

Early History of First Christian Church of Independence, Mo.

This is the first part of an unpublished manuscript about the history of the congregation.

In the beginning

The date was July 4, 1835.

Fittingly the setting was a frontier town located just 12 miles from the country's western border called Independence, Missouri. Fifty-nine years earlier, the Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia, had unanimously approved a remarkable document that became known as The Declaration of Independence. In the declaration, Jefferson asserted that the colonies had the right to break their bounds with the "absolute tyranny" of the British monarchy. The colonies would form a new government that would rule through the consent of the governed and help secure for its citizens their "unalienable rights" which included "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Perhaps there was a special reason for picking that particular day. There is nothing in the brief record to indicate. But on that day the small group constituted a new church having agreed to "take the Book, known as the Bible, as their only standard, guide, and directory, and rule in faith and conduct."

News of the young growing church was regularly communicated to The Millennial Harbinger – an early church publication that helped unify the new church denomination. The July 1837 issue contained an announcement that the two-year old Independence church would finally get a minister. The writer of the news item reported that F.R. Palmer "has now gone to Independence, in Jackson County, where I trust he will be a great benefit to that people, as you are well apprised of his distinguished abilities as a Christian leader."

Francis Palmer, was a transplanted Virginia who came to Missouri via Kentucky. He lived on an Independence farm and would preach at least once a month and often following the sermon he would sing a hymn solo. Palmer, like many Southerners who had relocated in the area, was a slave owner.

Evangelists regularly reported their success in attracting new members to the denomination. T.M. Allen, in the summer of 1840, wrote: "On the second Lord's day of May, I was in Independence, in Jackson County, Missouri. The meeting continued four days. There were thirty-two additions, chiefly by faith and obedience. Among those immersed was a very respectable lady, who had long been a Presbyterian – a few were also added from the Baptists and Cumberland Presbyterians. Brother F.R. Palmer is the Bishop of this congregation" Allen reported growing success throughout western Missouri. "The cause is advancing in our country – O! that we had a few more efficient preachers." By the annual meeting that fall, the Independence congregation reported 157 members, though membership hit a plateau as the church the following year reported on 166 members.

The January 1843 issue of The Millennial Harbinger reported that at the annual meeting for Upper Missouri held the previous fall, Independence counted 260 members in its congregation – easily the largest church. F.R. Palmer was listed as the church's

“Evangelist” and also was shown serving another church in Jackson County at Ragan’s School-House where 17 members had been added that year – five through baptism – to the 35-member church.

J. Creath, Jr., a missionary, paid a visit to the Independence church in June 1844. “I am now ‘far west,’ within a few miles of the western boundary line of the U States on the turbid waters of the angry, crooked, and turbulent Missouri” he wrote. “There is a congregation of disciples here, consisting of two hundred and fifty or sixty members.” The beliefs of the new church met with enthusiastic response in the rugged frontier town. During the first four months of 1846, the church added 86 new members – an endeavor probably added by a visit by Alexander Campbell several months earlier to Independence.

Campbell was such a renowned preacher that the meeting was held in the Methodist meeting hall rather than the small wooden Christian Church. Campbell preached twice that Sunday and the following day gave a short address on education before traveling on to Liberty.

One early leader of the Independence congregation, N.J. Hockensmith, reported in February 1850 that church attendance usually numbered around 100. “We read, teach, break the loaf, and exhort one another to love and to good works,” he wrote. “We have two elders and four deacons, all having, as I think, the scriptural qualifications. We have also one home evangelist (Palmer), and two we aid in sending out to proclaim the word. The elders attend to the discipline of the church entirely. We attend, also, to the weekly contribution. “

In a time when Missouri was very much a frontier state, there were very few established churches and fewer settled ministers.

The protracted meeting, when one or more preachers would come into a settlement and hold preaching services for several days was the adopted method.

The preaching tours brought the church members in direct contact with the spiritual and intellectual leaders of the growing frontier church who took a “back to the Bible” approach to worship.

Perhaps the most famous preaching tour through Missouri occurred in 1852, when Alexander Campbell toured the state to raise money to endow a chair of Natural Philosophy at Bethany College, located in what is now West Virginia.

That preaching tour brought to Independence a young preacher whose later ministry would change the life of the Independence church. His name was Alexander Procter.

Procter's Presence

Procter, who was a minister in Glasgow, Mo. at the time, had helped organize Campbell's tour and was selected to travel with the group throughout the state. He had graduated from Bethany College just four years earlier.

