

The Early Churches

Early settlers were scarcely established on their claims before they received a visit from some Methodist circuit-rider. In regions where settlers were miles apart and severed from former associations, the pioneer preacher guided them back into religious fellowship and put the impress of godliness on those who came under his influence. In 1840 all the Territory of Iowa was one district of the Rock River Conference of the Methodist Church. Shortly afterward it was divided into two districts, the Dubuque District under the Reverend Bartholomew Weed, and the Burlington District. In the former, work in Mount Vernon was begun August 26, 1840, when the Marion Mission was organized with the Reverend John Hodges as missionary. His long itinerary included Marion, Martin's Creek, Mount Zion, Linn Grove, Pleasant Hill, Yankee Grove (Lisbon), Pioneer Grove, Mechanicsville, and Olin.

From 1847 to 1850 the Reverend George Bowman was presiding elder of the Dubuque District. He formulated plans to combine all the preaching points around Mount Vernon into one charge on the hilltop. In 1850 of his own choice he resigned the eldership to become pastor of the Linn Grove Circuit. Services in the village were held in the school house on West Main Street.

One day Elder Bowman was seen hauling to the site of the present school house a load of brick from Albright's brickyard at the foot of the hill. "What are you doing, Elder?" he was asked.

"I am going to build a church," he replied. He had quietly collected money in the East for this purpose, and soon a building 40 by 50 feet, without balcony or spire, was erected and dedicated, free of debt. The church had two front doors; there were two aisles and four sections of seats. At that time the men and women occupied separate sections.

Conrad Kepler hauled the pine lumber for the church from Dubuque. He paid the \$150.00 he was assessed by cradling and threshing wheat under the feet of cattle and hauling it to Muscatine where he sold it for thirty cents a bushel. His sacrifice was typical of that of every pioneer Methodist.

Elder Bowman immediately began a great revival to reach the unconverted of the town and to promote religious interest. Scores of people were brought into the church, among them the leading men of the community: Allison Willits, Elijah Waln, William Hayzlett, Peter, Henry and Conrad Kepler, George Edgerton and many others.



Elder George B. Bowman, one of the earliest pioneers and founders of Mount Vernon and Cornell College. 1812-1888.

Early Picture of Cornell College

