

First Baptist Church Buildings 1850 to 1940

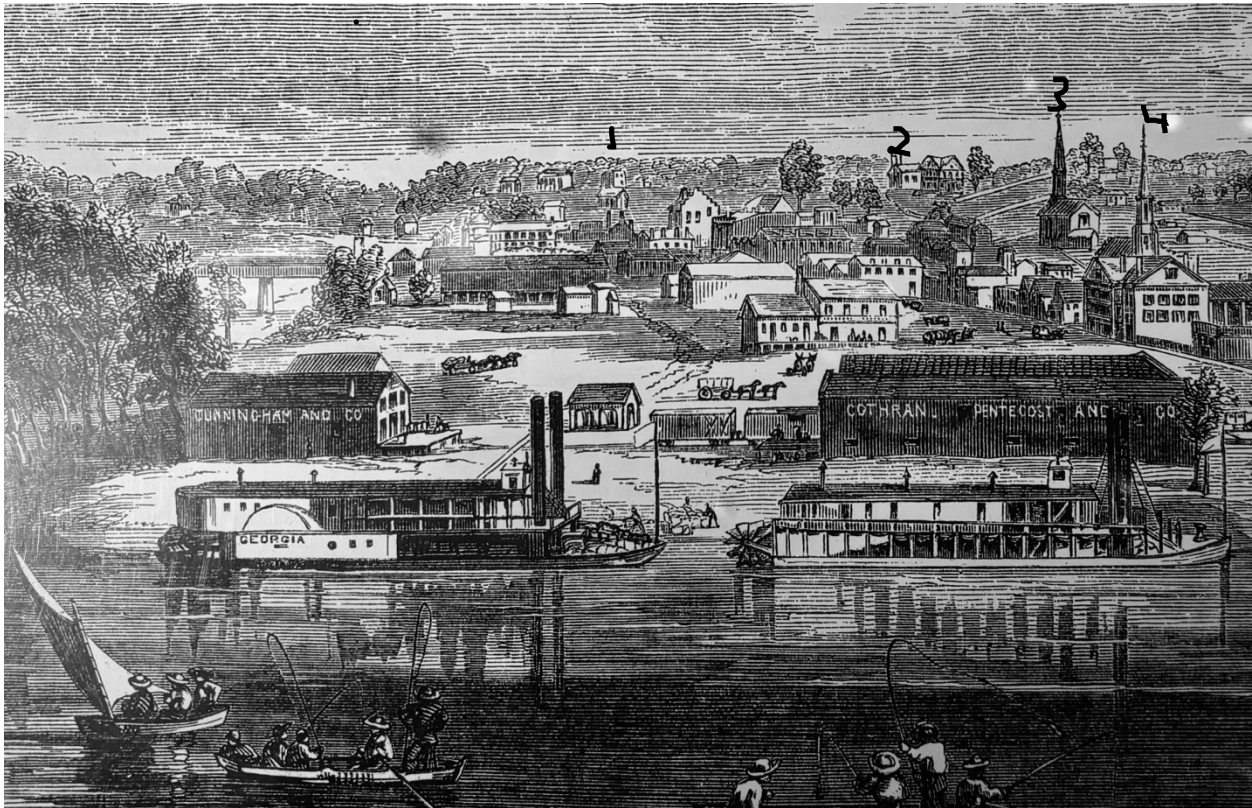
In Rome, it is always about the rivers. It always has been and always will be. The First Baptist Church of Rome discovered this soon after it was organized in 1835. Their first church meetinghouse was built in 1844 but was far from the river confluence and the growing Broad Street area.

In the early 1850's the congregation had grown to a membership of 140. The original meetinghouse only held 100, but the important issue was the location which was too far from the downtown area.

The first mention of a desire for a new building appeared in the April 10, 1852 Church Conference minutes. In true Baptist form, a building committee was appointed and later disbanded. Over the next year, several more building committees were formed and disbanded as multiple lots were considered, donated, and sold. We purchased one lot from a John Ray in 1852 for \$600. It was on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Broad across the street from the Buena Vista Hotel, now the location of the Desoto Theatre. We decided not to build there and later sold it.

