

+

Timeline on History of First Christian Church, Fort Smith, Arkansas

1817-1840s

The first Fort Smith was founded in 1817 to keep peace in the Arkansas River Valley between the native Osage and newly arriving Cherokee. Built of logs and stone, the first fort sat above the Poteau and Arkansas rivers, a spot known by the French trappers as Belle Point. By 1824, the frontier had pushed west. A second fort was established on the same site in 1838 and was completed in 1846. It was commanded by General Zachary Taylor, later the 12th president of the United States, in the early 1840s. When gold was discovered in California in 1848, Fort Smith became a supply depot and point of departure for fortune seekers taking the southern route across the plains.

Confederate troops occupied the fort early in the Civil War, but it was taken by Union forces in July, 1863. The fort largely fell into disuse after the war, but the city's growth was sustained with the arrival of the railroad in the 1870s. The U.S. Federal District Court for Western Arkansas was located in Fort Smith and had jurisdiction over the Indian Territory.

- 1842 The first church in Fort Smith was a log building at the corner of North 2nd and D Street. The church was named "Union Church" and was interdenominational. There were no organized congregations in Fort Smith yet. The pulpit was filled by circuit riders until it was later shared by Methodist and Presbyterian ministers. The Presbyterians will eventually take control of the building. There are several members of this church that will later be the leaders of a movement to start the Christian Church in Fort Smith.
- 1851 Spring. The first organization of a Christian congregation in Fort Smith was in 1851 with Samuel M. and Archibald H. Rutherford and Ben T. DuVal as elders. Deacons were John McDonald and Stephen McDonald. Robert Graham and Charles Carlton were evangelists. Graham had founded Arkansas College in Fayetteville, Arkansas in late 1850. Arkansas College was the first college in the state of Arkansas and was the forerunner to the University of Arkansas. Graham had also organized a Christian congregation in Fayetteville in 1848 and was it's first pastor.
- 1854 Robert Graham leads a group of eleven adults and three young people to form the Christian Church in Fort Smith. Mary E. Rutherford, daughter of Samuel M. Rutherford, is one the original fourteen members of the Christian Church. (She will later marry William M. Cravens, a well-known defense attorney in the federal court of Judge Issac Parker, and a pillar of the church during it's formation). Other members of that group were: Samuel Morton Rutherford, his wife Eloise Marie Rutherford, Margaret Rutherford, Judge Robert Beall Rutherford, Mr. and Mrs. Archibald H. Rutherford, Mr. and Mrs. Ben T. DuVal, Mr. and Mrs. John McDonald, Stephen McDonald and Mr. and Mrs. (Mary) Taylor. Mary, Margaret and Robert Rutherford were the children of Samuel and Eloise.
- 1858 A small frame building is bought on North 6th Street between C and D Street to be used as the first Christian Church chapel. The church is known at this time as "The Christian Church".
- 1859 Elijah Northum begins leading the church. He is paid very little, but he would use the building rent free as a school because there are no public schools in Fort Smith yet.

- 1860 September 20. A large fire in Fort Smith destroys several blocks of the downtown area. Many people have to leave Fort Smith because they lost their homes and employment.
- 1861 Civil War begins. All work towards the establishment of the church is ceased about a year after the start of the war. The Christian flock begins to scatter, mainly to Texas, as the Union Army occupies Fort Smith and many of the churches. Some church buildings are burned or taken apart for the wood. It is unknown what happens with the chapel building, although several churches in that area were used as hospitals or supply buildings for the Union Army. The Christian Church structure survived the war, but with some damage.
- 1869 Post Civil War. Four of the original fourteen members do not survive the time of the war and others did not return. Mary E. Rutherford and Mary Taylor are the only two original members that have returned. They, and some new Christian families, begin meeting at Mrs Walker's school because of the damage to the chapel during the war. Brother Hosea Allen Northcutt, a well-known evangelist from Missouri, would preach every fourth Sunday.
- 1870 Members from the 6th Street church and new families of Disciples that have moved back to Fort Smith after the war, decide to re-establish the church at the chapel. Repairs are done to the chapel for \$100 that is raised by Mary Rutherford and Mary Taylor. Lighting and seating are added to the chapel.
- 1871 January 29. The membership signs a document that begins, "The members of the Church of Christ met in Fort Smith on the Lord's day, January 29, 1871." This was a proclamation with the intention to re-establish the church and will meet in the chapel. S.R Ezell would be the first pastor after the reorganization, but will stay only for a short time. There will be a pastor as often as there isn't one for the next several years.
- 1877 Members agree to pay Elder George Owen and later Brother Lawrence W. Scott, \$283 a year, to preach and lead the church,
- 1880s In the early 1880s, a movement begins to build a new auditorium. Land is purchased on the southeast corner of North 7th Street and C Street. The chapel on 6th Street is sold. Members begin meeting on the second floor of a business at 713 Garrison Avenue. The foundation is laid at the property, but the funding fails and the building is not completed.
- 1881 William Joseph Echols and his wife Elizabeth move to Fort Smith from Mississippi and he founds W. J. Echols & Company, a wholesale grocery business, which was needed because the previous such business had burned in the 1860 fire. This business was very prosperous. Mr. Echols then founded Merchants Bank (now Merchants National Bank) in 1882 and was it's first president and later Chief Executive Officer. He was the Elder of the church and Chairman of the Board until 1894, when his health began failing. Mr. Echols was a major benefactor in the building of the chapel on 7th Street.
- 1885 February 20. Junius Wilkins becomes pastor. He leads a group of forty members to begin building a new auditorium at the 7th Street property. The original plans for a rock building were changed to a frame structure for a lower cost. Materials from the original foundation were used in the construction of the new frame building.

