

## A Brief History of Plymouth

*This brief history was written in October 2000 when the Sanctuary was rededicated after it had been renovated by funds raised through the 1997 Capital Campaign.*

Any history of Plymouth Church – even one purporting to cover only the Sanctuary – must make mention of our unusual origins. Plymouth began when renegade Presbyterians left (what is now called) Old Stone Church in 1850. Those leaving were abolitionists, upset with Old Stone Church for its refusal to oppose slavery. We became “Plymouth” in 1862 at the suggestion of Henry Ward Beecher, the illustrious minister of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, NY, who communicated this suggestion to Harvey B. Spellman (father of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller) who was a member of this newly formed Society.

We occupied various downtown sites, but too soon our glory years were past, and in 1913 Plymouth dissolved. The bulk of the proceeds from the sale of our property became an endowment for the congregational churches of the area. But \$30,000 of it was reserved for a new church start which would take the name of “Plymouth.”

At about that same time, the Van Sweringen brothers were planning Shaker Heights, and had reserved a five acre plot for the use of three to five churches. An agreement was struck with the Congregational Union to build a church, and it is worth noting that the deed allows for the possibility of other buildings with church related purposes, including a gymnasium! (Something to consider. . .)

On September 3, 1916 our Plymouth forebears worshiped on this site in a chapel that had been hauled from Lakewood! But it proved too small and cold, so the congregation retired to the High School Auditorium (in what is now Woodbury School). The chapel remained for several years, until it was moved to E. 214th St. near Euclid, where it was used by Euclid Congregational

The goal for the soon to be constructed building was that it would be “the most beautiful and convenient Colonial church in America.” Before that, during the Great War, a part of our land became a vegetable garden. By 1919 the 142 members of the congregation were unified in their desire to build a brick Colonial Congregational church, and in November 1919 construction began. That same month, Plymouth’s second minister (since coming to Shaker Heights), the Rev. Dr. Charles Haven Myers, was called from Chattanooga, Tennessee. The cornerstone was laid on June 27, 1920. (Note: there was a “cornerstone box” and a list of its contents were read.) Later that year, the Congregational Union conveyed the deed to Plymouth, but in 1921 construction stopped due to a lack of funds. Finally, monies were raised, and on September 10, 1922 Fellowship Hall (by a different name) was ready for use by the Church School.

Our Sanctuary was used for the first time on February 11, 1923, when 103 new members were admitted. Dr. Myers encouraged evangelism and people responded to the call. 750 attentive souls attended the dedication of the E. M. Skinner organ on March 18, 1923. A week later, 825 came to witness the dedication of the church building.

In the five years between 1919 and 1924, the cost of the building construction almost doubled from an estimated \$160,000 to \$314,317.47 – not a small sum when you consider that annual pledging to the church came to less than \$8,000. (If the ratio were extended to year 2000 dollars, with our current pledging at about \$500,000, it would be the equivalent of making a commitment to a \$20,000,000 project!)

By 1946 additional space was needed to accommodate the 2,419 members and 1,870 young people. The two wings of the church were proposed, and close to \$350,000 was promptly raised. The new wings were dedicated on February 15, 1953 at a total cost of \$680,000.

In 1964 the chancel was remodeled to accommodate a new Holtkamp organ, made possible by a gift from the C. Bert McDonald Charitable Trust. This remodeling did away with the small choir loft (where the pipes are now located) and for the first time in the church's history made possible a processional and recessional by the choir and ministers during worship. On December 20, 1964 the organ was dedicated.

Here and elsewhere when church histories are written, it is good to remember that they are never true representations of the church. Because they tend to present what can be fixed by date and dollar and count, they can obscure (perhaps unintentionally) the boundlessness of God's active grace. We can count the baptisms, but not the effect of that blessing on the thousands who have been washed. We know when our forebears first worshiped here, but nobody knows how many tears have been shed by families gathered in grief in these pews. The power of hands atop the heads of Confirmands; of vows uttered and families blessed; of confessions made, forgiveness offered, and lives changed; of goodbyes whispered, and sobbed, and in the end, accepted – this power is part of our history too.

This brief summary was written by the Rev. Dr. Jim Antal and is based on Paul J. Bickel's History of Plymouth Church of Shaker:

The Rev. Dr. Shawnthea Monroe. . . . .	January 15, 2008 -
The Rev. Dr. Jim Antal. . . . .	January 1996 – July 31, 2006
The Rev. Dr. Skip Holliday. . . . .	August 1984 – June 1994
The Rev. Dr. Gary Scheuer, Jr.. . . . .	January 1979 – December 1982
The Rev. Dr. Dave Rees. . . . .	March 1974 – February 1978
The Rev. Dr. Robert Blakesley. . . . .	September 1953 – January 1973
The Rev. Dr. Miles Krumbine. . . . .	November 1929 – January 1953
The Rev. Dr. Charles Myers. . . . .	November 1919 – July 1929
The Rev. John Stuchell. . . . .	September 1916 – June 1919