

SAMPLE HISTORY: Churches and Synagogues

NOTE: This sample history, comprised of fictional information, represents in format, scope of content, documentation and length the type of narrative history required for a historical marker application. It is presented as a general guide for developing a narrative of a church or synagogue.

YOUNGSTOWN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

I. CONTEXT

Brothers Philip and Gerald Young settled in what would become Post Oak County by 1853. The Young brothers, who came to the area through Louisiana, began a settlement which would later be named Youngstown. The community began as a rural settlement but grew quickly. By 1860, Youngstown had a school, post office, cemetery and two churches - Baptist and Methodist.¹

Although Youngstown was settled earlier, the nearby town of Smackdab quickly surpassed Youngstown in population. Following continuing raids by Native American tribes and a disastrous flood of Sopaipilla Creek in 1868, both early Youngstown churches moved to Smackdab.² Circuit riders from Smackdab and Jergenson served the area throughout the 1870s, but by the end of the decade, Presbyterians in the community sought a place of worship of their own.

II. OVERVIEW

Youngstown Presbyterian Church has been in continuous existence in Youngstown for more than 100 years and today is one of the oldest churches of any denomination to be established in the city. Its early history dates back to 1879, when it was a mission congregation meeting with the Presbyterian Church of Smackdab. In 1876, the Smackdab congregation, under the leadership of the Rev. Louis Taylor, built the stone structure where the church still meets today.³ By 1879, the Smackdab congregation was recognized as part of the Presbytery of Allentown, and THE Rev. Louis Taylor was listed that year as a licentiate “in transitu.”⁴ For the next two years (1880 and 1881) he is shown as filling the position of “teacher” in nearby Marionville,⁵ but it is likely that he served several area congregations in a number of different capacities.⁶

The earliest formal recognition of a Youngstown congregation occurs in the 1881 church records. Both the Smackdab and the Youngstown congregations are listed as churches in the Presbytery of Allentown, and the Youngstown congregation boasts a membership of eight persons. Howard Gibson was the “stated supply” pastor for both congregations.⁷ Louis Taylor was registered in 1882 as a “teacher” in Youngstown, and the congregation was shown to have thirteen members. Howard Gibson remained “stated supply” for both Smackdab and Youngstown in the same 1882 record.⁸

Early church historians credit the Rev. Louis Taylor with pioneering the Presbyterian church in Youngstown, as well as establishing one of the earliest private schools, the Youngstown Academy, in 1882. It is certain that the Presbyterian church was solidly established in March 1881, when a board of trustees, consisting of R.H. Johnson, B.A. Norris, David Howser, W.H. McDaniel and Samuel Brighton purchased Lot 13, Block 12 from the Texian Land Company for \$60.⁹ Two of those trustees, Norris and McDaniel, were recognized as “skilled architects,”¹⁰ and it is likely they were responsible for the Gothic-style frame building constructed on the lot in time for Thanksgiving Day services that year. In late 1881, Taylor also purchased two parcels of land from the Texian Land Company. The first parcel consisted of Lots 4, 5 and 6 of Block 9 and was intended to be the site of his own school. This parcel was located directly south of the church property and on the opposite side of 5th (now Beach) Street. His second purchase was Lot 9, Block 11 – a site he intended for his home. This parcel was located on Austin Street, one block north of the church property. Both parcels of land were purchased on the same date - December 2, 1881.¹¹ In 1885, the Rev. Louis Taylor was listed as principal of the Youngstown Academy, a position he retained through 1888, the year the school closed.¹²

