

Thankful that they were now bound together in a Christian community, the small congregation of the newly-established Presbyterian Church looked to the future with enthusiasm and determination. Hopefully, the day would soon arrive when they could worship in their own sanctuary. They could expect some help from the Presbytery and from the General Assembly, but if their church were to become an effective voice for Christ in Mt. Pleasant, they knew that all must give generously of their time, their substance, their labor, and their prayer.

The Reverend Luke Nott, whose missionary efforts had led to the establishment of the church, served as pastor of the new institution. During much of the week he traveled about Isabella County on his missionary rounds visiting hamlets and lumber camps. Sunday morning, however, found him in Mt. Pleasant preaching to the Presbyterians from the pulpit of the Methodist Church. Later in the day he would journey to Calkinsville (Rosebush) to conduct Sabbath afternoon services. Evidence seems to indicate that the Board of Home Missions of the General Assembly and the Saginaw Presbytery may have agreed to pay half of Nott's annual salary with the remaining half (probably \$300) the responsibility of the Mt. Pleasant congregation.



The steeple of the Court Street church may be seen in the center of this bird's-eye view of Mt. Pleasant, 1884.

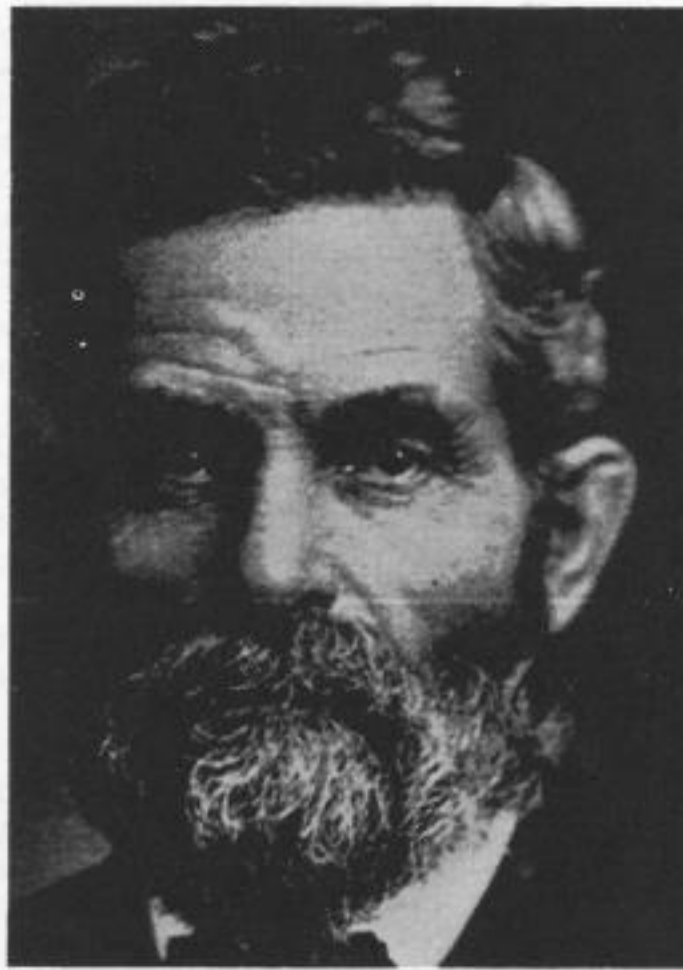
The women of the church were particularly active in raising funds for its support. The congregation had accepted the obligation to pay its share of the minister's salary but had no formal plan or procedure to acquire the necessary money. Indeed, money was apparently such a scarce commodity at the time that Nott was forced to accept a portion of his salary in produce and in mercantile orders. To pay the major portion of it, the women members scheduled "donation" dinners at frequent intervals. Everyone in the community was invited to these feast and fun affairs. There was no charge for the dinner but before leaving, all who attended "donated" something of value or small sums in cash for the minister.

The burden of sustaining the church fell heavily on the small congregation which, during its first year, attracted few new members. Fortunately, several former members of the First Presbyterian Society, although they did not affiliate with the congregation, strongly supported efforts to erect a church building. At a congregational meeting early in May, 1873, nine men won election to a Board of Trustees and were delegated "to take charge of the church property and to transact such business as may come before them from time to time."

