

FALL INTO ARTS FESTIVAL

Step Back in Time: Kennett Courthouse Square & Beyond Historical Walking Tour

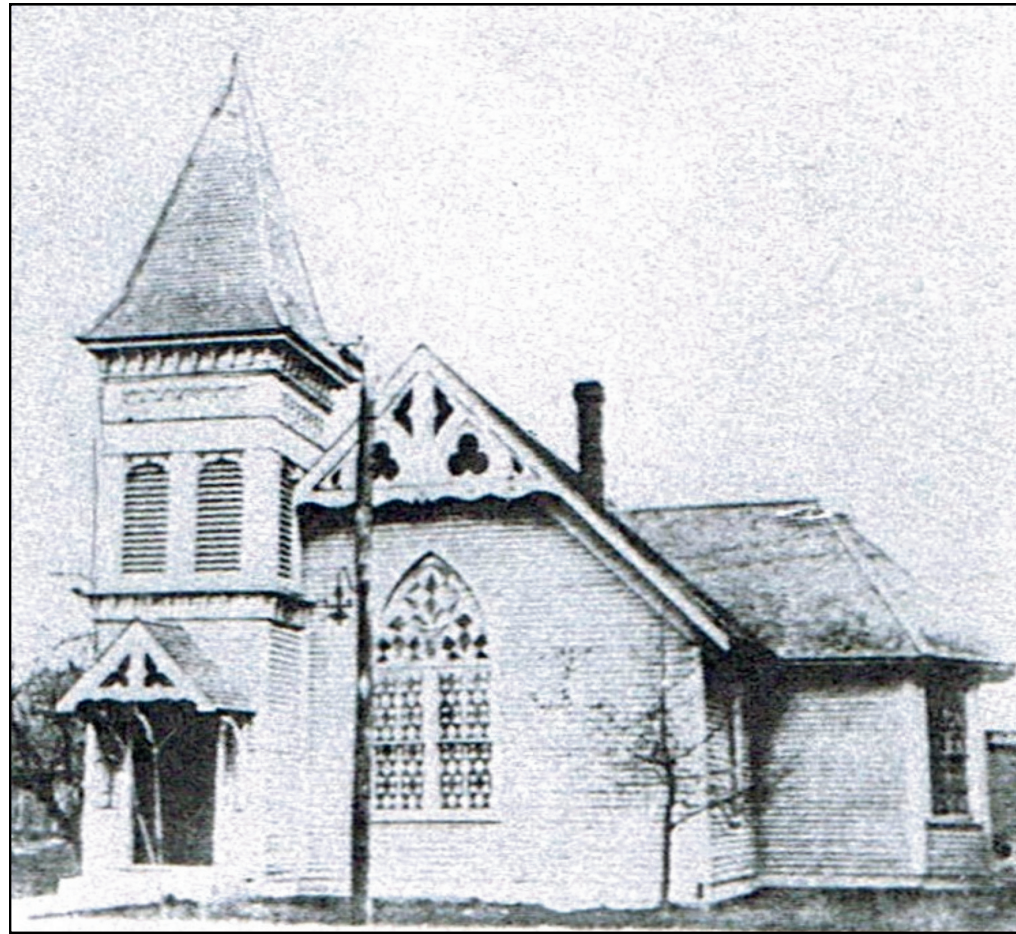
First Presbyterian Church - Established 1877 - Current Building Completed in 1915

300 College Avenue

History

Organized on June 4, 1887, the second Presbyterian Church in Dunklin County was founded at a time when Kennett was no more than a village with a population of fewer than 300. The church was established four years ahead of the first bank, and five years ahead of the railroad arriving in Kennett.

The church was started following an evangelistic meeting during which several persons were received into the Clarkton Presbyterian Church and then transferred by letter to form the First Presbyterian Church in Kennett. The first congregation had 41 members, including seven African Americans, an indication of inclusiveness that was not typical of the late 19th century.



The 1888 church.

At its formation in 1887, services were held in a school building located on South Main Street on the lot now occupied by Mitchell Park. Just a few months later the church erected its own building on North Main St. where today's church stands. The house of worship was also used by the Methodist and Baptist congregations until the establishment of their own church buildings. There are numerous examples of the four churches on this tour supporting each other in their early years and that cooperative spirit continues today.