- 1886 With a membership of about 150, the new building is completed and opens for services on Christmas Day, December 25, 1886. (This building is the oldest surviving church building in Fort Smith and is designated as an historical site by the Fort Smith Historical Society).
- 1888 A parsonage is built on C Street behind the church. This house will later have to be used for classrooms as the membership begins to grow.
- 1891 Reverend E. T. Edmonds is hired from a thriving Kentucky church as pastor. He will leave after four years in 1895 to pastor a church in Boston, but will return in 1898 and serve the church for ten more years until 1908. Reverend Edmonds will be instrumental in the building of a new, and much bigger, sanctuary during his second pastorate.
- 1894 A Packard grand organ is purchased for \$275 plus a trade-in of the old organ. The janitor is paid an extra \$1 a month to manually pump the organ during church services. Sometimes, one of the young boys would pump when needed.
- 1896 Huntington King Pendleton becomes pastor of the church, but would resign in 1897 to become a journalist. He was the son of a past president of Bethany College, William K Pendleton, and a step-grandson of Alexander Campbell. Campbell was also the founder and first president of Bethany College in Bethany, West Virginia from 1840 to 1866. Campbell, along with Barton W. Stone, had merged their two Reformation movements in 1832 to create what they identified as “Disciples of Christ” or “Christian Churches”.
- 1900 Electric lighting is added to the building for \$50.
- 1900 By this time, membership had outgrown the buildings and the church members agree to buy the property at 100 North 13th Street at A Street. The deed is dated December 29, 1900. The population of Fort Smith has doubled between 1900 and 1910 to about 23,000 people.
- 1901 March. For seven weeks, revivals were held with Evangelist Dr. S. M. Martin. During a month and a half, 175 new members are added to the church. The total result of Dr. Martin’s evangelism adds 283 new members to the church.
- 1902 In January, the congregation of 435 members votes to build a new sanctuary on the 13th Street property for no less than \$25,000. (The total final cost of the land and building would be \$34,016.94). The estate of W. J. Echols, and his widow Elizabeth, were major contributors, along with others, in the building of this sanctuary.
- 1903 Sept 27. The cornerstone is laid in the new sanctuary’s exterior.
- 1904 The last service in 7th Street sanctuary is held on June 5th. Services are held at Peterman’s Hall and McLands Park until the basement of the new building can be occupied in August.
- 1905 June 11. The new sanctuary on 13th Street is dedicated and opens for it’s first worship service.

- 1908 Pastor E. T. Edmonds resigns as pastor to represent the Christian Women's Board of Mission in New Zealand.
- 1911 Pastor E. B. Bagley leads the organization of a second Christian Church at 2801 Alabama Street. It is built because the population of Fort Smith has increased significantly and many of the new residents live further east and north of the First Christian building and transportation to the downtown area of town was difficult for many. It will be named Echols Memorial Christian Church in honor of William J. Echols, who had died in 1897. His widow, Elizabeth, gave \$10,000 for the building of the new church. E. Howard Peters will be the pastor the church.
- 1924 The education addition is built onto the north side of the sanctuary. The new addition includes classrooms and a music room.
- 1926 With a membership of 971, the congregation calls Reverend Wallace Bacon from a church in Atchison, Kansas. Dr. Bacon would serve as pastor for 26 years. He would begin his ministry on January 1, 1927.
- 1928 January. Echols Memorial Christian Church members decide to merge with First Christian Church. The need for a neighborhood church was no longer needed because more people had automobiles and transportation in Fort Smith had become much more available than it had been.
- 1947 The sanctuary is remodeled.
- 1951 Air conditioning is added to the sanctuary.
- 1953 The first Christmas Eve candlelight service was introduced by Reverend Ray Wallace.
- 1954 November 7-14. First Christian celebrates it's 100th birthday with a week of events.
- 1957 A three acre tract of land was purchased at South 32nd Street and Phoenix Avenue, with the agreement that if the church did not build on this property, it would be sold back to the seller at the same price as it was purchased. A church building was not built on this property.
- 1958 January 12. One hundred and twenty-seven new members joined the church at the conclusion of the Sunday morning worship service after a campaign led by Reverend Kenneth Teegarden and the evangelism department.
- 1961 The Ward house and six acres of property at 3600 Free Ferry Road are purchased. The house will be used as a parsonage for a short time until the new minister, Henry Tyler and his family find a residence in Fort Smith.
- 1961 July. The handbells, which have been on order for three years, arrive from the Whitechapel Foundry in London, England. These are the first set of handbells in the state of Arkansas.
- 1962 December 30. The property on Free Ferry Road is paid off and mortgage burned after the Sunday morning worship service.