For two months the newly elected trustees candidly evaluated the prospects of the town and discussed the advisability of erecting a church building. At length on July 6, 1873 they convened at Stevenson's Hall to make their decision. After electing Wilkinson Doughty as permanent chairman of the body and Samuel Hopkins, a young lawyer, as secretary, the Board resolved to undertake the erection of a Presbyterian church in Mt. Pleasant at a cost of "not less than \$2,000.00." To accomplish this resolve, it provided for the solicitation of a building fund, "for the procuring of a suitable lot for the church," and for the acquisition of "the timber and lumber as well as the other necessary material for building." Construction would begin in the spring of 1874 and be completed by the following October.

On the day following the meeting of the trustees, I. A. Fancher started the subscription list on its rounds of the village with a pledge of \$100. Before the week ended many others had added their names and pledges to the list. Pleased with the decision to erect a church home and with the seemingly solid support of the townspeople in the venture, the congregation joyfully looked to the time a few months hence when construction would actually begin. But developments during the late summer months depressed their hopes and crushed their enthusiasm. In September a disastrous financial panic swept out of the East to envelop even the unpretentious village of Mt. Pleasant. Caught up in the fears of the time, citizens guarded their slim resources. As trade slowed and business slackened, few were willing to contribute to a building fund. Would those who had already pledged be able to honor their commitments?

At Doughty's call, the Board of Trustees convened again early in January, 1874. Despite continued "hard times" and the scarcity of money, the Board decided to proceed with the erection of the building as planned. Thereupon, Doughty appointed Charles Slater, Hopkins, and Fancher to a committee to prepare plans, specifications, and estimated costs. Slater was well-qualified to head the committee. This twenty-six year old carpenter in company with his parents and sisters, had joined the church the previous year and had ever since been exceptionally active in its promotion. Indeed, earlier on this Sabbath day, January 3, 1874, he had been ordained as a ruling elder of the church which he would continue to serve as a trustee. Doughty named a second committee consisting of D. H. Gilman and Alexander Stevenson, both of whom were local grocery and dry-goods merchants, and himself "to see about a lot or lots on which to build & to receive proposals." Before adjourning, the Board agreed that the ladies of the Society should



Charles Slater served as a ruling elder of First Presbyterian Church for more than a half-century.

circulate the all-important subscription list to raise additional funds for construction.

Despite the cold of a Michigan winter and the frozen barrenness all about them, the Presbyterians in their mind's eye could dismiss the ice and snow and envision a spring scene a few months hence and their own house of worship rising somewhere in the village. After his committee had investigated several sites and reported to the Board of Trustees, Doughty called that body into session on February 7, 1874 to make its decision. In addition to eight trustees, the Reverend Nott, another man and seven women of the congregation were also present. After prayer, the group spent much of the remainder of this Sunday afternoon discussing proposed building sites. The most favored location lay just east of the courthouse square. Cornelius Bennett, who owned many town lots, offered to contribute one-half of the value of the site as his share of the building fund. Since the lot in question had an acknowledged valuation of \$400, Bennett's offer represented a gift of \$200. Pleased though they were with this development, the trustees interrupted their discussion long enough to have two of their number, Hopkins and Henry Bouton, "wait on" Bennett and learn how large a sum he would contribute to the building fund in lieu of the half-value of the lot if the Board should select another site. The two callers returned shortly to announce that the lot owner would limit a cash donation to \$40. Thereupon, Fancher moved and Doughty seconded "that Mr. Bennett's lot be accepted on the best terms he would make, all present members of the society being allowed to vote." Twelve of the fifteen persons casting ballots approved the motion. The Presbyterians of Mt. Pleasant had selected a site for their church home.

