

York Presbyterian is fine example of building

YORK — The First Presbyterian Church of York has been described by architects as one of the finest examples of anti-bellum church architecture in the Piedmont section of the South. It was one of three York County buildings, among 100 Presbyterian churches in the South, to be included in a pictorial volume, "Look to the Rock," published by the John Knox Press at Richmond, Va., in 1961.

The tall steeple can be seen for some distance from the different highways leading into town and people can say, "There is a House of God — there is a church." The doors are wide and seem to invite worshipers to come in and rest and pray; the weary to find the peace they need.

This beautiful landmark with Gothic sanctuary, tall steeple, flanking buttresses and high, narrow windows is different from the usual type of church now being built. Such church buildings may be seen in Charleston and two or three in Columbia but there is not another of this type in upper Carolina. It is not smaller and not less costly than the best houses of worship of the later school of ecclesiastical architecture.

The York area was settled by Scotch-Irish Presbyterians in the middle 1700s. When the county seat was selected in 1785, little Fergus Crossroad, the intersection of what is now Congress and Liberty streets, was chosen. Around this crossing were four Presbyterian churches which were formally organized in the 1760s. There were no other churches in the county at that time.

These churches, known as the Four B's of Bethel Presbytery, are Bethel, Bethesda, Bullock Creek and Beersheba Presbyterian. There was no organized church in Yorkville, as the town was called at that time. In fact, the First Presbyterian Church of York was not organized until 1842.

The First Presbyterian Church got its start as a mission field of ancient Beersheba Presbyterian Church for a number of years, but finally some of the members living in town, six miles distant, determined to

enjoy a nearer and more convenient place of worship, and they petitioned for an organization at the town of Yorkville.

On April 7, 1842, Bethel Presbytery was meeting in Yorkville. Certain citizens petitioned the Presbytery to constitute The First Presbyterian Church of Yorkville, and the Presbytery appointed a commission, consisting of Rev. Samuel L. Watson and Rev. Ferdinand Jacobs, to be in charge of organizing the church. These men gave due notice by newspaper or other means.

A congregation assembled on June 9, 1842, and heard a sermon by Rev. Samuel L. (Father) Watson after which it was announced that if there were persons present who desired to organize the First Presbyterian Church of Yorkville, they should present themselves with certificates from the church to which they formerly belonged. Fifteen persons so presented themselves with certificates from the following churches: Bethel, Bethesda, Beersheba, Ebenezer and Hopewell in York County, and two from Monnockin Church at Princess Ann, Maryland. The group met on the following day, which was Friday, and organized the church.

Officers elected and installed were: Elders — John S. Moore, clerk; E. A. Crenshaw, F. H. Simril and William P. McFadden; deacons — Col. I. D. Witherspoon Sr; S. R. Moore and John H. Adams. By this time Yorkville was a prosperous little community boasting a Male and Female Academy, a number of imposing residences and surrounding plantations. When the Presbyterians organized, the first services were held in their own building which still stands on W. Liberty Street and is used as an apartment building. It was a frame building across the street from the present church site. During the early days this building was known as the Neely Home, but was later purchased by Mrs. James Moore and converted into four apartments.

Rev. Ferdinand Jacobs served as stated supply from time

of organization until 1845. In 1846 the "Independent Presbyterian Church of Yorkville," which had been in existence since 1810, was dissolved, the members united with the regular Presbyterians of the First Church to increase the membership and usefulness.

Rev. E. B. Bishop succeeded Rev. Mr. Jacobs as supply until 1850. The infant church seems to have been greatly blessed and grew under faithful guidance of these consecrated leaders. First full-time pastor was Rev. J. M. H. Adams who directed the people in paths of righteousness from 1851 until his death in 1862.

The congregation had grown in such numbers by 1860 that the group desired a more pretentious and commodious building so they crossed the street and purchased the lot on which the church now stands. Dr. Maurice Moore says in his Reminiscences of Yorkville that the first residence in the town was built by Robert Smith on the exact spot where the church now stands. The lot was purchased from Mr. Smith or his family for the sum of \$1,300.37. The architect was paid \$520 and the building cost \$10,400, making a total of \$12,220.37.

The congregation subscribed \$8,865.50 and the original building was sold for \$1,250. Work was begun in 1860 and completed in 1862. Because of the War Between the States, the congregation endured hardships and there still remained a balance due contractors in 1862. John H. Adams, an elder, paid the contractor's balance and the congregation reimbursed him through subscriptions.

It was several years before the debt was paid in full and the church dedicated.

