

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

COVINGTON, KENTUCKY

Kenton County

The story of the First Christian Church of Covington, Kentucky begins almost with the start of the town itself.

Covington lies at the point where the Licking and Ohio Rivers meet and flow westward. The land was first issued by Lt. Gov. Beverly Randolph from the state of Virginia on February 14, 1780, and incorporated on February 8, 1815. Passing from hand to hand, it was traded for a "keg of whiskey, and again for buffalo beef, until it finally became the possession of one Thomas Kennedy, a ferryman and farmer."¹ He cut down the great beeches, red oaks, white ash and honey locusts that covered the territory, planting corn in its place. Soon others followed, settling on farms.

The town grew slowly and casually. In 1819 a small log schoolhouse was built on a corner of the public square and it became the meeting place for most community activities. The population grew to 700 by 1830 and on February 24, 1834, Covington became a city by act of the State of Kentucky. From then on growth was rapid. By 1840 the population was 2000 and within the next five years the number doubled.

As the church grew with the town, so it did with the development of the Campbellite movement in Kentucky. Alexander Campbell first came to the state in 1823 and Barton Stone and Walter Scott were still formulating their beliefs when a few scattered Disciples were gathered together by a man named James Arnold. He had been a teacher of considerable reputation at Washington, then Maysville, in Mason County.² "From Maysville Arnold, with but limited means, went to Covington, then comparatively a village and soon afterward began to collect together the few Disciples of that place, amounting, perhaps, to forty-five souls."

Arnold, with the help of a young preacher named James Challen, organized the small group into a church. They met in a room measuring thirteen feet wide and fifteen feet long, part of a one-story building Arnold owned which was located on the south side of Second Street. Small as it was, it was adequate for ordinary needs. However, among their first speakers was Alexander Campbell, who came from Bethany, West Virginia. His reputation had spread far, though he had been in this country only a few years. As a result, the room was "comfortably filled."

Unfortunately, an epidemic of cholera in 1833 took its toll so that all their efforts seemed to be for nothing. But James Arnold was a determined man. In 1840 he renewed his efforts. By that time he had built up a considerable tobacco business. Fitting up one of his warehouses to accommodate an audience, he appointed a day for meeting, then invited "Raccoon" John Smith to speak. Arnold had first met Smith in the Bracken Association at Wilson's Run in 1828.

He (Smith) accordingly went down, and finding deism in great strength, spoke much in defense of the simple Gospel, affirming that infidelity is often but the rejection of sectarian systems of religion which are as unreasonable as they are unscriptural. The deists themselves came to hear him and showed him every mark of respect.⁴

After lasting nearly a week, the meetings ended with "15 or 20 accessions."⁵

Encouraged by his success, Arnold decided to build a house of worship for the new congregation. In the same year (1840), without asking for help, he chose a lot on Third Street, hired laborers, superintended the building and paid the costs from his own pocket, entirely in silver half-dollars. The house was nearly completed in 1843 when John T. Johnson, the Evangelist, with John Newton Payne appeared and consecrated it by a "warm and successful protracted meeting."⁶ This building accommodated an ever-increasing congregation until 1865, when it was abandoned for a site on Fifth Street,

The lot was purchased, one portion from John G. Carlisle, on March 1, 1865, and another portion from John Kearney the same day, and conveyed to James M. Fisher, George W. McDonald, J. C. Thomas, Henry Hathaway and John Z. Price, trustees of the Christian Church in Covington. The Church was incorporated by the Legislature of Kentucky by an act approved February 15, 1865, under the style of "The Trustees of the Christian Church in Covington, Kentucky." The Incorporators were James M. Fisher, James C. Thomas, George W. McDonald, William B. Mooklar and Henry Hathaway. James G. Arnold again came to the church's aid with liberal donations and loans for the land and building.

The minutes of several congregational meetings during this early period give some interesting data on the activities of the new brotherhood.

"At a meeting of the disciples of Christ in the City of Covington March 6th 1858 the following Resolutions were offered and adopted

5th Resolved that we call Bro W Arnold as Paster (sic) of this congregation at a salary of Hundred dollars for the next 12 months with this understanding that he is to have if that amt can be raised in the congregation."

(From the minutes of April 6, 1858)
as Book "1

"Wednesday April 28th 1858

Prayer meeting - Bro John Anderson appointed at previous meeting to conduct meeting but Brethren Arnold and Patterson came in. He gave way for them. Meeting well attend. Ehortaions from Brethren Arnold and Patterson on an Encouraging Nature. Bro Summerwell appointed to lead meeting on friday Evening"

"Lord's Day June the 6th

Today large Congregation assembled to hear Bro D.P. Henderson of Louisville (?) who failed to attend owing to the Congregation failing to send Bro T N Arnold to fill his appointment at Louisville (?) according to agreements

"1st Lords day in July 1858

Bro Thos A Arnold preached for us to day Meeting well attended. Meeting at 3 P M for the breaking of the Loaf. After which Sisters Susan and Estella Hawley applied for letters of dismission from Congregation. A letter was granted Sister Susan Hawley but there were objections to Estella and request was not complied with "

"At the regular monthly meeting held Sept the first 1865 it was then & there resolved that this congregation erect a new house for to worship in on 5th st Covington Ky "

"Covington Mar 30 67

The Chairman Reported that on Lords day March 24th 1867 the Trustees notifies the congregation that the Edifice was completed on that day the congregation met in that Room for the first time on Invitation Eld W T Moore (?) preached the opening sermon & at the close stated to the audience that there remained a debt of about \$ 12000.00 Standing against the church property & requested Subscriptions from the Audience to Liquidate Said Debt to which request they responded with such Liberality that the whole sum was raised in a few minutes time. at night the dedication Sermon was preached by Elder Isaac Erret.

