

THE HERITAGE OF FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH CLARKSVILLE, TEXAS

The Texas Historical Commission recognizes that this Congregation is the oldest Protestant congregation in the State of Texas having continuous service. It was in 1833-34 that the Reverend Milton Estill and a small group of Tennessee immigrants, including the Latimer, Bagby, Moore, Hamilton, and Watkins families met under an oak tree and organized the Shiloh Cumberland Presbyterian Church, some three or four miles north east of Clarksville in what is now Red River County, Texas. The name was taken from their home church in Tennessee.

In a letter written in 1899, Dr. Samuel Templeton wrote "In 1840 Col. N. B. Patton, then 18, walked nearly all the way from White Oak Shoals on the Red River to Mr. Sampson Smith's where Mr. John West now lives (present day community of Cherry), got wagons and met Rev. Sam Corley and his family at Rowland Bryarly's on the Red River. Captain A. P. Corley, who was then eight years old, remembers seeing tall prairie grass, deer, prairie hens and wild turkeys as they passed along from Mr. George H. Bagby's home (north of Clarksville on present-day FM 1159) to Mr. Smith's."

In 1848, the Shiloh congregation united with the Presbyterian congregation that had been started in Clarksville, with the Reverend Sam Corley serving as the first pastor. Services were held in a building on North Walnut Street on the east side of the 700 block. A new church building with a belfry was erected on the banks of the Delaware on our present property in 1859-60 under the leadership of the Reverend Johnston Dysart. The building at that time was a very large wooden structure with a partition several feet high through the center. The men were seated on the left and the women on the right. Across the west end was a balcony in which Negro slaves were seated. In 1867 a committee was appointed in a meeting on this site, which eventually led to the formation of Trinity University in 1869 – one of Texas' oldest church-related colleges.

In 1896, the Church resolved to build a new house of worship, but owing to the disaster to the cotton crop that year by reason of the hot July winds, the undertaking was postponed. The old wooden structure served until 1899, when a larger, more elaborate wooden structure was erected. The original bell was installed in the new belfry.

When the Church was struck by lightning in a terrific thunderstorm and destroyed by fire in 1904, the wind and heat from the fire caused the church bell to ring its own death knell until the belfry crashed to the ground. When the bell was found afterward, the metal was not destroyed, so it was sent to the factory to be recast. This bell is still calling the congregation to worship each Sunday.

The present church building was erected in 1905 under the leadership of Dr. Samuel Moore Templeton, one of the great figures of Texas Presbyterianism and pastor of the Clarksville church for twenty-two years. The beautiful Pilcher pipe organ was donated by the Will Moore family in 1917 after the record cotton crop of 1916-17. A Sunday School addition and basement were added in 1923, and in 1961-62, during the pastorate of the Reverend Raymond Judd, Jr., the Christian Education Building was erected. In 1966, the Texas Historical Commission placed a Landmark Medallion on the building.

The Church owes its importance not just to the buildings and its dedicated ministers who have served here, but also to the Christian women who worked so fervently in the Ladies Missionary Society (organized in 1888) and to the Guild (organized in the 1920s); to the organists, pianists, and choirs who have so enriched the worship services with their beautiful music; to the Christian men and women who have served as Elders, Deacons, Trustees, and church school teachers, and above all to the church family who daily show their love for God in their relationship with each other and the community that we love.