

Cumberland Presbyterians of Paducah

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It is with sincere gratitude for my spiritual legacy that I write this short history of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Paducah, Kentucky. My research is dedicated to the memory of two Cumberland Presbyterian ministers: my father, Rev. E. Samuel Hicks, of Hickman County, Kentucky, who gave me opportunities for creating an abundant life; and Rev. D. W. Fooks, Paducah, who seemed a second father to me and grandfather to my children. Rev. Fooks was pastor of the Paducah church 1908-1911 and served as Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church for thirty years.

Mr. Frank Burnham, Paducah historian, now deceased, gave me many records and newspaper items and I pay tribute to him for his assistance.

In the Book of Job, chapter eight (Revised Standard Version), we read, "For inquire, I pray you, of bygone ages, and consider what the fathers have found; for we are but of yesterday. . . . Will they not teach you and tell you, and utter words out of their understanding?"

It is a great challenge to inquire and to search records for the spiritual understanding which our church fathers found. One hundred and twenty-five years have passed since 1849 when this church was organized in Paducah. Today the more than 600 members of the Margaret Hank Memorial Cumberland Presbyterian Church are witnesses to the spiritual inheritance of this long span of years.

There must have been many months of dedicated and prayerful planning before the twentieth day of August, 1849, when the church trustees began finalizing plans to buy Lot Number 124 in the Old Town of Paducah. McCracken County Deed Book F, page 231, records a Commissioner's Deed between Meriwether L. Clark, George R. H. Clark, and Jefferson K. Clark, heirs of William P. Clark, deceased, of the first part, and R. M. Searcy, Joseph S. Hobbs, and Charles H. Bonnin, Trustees of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Paducah, of the second part. This is an interesting deed because Lot No. 124 was included in the vast tract of land given to General George Rogers Clark for his valuable military service. Some 37,000 acres of this land was located in what is now the City of Paducah and McCracken County.

General Clark died in 1818 and in 1823 a ballot distributing the estate was conducted in Louisville, Kentucky, and the Paducah land became the property of General William Clark, youngest brother of General George Rogers Clark. McCracken County records give more than 140 dispositions of property, both acreage and lots, by General William Clark. On November 28, 1834, in St. Louis, he appointed his son, William Preston Clark, as "My true and lawful attorney for me and in my behalf to sell and dispose of and execute deeds to any lott or lots in the town of Paducah in the State of Kentucky" (Deed Book A, Page 438). Lot No. 124 had been sold at the Court House door in May 1849.

by B. Small, Commissioner, to John F. Harris for one hundred dollars. On August 20, 1849, Mr. Harris "authorized and requested the Court to direct the Commissioner in said case to convey said Lot No. 124 to the said Trustees and their successors, for the use and benefit of the Church." During the October term of Court, on October 31, 1849, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church became the owner of Lot No. 124 in the Old Town of Paducah.

Lot No. 124, Block 16, was on the west side of South Locust Street, now South Third Street, between Washington and Clark Streets. When the house of worship was completed it was located at 311 South Locust Street.

The three trustees were young men. Charles H. Bonnin, 29 years of age, became Paducah City Clerk May 4, 1857; Joseph S. Hobbs, a wool carder and factory owner, was 33 years old; and Russell M. Searcy, 30, was a minister and first pastor of the church.

In 1850 the Paducah Church became a member of Obion Presbytery at the meeting in Mayfield, Kentucky, on Saturday before the fourth Sunday in September. Obion Presbyterial Minutes state that Elijah Rudolph represented the church at this meeting. Rev. Russell Searcy was pastor and was promised one hundred dollars for six months of service.

On March 3, 1851, the General Assembly of Kentucky approved "An Act to incorporate the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in the Town of Paducah" in these words:

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky that Joseph S. Hobbs, C. H. Bonnin, and R. M. Searcy and their successors in office, shall be and they are hereby created a body politic and corporate by the names of Trustees of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church at Paducah and in their corporate name may for the use of said Church acquire and hold the right and title to one lot of ground in said town heretofore purchased by the Church and upon which a house of worship has been erected, and authorized to sell and convey the same or any part thereof whenever a majority of said Trustees or their successors may think proper for the use of said Church. They shall have power to do any legal act in changing said ground for the use aforesaid for the purpose of public worship or for a graveyard.

Dr. Reuben Saunders, who came to Paducah to practice medicine in 1847, bought part of the Church Lot on April 28, 1851, for one hundred twenty dollars. The Trustees sold "all of Lot No. One Hundred and Twenty-four, Old Town of Paducah except forty-four feet nine inches front running back eighty seven feet. It being the ground upon which Cumberland Presbyterian Church now stands and which is not intended to be conveyed by these presents."

When Dr. Saunders completed building his house it was located at 321 South Locust Street. This landmark was remembered not only as the home of Dr. Reuben Saunders who discovered a remedy for cholera

during the great epidemic, but also as the birthplace of Paducah's prolific writer and great humorist, Irvin S. Cobb. Dr. Saunders' daughter, Manie, was the mother of Cobb, who was born at 321 South Locust Street (321 South Third) in 1876. Kentucky Historical Marker No. 966 verifies Cobb's birth site.

The church building was used in promoting education in Paducah. The January 2, 1854, issue of the Paducah **Daily Democrat** carried the following advertisement under the heading, "Paducah Male High School:"

The first session of this school will commence Monday the 9th in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Rev. R. H. Harrison, A.M., Superintendent, assisted by such competent instructors as the wants of the school may require. Terms of tuition per session, of five months, one half in advance.