After traveling by horse and carriage for more than three weeks throughout the state, Campbell and his associates crossed the swollen Missouri River on Wednesday, Dec. 1 after having raised \$2,700 from a preaching engagement in Liberty.

It was Campbell's second visit to Independence, which by then was a community of about 2,500. That Friday Campbell was scheduled to preach but had lost his voice.

Procter took over and preached to the church members who had gathered at the Cumberland Presbyterian Church on North Liberty because their own small one-room log church at the corner of Lynn and Walnuts Streets was much too small.

Campbell, who had taught Procter at Bethany College, made this evaluation of his cherished student's lecture to the Independence congregation.

"Suffice it to say," Campbell wrote about Procter's Independence speech, "it was a good one; and so edifying and impressive, as to leave me nothing to regret about by hoarseness.... I had heard him on another occasion, and was not satisfied that this reputation among the brethren was not exaggerated. His delivery is too laborious and exhausting, but I trust that time, and a little more experience, will impart to him a more self-saving knowledge, and an utterance less laborious."

By the next day, Campbell had regained his voice and preached two services the next day, which resulted in subscriptions of \$1,800 to the young college. All told Campbell spent 76 days traveling Missouri and raised more than \$16,000 for the college. In addition, the trip brought to Independence a man who the community would in later years hail as its own sage – Alexander Procter.

Procter, in substituting for the indisposed Alexander Campbell in 1852, had remained in the minds of the Independence church that had grown and prospered. In addition, three former Bethany College classmates of Procter also lived in Independence – George S. Bryant, A.E. Higgason and Oliver Bryant.

Sales of Alexander Campbell's hymnbook were good in Missouri and Campbell proposed to give the profit from the sales to educate a young minister from Missouri at the newly founded Bethany College in Virginia. A committee of ministers chose Alexander Campbell as the one who showed the "greatest potentialities."

Procter completed his four-year college course in three years and returned to Missouri as a celebrity. He was the first Christian Church minister in Missouri with a college degree. He was licensed to preach and made preaching tours in Missouri and Illinois including the 1852 trip with Alexander Campbell.

The Alexander in Procter's name is for Alexander Campbell, the Disciples of Christ founder, whom Procter's mother admired. He was not called Alexander Campbell

Procter, simply Alexander, because of the objections of his father, who at the time, considered Campbell a religious heretic, although he later became a supporter.

Procter was born in 1825 in Fayette County, Ky. of Virginia people, though the family immigrated to Randolph County, Mo. when the youth was 12 years old. Procter attended school at Paris, Mo., working to pay his way. He excelled in his studies, affiliated with a Christian Church, and he often spoke at social meetings and even filled in for the preacher.

When the Independence congregation called him, Procter had since 1856 been the pastor at the Christian Church in St. Louis – considered to be probably the largest and most sophisticated Disciples church in the state at the time.

Procter's fond memories of Independence, its reputation as a healthy place to live and his need to leave St. Louis prompted Procter's acceptance. The Procters moved to Independence in the fall of 1860 and settled in a small house on Rock Street (now Maple Avenue) and Alexander assumed his duties as pastor of the brick Christian Church. Except for a brief period during the Civil War (1863-64), the Procters never left.

Procter came with his recently married wife Caroline Shaw Prewitt, a young widow and began serving the growing congregation. But trouble loomed in the community as the country steadily moved towards a civil war. Whatever the causes of the conflict – states' rights or slavery – sentiments within the border state of Missouri was split over who to side with in the event of an impending war between the states.

Many in the congregation had strong emotional ties to the South having been born in Kentucky, Tennessee or Virginia. The church's charter members included slave-holders and the names of some of their slaves. Blacks were not only present on the list of charter members, but also present at the worship services, at least according to one account while the congregation was in the log-cabin church.

In his 1904 church history, George S. Bryant wrote:

“This was not a noticeable thing then, but now it would attract attention that after all the white brethren had been waited on, some one of the deacons would take both emblems in his hands and walk to the rear of the church and serve the (Black) servants. This supper being over, the announcements were made. The people were dismissed.”

Early county records indicate that six charter members who were black belonged to church members, including Francis Palmer who served as the church's first pastor. Their owners were not farmers, consequently indicating that the blacks were domestic servants.

When the Civil War eventually broke out, Independence was not spared. Confederate forces, on a recruiting mission, charged into Independence on August 11, 1862 and engaged federal forces under the command of Col. James Buel who was headquartered in the community.