The building is brick, stuccoed and blocked, with about four feet of the foundation walls of rough hewn granite. Originally the pews had little gates or doors as the old churches of Charleston have and a close look will show the imprint of the hinges still on the pews. Each family had its own pew and there the parents sat with their children at each service. Rent was paid on the pews at

that time but this practice was discontinued as customs of the day changed. There were oak pillars or posts that stood along the side pews and supported the gallery which ran along the sides and back of the church. The pulpit was at the front of the center aisle and the sermon was preached from a center stand. The choir of early days sat in the right hand side of the gallery. The first organ was pumped with the feet and played by John R. Schorb, a photographer, in the 1800s.

It is notable that this church had only three pastors from 1880 to 1924, and such men they were: in scholarship, rare; in consecration, deep and earnest; as preachers, pastors and men their like is seldom found.

Dr. Thomas R. English was here from April, 1880, until June 1893, a period of 13 years, when he left to accept a professorship at Union Seminary. Dr. William G. Neville came in August, 1893 and left in January, 1905 to become president of Presbyterian College at Clinton. Dr. E. E. Gillespie led the flock to higher planes of growth and development. During his service of 19 years, from June, 1905 to August, 1924, every phase of the church's work grew and enlarged.

Dr. Gillespie was interested in the young people of the congregation. Every Sunday afternoon he would line practically all of the children up on two sides of the church aisle and drill them in the Shorter Catechism and Books of the Bible until each child could recite them well.

This lovely church has been remodeled and changed to meet the upward trend in better education within the congregation. In 1916 a building was erected adjoining the church by Mrs. Samuel McGowan McNeel. It was dedicated to the glory of God in memory of her husband who was a long and staunch supporter and officer of the church. It was designed as a Sunday School department, a social and civic center both for the church and the community. Mrs. McNeel added other space and facilities to the back of the sanctuary.

The side galleries and oak pillars have been removed and only the back gallery remains. Carpeting has been installed. A choir loft was built behind the pulpit and arch when the pipe organ was installed in the early 1900s. One happy and memorable occasion was when Joseph MacLean, dean of music at Agnes Scott College and a relative of Mrs. D. E. Finley, Misses Margaret and Daisy Gist of York, gave a recital on the pipe organ at the church.

It was on a lovely summer evening and the notes were soft and sweet to the ear — scarcely audible — and the increased in volume until the finale which literally rocked the church building.

The generations continued to preserve the old building and space was added to both church and McNeel structure. This church continues to be progressive and steadily go forward.

On Sunday, June 7, 1942, the Centennial Celebration of the founding of the First Presbyterian Church in York was celebrated. For this unique service, Dr. E. E. Gillespie, former pastor then serving as Superintendent of Home Missions for the Synod of North Carolina, brought the message and administered Communion.

The Centennial Homecoming Day was celebrated on Sunday, July 2, 1961. This was a celebration of the church building having stood for 100 years. The sermon entitled, "The Changeless Christ," was delivered by Dr. Malcolm P. Calhoun, a former pastor. The Holy Communion was administered on this special day also to friends, relatives and members. Following the services in the church, a picnic dinner was served on tables on the lawn. Many former members were present and this was an inspiring day for all. It was a time to review past endeavors of forefathers, keep the torch alight in the present, look to the future and pass along the tradition of working for the Lord and taking care of the priceless heritage.

The First Presbyterian Church of York's history shows that the organization was

brought about by Scotch-Irish pioneers who came south through Pennsylvania to settle in York County in the middle 1700s. The congregation showed the same pioneer spirit when it became one of the first churches in the Synod of South-Carolina to adopt the Budget Plan and Every-Member canvass.

The members of this church not only render outstanding services within their own congregation, but to the town and surrounding rural communities as well. The Week-Day Kindergarten is open to all five-year-olds of the community. This school is self-supporting, but the church furnishes supervision, facilities and equipment. They sponsor a Boy Scout troop and one Girl Scout troop meets in the McNeel Hall. The baby clinic is under the guidance of a doctor, several nurses and helpers. This clinic and other services to the less fortunate are supported by the Local Benevolent Fund.

Women of this congregation have always been active; their accomplishments are truly remarkable. This group sponsors "The Best Years Club" for elderly persons of all denominations within the town and nearby rural communities.

The Church School department is a flourishing one staffed with capable officers and teachers within the congregation because they feel called to teach their own children in the Christian way.

Worship here is a vital part of the congregation's contribution of service to the community. The place of worship stands in the middle of the town near the shopping areas and gives a daily witness to all who pass by its doors. Worshiping in a house built by their forefathers, these people strive to continue their labor of love and service to the community.

Rev. Neil C. Leach, pastor, and his assistant, Rev. Richard C. Massey, are leaders of this flock in this church located across the street from the county courthouse and the former white frame building that was the first house of worship.