The Rev. Preston Bradley was called to be the first full-time pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Youngstown in 1892. Prior to that he had served as supply pastor for both Smackdab and Youngstown congregations from 1886 to 1891. By 1890, the Youngstown congregation had 135 members.¹³ About this time, work began on constructing a manse, or pastor’s residence, on the church property along the east boundary. This structure is shown on a Sanborn map of 1896 as a completed single-story dwelling with wood shingle roof. The Sanborn map of 1901 indicates no change in the residence, but the 1907 Sanborn

map shows the house site to be vacant.¹⁴ This vacancy can be explained by church historians who relate that the manse burned in 1903. Property was then purchased by the church for a new manse. This “lot and dwelling,” located on Lot 6 of Block C of Blaine’s Addition to the City of Youngstown, was purchased in April, 1903 for \$2,900.¹⁵ The first resident of the new manse was the Rev. Mark Roberts, who became the pastor in 1903.¹⁶

The records of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church first refer to the church in Youngstown as the Youngstown Presbyterian Church in 1898.¹⁷ This distinction became necessary with the appearance of a second Presbyterian church, Hope Presbyterian Church, in 1897. On May 4 of that year, the board of trustees of the Hope Presbyterian Church (consisting of H.W. McWilliams, R.E. Doak and Marcus Daniels) purchased Lots 6 and 7 of Block 3, Blaine’s Addition to the City of Youngstown, for a church site. Seven years later, in 1904, the trustees purchased a downtown lot at the southeast corner of 6th and Main streets.¹⁸ The 1907 Sanborn map indicated a completed single-story brick church with a two-story corner tower on the northwest. By 1909, however, the congregation is no longer listed with the General Assembly of the Hope Presbyterian Church,¹⁹ and the 1915 Sanborn map indicates the former church building being used as a boarding house. These two facts support the claim of church historians that the congregations of the Hope Presbyterian Church and the Youngstown Presbyterian Church joined about 1913 (a unifying effort credited to the Rev. W.H. Wiley, pastor of Youngstown Presbyterian Church). Following the merger of the two groups, the congregation needed a larger building. Plans began for a new brick structure, and the church hired local architect/contractor Mark Wallace to prepare them.²⁰ The structure was completed on March 7, 1916 at a cost of approximately \$24,000.²¹ However, formal dedication services were postponed until the arrival of the new \$3,000 pipe organ on April 18, 1916.²² The organ was ordered and paid for by the church’s Women’s Auxiliary.²³ The Sanborn map of 1919 shows the new church to be a brick structure, 22-feet high at the eaves, with electric lights and steam heat.

At the same time the congregation was planning for its new building, a decision was made to charter the congregation as a private corporation under the laws of the State of Texas. The congregation

adopted the charter in October 1914, and filed the papers in January 1915.²⁴ At that time, all property previously purchased by the church and its trustees transferred to the private corporation.²⁵

By 1923, the church had experienced significant growth, with more than 225 adult men attending a weekly Bible class. On October 8, 1923, the church purchased an additional 60 feet off the south side of the lot immediately to the west (Lot 3, Block 31).²⁶ In May 1924, the men's Bible class met and constructed (in one day) a single-story frame educational building, which came to be known as the "House at the Roadside."²⁷ This building was used until 1955, when it was sold and moved to provide room for new construction. In October 1958, the new educational building was completed at a cost of \$40,000.²⁸

Through the years, Youngstown Presbyterian Church has played an important role in serving the community. In 1961, the Men's Bible Class began a building ministry called "Helping Hammers."²⁹ Two or three times a year, the members of the class help construct houses for those in need, and in 1984 they also built a community center in southwest Youngstown.

Since 1945, the church has also held an annual homecoming dinner, free and open to the community.³⁰ The event has grown over the years, feeding more than 700 last year. During the dinner, church members improvise skits and hold a concert. The church has worked with other area churches on the festival, which now commemorates the religious institutions of Youngstown.