More than 30 soldiers were killed in the battle and the wounded carried to the courthouse. The battle completed – the federal troops surrendered – the community responded, according to a contemporary newspaper account.

“So soon as the battle was over, our citizens, without respect to pray, flocked to scenes of strife and did all in their power for the suffering and dying All honor to the humanity and noble benevolence of the Christian women of Independence.”

One Jackson County history states that “during the Civil War days Rev. Procter did much to keep the peace between the friends of the South and the Union adherents in Independence.”

In fact, a time when Independence was being split asunder by political tension, Procter ministered so fairly and compassionately to all that “... only two members stayed away on account of their political bias.”

The trust that people had for Procter is indicated by one incident during the Civil War in which Dr. David Waldo gave Procter a hundred dollar bill and told the preacher: “Alex, use this in helping the poor and needy. You know who needs it better than I do.”

Procter made frequent horseback trips throughout the state urging Disciples “to hold fast their confidence and assuring them that the storm would soon pass by.”

On May 19, 1862, Procter signed a loyalty oath to the United States, a copy which is still extant. This signed oath also was to serve as a “safe passage” document for the bearer. The standard history is that Procter was forced from his home by Order No. 11. However, as can be seen from a reading of the document, those living in Independence were exempt from the order yet the Procter family left Independence and went to Paris, Mo., near the old Procter homestead. It is said that “Paris welcomed the Procters with open arms and were sorrowful when they left.”

The Procters returned to Independence and the Christian Church in 1864 and brought with them a new daughter Stella (Mrs. J.H. Montague). Their two older children Rowland and Mary (Mrs. Clifford Thomson) were born in Independence. Another child Emma (Mrs. William Southern) was born to them after their return.

In March 1866, the Procters bought several acres of land for their home which then was on the outskirts of Independence – one mile west of Westport Road (now Lexington Avenue). The Procter property extended (east of Park) from the alley (then Chicago Street) to Linden on the south, Vassar on the west and Lexington on the north.

Procter’s happiness at returning to his beloved church was somewhat marred by his respiratory ailments. His physician, Dr. John Bryant, advised the preacher that he need to spend time outdoors and invited the family to live at the home in the 800 block of S. Main Street. The yard was filled with great spreading trees. Under the care his doctor, Procter was able to carry on at the church.

During the last years of Procter’s life, as he became increasingly frail, the church provided assistant pastors to manage the day-to-day affairs of the congregation. They were L.W. Welsh and James Vernon, who were listed as pastors from 1897 until 1899 when he resigned. Procter was listed as pastor emeritus.

In 1899, R. Lin Cave came as pastor and remained through Procter’s death. During Procter’s frequent absences, the Rev. A.G. Higgason and George Bryant, both Bethany College graduates, led the congregation in worship. Higgason, an educator was the longtime chairman of the church board.

On April 1, 1900, Procter came to church for the last time. It was his 75th birthday and the church was filled with floral tributes to him. It would be his last sermon. These concluding words survive:

“I have lived for these people 40 years. I have ministered at funerals of their fathers and mothers. I have witnessed the development of their lives and character; have worked for them and their welfare. With them and for them I have lived and here I expect to end my days. The Master gave his life for others – His servants cannot do better than to try to imitate his example. My brethren, may God bless you.”

Procter died that summer on July 24.

A new century, a new church

An enthusiastic red-head came to serve the congregation at the red-bricked church in September 1902. L.J. Marshall was burning with enthusiasm for building up Bible study classes, Sunday school and increasing all activities of the church. He also had in mind an ambitious plan. The congregation would build a new church – something on a little grander-scale than the red-brick church which the congregation had used for fifty years.

The spring before Marshall arrived the church had finally retired an outstanding \$3,000 debt remaining that had helped pay for a new organ installed in the 50-year-old red brick church the previous year.

With no lingering debt, Marshall turned his efforts to the construction of a new congregation.

May Wallace – the longest continual membership in our church – has several childhood memories of those last years in the red-brick church.

A granddaughter of Alexander Procter, Wallace was baptized when she was 10 years old in the baptistry of the red-brick church. This, in her words, is what the no longer existing church and Sundays were like at the red-bricked church.

“Two of the Sunday school superintendents stand out in my early memory – Mr. Jim Phelps and Dr. William Schutz. Mr. Phelps, a rotund man who liked to sing, stood in front of the assembly of all ages to lead the singing. I can see him now, belting out ‘Trust and Obey, for there’s no other way.’

