

The First Presbyterian Church of Chester, Illinois

The history of presbyterianism in the Chester area goes back to the early 1800's. Kaskaskia was the center of the area then, and the first Presbyterian minister to visit the Illinois county was the Rev. John Evans Findly. Following him were Rev. John Schermerhorn and Rev. Samuel J. Mills, who were sent out by the Massachusetts and Connecticut Missionary Societies. In 1815, Rev. Salmon Giddings arrived in St. Louis and began preaching in the area. On August 27, 1816, he preached at Kaskaskia. Because there was no Protestant church in the area, he preached at various places until the Kaskaskia Presbyterian Church was organized on May 21, 1821 with nine members.

These nine members were: Mr. and Mrs. David J. Baker, Mr. and Mrs. Guthrie, Mrs. Permelia Burr, Mrs. Dr. Symington, Mrs. Robert Morrison, Mrs. Martha Heard, and Mrs. Eliza Conn.

Mrs. Permelia Burr was the force behind organizing the church. She was the wife of Chauncey F. Burr and had moved from Connecticut on September 13, 1817. At the organizing meeting of the church, the two men were nominated for Elders, but they refused to accept. So, Permelia Burr was duly elected, ordained and installed. She was the first woman Elder of the Illinois churches and that at a time when the denomination did not acknowledge women Elders.

This provided irony for the congregation because it hosted the first meeting of the first Presbytery in Illinois, Center Presbytery of Illinois, on January 19, 1829. But because the Elders were women, the Presbytery did not acknowledge the host church present at the Presbytery's first meeting.

The other person who strongly influenced the development of the church was Frances Celeste Brard who organized the Sabbath School. Later she married the Rev. John Millot Ellis who was the minister from 1825 to 1828. The Sunday School grew along with the church and from the record book of January 7, 1894, there were 68 students and 11 teachers. The collection that day totaled thirty six cents. During that year the largest attendance was 90 and the largest collection was \$4.08. The Sunday School officers of 1894 were:

Mr. Barnard, Superintendent
Mr. Nisbet, Assistant Superintendent
Miss Eva Gorsuch, Treasurer
Jessie McAdams, Secretary

In 1924, the Sunday School grew to 99 in enrollment with an average of 66 in regular attendance. The average collection was \$5.12, making the average collection for each scholar \$.05.

Today the Sunday School enrollment is 60 members, which reflects the smaller family unit. The giving is over \$1,000 per year. The officers are:

Andrew Schuwerk, General Superintendent
Bridgett Cress, Assistant Superintendent
Florence Ferrill, Secretary
Joy Benson, Treasurer

In 1830 two men joined Mrs. Burr as Elders: John Mann and James Clendenin. Under their leadership the church moved to Chester and on October 9, 1840 at a meeting of Presbytery in Hillsboro the church changed its name to the First Presbyterian Church of Chester. Its first meeting place in Chester was in Seth Allen's office. Then, they met in a school house in which many denominations held services.

The first building owned by the congregation was the "Old Stone Church" at 509 Harrison Street which was built between 1845 and 1847 for \$1500. Seventy-three years later on October 24, 1920 the congregation purchased the Methodist Church building by the courthouse and remodeled it. Forty-one years later in 1961 the cornerstone of the new church at 1750 State Street was laid. On September 23, 1962 the new building was dedicated. Today, the congregation of 240 worship in this building.

The women of this congregation started the church and came to be a strong force in the church. The United Presbyterian Women can trace their history back to the late 1800's when groups of women met in private homes, schools, warehouses, and the County Home. Then, Union School became the place to meet. In 1872 the women supervised extensive repairs and additions to the "old rock church" and Mrs. Amzi Andrews was given the title "Mother of the Year" for her wise council and godly example and for her affectionate supervision of things temporal and spiritual.

Somewhere in history the women were named "The Ladies' Aid." In July 1954 they changed the name to the Presbyterian Women's Organization. And in 1977, they changed their name to the United Presbyterian Women. Today, the President is Euladene Niblock. Vice President is Laverne Cook, Treasurer is Lydia Smith, and Secretary is Harriet Mueller.

The choir has been a part of the church since the old rock church time. In 1920 when the church moved to West Buena Vista Street, the choir had 16 members with Mrs. W. C. Roberts as the director. Then a youth choir as organized by Mrs. R. C. Mann. They sang for evening services and even sang on K.M.O.X. Radio. In 1948 a men's quartet got together and sang at all the local celebrations. In 1968, the Youth Choir was organized again with Mrs. Ivan Clayton as the director. In 1979, again the Youth Choir was assembled with Mrs. Alice Kabo as director and Linda Roth as pianist. The Adult Choir, today, has 15 members with Alice Kabo as director—organist. The Adult Choir sings at morning worship and has performed a variety of cantatas which has greatly enriched our worship of God.

Thirty-five ministers have served the church in its 158 years of existence. Only nine ministers have served the church for five or more years: Cyrus C. Riggs, 1840-1845; P. D. Young, 1852-1857; B. H. Charles, 1857-1866; Abram J. Clark, 1867-1875; D. L. Gear, 1876-1881; Dr. F. T. Roberts, 1925-1947; Dr. Frank W. McLaughen, 1951-1964; Howard L. Bailey, 1968-1973; Paul Kabo, Jr., 1973 and still serving as minister.

By Rev. Paul Kabo, Jr. [in 1979]