

# *A History of First Baptist Church, Barbourville, Kentucky*

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The First Baptist Church, Barbourville, originally named Cumberland River Baptist Church, was constituted on May 12, 1804. The site is believed to be "in the narrows" on the north side of the Cumberland River, close to Walker State Park. The original minutes state that the church was organized on the Cumberland River. Two ministers from Tennessee, Elder William Jones and Elder Matthew Sims, officiated in the organization with eight recorded members constituting the church body. Elijah Foley was elected the first pastor, and Lemuel Hibbard, church clerk. This was the first church of record in Southeastern Kentucky, and being missionary-minded from its earliest existence, the church extended "arms" in aiding the organization of the following churches: Indian Creek, May 1805; Poplar Creek, November 1805; Clear Fork, August 1807; Jellico Creek, 1808; Red Bird (Whitley County) February 1810; Concord, September 1812; Lynn Camp, July 1813.

Having no "meeting" house during the early years, the group met in the homes of the members, which extended over a large geographical area. Records indicate the first house of worship, made of logs, was supervised by two trustees of the church (1814) and located on the north side of the Cumberland River, a few miles southwest of the Knox County Court House. The first reference to a church house within the town limits is contained in a deed by Richardson Herndon. However, there is no record to indicate if there was a meeting house on this lot. Records do indicate that the church meetings took place in the "old meeting house", and on the usual days" (1820) in a schoolhouse located on the southeast corner of College and High Streets. This building became known as the "old Baptist Church" even though it was a school building, owned by the county school system and shared with the church. Intermittently, the church met for services in the County Court House, as well as in homes of the members.

Services were held on Saturday and Sunday, however irregularly, once a month, usually at the hour of eleven o'clock, with the worship service being held preceding the business session on Saturday. It is recorded, "the church met according to adjournment, and after divine worship, the unity of the Spirit being called for an appearing," proceeded to business. Members who had strayed on the "forbidden paths" were censored and, in many cases, excommunicated from the church fellowship until "properly repentant and confessions made" before being restored to the fellowship. There were no services held during the Civil War years and until some years afterward (1861-1869). The church was reorganized in 1869, in the "old meeting house" on high street. Irregular and infrequent services were held until 1877, when the church purchased the Mayhew School (near Sharp's Gap), and acquired the title so as not "to conflict with the free school purposes for which the house was built." After worshipping in this building until the mid-eighteen-eighties, the congregation voted the building was "no longer fit for use" and consequently, the property was sold at "public outcry at the courthouse to the highest bidder."

On May 27, 1886, Ellen Sue Matthews sold one-half acre of land on the corner of Main and Pine Streets to the Cumberland River Baptist Church. However, it was not until June 18, 1893, during the pastorate of Brother Steve Golden, that a building was erected and dedicated on this site.

Worship services were held here over a twenty-eight year span, with the Sunday School getting a firm footing. The Southern Baptist Convention organized their present Sunday School Board in 1891, and began providing literature and training for their constituencies. Thus, the Pine Street church began using the literature and organized an age-graded program in the Sunday School and began using materials including hymn books from the Sunday School Board. The church was described as "having a strong determination and a keen will to continue the work of those gone on before".

From the earliest days, women have played an important role in the First Baptist Church, serving

and supporting faithfully in the church's ministry. One of the stronger organizations of the church has been the Woman's Missionary Union, formerly called the "Ladies Aid Society" which served human needs in a missionary mode in the community in times of bereavement and stress. When the Woman's Missionary Union was organized in 1888, under the auspices of the Southern Baptist Convention, the women followed sometime later to organize their program accordingly in home and world endeavors. The WMU has been active in all phases of the church program since its existence. Records reveal that the WMU aided in the building of the church in the early part of the twentieth century sponsoring cake sales, bias tape sales, ice cream socials, and suppers. However in 1923, a motion was made to eliminate suppers, food sales, etc. and encourage members to give their tithes and free will offerings to such causes. Over the years the WMU has had varied groups with many named in honor of missionaries who served on foreign soil. Included in some of the groups so named are Brown – Brittain, Rose Marlow, Lottie Moon, Jennie Bright, Minnie Berry, Ethel Harmon, Eliza Broadus, Frances Gould, Sarah Hughes and Charolette McDonald Rock. Mrs. Rock, a missionary to Argentina (along with her missionary husband, Clayton), grew up in the First Baptist Church. At present there are three WMU groups actively serving in the church. The groups annually support the following weeks of prayer: County Missions, Annie Armstrong Home Missions, Eliza Broadus State Missions, and Lottie Moon Foreign Missions.

The church joined the "fraternity" of the North Concord Baptist Association in 1843, after having been an affiliate of the Stockton's Valley Association (1805), Cumberland River Association (1812), and the South Union Association (1815). In 1996 the North Concord Baptist Association merged with the Lynn Camp Association to form the Knox Baptist Association. The First Baptist Church remains a member of the Knox Baptist Association today.

In 1899, the church established and built Barbourville Baptist Institute, which existed until 1935, when it closed, becoming Knox Central High School.