“Dr. Schutz who followed Mr. Phelps gave us a motto which always seemed to me a good one – ‘Every member present on Sunday, on time, with his own Bible, a liberal offering, a studied lesson, and a mind to learn.’”

A great Jubilee Service marking the 50th anniversary of the red brick church was held July 4, 1904. Fourteen charter members answered “present.”

With the formation of several large Sunday school classes, discussions concerning building a new building took on more serious tones. It was a very active time at the church. Discussions began concerning building a new church and meanwhile several large Sunday school classes were also started. Marshall persuaded the official board to buy a lot – our present church site.

The church signed a contract with W.A. Findlay on August 10, 1906 to purchase the lot. The newspaper reported the price of the lot was \$8,000.

The land which was bought to build a house of worship on has its own interesting history. The lot was part of the original 160 acres that had been reserved for a county seat. The lot on which the church is located was sold in 1830 for \$20. There were other transfers of the property before Findlay purchased the lot in March 1887 for \$7,000. He had planned to build a residence on the property, according to a newspaper account.

Shortly after Findlay obtained the lot, an adjacent landowner, William Chrisman, wanted to swap his lot at the corner of Lexington and Pleasant but the deal never went through. Chrisman instead sold the property to the First Presbyterian Church for \$10,000 which built its church there in 1888.

Leah Cunningham Knox, a church member, remembers church reaction to the Findlay land purchase. "Everybody was shocked at such a price." But Dr. Marshall was a skilled money raiser.

J.N. Hanthorn told this story about a stirring sermon Marshall gave one Sunday that concluded with a plea for the congregation to pay an outstanding debt of \$2,000 before church was over.

"A hush came over the congregation and they began to wonder," Hanthorn recalled. With a couple of wealthy church members making sizeable contributions "the storm broke and when the (congregation) passed out (of the church) the debt was cancelled with \$500 left." Not all were in favor of building a new sanctuary. However, finally a building committee composed of R.D. Brown, John A. Sea, Dr. John Bryant, Fleming Pendleton Sr., Dr. W.H. Schutz, Miss Mollie Hughes and Mrs. J.D. Eubank was named.

The church had grand plans for a magnificent new church. The congregation, besides being one of the two or three largest in Independence, contained prominent community members particularly in the field of education.

At the turn of the century, a person's church membership partly determined one's social standing in the small-town atmosphere of Independence. Mary Paxton Keeley, a writer and a community resident, recalled in an oral history: "Everything was divided socially by churches, and the Presbyterians, I would say were top on the pole, then the Campbellites (the Christian Church)." She then ranked the other churches in this order: North Methodists, Southern Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans and the Catholics. Later, she added: "The status of the Mormons was just a cut above the Negro. People went to hear them sing in the Stone Church, but that was all."

As a prominent church, the building committee turned to a well-known Kansas City architect John F. Felt to design their new church building. Felt was so interested in promoting better architecture that his company began publishing a monthly magazine called *Modern Architecture*.

When he died in 1938, Felt had designed several large area churches including Wornall Road Baptist Church, the Roanoke Presbyterian Church and the Roanoke Baptist Church along with buildings at William Jewel College.

The design featured massive Doric porch columns that supported the pediment. The building was essentially square, though the gable roof left the impression that the church was designed in the form of a Greek cross. The center of the church supported a large dome.

Construction began in August 1907. A newspaper account said that "an open winter" permitted work to continue throughout the winter of 1907-1908 to such an extent that a cornerstone laying was scheduled for Feb. 28, 1908.

However, the ceremony was delayed when the contractor – J.W. Taylor of Kansas City, Ks. – found a flaw in the red granite cornerstone and had it returned. An article on the delay quoted a church member as saying: "When our church is completed, it will compare very favorably, in proportion to its size, with a large majority of churches in Kansas City." The reporter, in that same account, noted that the church location was ideal

because the church was located “in one of the most beautiful sections” of Independence and was only a half block south of the electric car line on Pleasant Street.

Local newspaper accounts about the church were both frequent and favorable because family members of William Southern, Jr., the publisher of *The Independence Examiner*, belonged to the church.

When the cornerstone was laid on March 8, a small box was placed inside the stone by Rev. Marshall. It included, the newspaper said, a membership roll of 612 names; names of church and Sunday school officers; names of building fund subscribers; a history of the church through 1904 by George Bryant; a list of the church’s ministers; a New Testament bible; a photograph of Rev. Procter; a history of the Bryant family; and a penny.

Church life remained busy as the building continued. Rev. Marshall, provided this report, in a denominational publication of a January 1909 community evangelistic effort.

