

## Building Churches

“The groves were God’s first temples,” wrote William Cullen Bryant, but through the ages man has felt the urge to build temples as a tribute to whatever gods he worshiped and to provide a place in which to carry on that worship service. So the Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Romans built temples in honor of their many gods; so the Jews worshiped Jehovah in a building dedicated to the Lord; so the craftsmen of the Middle Ages wrought the great cathedrals decorated with intricate carving and lovely windows of many colors. The people who settled America believed that God dwelt in a place not made by hands, but His people needed a sanctuary in which to worship. And so each pioneer community built churches — log or frame at first, perhaps, later brick or stone, and partly because most were poor.

The Methodists of England and those in the American colonies worshiped in chapels, usually with severe exteriors, plain glass windows, and simple furniture. This was done partly because ornate cathedrals and beautiful churches had become associated with formality and lack of spiritual life, and partly because the early Methodists were usually poor people.



The first church building in what is now Iowa was built by the Methodists at Dubuque, under the direction of the circuit rider, Barton Randle. When he arrived at that frontier mining village on November 6, 1833, he found a straggling collection of log cabins housing some four hundred pioneers. That evening Randle held a meeting in what was known as the Bell Tavern on the site now occupied by the Hotel Julien Dubuque. Later, a small room over a grocery (a store in which liquor was sold) was rented for a meeting place. The entrance was by a rickety stairway outside. While the congregation was engaged in singing, praying, testifying, and listening to the sermon, those in the grocery below were drinking, cursing, and fighting.

Early in the spring of 1834, some devout women organized a union Sunday school and on April 24 the first Methodist prayer meeting in Iowa was held at the home of John Johnson. When the first Methodist class in Iowa was organized on May 18, Johnson was named as class leader. That spring the Dubuque Methodists, "encouraged thereto, by some friendly sinners," decided to build a church. The original subscription paper, still preserved, described it as follows:

To be built of hewn logs: 20 by 26 feet in the clear; one story, 10 feet high; lower & upper floors; shingled roof; painted with lime & sand; one batten door; four 20 light & one 12 light windows — cost estimated for completing in



good plain style \$255.00. The above house is built for the Methodist Episcopal Church — but when not occupied by said Church shall be open for Divine service by other Christian Denominations; and may be used for a common school, at the discretion of the Trustees.

Below this statement are the names of seventy donors, their subscriptions ranging from \$25.00 given by Woodbury Massey to twelve and a half cents pledged by Caroline Brady — perhaps the widow's mite. The signatures reveal Dubuque's cosmopolitan population. Three names were followed by the word "collered," two of the three donating twenty-five cents and the third fifty cents. All the Negro subscribers are said to have been slaves. One, "Tilda," was a sister of Ralph, the slave whose fight for freedom constituted the first case heard by the Iowa Territorial Supreme Court. Nigley was described as "a dutchman," Duplissey was apparently French, while Patrick O'Mora was undoubtedly from Ireland.

A lot for the building was secured from Thomas C. Legate, the federal superintendent in charge of the mining area, for the land was not yet for sale. Work was begun on the building on June 23, 1834, and on July 25 John Johnson recorded in his diary that they "raised the meeting-house with a few hands and without spirits of any kind." Perhaps the lack of liquor, the usual refreshment provided at frontier "raisings," accounted for the few hands. The building occupied a site now



forming the southeast corner of Washington Square and apparently faced south. On August 23 and 24 the first Methodist quarterly meeting in Iowa was held in this log church, and the church organization was complete — class meeting, Sunday school, prayer meeting, preaching service, and quarterly meeting. At this two-day meeting the building was dedicated. The membership of the newly organized church was made up of five men and seven women. One of the women was Charlotte Morgan, a colored sister.

Several terms of court, under Michigan Territory, are said to have been held in this church building. The town of Dubuque was also incorporated in it. In the spring of 1836, Mrs. Caroline Dexter conducted school in the church, giving instruction in writing, arithmetic, and sewing.