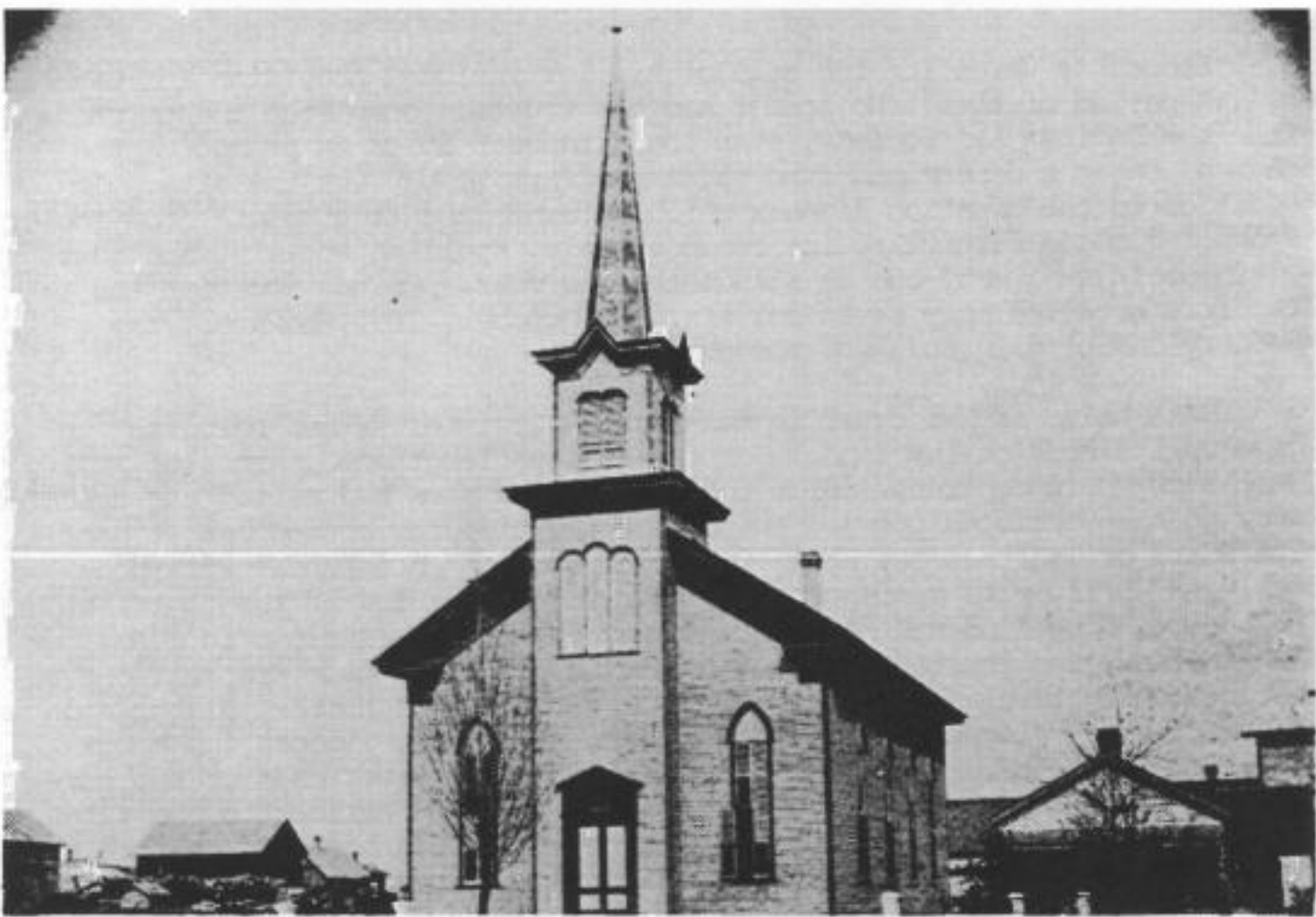
Bennett's terms for the sale of his lot included provision for payment over a period of time. No sooner had the trustees completed the purchase than the Ladies' Aid Society, ever the strongest force in promoting the church, began a determined fund-raising effort to pay for the site. In addition to the donation dinners which it continued to schedule, the Society sponsored music festivals, ice cream socials, spelling socials, and just plain socials—twenty-one in all during the year. On one occasion the receipts totalled only seven dollars. By October, 1875, however, the Society had paid in full for the church site.

Meanwhile, as was usual in mid-Michigan, winter seemed reluctant to give up its hold on the land. But as the days lengthened, hints of spring were everywhere apparent. Soon the last of the snow had melted and trickled away to the turbid Chippewa. Aware that the time for action was at hand, the Board of Trustees met again in formal session on a Sunday afternoon early in April. Its resources were slim for only a few of the contributors to the building fund had been able to pay their subscriptions in cash. Nonetheless, the trustees reviewed building plans and made preparations to begin construction as soon as possible. Two of their number, Slater and Fancher, were delegated to secure building materials. Before the month ended ox-drawn lumber wagons rumbled over the primitive roads of the surrounding stumpland to deliver freshly sawed pine and hemlock to the site. There during the spring evenings men of the church gathered to prepare the lumber and other materials for the start of construction.