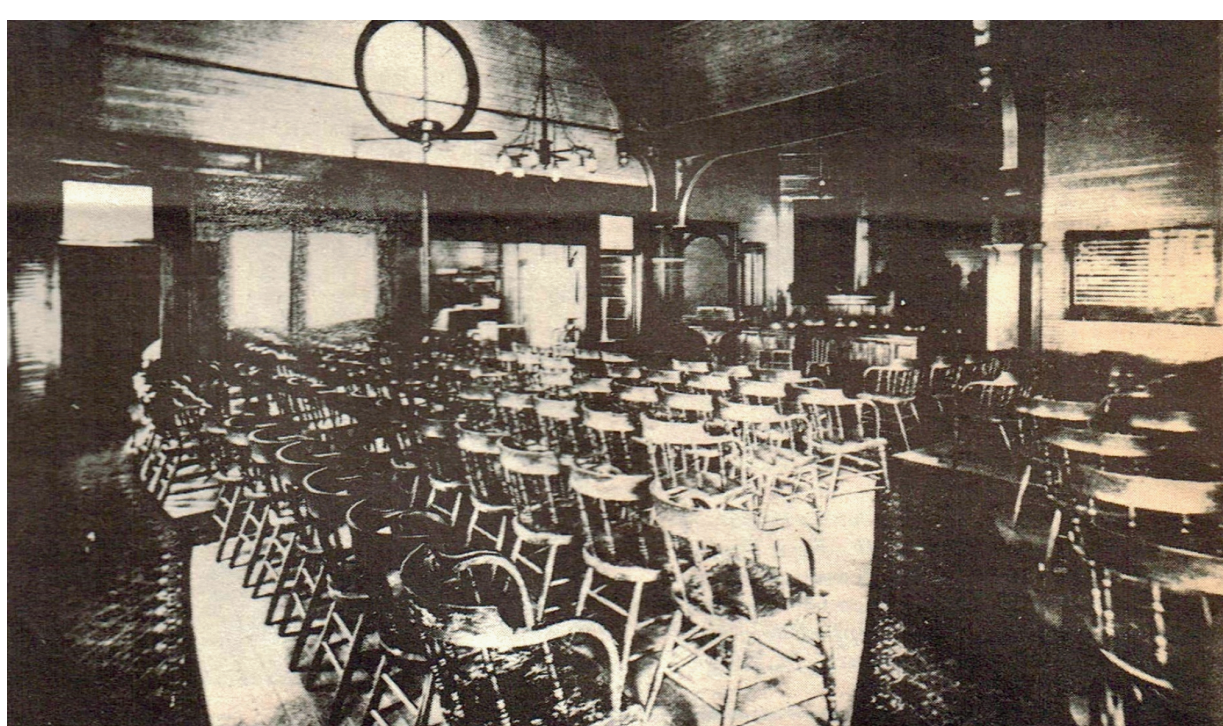
Weathering Storms and Growth

The original simple, one-room frame structure was severely damaged by a cyclone only a few years after it was built. T. E. Baldwin hired a St. Louis architect to repair and remodel the building into an attractive and spacious new church.

By 1913 the congregation had grown and voted to construct a new church building. The existing building was moved across the street and later remodeled into an apartment building, which no longer stands.

The new church was started with little delay, and the ground was broken on May 18, 1914. The first services were held in the new building on January 3, 1915. The cost, including furnishings, was \$20,000, much of which was raised by the ladies' society.

The Women's Missionary Society and the Westminster Circle combined to raise money to repaint the interior of the church in 1919. Reed Brothers of Sikeston performed the work. At the completion of the project, O. B. Reed presented the church with a painting "The Ascension" which hangs above the divider doors in the sanctuary.



Very early interior view with captain's chairs later replaced by pews.

A two-manual Gradian pipe organ was a gift from Mrs. D. B. Pankey and her two sons in 1921. The instrument was the fourth and most impressive organ that the church had used. By 1946 it was in need of serious repair, and it was removed by the Wick Organ Company who completely rebuilt it and added additional features for a cost of \$7,500.

In its earliest years, the church formed the social life of its members, indeed of the town. When the Christian Church was formed and some of the original Presbyterian members broke away to worship there the Presbyterian Church moved its Sunday school classes to the afternoon so that those who attended Sunday school at the Christian Church in the morning could come to Sunday school with the Presbyterians later in the day. Other social activities included trips on a flatbed railroad car with benches attached to it to the country for picnics and fishing trips; there were ice cream socials and music and even a Martha Washington tea where the girls dressed in costume.

Modernization and Preservation

There have been periodic times of repair and refurbishing but the largest project began in 1984 when the congregation undertook the task of restoring the complete structure under the guidance of a committee chaired by elders James Henson and Beulah Hale McHaney.