The log church was soon outgrown. By 1840 a new building, known as the Wesleyan Centenary Church, in commemoration of the first Methodist chapel built at Bristol in 1739, was erected on the northwest corner of Seventh and Locust streets, and the old log building was moved to a site near the corner of Bluff and Dodge streets, covered with clapboards, and used as a dwelling. Its later history has not been recorded. By 1850 the Centenary Church had also been outgrown, and a new building was soon erected on the west side of Main Street between Eleventh and Twelfth streets. The Main Street Church was



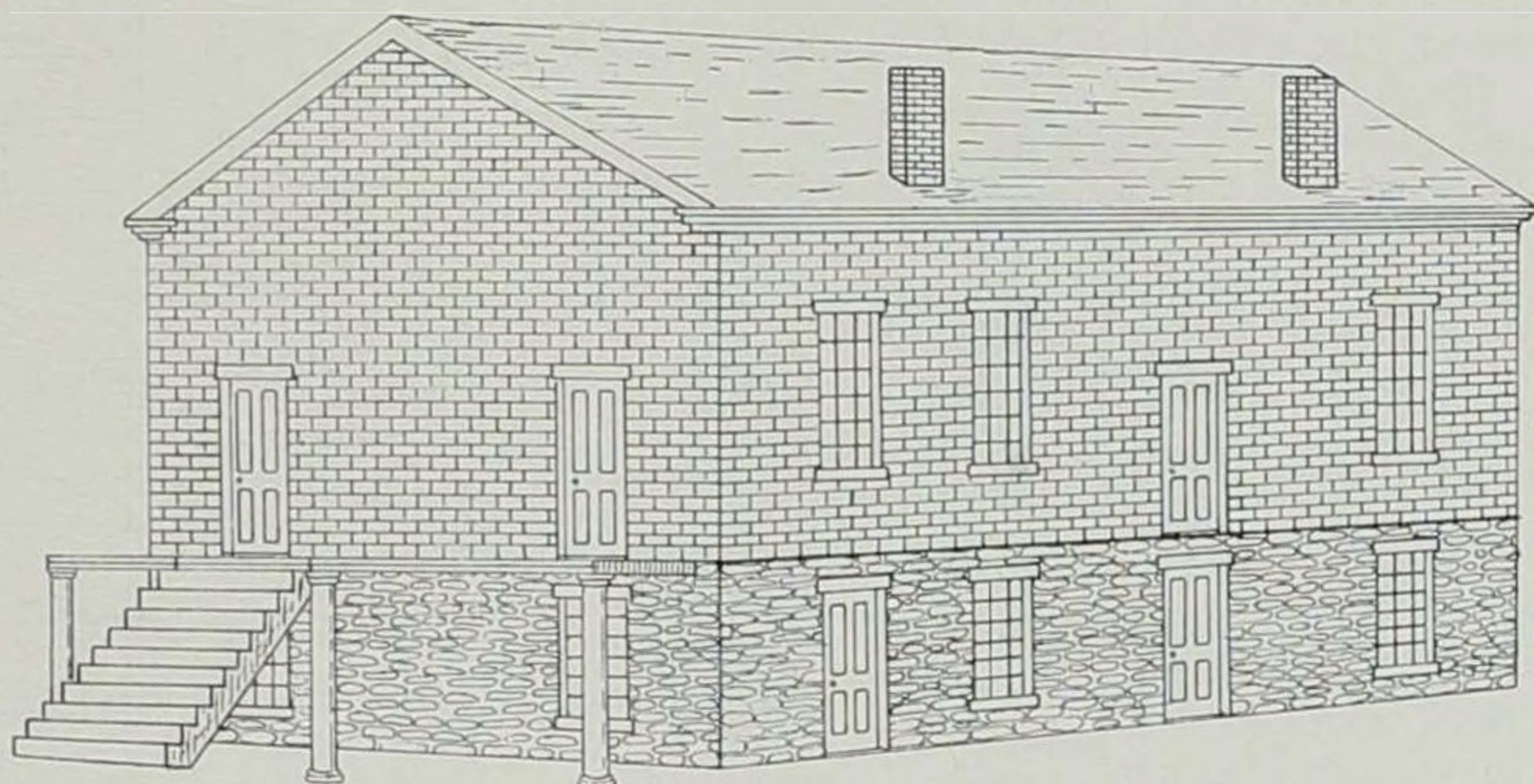
later remodeled and served until 1895 when it was torn down to make room for the present-day St. Luke's Methodist Church, which cost almost \$100,000 and has a seating capacity of fifteen hundred. Dedicated on May 16, 1897, St. Luke's is a lineal descendant of the first church in Iowa.