Primary — including orthography, reading, writing, and arithmetic, \$6.00

Advanced — including besides the above, geography, history, and English Grammar, \$10.00

Scientific — including rhetoric, mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, natural, mental, and moral philosophy, \$12.00

Latin and Greek, \$15.00

Pupils received at any time during the session and charged accordingly. No deduction for the loss of time except on account of protracted sickness.

During the early years of the church the names of other trustees were given in deeds and newspaper items. J. D. Kirkpatrick, H. A. W. Laurie, R. P. Allen, M. Nance, John G. Miller, and E. P. Gilson signed official documents as trustees. Pastors' names given before 1900 included Revs. Russell M. Searcy, R. S. McElsee, Felix Johnson, D.D., Joe McLeskey, H. B. Milner, D. T. Waynick, J. D. Gold, and M. E. Chappell.

The Paducah City Directory of 1859-60 listed the Cumberland Presbyterian Church on the west side of Locust between Washington and Clark without a pastor. During the war years of 1861-1865, church life became disorganized. However, in 1868 Rev. Felix Johnson, D.D., was pastor, Elder R. A. Hughes was mentioned as Sunday School Superintendent, and Professor Ferguson was Musical Director.

The Paducah **Daily News** in its December 20, 1875, issue stated that "Rev. (Joe) McLeskey of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church here has accepted the call of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church at Mayfield to preach there every first and third Sunday in each month."

The following news items from the Paducah **Daily News** are interesting and revealing:

February 14, 1880. The 70th anniversary of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church will be celebrated tomorrow at 10½

O'Clock with appropriate services by the church here. After the services Sacrament will be administered by the pastor, Rev. H. B. Milner.

August 14, 1880. No preaching at the Cumberland Presbyterian Church as pastor Milner is out of the city.

September 12, 1880. In the revival which has been in progress at the Cumberland Presbyterian Church for near two weeks past, there were no additions to the church, but a religious interest was created which no doubt will yet result in good to the church.

In 1884, Deed Book 30, page 371, reports the sale of the remainder of Lot 124 on South Locust Street to Dr. Reuben Saunders for the consideration of seven hundred dollars. The deed was signed by J. D. Kirkpatrick, John Sam Hobbs, and M. Nance, Trustees, but there was some discrepancy in the appointment of Kirkpatrick and Nance. They were not bonafide trustees, so J. S. Hobbs, the sole survivor of the three original trustees, "created and appointed J. G. Miller and R. P. Allen to fill the vacancies occasioned by the death of R. M. Searcy and C. H. Bonnin." Another deed conveying the property to Dr. Reuben Saunders was signed on June 3, 1890, by Joseph S. Hobbs, R. P. Allen, and John G. Miller, Trustees. This interesting record is found in McCracken County Deed Book 38, page 619.

The Trustees purchased another lot in July 1890 from Anna Grief for the sum of \$3,000.00. This lot was on the southeast corner of Sixth and Court (now Kentucky Avenue) Streets and was fifty-seven feet, nine inches by one hundred seventy-three feet and three inches. The Cumberland Presbyterian Church Board of Missions and Church Erection loaned \$2,000.00 to the Paducah Church (Deed Book 47, page 142). This agreement was signed by trustees Joseph Sam Hobbs, E. P. Gilson, and John G. Miller. The **Daily News** reported the purchase and plans of the congregation on August 20, 1890:

Yesterday Mr. John G. Miller purchased, for the Board of Trustees of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, a site for the new building they are to put up. It is the Grief lot fronting on Court Street, and at the corner of that street and Sixth. The lot is very pretty and the location is desirable and central. It is surrounded by some of the best residence property in the city. It is expected by the people of the church to commence the erection at an early day and to make it comely and of ample dimensions. Since disposing of the Church building on Third Street some years ago the congregation has had no regular place of worship of their own and their affairs as an organization suffered some in consequence, but being now again on their feet, and with increase and increasing membership, they are likely to move on in a more prosperous way.

Church services had been held in various places following the sale of the original place of worship, the buying of the Sixth and Court Street lot, and the building of the church. Two specific places mentioned

were sites at Seventh and Court or Kentucky Avenue, and the south side of Broadway between Ninth and Tenth Streets.

The construction of the new church must have gone rather slowly because on July 8, 1894, the **Sunday Visitor** had this item: "The Cumberland Presbyterian Church will occupy the lecture room of their new church at the corner of 6th and Court Street. M. E. Chappell, Pastor." Rev. Chappell became pastor in October 1893. The Paducah **Daily News** of October 29, 1894, stated that:

Rev. M. E. Chappell yesterday one year ago preached his first sermon in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Yesterday the fact was called to the attention of his congregation along with a recount of the church progress during the year. Mr. Chappell not only spoke of the new church building, etc., but showed that during the year one hundred members had been added to the congregation. Next Sunday Mr. Chappell is to preach an annual sermon to his charges.

The **Sunday Visitor** on June 23, 1895, carried this item: The congregation of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church has or will have, when completed, one of the prettiest houses of worship in the city, is very anxious to finish the main building this year. The work to be done is not so great, consisting only of putting the carpenters' finishing touches to the auditorium, and it would seem that the energetic body could easily do this, when it is recalled how much they did last year. It is very likely the work of completing the edifice, which was a mistake to stop even for a week, will be under way by or before August.

Through faithful efforts the congregation completed and worshipped in this attractive new brick structure. The first fifty years ended with dedicated members but other problems were soon to be faced. After the turn of the century the question of union with other Presbyterians arose and the "merger waves" swept many Cumberland Presbyterian Churches into that union. That is too long a story to give with this article. Suffice it to say that loyal Cumberland Presbyterians by legal directive "lost" the new church and began again.

This history has given only the "highlights" of the first fifty years of the Paducah Cumberland Presbyterians. In the words of Daniel Webster, "The past belongs to us by affectionate retrospect."