

7-1-1932

Old Zion Church

J A. Swisher

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Swisher, J A. "Old Zion Church." *The Palimpsest* 13 (1932), 274-284.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol13/iss7/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Old Zion Church

The Holy Roman Empire owed much of its importance to the dignity of a name. It was, in fact, not holy, nor Roman, nor was it an empire. In somewhat the same manner Old Zion Church is remembered. It was not always "Old". Its real name was not "Zion". Nor did it first become famous as a church.

In the spring of 1834 the venerable Peter Cartwright visited Iowa, and, from a pulpit improvised from the trunk of a broken tree in the little settlement at Flint Hills, he "declared the unsearchable riches of the Gospel of Jesus Christ" and "had a good meeting". About this time a prayer meeting was organized under the leadership of Dr. William R. Ross. Three years later this prayer-meeting group incorporated as the Methodist Episcopal Church of Burlington and began the erection of a house of worship. Before this building was completed it was rented as the seat of the Iowa Territorial Government. When the capital was moved to Iowa City, the structure was refurnished exclusively as a church. In 1851 the building needed repairs and a festival was planned to raise funds. Handbills were printed

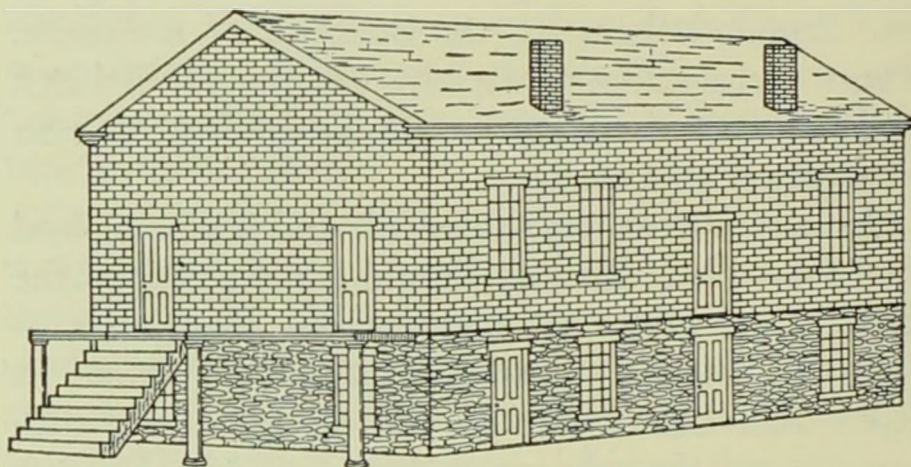
which declared that "Old Zion wants a new roof". From that time forth, this historic old edifice was known as "Old Zion Church".

The principal actor in the building of Old Zion was Dr. William R. Ross, who purchased two lots on the west side of Third Street between Columbia and Washington streets in Burlington, and donated them for the building of a church. Plans were adopted for the erection of a brick building forty by sixty feet in dimensions, and an excavation was made.

Money was scarce, however, and it was agreed that Rev. N. S. Bastion should make a tour of the East in an effort to raise funds. Four men — John C. Sleeth, Thomas Ballard, William R. Ross, and Levi Hager — contributed thirty dollars to pay the current expenses of Mr. Bastion on his soliciting campaign. But misfortune attended his mission. He went as far as Louisville, Kentucky, where he had to borrow twenty-five dollars to pay his expenses home. The balance sheet of this adventure showed that the trip cost fifty-five dollars — a total loss, for no gifts or pledges were secured. Local funds, however, were made available and the work was carried forward.

The building as originally constructed was without vestibule, tower, or bell. It consisted of

a basement and main audience room. The basement walls, two feet thick, extended about eight feet above the surface of the ground. On the level of the upper floor along the front end of the building was a platform supported by turned posts and reached by a broad flight of steps that



SKETCHED BY DONOVAN G. TEMPLE FROM AN OLD DRAWING

THE FIRST CAPITOL OF IOWA TERRITORY

led to the entrance of the auditorium. For eight years the building remained in this condition before being remodeled.

When the erection of the church was begun, Burlington was the capital of the Territory of Wisconsin. On the night of December 12, 1837, the capitol had burned. In June of the following year the Territory of Iowa was created and the first Iowa Territorial legislature convened in the

following November. Because of the fact that there was no capitol building, arrangements were made to hold the meetings of the Legislative Assembly in the newly constructed church building.

On the occasion of this meeting the *Iowa Patriot* said: "The new Methodist Church is now occupied by the Legislative Assembly. It is a very neat and substantial building. The basement story, partitioned off for conference and class-meetings, is composed of stone, and the upper part of brick. It is in a commanding situation, and when finished, with its cupola and bell, it will be a great ornament to the city of Burlington."

To equip this building for legislative purposes a railing was placed across the room to separate the lobby from the House, desks were built for the officers and members, and the floor was carpeted. The Council — the upper branch of the legislature, consisting of thirteen members — met in the basement of the church, while the House, composed of twenty-six members, convened in the room above. Thus, by a strange paradox, the upper house was below, while the lower house was above.

