

Story of First Baptist Church

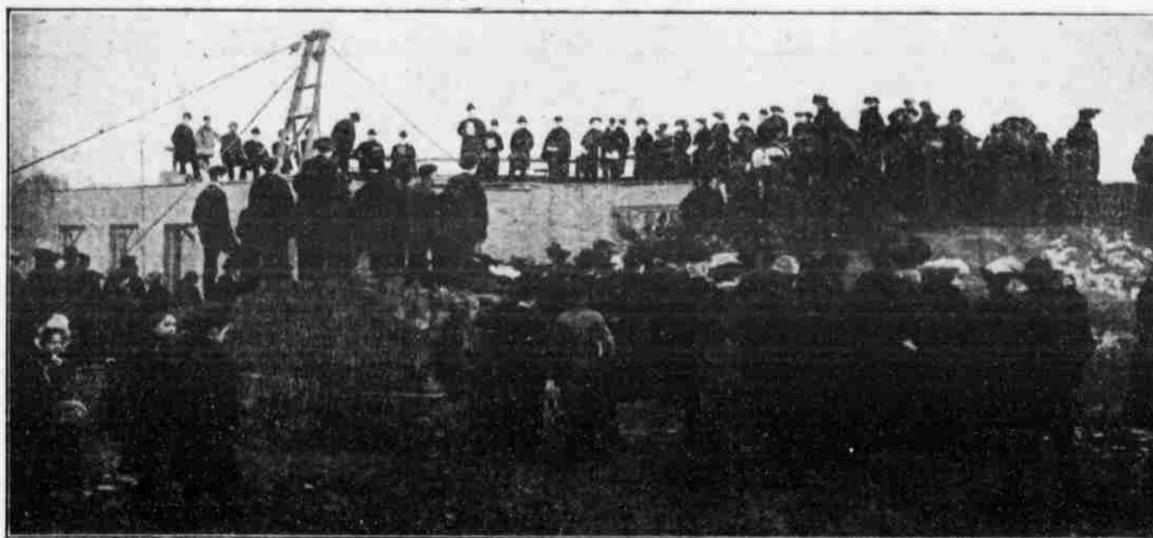


LAYING THE CORNERSTONE FOR THE NEW FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, OMAHA—RESPONSIVE READING WHILE THE WORKMEN LOWERED THE STONE TO ITS PLACE.—Photo by a Staff Artist.

THE laying of a cornerstone by any organization is always a most important event, and one which makes a point in its history, ending one epoch and beginning another; an event standing forth in its past as significant as some monument placed on the field of a great battle. The First Baptist church has reached a milestone in its history, and Friday, January 15, laid the cornerstone of the handsome new church that is to rise at Twenty-ninth avenue and Harney street. This event brings back the history of the church, which has grown from the smallest struggling congregation to a united and numerically strong body.

The First church is the mother of all the Baptist congregations in the city and had its beginning in 1835. Rev. Mr. Stephens during that year gathered a few pioneers of the faith and began a mission and Sunday school at Fifteenth and Capitol avenue. He continued in this work until 1857, and there was no spiritual head to the little mission until the fall of the following year, when came Rev. G. W. Barends. He went during the next year and the work was discontinued for several years, the Kansas-Nebraska troubles and other political matters having a bad effect on church work. In 1865 new arrivals and some of the old members met in the courthouse and organized the First Baptist church and a mission Sunday school. None of the charter members are alive today.

Services were conducted until 1866 without a pastor, and then came Rev. W. J. Kermott. Prosperity followed and the Omaha association was formed. In 1867 at a directors' meeting, at which Darius Pearce, W. H. Churchill, Thomas Bonner and Watson B. Smith were present, a church was decided on to be built at Fifteenth and Davenport streets. It was to be of brick, 40x80 feet, two stories high and to cost \$10,000. On advice from Chicago the ground plan was enlarged by one-half. A temporary frame chapel was put up on the foundations for use until the building was finished, this later being sold to the Scandinavian Baptist congregation. In 1870 the church became divided against itself, and Rev. Mr. Kermott resigned. The First church called Rev. J. W. Daniels and the same year Rev. J. T. Sunderland became leader of the branch, which was called the Tabernacle church. He felt that two churches were



