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**THE BI-CENTENNIAL OF THE REFORMED CHURCH
IN THE UNITED STATES.¹**

BY THE REV. PROF. WILLIAM J. HINKE, PH.D., D.D.

In the month of October of 1925 the Reformed Church in the United States celebrated the two-hundredth anniversary of the organization of the first Reformed congregations in Pennsylvania. It was on October 15, 1725, that forty Reformed people met at Falkner Swamp, in the present New Hanover township, Montgomery County, Pa., to celebrate the first Reformed communion service in the province, with John Philip Boehm officiating as minister. This was followed by a similar service in November of that year at Skippack, and by a third service at Whitemarsh, near Philadelphia, on December 23, 1725. These three communion services are called by Boehm himself "the first beginning."² It was a very modest and small beginning, for there were but forty members at Falkner Swamp, thirty-seven at Skippack, and twenty-four at Whitemarsh, a total of three congregations, with 101 members. This was the small nucleus out of which there has grown in two hundred years a large church with 1,761 congregations, having a communicant membership of about 348,000.

In the same year, 1725, the first traces of Reformed church life appeared at another place, namely at Conestoga, in Lancaster County, now represented by Heller's Church, in Upper

¹The substance of this article was delivered before the Synod of Ohio, at its meeting at Dayton, Ohio, October 7, 1925, on the occasion of the commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the founding of the Reformed Church in the United States.

²See *Life of Boehm*, p. 409.

NOTE

EARLY PRESBYTERIANISM IN PHILADELPHIA *

BY HARRY PRINGLE FORD

When and where the first Presbyterian congregation in America met and worshipped, and by whom called together, will, in all probability, never be known. From early colonial days, members of this denomination were scattered all along the Atlantic seaboard and doubtless had their meeting places. Presbyterian ministers are known to have labored in this country before the coming, in 1683, of Francis Makemie, the acknowledged father of organized Presbyterianism in America.

Makemie, after organizing churches at Rehoboth, Snow Hill, and elsewhere on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, shortly after his arrival in that colony in 1683, visited Philadelphia in 1692, and finding a little band of Presbyterians organized them into a church. They worshipped, in connection with a small body of Baptists, in the Old Barbadoes storehouse, which stood on the northwest corner of Second and Chestnut Streets as late as 1832. Not having a settled minister, it was agreed that the Rev. John Watts, a Baptist minister of Pennepack, should preach to the united company every other Sabbath. In 1698, the Presbyterians invited the Rev. Jedediah Andrews, of Boston, and a recent graduate of Harvard, to settle among them, which he did. He was ordained in 1701, the year in which Philadelphia received its charter as a city and Edward Shippen became its mayor. The population at that time numbered about 5,000, and the town contained some 500 houses.

Shortly after Andrews came, misunderstandings arose between the Presbyterians and the Baptists, and the latter withdrew from the union, leaving Mr. Andrews and his followers in possession of the building. In this connection, it is interesting to read the following impressions made upon others by the young pastor and his feeble flock.

Thomas Clayton wrote, in 1698: "I have often talked with the Presbyterian minister and find him such as I could wish. They tell me, that have heard him, that he makes a great noise, but this did not amaze me, considering the bulk and emptiness of the thing; but he is so far from growing upon us that he threatens to return to Boston in the spring."

Instead, however, of going home, Andrews continued in the work for nearly fifty years. In the letter book of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, is a communication written in February, 1702, from which we quote:

* Abridged from *The Philadelphia Record*, Saturday, Dec. 13, 1924.

"They have here in Philadelphia a Presbyterian minister, one called Andrews, but they are not like to increase." Time has proved this writer to have been a poor prophet. In another letter written to the secretary of this same society in 1703, we find: "The Presbyterians have come a great way to lay hands one on another, but, after all, I think they had as good stay at home for the good they do."

Contrary to all these predictions, the congregation did increase; so much so, indeed, that by 1704, it was necessary to have a church building. A lot was secured on the southeast corner of Market Street and White Horse Alley, now Bank Street, between Second and Third Streets, and a frame building was erected. The site was on the then outskirts of the little town. The house was surrounded by sycamore trees, and became known as the Old Buttonwood Church.

In Kalm's travels we read that the edifice was "not far from the market and was of middling size. The house is built almost hemispherical, or at least forms a hexagon. The whole building is north and south, for the Presbyterians do not regard, as other people do, whether their churches look toward a certain point of the heavens."

This building had to be enlarged in 1729, and in 1793 it was rebuilt, the building line extending to Market Street. A handsome portico, with Corinthian columns, made it one of the show places of the city. After occupying this site for one hundred and sixteen years, a lot was secured, in 1820, on South Washington Square, where the present venerable First Church stands, in which services have been held without interruption since that time.

It is interesting to know that when this land was bought, it was covered by a pond, which had its outlet into the Delaware River through a stream that flowed through Washington Square to Dock Creek. The pond and stream have long since disappeared, and Dock Creek is now an important commercial street.