Actual construction began early in July. By the end of the month, with most of the labor contributed by the trustees, the Reverend Nott, and other men of the church, the foundation was complete and work on the upper structure was underway. Work continued somewhat sporadically during the summer and fall, but by the Christmas season the Presbyterians knew that within a few weeks the doors of their new sanctuary would open to them. In January workmen installed the "quite modern and handsome" new pews and suspended from the ceiling a "12 light chandelier." To the editor of the local newspaper the now all-but-completed church was "an ornament, not only to the industry and perseverance of those who erected it," but to Mt. Pleasant and Isabella County as well. In his opinion it was "the finest building in the county, being commodious, finely designed, well built, tastefully finished and furnished."

The Presbyterians were determined that their church should be dedicated to the worship of God with fitting ceremony. Congregations throughout Isabella and neighboring counties were urged to join in the dedication which was to be held on Sunday afternoon, January 31, 1875. On the designated day, the Reverend Thomas Middlemas of East Saginaw preached the dedicatory sermon before the largest gathering of Christians ever assembled in the county.

Occupancy of their own church home posed new problems for the Presbyterians. In the past they had encountered difficulty raising funds to pay their minister. Now with their numbers only slightly increased they must also maintain a building and pay the balance due for its construction. With some work yet to be done, it had already cost \$3,500, much more than anticipated. In recognition of this situation and in gratitude for God's blessing, some members and some non-members at the time of the dedication had generously increased their subscriptions to the building fund; even so, the total pledged amounted to less than \$2,500. Because of straitened economic conditions and the scarcity of money, however, some subscribers were unable to honor their pledges. Thus, at the time of occupancy more than \$2,200 in building costs remained unpaid.



A view of the Court Street church in 1885. The man in front of the building is probably the Reverend F. A. Bissell, pastor of First Presbyterian from 1885 to 1887.

At a meeting early in February the trustees endeavored to ease the financial crisis confronting the church. Of immediate concern was the pastor's salary for the forthcoming year. The Ladies' Aid Society had contributed generously for this purpose, but it now had determined to pay the balance owing on the church lot and could not be expected to do as much as in the past. The Board of Home Missions would continue to pay half of the salary, but some new means had to be found to provide the remainder. Rather than seek individual pledges, as in former years, the trustees decided to rent the church pews on a yearly basis and allocate the monthly payments to the minister. To this end, on Saturday afternoon, February 13, 1875, they accepted sealed bids for the choice of pews. With an offer of \$2.00 monthly, I. A. Fancher won the right to make the first selection and chose pew #21. Wilkinson Doughty bid \$1.70 for pew #25. In all, the 28 bids received--ranging as low as 25 cents--promised an income of \$23.07 monthly and \$276.84 yearly to meet the \$300 salary commitment.

The Reverend Nott began his pastoral year on March 1, 1875. He had now served the church and the community for more than three years and had won many friends. To provide him with a portion of his salary immediately, the church arranged for a "donation" on March 17. "As usual," said the announcement, "we anticipate a good attendance, good cheer, a pleasant time generally, and a liberal purse for our pastor." Despite a late winter storm which by the next day had blanketed the town under fourteen inches of snow, townspeople crowded into the church on the appointed evening. The number present, reported the local newspaper, "testifies to the esteem with which Elder Nott is held in our midst. There was lots of fun, plenty of ham, and the flow of generosity we are informed, reached the figure of \$170.00."

If the newspaper account is correct, the trustees retained a portion of the proceeds to meet other church expense. They paid Nott \$82.77 in cash

and \$42.50 in house rent, provisions, and trade orders. But this was his only substantial payday! For the remainder of his year of service he received his salary in dribblets, the church treasurer turning over to him the pew rental income as it was received. In addition to house rental credited to Nott's salary, he was also paid in cordwood and butter. At the year's end, the treasurer, unable to raise enough cash to meet the balance of the pastor's salary, paid him with the due bills of several church members. In all, Nott received \$301.99, a sum slightly in excess of his promised salary.

Despite the difficulties encountered in raising funds to pay their pastor, the trustees managed to reduce the church debt substantially. In response to their request for assistance submitted some months earlier, the Board of Church Election of the General Assembly provided a long-term loan of \$600 at minimal interest. In addition, some who had subscribed to the building fund met their commitments by tendering personal notes which, because of the money shortage, found ready acceptance in the village and circulated freely.

