

First Baptist Church of Ionia

Reviews 115 Years Of History

June 24, 1949

Following is a history of the First Baptist church of Ionia. It was written by Mrs Nettie E. Krainbrink, custodian of the church records and read at services which recently marked the 115th anniversary of the founding of the church.

The First Baptist church of Ionia, Michigan, has the distinction of being the first church organization in this section of Michigan. The original settlers who came here from the State of New York were God fearing people, as evidenced by the steps being taken soon after their arrival to form a religious organization.

Ionia was then called Washington Center, a name given to this settlement by the Hon. Samuel Dexter, its founder. On June 24, 1834, a meeting was held at the home of Erastus Yeomans. Elder Loomis, an agent of the American Home Missionary society, and Elder Slater, a missionary at Thomas Station, in what is now Grand Rapids were present. (This home of Mr Yeomans was on West Main street near what is now Yeomans street.)

Six At Meeting

At this meeting six persons, Samuel Dexter and wife, Anna, Erastus Yeomans and wife, Phoebe, Alfred Cornell and wife, Nancy, united in a conference. August 23 of this same year Elder Loomis again visited here together with Caleb Eldred a member of the church at Comstock in Kalamazoo county. After a sermon and discussion it was voted that this conference should ask recognition as a church. It was at this time that the permanent organization was effected, the first charter members being the six who united in conference. Since then our church has been in continuous active existence.

First Baptism

At this meeting Benjamin G. Barber was received by letter, and Dr. Wm. B. Lincoln was received as the first candidate for baptism. Dr. Lincoln was Ionia's first physician and school teacher. The following day, August 24, a service was held with Elder Loomis preaching, and during an intermission the congregation proceeded to Grand river where the solemn rite of baptism was administered. After baptism, Dr. Lincoln was chosen as the first church clerk. Church records show that relatives and descendants of the charter members followed in rapid succession in church membership.

Males Ruled

One of the articles of faith of this new organization was that the government of the church be vested in the hands of the male members.

Our church is indebted to this same Samuel T. Dexter for the land upon which the present building stands. It was originally a plot eight rods square, at the corner of Main and Norvell streets. The original deed to this property is still in existence and bears the signatures of Mr and Mrs Dexter.

It is interesting to note that Samuel Dexter was a direct descendant of Roger Williams, founder of the first Baptist church in America, at Providence, R. I. Meetings of the church were held at the home of Erastus Yeomans and others, and later at the school house which was also located on West Main street. Baptism was solemnized in the waters of the Grand river.

No Pastor

For nearly three years the church had no pastor but flourished under the guidance of Alfred Cornell. In May, 1838, Rev. A. C. Sangster was engaged as the first pastor at a salary of \$300 per year. He remained two years.

In August, 1840, H. B. Buttolph preached in the school house, where the church met, and it was voted to ask his home church at Troy, in Oakland county to ordain him, so that he might become pastor of the Ionia church. He arrived in October of that year and continued his pastorate until 1845. What the salary of the pastor was at that time is not recorded, but on August 2, 1845, it was voted to tax each male member 12½ cents and each female member 6 cents per month for the support of the gospel. A committee was appointed to collect the same. During the pastorate of the Rev. Buttolph the church was represented at the Shjawassee association at its meeting at Perry, Mich. Letters and reports were read. The next year the Grand River association came into existence.

Palo Church

About this time John VanVleck reported that some people in the vicinity of North Plains were wanting religious services and he asked for a license to preach. This was granted September 11, 1834. On June 1, 1845, he was ordained to the ministry and became the organizer and first pastor of the Palo church. This Rev. VanVleck was a great uncle of Leo Van Vleck, now deceased.

Rev. Alfred Cornell, son of a charter member, became pastor here in 1845 and remained seventeen years. During his pastorate here the first church building was erected, just east of where the present building stands. In October, 1846, it was decided to rent the pews in the new building, the income from such rentals to apply on finishing the interior. Rentals ranged from \$1.00 to \$5.00 per year. Each person who had taken a pew was to give his note, payable in grain or its equivalent. It was also voted at this time to raise money by a committee whose

duty it was to "search the tax rolls and levy a tax upon each member, (residing near enough to enjoy the privileges of church meetings) according to the amount of property assessed to each on said tax roll."

Covenant Meetings

Covenant meetings were held on the Saturday afternoons preceding the first Sunday of each month. The clerk kept a record of all absentees from church service and at each covenant meeting the clerk informed those present of all absentees and they were required to render a satisfactory excuse, or be admonished for neglect of religious duty. The church was to investigate all absentees after a second offense.

The Rev. E. H. Morrison, a graduate of Colgate university, came as pastor in 1863, remaining two years at a salary of \$600 per year.

In 1865 the Rev. Alfred Cornell returned for another two years, making nineteen years that he served the church here.

The Rev. Levi Parmely came to the church in 1868 and remained until 1872. On June 22, 1868, it was voted to erect a new building as the old frame building was found to be inadequate for the work of the church. It was also greatly in need of repairs. Orry Waterbury, sr. (father of Miss Della Waterbury and grandfather of Stanley Powell) was asked to submit estimates, at a cost of not less than \$10,000. After considerable discussions at various gatherings of the church, it was voted to let the contract for the new building to Mr Waterbury. It was like the present building except for a small tower on the southeast corner and the entrance which was added later. Rev. Parmely preached the dedication sermon on January 7, 1872.

Fire Organ, Pumper

Johnathan Rowley was pastor from 1873 to 1874 and following him the Rev. E. O. Taylor was here for two years.

The Rev. John Donnelly, also a graduate from Colgate university came in 1877 and remained five years. He was followed by Rev. D. Van Alstyne in 1882, whose pastorate was four years.

The Rev. T. S. McCall became pastor in 1886 for two years, followed by Rev. J. J. Phelps in 1889 for four years. Rev. F. O. Dickey came in 1893 and remained three years.

In June, 1895, it was voted to hire an "organ pumper", the salary not to exceed 50 cents per Sunday. (We have not been able to find the date when pipe organ was installed.)

The Rev. E. M. Jeffers became pastor in 1896 and remained three years and was followed by the Rev. D. L. Martin in 1900. The

This was moved into lot east of new building now erected.
Pipe organ installed in 1892.
Hook - HASTINGS "organ"
2 manual tractor active. Would cost to day to duplicate 20000.
Dec of oldest organ in Michigan
yellow brick

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