“Two services were held every day, one in the afternoon and another in the evening. The ministers decided by lot where they should preach. The public did not know who would preach until the speaker arose to being. The first service was largely attended, and the meetings gather power and interest.”

During the four weeks, the “whole city was deeply stirred,” the minister reported. The business community even responded. “All business houses closed for one hour in the afternoon on five different days,” Rev. Marshall wrote. “And on three of these days the saloons closed.” The final worship service in the old red-bricked church was held on March 7, 1909 – a year after the cornerstone was laid. The newspaper published this graphic account.

“Sunday was a day of deep and tender interest to members of the Christian Church. May of them, even elderly men and women, had worshipped all their lives in the old church on South Main Street. The services were in the nature of a farewell to the old building and the last that will be held there.

“As a result of the deep interest in the services, there was not a vacant seat in the house. The Rev. L.J. Marshall preached in the forenoon, his subject ‘The Old and the New.’ He spoke of the experience of the congregation in the old building and what they hoped to see in their new house of worship just completed on South Pleasant Street.”

Fourteen church members were in attendance who had been present at the 1854 red-brick church dedication. And that afternoon 14 new members were baptized in the baptistery in the new church on Pleasant Street.

The church, costing \$50,000 was considered the finest and largest in all of Independence with a red tiled central dome, imposing white columns on the front portico and two beautiful stained glass windows.

The window on the west (Pleasant Street) given by members of the Alexander Procter family suitably depicted *The Sermon on the Mount*, while the south (Kansas Street) window showed the story of the Good Samaritan, dedicated to Dr. John Bryant and other family members. The building faced west, but was so arranged that the sanctuary was on the bias and the congregation faced southwest, the organ being high up in the southwest

corner with the pastor's study beneath the entrance on Kansas Street side. At the back of the sanctuary was a series of folding doors, which when opened, added an area seating about 1,200 persons. Behind this were the Sunday school rooms.

The church was formally dedicated with a service on Sunday, March 21. It was a wonderful day. During the morning worship service, the congregation raised \$30,000 for the new building. The newspaper commented: "On that day (First Christian Church) not only dedicated its beautiful new temple to the service of God, but it succeeded in less than an hour in raising every cent of debt against the building ..."

Dr. Marshall left his pastorate here in 1910 when he accepted a call to the Wabash Avenue Church in Kansas City.

The church had several short-term ministers. Brother F.F. Walters, who came in October 1910, was successful in building up a great Bible School and his Sunday evening services drew large crowds.

The next pastor was the Rev. R.H. Pendleton, who during his tenure from 1912-1915 emphasized the importance of missionary work and study. A church evangelist, Orville Hamilton, gave an interesting account by an outsider of what the church and the community was like in 1915. Writing in the church publication *The Christian Standard*, Mr. Hamilton said:

"The town is characteristically Southern, the most hospitable in the world. We never met a more royal people and were never backed better by a minister than by H. King Pendleton. He is a royal fellow, an uncompromising leader of civic righteousness."

The later comment largely referred to Rev. Pendleton's efforts during a city election that concerned whether saloons should remain in the city. The minister was a leader in those seeking their removal and was strongly opposed by "the whiskey forces."

During the the four-week evangelistic campaign, Hamilton reported that 352 additions were made to the church by baptism or confession of faith. During one service, the new members pledged over \$1,000 to their new church.

The whole experience prompted the evangelist, who lived in Mountain Grove, Mo., to comment: "The Independence Church is coming into its own."

The Rev. Elvin F. Leake was pastor from 1915 to 1917. During his ministry the Bible School had an average attendance of 400, the social life of the church was emphasized and church membership greatly increased. A Feb. 6, 1916 Sunday School bulletin announced that the 20th Century Class met every Sunday at 9:30 a.m. offering "A man's welcome for every man."

A Sunday school attendance contest was going on offering as a reward of merit an appropriate picture to be hung in the room of the class which showed the greatest percent increase. In the contest between men and boys versus women and girls, the losers were to entertain the winners with an evening of fun. "Meanwhile, let all get in to win that both church and school may be built up and the Kingdom of our Lord advanced which is the real desire of our hearts."

The congregation was in the new church less than nine years when James Ernest Wolfe came, a young man just out of the University of Chicago with only his dissertation to complete to gain his Ph.D.

He was very proud to be called to such a beautiful, big, important church and had big plans and dreams for accomplishment. But those dreams gave way to the others within two months.