

FALL INTO ARTS FESTIVAL

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

First United Methodist Church - Established 1877 - Current Building Completed in 1917

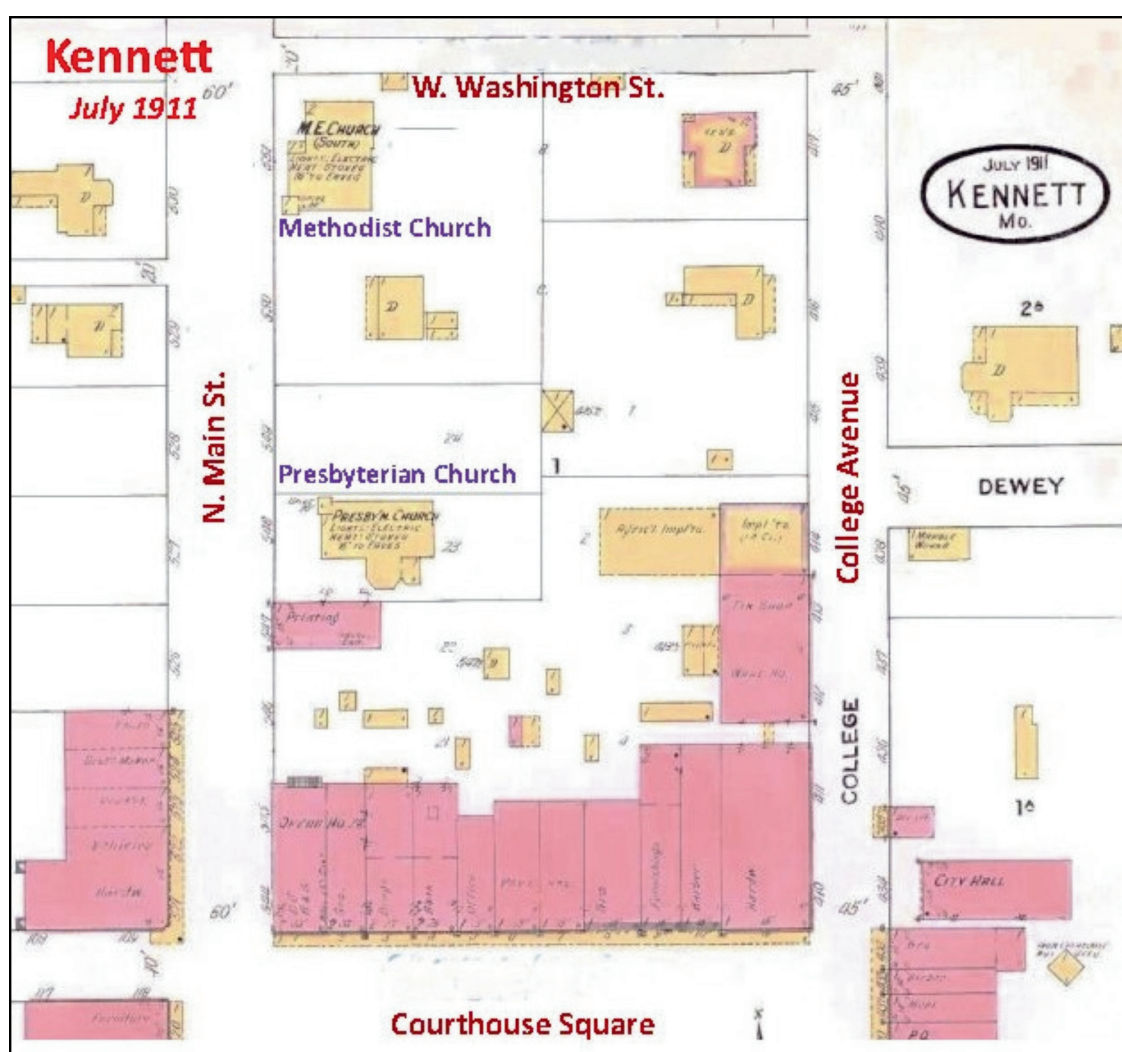
300 College Avenue

History

As early as 1830 Methodist circuit riders were visiting the area even before Kennett was established. One of the earliest, J.H. Headley wrote to a friend that, "I went to Dunklin County as circuit preacher in the fall of 1842 - my circuit embraced most all of Stoddard and Dunklin counties ... there were twenty-one appointments to be filled in three weeks and over two hundred miles to travel on horseback to reach them. By far the greater portion of your county was in a primitive condition, Clarkton and Kennett were not yet built, and all the country between where they now stand was a wilderness."



