

Preserving Lake Forest: The Heritage of the City's Old Institutions January 24, 2007

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The Church's Early History

Without the Presbyterians we wouldn't be here. You know the story: in the mid-1850s, a group from the First and Second Presbyterian Churches in Chicago determined to establish a university. Having explored the metropolitan area, in 1855 a five-man committee settled on Lake Forest. This committee included four pastors – Rev. Patterson of Second Church, Rev. Curtis of First Presbyterian Church, Rev. Weed of Waukegan and the Home Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church, Rev. Slocum of Cincinnati who had helped other Presbyterians establish schools – these four pastors were joined by Devillo Holt, businessman and elder at Second Church.

In 1856 the Lake Forest Association was established to purchase land, and the funding for the university was committed by Mr. Gibson of Cincinnati, an associate of Rev. Slocum. When the good Presbyterians of Chicago discovered Mr. Gibson's money had been gained through the distilling of whiskey, they quietly rejected his offer. But just a year later – even in the midst of a national economic panic -- the beautiful park-like plat designed by Almerin Hotchkiss was complete, and Lind University, the forerunner of the College and the Academy, was founded. Sylvester Lind had stepped forward with a generous pledge, to be matched by members of Chicago Presbytery, and though later he lost his fortune, the wheels were turning.

In May of 1858, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church met in Chicago – remarkable in itself, considering how remote Chicago must have seemed to the established Eastern denomination – and the nearly 500 Assembly Commissioners included in their agenda a train ride up to the untamed region of Lake Forest, a hike and picnic in the woods, and a tour of the plot that was to be the next Presbyterian university, preparatory academy for young men and seminary for young women.

In 1859, the congregation of First Presbyterian Church Lake Forest was formally established by the Presbytery of Chicago; its first two elders included Prof. Samuel Miller, principal of the Lake Forest Academy, and Dr. Charles Quinlan, a dentist who served the medical needs of the community. In 1862 Rev. William Cowper Dickinson, an instructor at the

academy, was called as the first full-time pastor of our church when the first building was erected.

A pivotal moment in our church was the call of Dr. James G.K. McClure of New York in 1881; he served until 1904 when he was called to serve as President of McCormick Theological Seminary. Under his leadership our “new” building was erected – built with the spotted stones gathered from the rubble of our mother church, 2nd Presbyterian, after the Great Chicago Fire. Benevolences from our increasingly prosperous members increased dramatically, distributed for foreign and domestic aid. The city of Lake Forest benefited from his influential leadership – including removing the disreputable Lake Forest Hotel from Triangle Park -- and the college enjoyed his presence as President pro tem not once but twice. He was, as they say, a force to be reckoned with; I count him as a mentor in spirit.

Presbyterian Elements

This is our story, in a nutshell; but whence the prompting for this remarkable endeavor and its early unfolding? This city and its institutions, I am convinced, owe their life to a peculiar amalgam within Presbyterian faith: the amalgam of commerce, education, and civic responsibility. These three signature traits coalesced in the souls of our Scots Presbyterian founders. Let me say a brief word about each element.

First, regarding commerce. The Scots Presbyterians brought a Calvinist work ethic which aspired to modesty, discipline, and industry – not out of grim duty, but because a sign of God’s saving grace in one’s life was the joyful desire to please the Almighty. By the mid-1800s, the Industrial Revolution provided some the means to please the Lord with staggering efficiency. Their success in turn brought Chicago into play as the hub of transnational commerce; without the Illinois-Michigan canal and the Chicago-Milwaukee railroad, Chicago, let alone Lake Forest, would not be on the map. Leading entrepreneurs who played a significant part in Lake Forest’s founding included Devillo Holt, lumber baron in his own right, who also married into Hubbard money; Charles Farwell, banker and political leader; John Farwell, wholesaler to the Western expansion. The Industrial Revolution provided the financial means for remarkable religious, social and civic generosity. Not incidentally, it also prompted a flight from the city for an environment more bucolic and pure.