The first pastor of the new church was P. B. Wiles, who served until October 3, 1871. He was followed by three men who served until December, 1874. At this time an unfortunate disagreement split the church, causing some members to withdraw. The issue was whether or not to re-call Mr. Wiles to the church. Those who favored having him back won out over the dissenters with the result that the minority group began their own church on a Fourth Street location between Greenup and Scott Sts. Many of these were socially prominent people.⁷ Ultimately this group joined with another small congregation to form what is now the Madison Avenue Christian Church in Covington.

One of the members of the Ranshaw family, prominent in the church at that time, is quoted as saying "I joined the church, not the man." He remained an active member at First Christian Church.

As far back as February, 1871 missionary meetings are mentioned. There was a "Ladies Mite Society" which helped care for church needs and the Missionary Auxiliary which sent offerings to the Brotherhood for the needs of others.

Members worshiped in this building until March 5, 1893 when a sudden and disastrous fire damaged it beyond repair. A full account of the tragedy, which

fortunately happened before services began, is given in a newspaper account published after the fire:⁸

The fire Sunday morning is beyond question the most disastrous that ever visited Covington. The total loss will probably reach \$500,000...

The largest manufacturing establishment in the city is a complete wreck, the largest tobacco warehouse is also razed to the ground, and one of the best of our churches so badly damaged that repair will be like rebuilding.

The Meyer's building was a roaring furnace from top to bottom, and the flames were shooting up high above the tall building, illuminating the neighborhood so that one could read a paper a square away.

It was over a half hour before there was noticed any fire on the tobacco warehouse buildings, which were the next in order to be consumed.

When the fire did start in the warehouse it went with a whirl, and in a few minutes it also was gone.

In the meantime the fire was threatening the Christian Church, on Fifth Street. The rear of the building almost touched the rear of the wire works building, but for a long time, owing to the direction the wind was blowing, the church escaped unharmed. Elder Keene (the pastor), who was on the scene, urged the department to bring the hose around into the alley, and had there been but one stream there where he asked for it, there is not a doubt what the Church would have been saved.

For a half hour Mr. Keene stood there, watching the church gradually become more and more endangered, and not a drop of water could be obtained. He offered to take the hose himself but there was none to be had. At last the fire got under the slate roof, after which it did not take long until the smoke was pouring out from every crevice, and the cupola on the end of the building was sending the smoke out in immense volumes. The flames burst out at last, and when once they got a start it took but a few minutes to gut the building.... Not until the church was beyond rescue did the department try to save it. Mr. Keene had long since given up hope, and got to work to save what he could. The organ was removed safely, and a few things from his study, but all else was lost.

The loss to the Christian Church is placed at between \$30,000 and \$35,000.

The Fourth Street Christian Church, the Madison Avenue and Fourth Street Presbyterian churches invited the congregation of the burned out church to participate with them. Mr. Keene, while grateful for the kind offers, declines and the services will be held either in the Masonic Temple, or Odd Fellows Hall until the church is rebuilt. It is not likely that the same site will be selected. Mr. Keene thinks that if the Meyers Company rebuild it would be inviting another

fire should the church rebuild on the same ground. If a suitable locality can be found, the church will go elsewhere to build. As yet, however, nothing is decided.

The saloons in the neighborhood, with an eye to business, opened up, and did a thriving trade.

One of the colored men living in the shanties that were crushed by falling walls, in his haste to get out of the way, jumped out of the second story window, with his trunk on his back. He landed safe and went up the street at a lively gait. The darkies got nearly everything out, and Mr. Connor is the only one who lost to any serious extent.

Church members wasted no time mourning over the ruins of their church. What was left was razed and the foundation removed. The decision was finally made to rebuild on the same spot and work began almost immediately. Just a year after the fire the Chairman of the Board announced that the whole cost would be \$30,000 and that only about half had been subscribed. On October 14, 1894 the new church was completed and equipped but they still \$16,000. At the first morning service in the new sanctuary Elder F. M. Rains preached the sermon, after which he called for pledges to cover the indebtedness - payable in quarterly installments for five years. A large share of it was promptly subscribed and at the evening service the rest of the amount needed was pledged. Unfortunately, payment of the pledges was not so prompt. Letters of reminder were sent out but things reached a critical enough stage that the Board was forced to sell some other property.

The building itself was described in the Dedication Bulletin as a "handsome pressed brick building with Hockcastle stone trimmings. The style is Gothic. Adjoining and connected with the church edifice proper... is the pastor's study, a light, airy room, handsomely furnished."