

There were serious consequences for Oberlinites who sought to help slaves escape. Calvin Fairbank was an Oberlin student in the early 1840s and a committed abolitionist. He said that between 1837 and 1844 he helped liberate at least 44 slaves. In August 1844, he traveled to Kentucky to try to liberate the wife and children of Gilson Berry who had escaped and arrived in Oberlin. During his attempt to free the Berrys as well as slave Lewis Hayden and his wife, Fairbanks was apprehended and jailed. He served five years in prison. Paroled in 1851, he immediately returned to Kentucky to rescue a slave woman named Tamar. Again he was caught and, this time, sentenced to 15 years hard labor. The price he paid for his principles was significant.

When we think about the ways in which First Church was active in aiding slaves as they sought safety and passage to Canada, we need to remember that in the years in question (from the 1840s through the Civil War), First Church was the only church. Almost all citizens were members. So the history of Oberlin and the Underground Railroad is also the history of First Church and fugitive slaves. Let's start with what Finney had to say: that the only fugitive slave law worth obeying was God's "higher law" of justice and righteousness. "Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee; he shall dwell with thee, even among you, in that place which he shall choose...thou shalt not oppress him."

MEETING HOUSE ARCHIVES: Today we begin a series about the history of First Church as a center of what J. Brent Morris (author of *Oberlin, Hotbed of Abolitionism*) called "A City of Refuge." This is especially timely as the nation wrestles with issues of immigration and undocumented citizens in our midst. A lack of space this week dictates that I begin with just a quote, from one Ohio judge who, when describing Oberlin's involvement in the Underground Railroad, said "that old buzzards nest where the negroes who arrive...are regarded as dear children."

FROM THE MEETING HOUSE ARCHIVES: Many are aware that First Church, from 1835, was an integrated church with black and white families worshipping and working together for common social goals. But according to a paper, researched and written by Marlene Merrill in 2003 ("First Church and Oberlin's African-American Community"), this integration continued long after the first black churches in Oberlin began to form in the 1860s. "...well into the 20th Century, many African-American residents continued worshipping at First Church, or at its extension, Second Church, which was established in 1860 to relieve the pressures of First Church's over-large congregation)." Marly suggests the following in her paper as a reason for this: "...I wondered if one reason for the unexpectedly high black members in First Church [after the establishment of black churches] might have been the role that it played in historic nineteenth century events that profoundly affected black Americans." These include: abolitionist discussions and debates; public mourning for victims of slavery and the fight for emancipation; celebrations, like the one at the successful conclusion of the Wellington Rescue. This is a topic that is just waiting for someone to explore it further.

FROM THE MEETING HOUSE ARCHIVES: This week, reading *The Politics of Benevolence: Revival Religion and American Voting Behavior* (John L Hammond), I came across the following, which helps us understand the relationship between the revivalist spirit, that was essential to establishing Oberlin, and the subsequent reform movements for which Oberlin became known. Of course, Charles Finney was at the heart of all of this: "...the elements of revivalist thoughts and practice that contributed to the social reform movements that grew during the 1830s: a God who revealed the laws of nature to men that they might use them; a race of men who, by acts of their own will, might realize the will of God; a conviction that benevolent activity was the will of God, within the capabilities of men, and a sure sign of the salvation of those who undertook it; a disposition to use whatever means would be effective in achieving a chosen end, without regard for tradition; and the simultaneous belief that the triumphant kingdom of God on earth was hastening toward them, and that through their activity they might bring it on even faster."

In this Meeting House, on Saturday, April 20, 1861, after the surrender of Fort Sumter (which marked the first aggression in the Civil War), a meeting was held to announce and discuss the duty of the hour: President Lincoln had called for seventy-five thousand volunteers. A roll was laid upon the desk, open to enlistments; the young men rushed onto the platform, and this became the nucleus of Oberlin's distinguished Company C. Ten thousand dollars was pledged to supply and sustain the volunteers. By Monday morning, one hundred and thirty had enrolled. While for Lincoln and many in the North, this was a war for Union, in Oberlin it was always a fight for freedom. "In this collision," wrote Finney, "the cause of the slave is that of humanity, of liberty, of civilization, of Christianity."

The first cabin was built on what is now Tappan Square in April 1833. Yet it was not until August 1834, that the community took formal steps to establish a church. Because the community was formed as a Christian outpost, it seems odd that they would delay this important step. One explanation comes from Shiperd's extensive travel schedule. He didn't arrive in the colony until September 1833, and was gone again from December 1833 until March 1834. He was raising money, seeking students and faculty, pursuing a charter for the college and for the "Oberlin Society" in Columbus. Also contributing to a lack of urgency was the fact that all the settlers had signed the Oberlin Covenant. In addition, there was no lack of church services. Perhaps all these factors help explain this seeming delay.