During Territorial days the legislature paid more than two thousand dollars rental for the use of Old Zion, but this was not sufficient to pay for

its original cost. Because of a lack of funds the church became seriously embarrassed, and sale of the property was threatened. Dr. Ross came to the rescue, however, and it is reported that he sold his own private residence, which cost thirty-four hundred dollars, for the sum of twelve hundred dollars in order to save the church from sale.

While Burlington was the Territorial capital, Old Zion Church was the scene of much activity and of many interests. Legislators, judges, and the Governor assembled there to perform their official duties during the years between 1838 and 1841. Frequently the building provided a meeting place for public assemblies. On the Fourth of July, 1839, it was the scene of a patriotic celebration. Governor Robert Lucas was the presiding officer, Augustus Caesar Dodge read the Declaration of Independence, and James W. Grimes was orator of the day.

Old Zion was also the meeting place of the Supreme Court of Iowa, as well as the Territorial District Court in Des Moines County. In June, 1845, the Hodges brothers were tried and convicted of murder by a court sitting there. The verdict of guilty was rendered on Sunday morning, and in the afternoon of the same day the condemned men heard the death sentence read from the pulpit of this historic church.

Nor did this dwelling place of peace escape Indian controversies and questions of boundary warfare. In January, 1840, it was the scene of an Indian council held by Governor Lucas to confer with the chiefs of the Sauk and Fox tribes. On another occasion it was the headquarters of a company of soldiers on their way to the threatened border war between Missouri and Iowa. Perhaps the influence of the church was significant in this event, for it proved to be a model war, "where not a drop of blood was shed", and where "those who won the glory paid the bills".

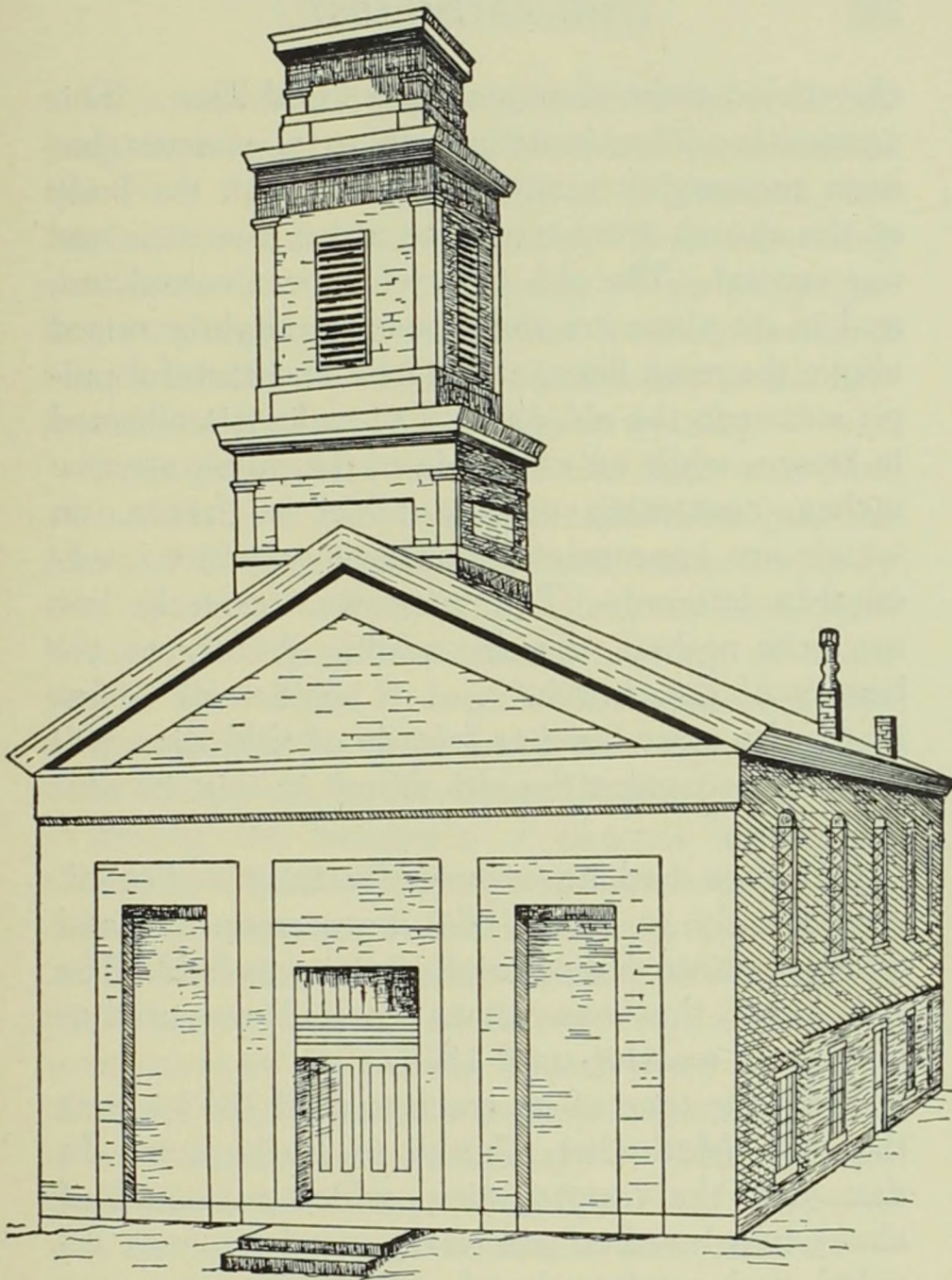
Worshippers, who in the late fifties sat within the hallowed precincts of Old Zion and "listened to the fervid prayer, the calm discourse, the swelling anthem, or the loud hosanna", were reminded that these were not the only sounds that had echoed forth from this room through the years. At an old settlers' meeting in the church in 1858, Judge Charles Mason said: "As illustrative of the novel uses to which it was necessary to adapt the limited means within our reach in those early days, and the shifts to which we were driven by the great mother of invention, I need but remind you of the scenes which have been witnessed within these walls".