As the months passed, the new church quickly became an influential center for Christian worship and teaching in the newly-incorporated village of Mt. Pleasant. Townspeople, regardless of their faith, looked to the new building as a symbol of progress, as an indication of the better times and better life that were to come. They watched with interest and appreciation as Billy Mann, a member of a touring theatrical group and a talented sign painter, worked with gold leaf on the transom window above the entrance to inscribe, "First Presbyterian Church, Mt. Pleasant, A. D. 1874."

The congregation made excellent use of its new facility. The crowded pews at both the Sunday morning and Sunday evening services seemed to belie the fact that the fellowship had attracted only nine new members during 1875. Indeed, many townspeople who were unaffiliated with any denomination regularly attended the Presbyterian services. The Thursday night prayer meetings were also well attended. Frequently, on Wednesday afternoons or evenings the women of the church sponsored "socials," musicales, lectures, or other types of entertainment. The Ladies' Aid Society met weekly--sometimes at the church, but more often at the homes of members. Sometimes a missionary or visiting preacher would arrive in town and conduct daily services in the sanctuary over a period of a week or more.

In mid-summer, however, a local disaster temporarily halted some church activity. Early on the morning of August 5 the dreaded clanging of the fire bell sent the citizens of the village tumbling from their beds and hurrying into their clothes to fight the blaze. Mt. Pleasant was "a wooden town," and its people were well aware that a fire, regardless of its location, could be a threat to every home and building in the village. Despite the danger, the town had yet to purchase a fire engine. Those who first reached the scene found the night sky already alight as towering, wind-driven flames swept unchecked down a block of adjoined stores. Nothing could be done to save the poorly constructed frame buildings in the path of the fire. But everyone--men, women, and children--worked frantically through the night to save the rest of the town. They poured water on the roofs of nearby stores and homes and hung soaked carpets, blankets, and burlap bags from their eaves. Although smoke and burning embers swirled about the spire and over the roof of the Presbyterian Church, it did not ignite. By dawn, however, practically the whole business section of the village was in ashes.

Despite their heavy loss, some businessmen--including several members and friends of the Presbyterian Church--began rebuilding before the last ember was extinguished. Within a week's time a few had replenished their

stock and were again in business at improvised sites. Before the year ended, new, more substantial buildings had risen to all but obscure the desolation resulting from the fire.

Stunned though they were by the disaster, the townspeople, too, quickly recovered and soon proceeded with their affairs in a normal manner. On a Friday morning only three weeks after the fire, at a time when Mt. Pleasant's population was less than 800, more than a hundred children and adults gathered at the church to set forth on a Presbyterian Sunday School Picnic. Leading the procession of farm wagons to the picnic site at the Indian camp-meeting grounds east of town was a gaily decorated carry-all "with twenty-three gay and happy hearts on board." Joining in the festivities were Sunday School groups from the nearby Mission and Salt Creek (Shepherd) churches. The men quickly constructed a long table and the women loaded it "to almost breaking weight with cake, pies, biscuit, sandwiches, chickens, ham, goose, and peppers and spice and all things nice." After eating it clean "except for a dozen choice cakes and about three bushels of fragments," the picnickers spent a long and pleasant afternoon, the children frolicking and the older folks remembering "how wild, happy, and free" they were when they were children on picnic day.

Their first Christmas in their new church proved to be another joyful occasion for the Presbyterians and their friends. On the eve of the holiday, groups of carolers approached the brightly lighted church over the snow covered wooden sidewalks leading to its door. Inside was a Christmas tree decorated with "fixings and goodies." The throng of happy children and adults provided their own entertainment--group singing, choral numbers and solos, and tableaux vivants. To cap the festive evening, Santa Claus arrived (reportedly by way of the south chimney) and distributed gifts to young and old.

When spring arrived the Reverend Nott ended his pastorate at the First Presbyterian Church. In appreciation of the role this "faithful and conscientious worker" had played in the organization of the church, and of his five years of service thereafter, the congregation promoted a second "donation" for his benefit. Entertainment for the evening included "a pleasant medley of attractive features." There was "Music, both choral and solos, Tableaux, Reading, and Singing by Prof. Curtis' School." Unlike the affair of the previous year, the total proceeds of the evening were given to the minister. He preached his farewell sermon on April 1, 1876, and left the town. With him went the love and gratitude of the many friends he had made in the cut-over lands of mid-Michigan.