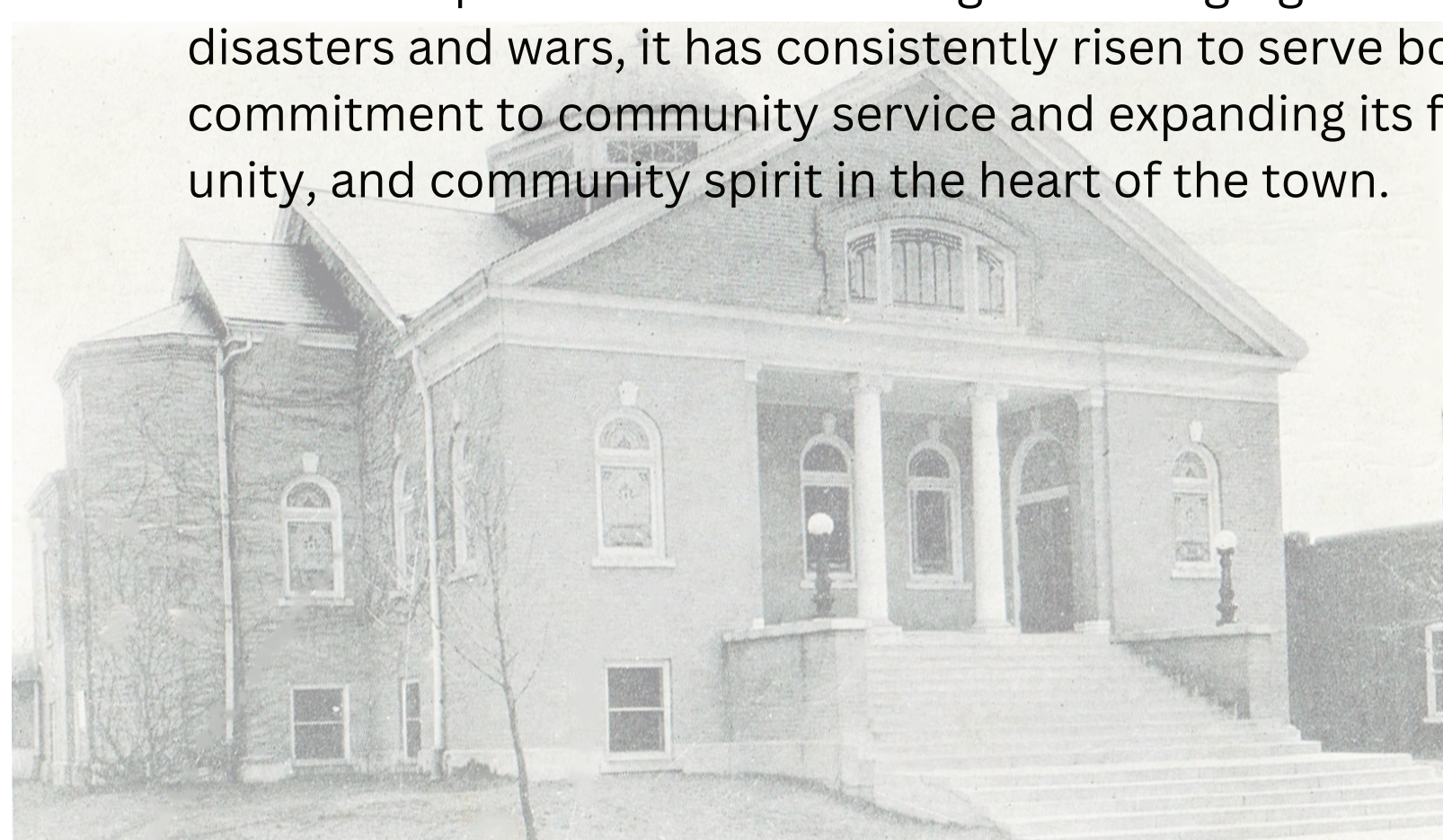
Working with an architect, the goal was to restore the building and modernize the electrical, heating and cooling systems leaving the main design of the building and decor intact. This work was completed by the end of 1986 at a total cost of \$120,000, a cost fully met by the congregation.

Community Service through the Decades

The church has always been engaged in community service and the building is a center of that activity. Each decade has recorded a particular type of service. During World War I, a special Red Cross room was set aside for devotions and rolling surgical dressings. During the Great Flood of 1937, the church building was virtually given over to the service of the Red Cross, and an emergency kitchen and dining room were set up in the basement where as many as 900 people were served meals twice a day. During World War II, the women were active in Red Cross work and the church continued in the post-war years to express concern for the local needs through a variety of organizations.

The First Presbyterian Church is steeped in a history of community service that continues today. It began by sharing its building over a century ago with the First Baptist and First Methodist congregations. Around 2000 they purchased the former Dunklin County Library building to serve as a community facility and additional church space.

The First Presbyterian Church stands as a testament to resilience, community engagement, and adaptability. From its inclusive beginnings to its role as a hub for cooperative efforts among local congregations, the church has woven itself into the fabric of Kennett's history. Through trials like natural disasters and wars, it has consistently risen to serve both its members and the broader community. Today, it continues to evolve, maintaining its commitment to community service and expanding its facilities to better meet the needs of Kennett. The church remains an enduring symbol of faith, unity, and community spirit in the heart of the town.



This 1915 photo shows that today's church is relatively unchanged from the year in which it was built.

Sources: History of Presbyterian Church by Mrs. Paul Elizabeth Baldwin April 27, 1944; Centennial Directory, 1987 written by Allen Oakley; the Dunklin County Historical Society volume one; The Daily Dunklin Democrat.

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