More widely known than the little log church at Dubuque was the brick church erected by the Methodists at Burlington in 1837. This church was one of the projects of the Methodist class organized in the cabin of Dr. William R. Ross in the spring of 1834. It was Dr. Ross who purchased the two lots on the west side of Third Street between Columbus and Washington streets in Burlington and donated them as a site for the proposed church. Money was scarce on the frontier in 1837, and Reverend Nicholas S. Bastion was sent east to solicit funds. He was unsuccessful, however, and had to borrow twenty-five dollars to pay his expenses home. The pioneers, as usual, took over the responsibility, and the church was built.

As originally constructed, the Burlington church was a plain brick two-story building forty by sixty feet in size, without vestibule, tower, or bell. The second story was the church auditorium or sanctuary and was reached by steps leading up to an open platform along the front of the building. The basement, with stone walls two feet thick, extended some eight feet above ground and



was apparently intended for Sunday school classes and smaller group meetings.

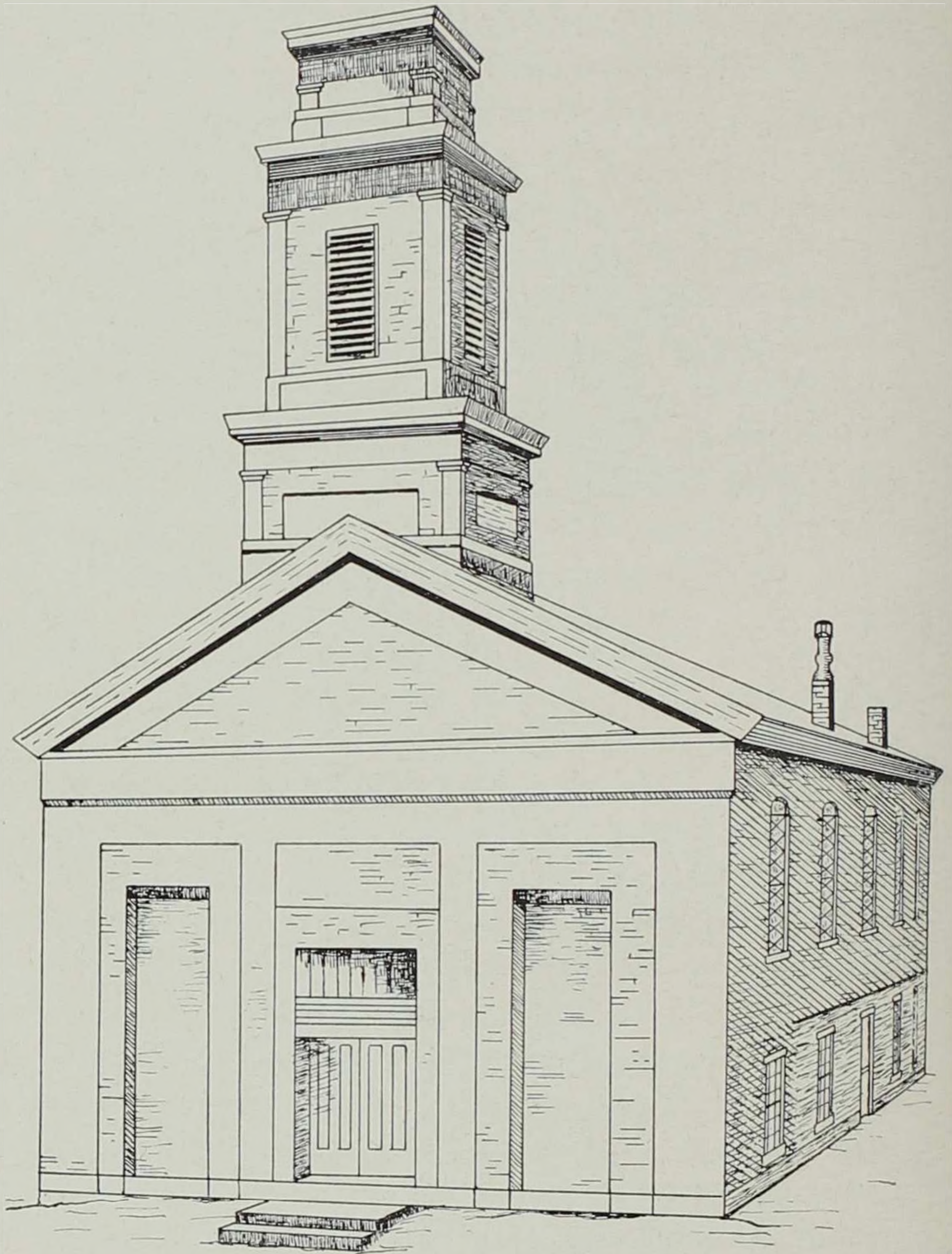


SKETCHED BY DONOVAN G. TEMPLE FROM AN OLD DRAWING.

#### THE FIRST CAPITOL OF IOWA TERRITORY

But the "best laid plans of mice and men ging aft aglee." The church was approaching completion when, on December 12, 1837, fire destroyed a building which had been erected by Jeremiah Smith to house the Legislative Assembly of Wisconsin Territory. A building to take the place of the burned structure was needed, and the men responsible for the debt of the church needed money, so both financial and patriotic considerations led to an agreement by which the recently completed church building was rented to serve as the temporary capitol of Wisconsin Territory. A year later, on November 12, 1838, the First Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Iowa convened in it. The House of Representatives used the upper story and the Council met in the basement.





SKETCHED BY DONOVAN G. TEMPLE FROM A PHOTOGRAPH.

## OLD ZION CHURCH



A total rent of over \$2,000 was paid to the church authorities, but this was not sufficient to take care of the debt. The building was about to be sold when Dr. Ross came to the rescue by selling his \$3,400 home for \$1,200 to save the church.