Continuing our look at the 75th anniversary celebration at First Church: after a full day of events on Saturday, September 11, 1909, and a morning service the next day, Sunday afternoon was reserved for Professor G. W. Andrews' talk about the music of First Church. He pointed out that from 1833 until 1860, the choir of First Church supplied all the community's music, from Sunday services to oratorios and other public concerts. Sunday evening, Professor A.S.Root spoke about the history of Oberlin and its First Church. He pointed out what seems to be an odd discrepancy: it was more than a year from the time the first cabin was built before the church, the First Church, was formally incorporated. We will talk about his explanation for this

later. If you want to know more, his address was printed in its entirety in the *Oberlin News*.

Our look at the church's 75th anniversary picks up the celebration on Monday, September 13, 1909. That morning, Professor of W.H. Ryder spoke on "The Pastors of First Church," and in the afternoon, Mrs. A. A. F. Johnson delivered: "Significant Events and Noted Persons." According to the reporter, she "spoke particularly of the inestimable service of women of Oberlin to all of its best life." The final talk of this three-day event was "The Place of the First Church in World-wide Christianity," presented by Rev. C. C. Creegan, D. D., district secretary for the American Board of Foreign Missions. More than 100 missionaries had been commissioned (from First and Second Churches) by the ABFM, and 35 were currently in the field in 1909. In sum, the *Oberlin News* declared: "The exercises of this celebration were of a very high character and all of inspiration."

On September 15, 1909, the *Oberlin News-Tribune* published several articles about the three-day celebration of the 75th anniversary of the founding of First Church, originally called "The Congregational Church of Christ in Oberlin." For the next few weeks, "From the Archives" will draw from these articles. The celebration started with a reception on the Meeting House lawn on Saturday afternoon, followed by a service of welcome in the auditorium (an earlier configuration of James Brand House). Sunday morning, James Bradshaw preached a memorial sermon, noting that the secret to what Oberlinians had accomplished was their faith. "The results have been so great that they call upon us to imitate their faith in order to secure their results." Little could he have known how timely those words would seem in 2016.

On July 19, 1865, the Meeting House filled with Oberlinians gathered to listen to addresses and take action accordingly giving the ballot to African-American citizens. After several speeches "Father" Keep offered this resolution which was unanimously adopted: "Resolved. That we demand equal suffrage, not simply because, like the negro's [sic] musket it is now needed to save the freshly imperiled nation, but because Justice, whose eyes are bandaged so that she may never know the difference between the white man and the black, holds an even scale in her hand, wherewith she weights the right of one citizen by the exact weight of every other."

First Church has a remarkable history of producing missionaries: both domestic and international. This is certainly due, in part, to the existence of a School of Theology in the church's "backyard." The relationship between the American Home Missionary Society, however, and Oberlin was hindered in the early years by the rise of abolitionism in Oberlin and the Society's refusal to take a stand against slavery. As a result, few Oberlinians received appointments to foreign missions from the Board. James Harris Fairchild (third president of Oberlin College) described it this way: "The conservative fathers in the East looked with apprehension upon what seemed to them, in the distance, the religious and reformatory fanaticism of Oberlin, and wisely, as they thought, concluded not to open the way for its extension to their field."

In the First Church calendar produced in Oberlin's Sesquicentennial (1983) to be used in 1984, parishioners wrote chapters — one for each month — about the history of First Church. Karl Aughenbaugh wrote about modifications to the Meeting House that were completed in 1908. In addition to the many changes to James Brand House that year, there were additions to the Meeting House including a new organ, and new ventilating and heating systems. But the most remarkable, perhaps, was replacing hand-lit gas lamps with electric fixtures. "Three hundred seventy-nine lamps which may all be lit at once!" wrote an ecstatic viewer.

This summer, while doing research for the First Church application to the National Endowment for the Humanities, we discovered a special autograph in one of the books being consulted. In 1883, President of Oberlin College James H. Fairchild published a history of the community: ***Oberlin: The Colony and the College***, a book that found its way into the First Church library. Inside was found the following inscription: "To Miss Wright, With the best wishes of Lucy Stone." Lucy Stone was one of Oberlin's best-known early graduates (OC 1847), becoming a nationally known speaker advocating abolition, women's suffrage, and women's rights. Fairchild was one of the young faculty at Oberlin when Lucy was a student. But who is Miss Wright?

Here's a mystery to solve regarding the original plan of the Meeting House: The drawings created by Boston architect Richard Bond in 1841 show that the seating on the main floor was semi-circular, mirroring the design of the gallery. Some writers (Jeanne Kilde) claim that the building committee changed the plan to create more traditional, rectilinear box pews on the ground floor — like those we see today. Frances Hosford, however, in her book *Living Stone: The Story of The First Church in Oberlin* (1933) says that the renovations of 1927 changed not only the pillars but that after the work: "...never again shall we rejoice in that stately semicircle." Can anyone help resolve this?

Reverend James M. Fitch was the Superintendent of Sunday Schools at First Church at the time of the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue. As one of the active participants in the rescue of captured slave John Price, Fitch was eventually imprisoned in Cleveland along with 20 other Oberlinites. The youngest group to visit the prisoners during their months in jail was the entire body of the First Church Sunday School, about 400 children who were led by a band and under the care of Professor John Ellis. In his talk to the children, Fitch ended with: "Nothing shall by any means harm you if ye be doers of that which is right."