Although erected more than a century ago, the Old First is still one of the most impressive of our church buildings. The chaste colonial simplicity and worship-inspiring dignity of its interior impress all beholders. It is one of the city's historic landmarks and is frequently visited by strangers.

Andrews was succeeded in the pastorate by Robert Cross, 1739-1766, and he was followed by Dr. Francis Alison, vice-provost of the University of Pennsylvania, who was the first Presbyterian minister of this country to receive the honorary degree of doctor of divinity from a foreign university (Glasgow).

Dr. John Ewing, the first provost of the university, was the pastor from 1759 to 1802. He was a prodigy of learning. "When other professors were absent, the provost could take their place, at an hour's warning, and conduct the instruction with more skill, taste and advantage than the incumbent of the chair himself."

A learned writer says: "Because of the solid intellectual character of

its pastors, and because of the intellectual and logical character of its system, Presbyterianism has always attracted to itself a large proportion of the intelligence of the city."

Other prominent ministers of the church were Drs. James P. Wilson, Albert Barnes, Herrick Johnson, Lawrence M. Colfelt, George D. Baker, and the able incumbent, Edward Yates Hill, who was installed nearly twenty years ago.

Some of the books in the library of the church date back as far as 1515. The fine vestibule has many interesting historic tablets. Dr. George D. Baker, a former pastor, well wrote: "What this church has been to the community, what part it has had in moulding public opinion for good, as well as in saving individual souls, is known only to Him who gathers up into His own pierced hands all the scattered threads of human lives."

Thirty-eight General Assemblies have met in this church; and it was in the Old Buttonwood Church that Francis Makemie, in 1706, was instrumental in organizing the first Presbytery, which was the beginning of the movement which has grown from the primitive efforts of the little flock on the banks of the Delaware into a national church. The First Church has the undisputed title to being the mother church of Presbyterianism in Philadelphia; and in view of the fact that the effort to weld the scattered churches of the colonies into an organized body had its happy consummation within its walls, it may also well claim to be the mother church of organized Presbyterianism in this country.

It is interesting to recall that just below the Old Buttonwood Church, on Market Street, there was at one time a slave market. In an old paper printed by "B. Franklin," under date of 1758, is the following: "To be sold, a likely negro wench, about thirty-five years of age; is an exceedingly good cook, washerwoman and ironer, and is very capable of doing all sorts of housework."

It is needless to speak of the matchless contributions made to the cause of liberty during our Revolutionary War by Presbyterians. It is conceded by historians that without them our country would never have achieved its independence.

The Second Church, an offshoot of the First, was organized in 1743, and was the result of the labors of George Whitefield in this city. For the first seven years of its history it worshipped in a building known as the academy, on Fourth Street, between Market and Arch Streets. In 1750 the congregation occupied its new home on the northwest corner of Third and Arch Streets. Its first pastor was the celebrated Gilbert Tennent. The present building, at Twenty-first and Walnut Streets, was first occupied in 1872. Dr. Alexander MacColl is its distinguished pastor.

The Third Church, organized in 1762, is still standing upon its original foundations, at Fourth and Pine Streets. It was used as a barracks by the British during the Revolutionary War, and was sadly defaced by

them. In its graveyard rest many of the best-known men of the city of the olden times.

The Fourth Church was organized in 1790, and is still doing a most excellent work. It is located at Forty-seventh Street and Kingsessing Avenue. These were the only churches organized by Presbyterians during their first hundred years of church history. Since that time the growth has been rapid. There are now 108 Presbyterian churches within the limits of the city, with over 66,000 communicant members.

It is an interesting bit of historic information that on the southeast corner of Broad Street and South Penn Square once stood the Tabernacle Presbyterian Church, formerly the Seventh, which when located in Ranstead Court, between Market and Chestnut Streets and Fourth and Fifth Streets, was known as the Ranstead Court Tabernacle, and in which for nearly twenty years the General Assembly met. In the Tabernacle Church building, at Broad Street and South Penn Square, the Assembly met, in 1861, for the last time as the representative of the entire Church. Dr. Gardner Spring introduced resolutions, which were adopted, pledging the support of the Assembly "to strengthen, uphold and encourage the Federal Government in the exercise of all its functions under our noble Constitution; and to this Constitution, in all its provisions, requirements and principles, we profess our unabated loyalty." Naturally, the Southern members present could not subscribe to such declarations, for their States were already in rebellion against the United States Government. They at once withdrew from the Assembly and returned to their homes. In the following August "The Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America" was organized. It is now known as the Southern Church. Singularly enough, although our country is rapidly forgetting the ill-starred days of the Civil War, and is growing more united than ever, yet the two Churches remain apart. It is, however, gratifying to know that Christian men and women, both in the North and in the South, have never ceased to hope and labor for the time when these two great branches of Presbyterianism will be united.