Beginning in 1841, the legislature held its sessions at Iowa City, but the brick church continued to be used by the government for several years. There the Territorial Supreme Court met, and from the pulpit the death sentence was read to the notorious Hodges brothers. There, too, Governor Robert Lucas met his Indian wards, and there on July 4, 1839, he presided over a celebration at which Augustus Caesar Dodge read the Declaration of Independence and youthful James W. Grimes was the orator of the day.

These activities did not, however, interfere with the use of the church for worship on the Sabbath, the elect in the "Amen Corner" sitting on straight-backed rough benches, and the run-of-the-mill congregation on backless seats. In 1845 more comfortable seats were provided, and the front platform, supported by the three turned posts, gave way to a dignified two-story vestibule. A belfry was provided in 1850, and a bell weighing 1,450 pounds was installed. It was, perhaps, to raise money to pay for this innovation and certain repairs that a festival was advertised in 1851 by a handbill which declared "Old Zion wants a new roof." From that time the historic building was



popularly known as "Old Zion Church." Fourteen years later the interior was remodeled, and the windows, formerly plain parallelograms, were arched. Finally, in June, 1864, the church was formally dedicated.

The career of Old Zion was, however, running out. In 1853 a second Methodist Church had been built in south Burlington and named Ebenezer. In 1879 the two congregations were combined in the Ebenezer church building as the First Methodist Church of Burlington. The old bell brought to Iowa in 1850 was moved to the newer church building, and in 1881 Old Zion was torn down to make room for a theater. Only a bronze tablet now marks the site where the pioneer church and capitol once stood, but more than the inscription on the tablet commemorates the church. How many lives were benefited by its ministry cannot be learned, but one man, Charles C. McCabe, converted at a watch night party at Old Zion on January 1, 1851, lived to raise millions of dollars to build new Methodist churches on the frontier and to become an honored bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

These pioneer churches were only two of the many Methodist churches which were built in Iowa communities and towns. There were hopes and sacrifices, tragedies and defeats, growth and prosperity, but each church added something to the moral and spiritual development of Iowa.