

# New Orleans' Third First Presbyterian Church

*(and Its First, Second, and Fourth)*

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**A** GOTHIC LANDMARK soaring over Lafayette Square, the First Presbyterian Church reflected the early 19th-century Americanization of New Orleans — in its religion, its language, its ethnicity and its architecture. It also tells the story of a residential shift in its population, and a change in downtown land use which eventually led to the church's demise.

Presbyterianism arrived in New Orleans after the Connecticut Missionary Society in 1817 sent representatives to assess spiritual conditions in this Catholic city. Finding need, the Society dispatched Rev. Sylvester Larned here in 1818, and he proceeded to acquire a parcel and a \$40,000 loan for the establishment of a Presbyterian Church.

Over the next year, the original First Presbyterian Church, a modest Gothic edifice more suited for a village than a city, arose on the corner of St. Charles and Gravier Street. Larned died in 1820 and left his flock of 40 to the brilliant theologian Dr. Theodore Clapp, who stabilized the Presbyterians' earthly finances by selling the original church building to his friend, Jewish philanthropist Judah Touro. But on matters of Presbyterianism's Calvinist doctrine, Clapp was provocative — so much so that the Mississippi Presbytery deposed him from the ministry. (Undeterred, he went on to found the Congregationalist Unitarian Church of the Messiah — the "Strangers Church" — within the old Presbyterian building now owned by Touro. It burned in the 1851 fire that claimed the adjacent St. Charles Hotel.)

The Clapp affair forced the Presbyterians to find a new home in a little warehouse owned by Cornelius Paulding, located on the upriver side of Lafayette Square. Under the leadership of one Dr. Parker, the congregation came into possession of the lot in 1835 and erected upon it, at a cost of \$70,000, the "second" First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans, in what a source at the time described as "the Grecian Doric order."

Disaster struck on October 29, 1854 when fire destroyed that building. The prosperous congregation of 600 members promptly funded a new structure, designed in a Gothic Revival style by architect Henry Howard and built by George Purves. This "third" First Presbyterian Church was completed in November 1857 at a cost of \$87,000 — "a more complete and

elegant structure for the cost and purposes is not to be found anywhere," declared the *Daily Picayune*, "and it will be reckoned among the finest ornaments of the city." Purves devised a clever manner to erect the spire, by assembling it within the tower and hoisting it into position. Located across the street from the new City Hall, the First Presbyterian Church became a beacon of the First District — and a symbol of the emerging Anglo-American influence in the formerly Creole city.

Ministering at this time was Rev. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, who would gain notoriety for his Thanksgiving Day sermon delivered on November 29, 1860, a few days after the election of Abraham Lincoln as President of the United States. A gifted orator, Palmer passionately defended the institution of slavery and questioned the sanctity of the Union. Palmer's sermon, which was printed in newspapers and distributed in pamphlets, fanned the flames of Secessionist sentiment in this, the largest and most important city of the South, and helped win momentum for Louisiana's leaving the United States and joining the Confederate States of America. That April, war broke out, and Palmer would go on to be something of an unofficial minister to the Confederacy. (Palmer Avenue and Palmer Park in New Orleans are both named after the reverend, and he remains a source of controversy to this day.)

Five years later, with the Confederacy defeated, great change came over the city, not the least of which was the beginning of a shift in its residential geography. Over the next few decades, as streetcar lines expanded and access improved to the upper *banlieue* (outskirts), former colonial-era plantations and working farms that had been gridded with streets in the mid-1800s were now seeing full-scale development with houses and gardens. Wealthier families gradually divested from downtown and relocated to the new uptown faubourgs, as well as those along Esplanade Avenue toward Bayou St. John. Among them were Protestants and Reform Jews, and their cultural and religious institutions soon followed. The Episcopalian Christ Church and Touro Synagogue, for example, both of which had roots in the same building on the downtown corner of Bourbon and Canal, resettled within a dozen blocks of each other on St. Charles Avenue. There they

ABOVE: The second First Presbyterian Church appears in the lower left of this detail of a J.W. Hill and Smith lithograph capturing the view of New Orleans from the top of St. Patrick's Church in 1852. Two years later, the church burned. Courtesy Library of Congress

found themselves neighbors with new Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, and other new uptown houses of worship.

The “third” First Presbyterian Church remained vibrant at Lafayette Square in the First District (today’s Central Business District), but the growing number of faithful increasingly found themselves living four and five miles away. Acknowledging this reality, church authorities in 1905 acquired land on St. Charles and State Street, and in 1912 built the St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church as their main house of worship, along with a number of other branches citywide.

