

## **The Founding**

*From "The First 100 Years, 1868 – 1968"*

With the Civil War ended and city and county prospering, that small group who had known Congregationalism "back East" took long-considered action to establish here a town meeting type of church in which every member had an equal voice in policies and discipline. This group withdrew from the Presbyterian Church which then had its own building and more than 100 members.

It was at the Baptist Church, a newly completed \$17,500 building, that the founders met for the start of their history. After withdrawing from the Presbyterian Church the ten adults issued a call for a council of nearby Congregational churches to meet to "weigh the advisability of establishing a new church" in the "Queen City." In response, on July 9, 1868, came two representatives from Belle Plaine, two from Oxford, one from Boonesboro, two from Green Mountain, (the Rev. R. Stewart and J. C. Hopkins, delegate) and the Rev. J. Guernsey, superintendent of Home Missions in Iowa for the American Home Mission Society.

After the 10 o'clock morning session of prayer and preliminaries the meeting adjourned until 2 o'clock. No record is available of the interval - no mention of women who probably prepared the midday meal and set the standards for Congregational meals in the 100 years ahead. With the Rev. D. Lane of Belle Plaine as moderator and the Rev. H. L. Bullen of Oxford as scribe, the official afternoon session began.

A. C. Carpenter, spokesman for the group, presented the need for the new church. Honestus Johnson, who came to the county only the year before, read the minutes of all preliminary proceedings. Apparently the two made an effective presentation for the council confirmed the need and accepted the Marshalltown application. It adopted the proposed Confession and Covenant then used by the First Congregational Church of Ames and set that very evening for the formal organization.

At 8 o'clock that evening the First Congregational Church of Marshalltown came into being with eleven charter members all by letters: A. C. Carpenter, Mrs. Ann Carpenter, Joseph Greeley, Honestus Johnson, Mrs. Anna M. Johnson, A. H. McNitt, Mrs. Sophronia McNitt, Jeanette Miller, Nathan Wheeler, Mrs. Mary Wheeler and their daughter Laura Wheeler.

The new church that first summer met in the Baptist or another church depending upon the courtesy of neighbors for both meeting place and supply pastor. By September 1, the Rev. R. B. Pull accepted the call as the first pastor with the specified salary of \$1,000 annually. The Home Mission Society guaranteed half and then \$400 for the following year until the group could be entirely self-supporting. During the Rev. Bull's first year the congregation held services in the court house and during the second in Rice's Hall. Weekly prayer meetings were at the homes.

Members agreed that all who joined before the end of 1868 should be considered charter members. Those who came in under that arrangement included Mrs. Sarah T. Meeker who continued on the roll until her death in 1923. Chimes were subsequently given in her memory.

By the time of the first annual meeting the membership totaled 78 and included Mrs. Henry Clay Wilson, a member until her death in 1928.



**First  
Congregational  
Church  
1870 - 1914**

Before the Rev. Mr. Bull ended his pastorate in August, 1870, his little congregation bought a \$1,500 lot on the southeast corner of the intersection of First and Church Streets. Built by Heath and Rhem for about \$3,815, the new building was ready for dedication on Pilgrim's Day, December 21, 1870. Dr. George Magoun, president of Iowa College of Grinnell, gave the dedicatory address. Next day the new minister, the Rev. W. L. Bray, took over congregational duties.

Like those of any town meeting, the Congregationalists' sessions did not always get unanimous support. Members had adopted the first set of by-laws on January 2, 1869. It included Article 13 which read: "Each member of the church shall regard it as duty to aid in the support of the gospel with his money and shall promptly make and pay his subscription fee for the same to the trustees or their agents according to the terms of the contract." Proof that at least two members did not support the provisions of Article 13 may be found in deacon's records of public reprimands for their failure to pay their share.

1871 saw charges filed against members, one for failure to help erect tile new church and two for use of "unfit language" to the pastor. That the congregation was somewhat divided on the subsequent temporary suspending of the offenders shows up in the 1872 report of the senior deacon who noted a decline in membership from 117 to 111. One reprimanded for his language soon repented and his name appears on a committee named with the pastor "to labor with the delinquent in the city." He then went on to help his fellow churchmen organize t h e LaMoille church in December of 1872.

By 1873 the church members voted that at each communion service "collection should be taken up by the deacons to be used by them in furnishing the communion table and for the poor in the church" - a policy that has continued. The senior deacon, in his 1874 report, pointed out that although there were 101 on the roster, only 76 were on the "working force" - a brother had been dropped for intoxication and a sister for immoral conduct. He urged the members to "buckle on the armor of God and deal with the sinners around us."

Things evidently improved after such admonition for the next year the senior deacon reported "perfect harmony with pastor and flock." In the first nine years 250 members had joined the church but death, marriage and the westward trek annually cut down the active list. The membership reached 134 in 1876 and 148 in 1879. The 1878 record showed six of the founders still active - three had died and two had moved away. In the years that followed, the influx of new members included some by confession of faith and some by baptism, often second generation First Congregationalists.

By the end of the century there were 218 active members and 683 names were on the membership rolls. However two of the latter number, a mother and daughter, did not appear for acceptance because of the objection of the husband and father.

Eighteen years after its completion and the very year the new courthouse was built in Anson's square, 1886, the Congregational building on First and Church got a face-lifting. Renovation included an extension of the front and installation of a dining room and kitchen in the basement - needed improvements for a growing congregation. While the remodeling was in progress the congregation met at the Odeon Theatre, the midwest marvel that drew famed opera and theatre companies. Later changes included removal of round, port-hole type blue glass windows, features evidently disliked by a later historian who chose to see all Congregational activity "through rose-colored glasses."

Congregational women, records show, were always active, willing workers through the century. "With their tin pails, cleaning rags, soap and enthusiasm (1870) they readied their new structure for occupancy. As they enjoyed their basket lunch, future church plans were discussed including the perplexing question of the new carpet." There they established the pattern for women's work - work that has ranged from helping Kansas refugees in the 1880's and sharing the church debt when it meant collection of 5-cent weekly pledges by one of their own in each city ward, to purchasing red carpeting for a newly decorated sanctuary decades later.