CROWD WATCHING THE EXERCISES AT LAYING OF THE CORNERSTONE OF THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, OMAHA.—Photo by a Staff Artist.

not needed and, resigning, effected a reconciliation. During 1870 the church had many accessions, but in the following year Rev. Mr. Daniels went to Cedar Rapids. From that time until 1876 the church made little advance and had the following pastors and supplies for its pulpit: E. C. M. Burnham, J. H. Ruby, J. W. Donnelly, O. T. Conger, Lloyd Morgan and H. E. Jameson. Under the latter many strangers came to the church and an attempt was made to pay off its debt, J. W. Daniels being made a financial agent in the east. Rev. J. W. Harris came to the church in October of 1879, and during his services the congregation grew from 150 to 400. In 1885 the church became free of debt, the building having cost \$23,000, \$20,000 of which had been subscribed by the American Baptist Home Missionary society.

The missionary spirit first began to grow at this period and Rev. C. B. Keeler became assistant pastor and a chapel costing \$1,200 was built on Twenty-fourth street near Cumings, and he was put in charge. In 1886 Rev. F. A. Genius and others were given letters to found the German Baptist

church and in November of the same year forty-nine members in the Hanscom park district were given letters to found Beth-Eden church. These put up the building on Park avenue near Leavenworth, which is the present home of the united congregation. In 1887 letters were given to members who founded the First church in Council Bluffs and in November of the following year forty-eight members branched off and formed Calvary parish, being given the chapel on Twenty-fourth street.

In 1888 Rev. Mr. Harris resigned and was followed by Rev. A. W. Lamar, who remained until March, 1892. Five thousand dollars was spent in repairs. Dr. W. P. Heilings came during this year from Milwaukee. In 1891 members were given letters to found Grace church. December 4, 1891, the church building was burned, being a total loss. Insurance to the amount of \$11,500 was received and services conducted in the Young Men's Christian association rooms for a year.

Finally lots costing \$7,500 at Thirty-fifth and Farnam streets were bought and an old

building repaired at a cost of \$3,000 more as a temporary chapel. In 1893 Rev. T. L. Ketman succeeded Rev. Mr. Heilings. At this time the idea of uniting the First church and Beth-Eden congregation grew in favor and August 19, 1893, a committee was appointed to meet with a committee from the other church. Rev. Mr. Ketman resigned and the union of the two was accomplished in the building of the Beth-Eden congregation October 25, 1893.

Going back to 1886 in November of which year Beth-Eden church was authorized, we find the new congregation beginning on the fourth of that month under the spiritual leadership of Rev. E. L. House, who was followed in turn by Rev. R. E. Harris. The new church was fortunate in its location, while the residence part of the city rapidly drew away from the First church, the new branch was in the best part of the new building district. Land was purchased and the present church building put up. Dr. D. D. Odell was the third pastor of this half of the present church, and Dr. W. W. Everetts the fourth. Finally Dr. Albery was called and when the union came he continued over the two flocks. He was followed by the present pastor, Rev. J. W. Conley.

In uniting the government of Beth-Eden was continued and the name of the First church. The agreement reached was that the property of the latter should be held in a trust fund to be used toward a building to be erected at a point to be selected by the two congregations. The location on Harney street is the result of this compromise, being between the two old locations. The First church had the lots at Fifteenth and Davenport streets and at Twenty-fifth and Farnam streets, with the chapel standing on the latter. The Beth-Eden church owned the two lots where the church stands, which had cost \$10,000, and in addition a small cottage. The Davenport street property was sold and the Farnam street lots were given with a bonus of \$1,200 for the new location. There remained on hand \$3,000 when the building was begun, and the church now in use, which will be sold.

The new church, including all furnishings, is to cost \$46,000, of which \$31,000 is now available, leaving \$15,000 to be raised. The structure has been designed in the Italian renaissance by Architect John McDonald. Its architectural features will be Ionic stone columns of which there are to be six on Park avenue, and pilasters, large art glass windows at the sides, lighting the auditorium and the interior dome over the same with a skylight. The exterior will be of gray pressed brick and Bedford stone. The building will be over all 67½ by 102½



LAYING THE CORNERSTONE OF THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, OMAHA—AFTER THE STONE WAS IN POSITION.—Photo by a Staff Artist.

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