Second, regarding education. Why a university? By the mid 19th century the revivals of the Second Great Awakening ignited moral education, particularly from the Presbyterians, the Methodists, and the Baptists. By the early 1850s the Methodists had established Northwestern and the Baptists the University of Chicago, and it’s clear the Presbyterians were not to be

outdone. But there was more to it than that. Our founders' extraordinarily deep commitment to education is traceable to our Reformation origins. John Calvin had notably established not only his church in Geneva, but also a Lay Academy *immediately across the street*, so that not only clerics but also the laity might be fully versed in Scripture and the science of theology. Scottish Reformer John Knox studied under Calvin; the educational priority he carried with him into the Scottish Church was then exported across the Pond, eventually to this very place. So essential was this value that by mid-nineteenth century America, when Methodists, Baptists, and others were sending Circuit riding preachers across the Western frontier without seminary training, the Presbyterians alone insisted that their clergy receive a full education and divinity degree before they were ordained. So it is hardly accidental that Rev. John Patterson, founding pastor of 2nd Presbyterian Church in Chicago, one of our principal founders, went on to become the 1st president of Lake Forest College; or that Cyrus and Nettie Fowler McCormick funded the Presbyterian Seminary in Chicago, and established schools around the world; or that our church's revered pastor, Dr. McClure, became president of the college twice and went on to serve as McCormick Seminary's first president.

Third, regarding civic responsibility. Our Presbyterian forebears carried a deep sense of religious mission and civic obligation to the common good. Again this is traceable to John Calvin, who was trained as a lawyer long before he was a preacher, and established a theocracy in Geneva. While the American descendants of Calvinism would never abide by such a thing – indeed they insisted that the government not interfere with the practice of religion – nevertheless, they understood that their faith compelled them to tend the fires of justice, and to care in tangible ways for the betterment of their fellow men and women. Those who established this community were particularly bold in their abolitionist sensibilities. Rev. Patterson of 2nd Church in Chicago, so instrumental in our founding, had trained under abolitionist Lyman Beecher (brother to Harriet Beecher Stowe), and was part of the “New School” Presbyterians that split the denomination in 1837, in part over the issue of slavery. Lake Forest's first school teacher was Roxanna Beecher, Lyman Beecher's great-neice. In a twist on the Underground Railroad, Sylvester Lind and Devillo Holt both used their commercial enterprises to allow slaves to jump ship to escape to Canada. Abolitionism wasn't the only cause, by any means. This city was remarkably forward thinking in women's opportunities: in the 1870s the college went coed to welcome Anna Farwell as a student, and under Dr. McClure's pastorate the church hired a woman to be parish caller. Home and foreign missions were also a significant priority; in the 1870s, the church hired Sarah Jane Rhea, a retired missionary from Persia, as the 1st paid worker

of Board of Missions Northwest, to found the Steady Streams Mission Society for children, so that even the youngest might be immersed in the larger world, and in 1911, the church commissioned Dr. and Mrs. Roy K. Smith as missionaries to Korea; their son, Mac Smith, just passed away; their legacy lives on.

Continuing Impact Today

Let me comment briefly on the impact and implication of these roots for today. First, I must acknowledge that these three key values – commerce, education, and civic responsibility for the common good are not always easily balanced, nor have they ever been. I think of the time of the Haymarket Riots, when a number of First Church's members, leaders in the Commercial Club of Chicago, moved to establish Ft. Sheridan not only as a sorely needed law-enforcer and protector of their commercial interests against anarchist agitators; yet perhaps their response was not altogether as fervent to the crying needs of labor. And I think of the tension we have inherited from our industrialist forebears, whose commerce yielded money for astonishing civic generosity ... but also led to flight into the bucolic protection of this more pure suburb. It is, at times, quite easy to hide from the world's ills here.

That being said, much of what was good and noble in our community's Presbyterian origins lives on still today. We seek in our faith to have a deep devotion to God – lived out not only in church but also in our commercial dealings, in our support of education and in our obligation to civic responsibility. As industrialization rocked the world then, so globalization does now. In our church, we urge our members to live not only moral personal lives but also provide ethical corporate leadership. We continue to support education, and aspire to re-establish close relationships with the College whose origin was so entwined with our own. And in civic responsibility, we continue to go about establishing ministries, just as our forebears did, entrepreneurs in creating agencies to help those in job transitions, those who are hungry, those who are seeking the comfort of community and the safety of a home. And in cultural pioneering, we continue to reach farther than the society around us might find predictable and safe. It is no small thing, I have come to believe, that this church continues to support opportunities for women. This is the largest Presbyterian Church ever to call a woman as head of staff – and we owe it to the courageous souls whose identity and spirit we are privileged to bear.