One church member that was consistently mentioned on all committees was Alfred Shorter. Yes, that was the Shorter of Shorter College fame. Finally, in April 5, 1853 the lot on the corner on East Fourth Ave (at that time it was known as Oostanaula St) and East First Street (Court St) was purchased for \$800. Known as lot #23, it was owned by Atkinson T Hardin. There was no evidence of a structure on this lot when First Baptist acquired it. This lot has been our home ever since and is strategically located in the heart of downtown Rome.

In 1853, buildings were steadily being built on Broad Street, but this corner lot was considered off the beaten path. The Presbyterian church was being built nearby but there was no Masonic Temple or post office, or Clock Tower.



1856 drawing of Downtown Rome:

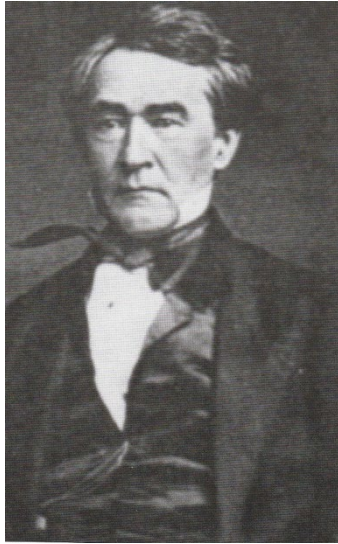
1) the 1844 FBC church. 2) the first Episcopal church building on 5th Ave. 3) the 1855 FBC church. 4) the original and present First Presbyterian church

In typical committee fashion, the original meetinghouse was sold in December of 1853 for \$600. Yet, there was no completed building for worship on the recently purchased lot. The pews and other furniture of the old church were thus moved into the old courthouse on Tower Hill. For over a year, First Baptist services were held there and in the 'new' Methodist church at the corner of East Sixth Ave and East Second Street. That building is still used today by the AME congregation. (The Methodist used that building until 1884 when they built their present sanctuary)



AME Church today.

A second new building decision was made in April 1853, as another more efficient building committee was formed. It had one member - Alfred Shorter. He combined funds raised over the last two years with generous donations of his own to construct a new sanctuary on the recently acquired lot. The new sanctuary could accommodate 350 people and the first service was held there was October 21, 1855.



Alfred Shorter

The size and appearance of the new sanctuary can be easily visualized today, as the present First Presbyterian sanctuary was built at the same time. It was almost of the exact same size, shape and architecture.



This photo taken around 1864 show the two sanctuaries back-to-back with the Noble house in between.

The costs of the building and furnishings was approximately \$8000. A large portion of the building itself was financed by Mr. Alfred Shorter. However, in 1850 The “Ladies Working Society of the Baptist Church” had been organized to support mission work. Their efforts were expanded to finance the costs of most of the furnishings as well as the Meneely steeple bell.

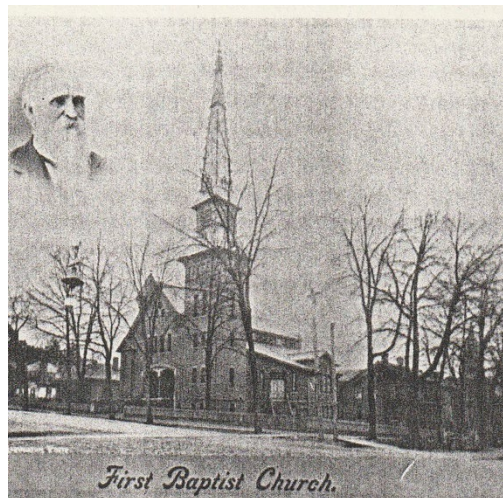
Just six short years later, Rome became embroiled in the Civil War. Church services continued with those citizens remaining in town until 1863. At that time, Pastor David Gwin joined the war effort, and the church closed. As the Union army invaded Rome in 1864, the church building was used as a hospital. Since the building was built on a hill, the full basement was also used as a stable. General Sherman stayed in a home just up Fourth Avenue for a time and it would be a good assumption that his horse, Cincinnatus, was housed in the basement of First Baptist.

Although much damage was done to the building, the church was the first to reconvene services at the end of the war. Beginning in 1865 and for better than a year, it was considered Rome's town church.