Youngstown Presbyterian Church has also been active in the mission field since 1932, particularly with youth missions, sending youth and adult groups to places nearby (such as New Mexico and Mexico) and far away (including Cambodia and Russia). Youngstown Presbyterian Church is perhaps most famous in the region for the congregation's response to the flood of the Riparian River in 1911. When rising floodwaters destroyed several businesses and left hundreds homeless in Turnbuckle, the parishioners of the church opened their homes to their neighbors from Turnbuckle, housing many of them for several months. From November 1911 to June 1913, the entire proceeds from the collection plate at Youngstown Presbyterian Church were donated to the Turnbuckle relief fund, a sum of more than \$210,000. Since 1912, a fellowship supper precedes the annual Turnbuckle–Youngstown football game,

and proceeds from the supper and game are donated to the Post Oak County Community Foundation. Youngstown's generosity following the flood has ensured that Turnbuckle–Youngstown has been a friendly school rivalry through the years.³¹

III. SIGNIFICANCE

Youngstown Presbyterian Church was the first Presbyterian church in the city, with the congregation established in 1879. The community built the present house of worship in 1881, adding new educational facilities over the years. The Presbyterian congregation also established the first school in town, the Youngstown Academy, which operated from 1882 through 1888 and was one of few places in the area to offer higher education at the time. A second Presbyterian church in Youngstown, Hope Presbyterian, organized in 1898 and merged with Youngstown Presbyterian in 1913. Notable programs in Youngstown Presbyterian Church history have included a men's Bible study group, a community building effort called Helping Hammers, and an annual homecoming and dinner open to the community. The congregation's generosity following a 1911 flood in Turnbuckle has fostered a positive relationship between the neighboring cities. The church's mission work has covered adjoining states and countries halfway around the world. Through service and missions, the church has had a significant impact on the community and the region.

VI. DOCUMENTATION

¹ Smith, Jim, ed. "Gable's Gap," *The Texana Handbook*. Austin: Smith Texana Publishers, 1999. Vol. 5, pp. 356-357.

² Prater, Elihu. *Beyond the Rim: A History of Early Post Oak County*. Jergenson: Post Oak County Historical Commission, 1978. p. 356.

³ Church Minutes, First Presbyterian Church of Smackdab, 1872-1890, p. 47-48.

⁴ Church Minutes, p. 53.

⁵ Church Minutes, p. 54.

⁶ Prater, p. 364.

⁷ Church Minutes, p. 57.

⁸ Church Minutes, p. 71.

⁹ Deed Records of Post Oak County, Vol. 17, p. 74, Office of Post Oak County Clerk, Post Oak County Courthouse, Jergenson.

¹⁰ Prater, p. 309.

¹¹ Deed Records, Vol. 17, p. 453-454.

¹² Savitch, Paul. *Schools of Post Oak County*. Jergenson: Post Oak County Historical Commission, 1984, p. 178.

¹³ Minutes of Youngstown Presbyterian Church, 1879-1979, p. 44.

¹⁴ Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, The James McCann Collection, Middle Texas College.

¹⁵ Deed, Vol. 79, p. 31-32.

¹⁶ Church Minutes, p. 93.

¹⁷ Church Minutes, p. 97.

¹⁸ Deed Records, Vol. 76, p. 218-220.

¹⁹ Church Minutes, p. 124.

²⁰ Local History Collection, Youngstown Public Library.

²¹ "Church Builds New Sanctuary," *Youngstown Caller*, March 21, 1916.

²² "New Organ at Church," *Youngstown Caller*, April 25, 1916.

²³ "History of Youngstown Presbyterian Church," 1982, unpublished, p. 107.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 105.

²⁵ Deed Records, Vol. 101, p. 52.

²⁶ Deed Records, Vol. 134, p. 309.

²⁷ Deed Records, Vol. 242, p. 62.

²⁸ Deed Records, Vol. 237, p. 158.

²⁹ "History of Youngstown Presbyterian Church," 1982, unpublished, p. 165.

³⁰ "History of Youngstown Presbyterian Church," 1982, unpublished, p. 174.

³¹ Smackdab *Gazette*, November 25, 1911; Youngstown *Caller*, November 27, 1911; Minutes of the Youngstown Presbyterian Church, November 1911 to July 1913; Post Oak County Community Foundation files.