He reminded his listeners that it was in Old Zion that "the amiable governor of the Territory

met in friendly conference the representatives of some of the dissatisfied red children, to hear their complaints, and at least to promise them redress — an easy and oft-repeated remedy. Here the citizens listened to the native eloquence of the Indians, and were treated to the exhibition of the song and the war dance. The wild whoop of the savage, which had often carried dismay and horror to many a stout heart, failed to make any impression on Old Zion, which . . . looked on in strange gravity, and was determined not to be surprised at any scene that might transpire within it."

When the Territorial Government was removed from Burlington to Iowa City in 1841, Old Zion was equipped as a house of worship. Some rough benches, with a back to each seat, were placed in the "Amen corner", while the other parts of the house were equipped with seats without backs. In 1845 more comfortable seats were provided. It was about this time, too, that the outside stairway and platform were removed and a vestibule and tower were built. In 1850 a bell weighing fourteen hundred and fifty pounds was purchased from the Buckeye Bell Foundry in Cincinnati, Ohio, and placed in the belfry.

Fourteen years later further repairs and adjustments were made. The Burlington *Hawk-Eye*



SKETCHED BY DONOVAN G. TEMPLE FROM A PHOTOGRAPH

OLD ZION CHURCH

chronicled these changes thus: "Old Zion. This venerable edifice, in its internal arrangements, has been thoroughly remodeled. Through the body of the church were run three aisles, two side and one central. The old gallery has been remodeled, and in its place are the pews, but slightly raised above the main floor, and a new and tasteful pulpit succeeds the old one. The ceiling is adorned in fresco, while on each side of the pulpit are two niches, containing each a tablet in fresco, on which are appropriate scriptural quotations, admirably lettered. The windows, formerly low are now arched, thereby adding greatly to the beauty of the church. . . . When all is finished, the most familiar friends of Old Zion will scarcely recognize the old church in this, its second youth."

Old Zion had never been formally dedicated. Accordingly, in June, 1864, it was reopened and an appropriate dedicatorial service was held. The old church, thus many times repaired, was used as a house of worship until 1879.

From the time of its erection until 1853 it was the only Methodist Church in Burlington. In that year the congregation, which consisted of about two hundred and sixty members, was divided, and another church, called Ebenezer, was built in south Burlington. These two churches

worked side by side until 1879 when the two congregations were again combined and continued as the First Methodist Church of Burlington, the services being held at Ebenezer. A new building was erected a few years later. This congregation now consists of more than fourteen hundred members, and the old bell which hung in the belfry of Old Zion still calls them to worship.

During the years in which Old Zion was used as a church, it had twenty-six different pastors. Most of them served but one year each, and only two of them — Rev. J. B. Blakeney and Rev. Charles B. Clark — remained as long as three years. Rev. Pearl P. Ingalls was pastor for only a few months in 1861, when he resigned to become a chaplain in the Union Army.

Among the hundreds of persons who worshiped at Old Zion through the years there were men of prominence in the affairs of state. These included Governor Robert Lucas and Chief Justice Charles Mason. Moreover, from among the worshipers at this historic church there came two ministers who attained a national reputation. At a watch-night party on January 1, 1851, Charles C. McCabe was converted at Old Zion. Later he was the leader in a movement to raise millions of dollars for church extension, and finally he became a bishop in the Methodist Church. In 1852

Addison C. Williams became a member of Old Zion. Fifteen years later he served as pastor. From there he was transferred to Des Moines and then to Indianola. Later he held pastorates at St. Louis, Kansas City, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles. Thus it appears that the influence of Old Zion has radiated far and accomplished much.

But the old church building has long been gone. In 1881 it was razed and a modern theater was erected on the site. Thus, this sacred shrine, in which "the people of God had so long gathered for worship, which had been solemnly dedicated to its sacred uses, and which had become hallowed by its association in the memories of thousands" passed from view. Yet, memory lingers. A bronze tablet, twenty-four inches square, marks the site where the old church stood. History will not permit this shrine to be forgotten. Iowans, in generations yet to come, will pause to honor Old Zion.

J. A. SWISHER