- 1964 July. A committee is formed to look into the possibility of establishing a second Christian Church in Fort Smith. However, in August, many of those members who were the most enthusiastic about a second church, resigned their membership from First Christian and formed Central Christian Church. A couple of the main factors were that these members perceived a threat in the restructuring of the Disciples of Christ at the state level, which had been approved in April, 1963 at the state convention. There was a fear of a possible loss of local autonomy. They felt that the new state structure, the proposed national restructuring of the Disciples of Christ, and the NCC (National Council of Churches) were all non-scriptural and unacceptable. They felt that the bible was not being adequately preached and taught in the congregation. Also, some looked with suspicion at the emphasis on the “social gospel” *. They believed the NCC to be communist dominated. Thirty-three members submitted, in bloc, their resignation of membership from First Christian and transferred it to Central Christian. The membership of First Christian had dropped from 986 in 1960 to 652 in 1965.
- 1965 June. The First Christian Handbell Choir attends the National Handbell Convention in Washington, DC and was the only choir to receive a standing ovation from the audience, which would have been mostly the other fifty handbell choirs who had attended the convention. From there, they would go to New York City and perform at the World’s Fair.
- 1965 August 8. Groundbreaking for the new sanctuary is held at the Free Ferry property. Pictures from the groundbreaking show the Board Chairman, Don Mullins, with a shovel in hand and with very little dirt and mostly grass in it. The ground was rock hard because it had been a dry summer. He missed the opportunity to proclaim, “On Christ, the solid Rock I stand, All other ground is sinking sand”.
- 1966 June 26. The new sanctuary on Free Ferry opens for it’s first worship service. The previous three ministers, Wallace Bacon, Kenneth Teegarden and William Howland, participate with Reverend Tyler during the following week of dedication services. The three story house on the property will be used for classrooms, offices, dining and most other events.
- 1970 February. Reverend Henry Tyler resigns as minister to accept a call to a Springfield, Missouri church.
- 1970 July. Reverend Howard Marshall begins his ministry at First Christian and will serve for twenty years until his retirement at the end of the year in 1990.
- 1991 Reverend Randy Jay is hired as senior minister after serving four years as associate minister. Reverend Jay retires in 2016 after 30 years of service to the church.
- 2004 October 16-17. First Christian Church celebrates it’s 150th anniversary with all day events on Saturday and Sunday. Reverend Dr. Fred Craddock will preach the sermon during the Sunday morning worship service.

*The Social Gospel is a social movement within Protestantism that aims to apply Christian ethics to social problems, especially issues of social justice such as economic inequality, poverty, alcoholism, crime, racial

tensions, slums, unclean environment, child labor, lack of unionization, poor schools, and the dangers of war. It was most prominent in the early 20th-century United States and Canada.

April, 2024

After reading all the information that I have been able to find on the history of First Christian Church, I think that without the early determination of keeping the church alive during its beginnings, we may never have lasted more than ten years from 1854. But there was a building and there were a few people that were determined to start the church again after the disastrous fire in 1860 and the discontinuation of the church during the Civil War. The people we have to thank most for starting and saving the church are: Robert Graham, who led the original fourteen members to establish the Christian Church in Fort Smith in 1854. Mary Elizabeth (Rutherford) Cravens and later, along with her husband, William Murphy Cravens, gave the leadership and financial support that was needed at the time. Mary Taylor, who along with Mary Rutherford Cravens, solicited businesses for money to help repair the damaged chapel to get the congregation back into the church building after the Civil War. William Joseph Echols and his wife Elizabeth were instrumental in the building of two of the church buildings and another church further north and east of the downtown area. These six people have been well recognized in the past, but not enough members of the church now know who they are. Not all of the information in our historical records are in this timeline, but this is a good overview of how the church got started and thrived. Of course, there have been many others that have been important in the history of First Christian, but these six people are the ones that were the important leaders in the formation and continuation of the church.

I hope those that read this enjoy knowing a bit of history of First Christian Church in Fort Smith. I got the impression that First Christian Church in Fort Smith was a well respected church in Fort Smith, in the state of Arkansas, and around the southwestern United States.

Randy Alexander