's was a quarter mile west and still is owned by descendants.