

First English Presbyterian Church, 1770

— HISTORY OF THE ARCHITECTURE —

1742: Held first recorded Presbyterian services, Center Square courthouse.

1770: Dedicated first known house of worship.

1851: Dedicated second house of worship, red brick Greek Revival.

1877: Remodeled interior of sanctuary, dedicated new steeple.

1887: Constructed Evans Memorial Chapel, east side of Greek Revival house of worship.

1932: Enlarged and modernized Christian education building and social hall.

1952: Built parsonage on east side of Evans Chapel, razed old parsonage.

1970: Connected parsonage (now the parish house) and new chapel to house of worship.

1995: Renovated Christian education building and church offices.



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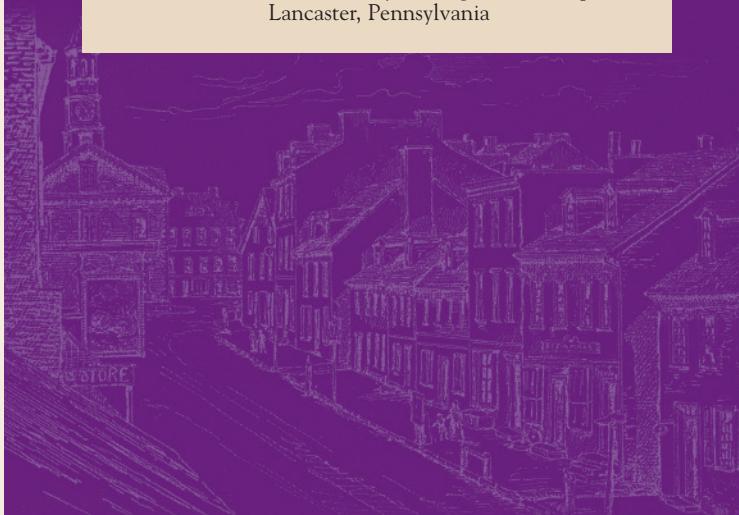
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Presbyterian
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STORY OF THE PEOPLE AND NEIGHBORHOOD

Like many other Europeans in the late 1600s and early 1700s, people from Ireland and Scotland flocked to Pennsylvania. The promise of affordable land and religious freedom held great promise for these rural people. Most Scots-Irish headed immediately for the frontier. Some found their way to what would become Lancaster Town where they established homes and began building a community.

In the summer of 1742, the year the growing town became a borough, Lancaster's Scots-Irish Presbyterians held their first recorded gatherings. Two preachers serving rural Lancaster County pastorates were asked by the Donegal Presbytery to give sermons at the Center Square courthouse.



Center Square courthouse

The courthouse, an "elegant brick structure" at the heart of the borough, would be the site of occasional Presbyterian worship in Lancaster for a significant portion of the next 30 years. In 1763 the Lancaster landholder, James Hamilton, granted the Presbyterian congregation a lot on Orange St. Also described as vacant, the lot was being used by Presbyterians as a burial ground and had been deeded to church member Robert Fulton. Fulton was the father of Robert Fulton, Jr., who is remembered as the inventor of the steamboat. Several old documents refer to the construction of a log church, but session minutes make no mention of such a structure. Most First Church historians doubt its existence.

Six years later when the Rev. John D. Woodhull came to Lancaster County, the congregation still held occasional services in the courthouse. The 25-year-old pastor found "very few communicants" and a red brick shell with walls and a roof.



Rev. John D. Woodhull

Charged with serving both the Lancaster and Leacock Presbyterians, he set out to gather funds so the Lancaster congregation could complete its house of worship. The first services at "the English Presbyterian Church of Lancaster" were held in 1770.

A popular preacher, the Rev. Woodhull brought lots of youthful energy to the community. He persuaded both the Lancaster and Leacock churches to align themselves with New Side Presbyterians. New Side congregations fostered Presbyterian participation in the Great Awakening, a revival movement that swept through many denominations in the early years of European life in America. The Donegal Presbytery, including most Presbyterian churches on the Pennsylvania frontier, supported Old Side leaders, strongly opposing the emotional manifestations of revival.

Many early Lancaster Presbyterians also had connections to St. James parish, the Anglican congregation directly across Orange St. In part this happened when St. James closed its doors in 1776 because of the Revolution and the church's ties to England. When St. James reopened in 1783, some of its former members had become communicant Presbyterians. Their loyalties were divided, and many chose to attend services and pay pew rents at both houses of worship.

Presbyterian women were part of an ecumenical organization called the Female Benevolent Society, founded in September 1816. The Society met every two weeks to make clothing for the poor and to set up plans for visiting the sick and infirm.

Nearly forty years later in 1850, First Church dismantled its original house of worship in favor of a much larger Greek Revival structure. Many congregants were people of influence in the community, and their choice in architecture symbolized this reality.

The men of First Presbyterian included President James Buchanan and U.S. Congressman Thaddeus Stevens. Well remembered for his uncompromising commitment to the abolition of slavery, Stevens never officially joined First Church. However, he paid annual pew rents and attended business sessions when at home in Lancaster.

In his younger years, Buchanan did not settle on any single community of faith. He kept a pew at St. James where both his niece, Harriet Lane, and his fiancee, Ann Coleman, were members. Coleman died unexpectedly in 1819 after their engagement broke up over an unexplained dispute. Buchanan became a communicant member of First Presbyterian Church in 1865.

By the 20th century, the congregation was home to people like Mary Slaymaker Kepler and Henning W. Prentis Jr., the president of Armstrong Cork Company (now called Armstrong World Industries). Kepler, a lifelong Lancaster city resident, served 25 years as President of the YWCA Board of Directors. One of her well-remembered sayings, "Doing for others; that's the joy in life," sums up her commitment to both the church and the YWCA.

A major renovation project united the parish house, chapel, and sanctuary in 1970. Initiated at a time when businesses and other faith communities were abandoning their city locations, these physical improvements signaled First Church's dedication to a downtown ministry. A successful 1995 capital campaign supplied funds to renovate Christian education and office facilities, further affirming the congregation's commitment "to the city whose heritage it so richly shares."



Mary Slaymaker Kepler

**Earliest Known Record: 1742 minutes
of the Donegal Presbytery**

**Current House of Worship: Worship:
Greek Revival, completed 1851**