This is the 1877 church on North Main St., circa 1910. The congregation moved to the current church building in 1917. Subsequently, the First Christian Church occupied it for eight years before it was torn down.



This 1911 map shows the Methodist and Presbyterian churches built in 1877.

In 1950, the church embarked on a campaign to add an education building and in 1952 purchased a lot directly east of the church. A drive for \$100,000 to build and furnish the building was begun, but plans were slowed in August 1957 when tragedy struck. During a powerful storm, lightning ignited a large tree near the church, sparking a devastating fire. The fire caused considerable damage to the church building, resulting in more than \$60,000 in repairs. The community reacted with resilience and unity. Church and Sunday school were jointly held with the Presbyterian congregation for two months and then moved to the high school building for another six months while reconstruction efforts were underway.

During this time of upheaval, in August 1958, the foundation for the new education building was laid, even as fire repairs were ongoing in the adjacent church building. The fire restoration was completed in 1958 and the education building finished in March 1959, ready to serve as a place of learning and spiritual enrichment. On April 26, 1959, a dedication service was held for both the rebuilt sanctuary and the new education building.

As the church entered the 21st century, the congregants were surveyed to better understand evolving needs. It was decided a gathering spot for the community was needed, which led to the completion and dedication in 2002 of the Christian Life Center. This multipurpose building has become a hub of activity in the community.

The Kennett First United Methodist Church has come a long way from its early days in a two-story building on South Main Street. Through trials and triumphs, it has remained a steadfast pillar of the community, providing a place of worship, fellowship, and spiritual growth for generations of faithful individuals and families. Its journey is a testament to the enduring power of faith and community in shaping the history of Kennett.

Special thanks to the Kennett Ministerial Alliance, Jean Mowrer and the Dunklin County Genealogical Society.

Sources: Dunklin County News, Dunklin Democrat, History of Dunklin County; History of the First Methodist Church Kennett MO 1870 - 1963 written by CR Talbert, chairman of the committee on history.

Nearly 30 years later, and before the church was officially organized, 1870 found the city's early Methodists meeting in the courthouse on the square, a large frame building that burned in April 1872. After the fire, the Methodists met for eight years in the temporary courthouse that the county rented.

The church was officially established in 1877 while still meeting in the temporary courthouse. In 1880 the congregation became the first in the area to have their very own building when they moved to the schoolhouse, a two-story frame structure with an upstairs hall and the schoolroom below. The building was located on South Main Street where Barton Lumber stands today.

Prior to that move, while looking to the future to build a dedicated church building, the congregation purchased a half-acre lot on North Main St. for \$250. The lot is near where the Presbyterian Activity Center is located today.

Records show that in 1886, seven years after purchasing the lot, the congregation began raising money to fulfill their dream of a new church as they set aside \$307 for the building which was estimated to cost about \$1,000 when completed.

In 1887, both the Methodists and the Presbyterians were ready to build new churches on North Main St. The Presbyterians began first and the Methodists shortly after, using the lot purchased in 1879.

Kennett resident J. H. Dunmire remembered well the construction of these two buildings, for as a young clerk in Dr. A.B. Mobley's drug store, he ordered paint for both buildings at the same time.

While the new church was under construction, the Methodists held services in the Presbyterian church as it was finished ahead of their own. At that time, the congregation consisted of 683 white members, and one African American reflecting early integration of the church. Sarah Harkey, a formerly enslaved person, came to the Kennett church by transfer from Harkey's Chapel (south of Senath) and held Methodist membership until her death in 1915.

As the congregation grew, it found the need to expand, and a new building movement got underway in 1915. In 1916 the church family started construction of the new church on the corner of College Avenue and W. Washington Street, where it continues to stand today.

The February 23, 1917, Dunklin Democrat reported that "The art glass windows for the new Methodist church have arrived and are being installed, and the new church will be ready for occupancy in a short time now." Indeed, it was, and the beautiful new church building was dedicated in the spring of 1917.



in 1895 Rev. John L. Batten became Kennett's first full-time minister.



When rebuilding after the 1957 fire, the sanctuary was changed to face east instead of north.