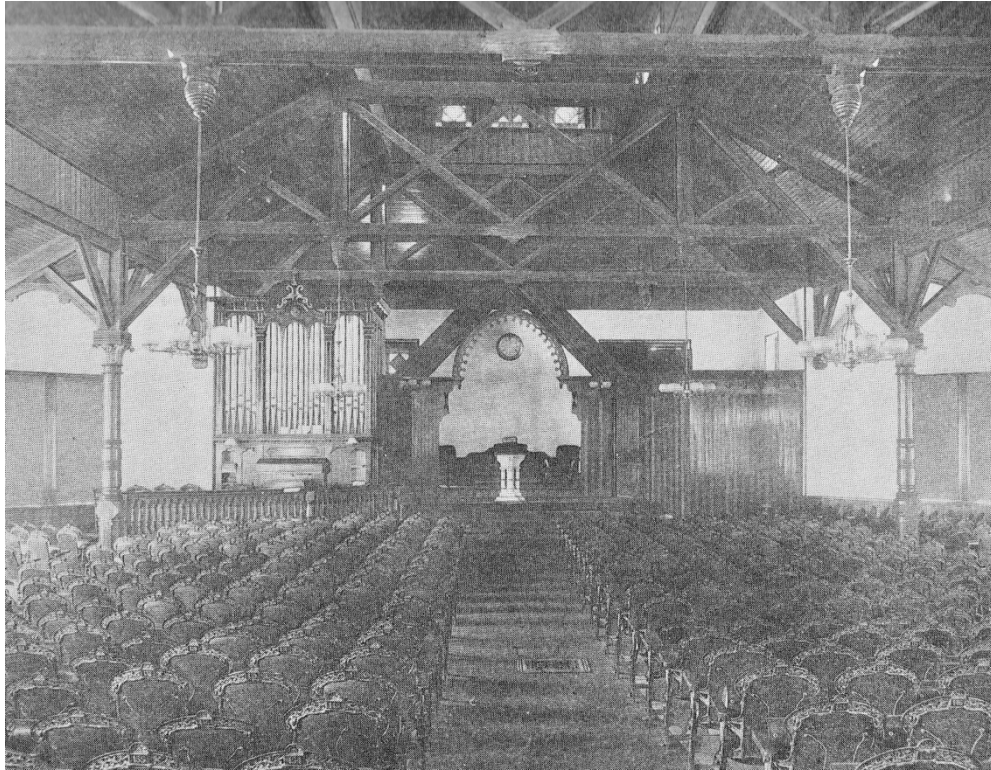
In 1870, major repairs were made including a new organ, new supports for the steeple and Meneely bell, and renovation of the basement for use by church programs.

Over the next decade the membership continued to grow, and discussions began on enlarging the sanctuary. Naturally, committees were formed and after much research in 1880 the church voted to pursue a new building entirely. In 1882, the congregation undertook plans for the new sanctuary designed by architects Mozer and Lynn and built by William Benzel. The church again moved into a temporary home and the 1854 sanctuary was torn down.

The new sanctuary took two years to complete and the total cost for this structure was \$22,858. The sanctuary seated up to 900 with additional chairs. Once again, a full basement provided needed classroom space. The first service was in June 1884.



The 1884 sanctuary with Pastor Headden in the background. This was taken before the annex was built and with the original steeple intact. The two houses to the left of the sanctuary were later bought by the church and was torn down to make room for our present sanctuary and outdoor courtyard.



This photo taken in 1890 of the interior of the sanctuary.

In 1900, a two-story annex building was added to the back of the sanctuary. The first floor was needed classrooms, but the basement became a Fellowship Hall and kitchen area. This apparently was the beginning of a long-standing tradition of dinners at First Baptist.

Other than minor repairs and upkeep, this church campus stayed intact until the summer of 1920. An August lightning storm hit the steeple and destroyed the top part. The support structure for the Meneely bell was destroyed and the bell was stored in the basement. Over the years, several efforts were made to replace the steeple, but it was never done.



First Baptist Church as it looked after the steeple incident.

In the 1920's and with a membership nearing 1000, plans were made for a new Sunday school building. The Annex of 1900 was torn down, and a new Education Building was erected connecting to the sanctuary. O.W. McCurry Contractors built the building for \$61,500 and it was dedicated on May 3, 1925. This building served many purposes over the years including an enlarged kitchen and dining area. The renovation of the interior of the sanctuary was also included in the project.



1925 Education Building

As the Depression years enveloped Rome and First Baptist, the church continued to thrive. However, all building dreams and plans were put on hold.