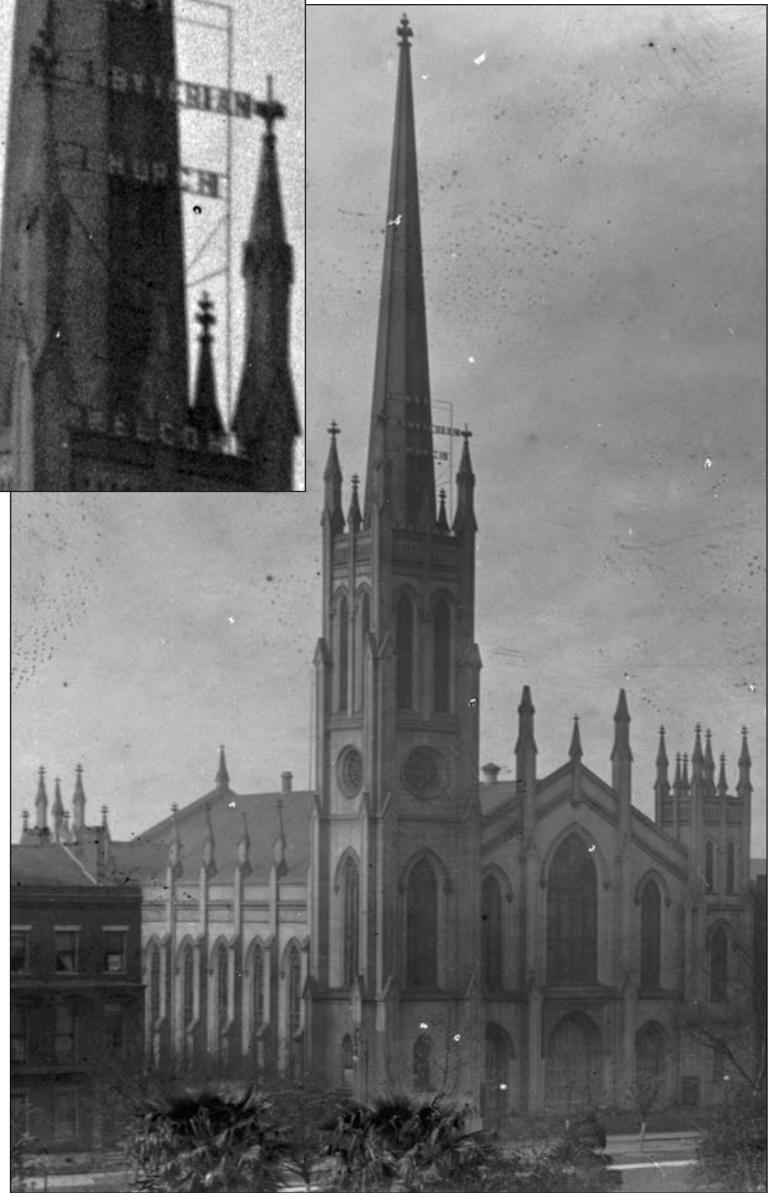
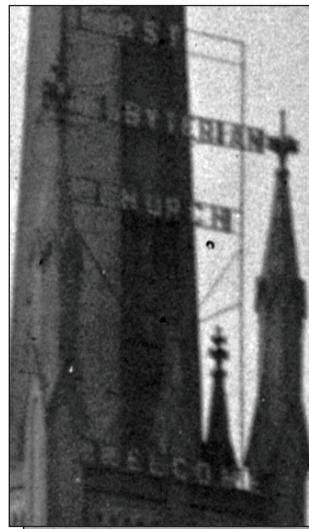
Three years later, the Great Storm of 1915 struck, leaving 25,000 structures damaged or destroyed and at least 11 major churches without their steeples. Among those damaged was the First Presbyterian’s spire and main building. Congregants debated the symbolic importance of their historic home, and weighed it against expenses and other needs. They decided to repair the old church — but without the spire.

The residential shift to Uptown left the urban core with mostly commercial or institutional land uses, a pattern that only hardened when municipal zoning began in the 1920s. It became costly to maintain the old church, and its land became more valuable than its structure — a situation that usually foretells demolition. In 1937, a committee in Washington D.C. identified the land on the upriver side of Lafayette Square, adjacent to City Hall and across the street from the circa-1915 U.S. Post Office (today’s John Minor Wisdom Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals Building) as an ideal site for a federal office building. The Corporation of the First Presbyterian Church agreed to sell.

On April 17, 1938, in a bittersweet Easter Sunday service, members worshipped in their 81-year-old home for the last time. Workmen commenced demolition the next morning. Funds earned from the sale underwrote the construction of the “fourth” First Presbyterian Church, on Claiborne between Jefferson and Octavia, which remains in use today. According to the congregation, relics from the 1857 church now in the 1939 structure include “the organ, bell, pews, [most] stained glass windows, matching tables [and] the four chairs on the altar, millwork on the rear choir loft, and two plaques.”

Lafayette Square, meanwhile, is surrounded today on three sides by government buildings. Among them is the circa-1940 F. Edward Hebert Federal Building and its service alley, sitting on the site of the lost Gothic landmark that was the third First Presbyterian Church.

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ABOVE: The 1857 church on Lafayette Square around 1905. In a move that might have mortified architect Henry Howard, congregants in the early 1900s erected a cheerful if rather functional frame-mounted billboard reading “FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH-WELCOME” on the otherwise elegant Gothic tower. Probably illuminated, the sign took advantage of the spire’s prominence and unobstructed views. BELOW: The third First Presbyterian Church (1857, center, to the right of St. Patrick’s Church) viewed from Baronne Street around 1910. Images courtesy Library of Congress