The present church site was purchased March 19, 1921, and in the following year a sanctuary, along with educational space, was built. Much of the labor and materials were provided by the members. On January 6, 1926, in regular business session, the church instructed the trustees of the church to "take the necessary steps to legally and properly complete all records necessary in changing the name of the church to the "First Baptist Church." This was done accordingly and recorded in the Knox County Clerk's Office. In 1931, the church building was partially destroyed by fire, but was immediately rebuilt by the untiring efforts and long hours of work by members of the congregation. Additional Sunday School space was completed in the early forties.

The First Baptist Church continued to reach out to other communities with the same strong sense of purpose and missionary zeal that marked the early history. Examples of the second major phase of extending arms to mission centers that later developed into full-fledged churches are Tugglesville, Apple Grove, Highland Park Baptist Church, Prichard Branch, East Barbourville Baptist Church, Turkey Creek Baptist Church, and Northside Baptist Church.

In 1966-67, the Church constructed an education building adequate to house the Sunday School, fellowship hall, kitchen, music department and library. From March 1967 until November 1974, both the Sunday School and Worship Services were held in the education building. In 1972 a bus ministry was begun. In 1974, a sanctuary designed to seat 580 people, and costing \$433,578.55, was completed and dedicated. In 1984, at the bequest of the late William Jones estate located on North Main Street, the church was given the family home, which was completely renovated for use as a parsonage. A parsonage on Pine Street, bought in December 1916, was sold at public auction in 1991.

A pageant entitled, "Unity Appearing Among Us," has been presented seven times as a dramatic presentation of our history. The title was derived from the minutes and was a phrase the forebears used to describe the business sessions of the church. The church celebrated its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary over a three day period in September of 2004 with a presentation of the pageant, open house, a concert, a WMU tea,

a historical tour, special music, dinner on the grounds and special worship.

Former pastors of the church, listed in order of service, are Elijah Foley, Moses Foley, Sr., Black Grove Hopper, Andrew Evans, William S. Hickey, Richardson Herndon, Calvin Prichard, William Hopper, Ezekiel S. Jones, John H. Bingham, John G. Amis, Benjamin F. Main, Robert C. Medaris, John C. Steely, Stephen Golden, William A. Borum, Elisha L. Stephens, Robert L. Baker, A.F. Baker, J.V. Dawes, Thomas S. Hubert, Mitchell J. Webb, Lewis Butler Arvin, Charles Pressley Estes, Andrew Carter Hutson, Lorenza William Russell, Robert E. Lee Creal, Daniel Edgar Allen, Calvin M. Thompson, Jr., Harley C. Chiles, Fred Tarpley, J. Carroll Chapman, J. Frank Hixon, Jesse Hatfield, Jr., M.A. Reese, (who held the longest tenure as pastor - 25 years) and Robert K. Lowery. Wendell Shane Nickell has been pastor since 1997.

The Sunday School was begun before 1900 and has been the continuous teaching agency of the church with a fully graded program for all ages and includes classes being taught at the nursing home and at College Heights. The Bible is used as the basic teaching tool under girded by literature from Lifeway Christian Resources. A missionary organization for children is provided for grades 1- 6. First Baptist provides musical opportunities for all age levels beginning with a graded children's choir program. An organization known as B.A.L.L. (Be Active Live Longer) Club was begun in 1987 for those fifty years of age and older for the purpose of convening once monthly for a meal and fellowship. A fully staffed church library has a holding of over three thousand books as well as numerous video and audio recordings.

The church continues to have "a strong determination and a keen will" to continue the Lord's work. In 2000, out of love and concern for the youth in the community the church opened Oneway, an innovative outreach, worship, fellowship and discipleship center on the Courthouse Square, under the direction of a full time Youth Minister. The Academy of Christian Training and Service (A.C.T.S.) began in 2001 and focuses on adult discipleship training. In 2002 First Baptist began using the AWANA program to reach boys and girls for Christ and train them to serve Him and in 2010, began reaching out to the community through the Upward Sports program. As part of a long range planning process (1985), the church had expressed concern for "the need for recreational facilities for all age groups...a place to foster Christian fellowship in a social setting". With that dream in mind, land was acquired over a period of several years as opportunities arose. Momentum began to build in 2007 to make the dream become a reality. In April of 2008 members pledged \$1,004,144 toward that end in the *Future @ First* campaign. On November 2, 2008, the church gathered and ground was broken for the family life center. It was completed in 2010 and contains recreational facilities, a full kitchen, staff offices and additional educational and multi-use space. The church facilities now sit on approximately 1.75 acres of land that extends from Main Street to Sycamore Street between High Street and Wall Street.

Independently and through organizations including Kentucky Changers, the North American Mission Board, the International Mission Board and other mission organizations, First Baptist members continue to be personally involved in "extending loving arms" in a wide variety of ways to people in Knox County and other communities in North America and around the world and the church continues strong support of the Kentucky Baptist and Southern Baptist Conventions' Cooperative Program.

The above illustrations typify the purpose for which the church was founded, for which it exists and which was thoughtfully worded and adopted by the church:

"The purpose of the First Baptist Church is to be a fellowship of believers that seeks to worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, win the lost to Christ, lead Christians toward maturity in discipleship, minister with Christian love to the human needs in our community, and support missions here and abroad."