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Oberlin's Meeting House was designed to allow Charles Finney to reach each member of the audience and for members of the audience to see each other. A sketch done by Finney shows lines from his eyes to people in all parts of the church. Finney's grandson explained that Finney had workmen move a makeshift platform around the space at it was being built so that he could test his voice until he found just the right spot for his pulpit. Even today, musicians talk about the outstanding acoustics of the Meeting House.

"First Church purchased its first organ from the Andrews Company in Utica, New York, and dedicated it on March 6, 1855. It had two banks of keys, 23 stops and couplers and was placed in the front of the choir loft so the organist could face the choir. It was insured for \$2500 by the Church Council., who made Professor George Nelson Allen responsible for its care and use."

On December 17, 1850, Lucy Stanton became the first black woman to graduate from a four-year college program and read her commencement speech, "A Plea for the Oppressed." That year, and every year until Finney Chapel was finished in 1908, Commencement exercises were held in the Meeting House.

"When the Meeting House was nearing completion — after more than two years of fundraising and building — the church found itself \$500 short of the amount needed to finish the construction. It was suggested that pews be auctioned off, for a four-year term, to the highest bidders. This was hotly debated. Did the church want to move away from the notion of the "free church" where rich and poor are seated together? Possibly because there was little difference between rich and poor in Oberlin in 1844, and because a loan was not forthcoming, the pews were auctioned at rates ranging from \$1 to \$17 per pew. Nearly \$750 was pledged."

The summer of 1853 was a time of severe drought in Oberlin. Fields were brown; crops had died; and many wells were almost empty. One hot Sunday, Charles Finney led the congregation in prayer, "We do not presume, O Lord, to dictate to thee what is bet for us; yet thou dost invite us to come to thee as children to a father, and tell thee all our wants. We want rain." Before Finney finished his sermon, thunder roared and a torrent of rain came down.

First Church had a choir before it had its own building. The first choir director, Rev. Elihu Ingersoll, served 1835-1836, conducting the choir assembled under the big circular tent on the square. The choir also sang for Sunday revivals. The choir was legally

incorporated in 1841, the year when Finney first exhorted his congregation to come together to plan a church which is now our Meeting House.

Sarah Margru Kinson was born in the region of West Africa called "Mende." Sold to Spanish slave traders, she was one of four children on the slave ship *Amistad*, which was found drifting in Long Island Sound in 1839. The story of those slaves is well recorded in many places; those who survived returned to West Africa with missionaries including two from Oberlin: William Raymond and James Steele. At the age of 14, Sarah returned to Oberlin to study: first with children in the schoolhouse and then in the College. She was remembered by Antoinette Brown Blackwell (see historic marker in front of the church) for her preaching about her country at First Church, probably at all-women prayer meetings.

The Meeting House has been the site of many famous speeches, debates, and rallies. It is also a place where people have come to mourn. On December 25, 1859, black and white Oberlinians gathered at First Church for the funeral service of a black Oberlinian, John Copeland, who had been hanged a week before at Harper's Ferry for his participation in John Brown's historic, failed raid.

The site where the Meeting House now stands was first occupied by Oberlin's original public school. Located slightly north of the Meeting House (perhaps where the James Brand House now stands), this one-room school was built in 1836. This school was moved many times before finally coming to rest between the Jewett and Monroe Houses, now the Little Red Schoolhouse, part of the Oberlin Heritage Center.

On May 22, 1966 — almost exactly 50 years ago — First Church dedicated its new facilities: the fellowship hall capable of seating over 180 at tables, or 300 in chairs only; the well-equipped kitchen with its gleaming stainless steel sinks; a comfortable lounge with fireplace and paneled altar; new offices and classrooms in James Brand House; and a beautiful, glass-walled corridor that led from the Meeting House to James Brand House. The fundraising drive to pay for this construction raised \$142,000 in less than a year (1964 - 1965), and a further \$170,000 to pay off remaining debt by June 1, 1969.

In 1865, barely six months after the end of the Civil War, two Oberlin graduates — Erastus Milo Cravath and Edward P. Smith — and a representative of the American Missionary Association, John Ogden, established Fisk School in Nashville to educate newly freed slaves. The Fisk Jubilee Singers were formed in 1871 with the hope that this traveling troupe would secure the support desperately needed to maintain the university. It is not surprising that their first tour, launched in October, reached Oberlin's Meeting House by November 16 and from the choir loft captured the attention of the

audience (which included the National Congregational Council meeting in Oberlin) with the hushed pianissimo of “Steal Away.”

Many famous people have been members of First Church including Charles Martin Hall, who in 1886 succeeded in producing aluminum metal by passing an electric current through a solution of aluminum oxide in molten cryolite. Before his discovery of this process, aluminum was a semi-precious metal. Hall was a benefactor to Oberlin and to First Church, where for many years the organ — purchased by Hall for the Meeting House — could be heard.

First Church was formally organized on September 13, 1834 with 61 members as The Congregational Church of Christ at Oberlin. The church affiliated with the Cleveland Presbytery as there was no Congregational organization. Tensions quickly developed because of the differences between the Oberlin church and the Cleveland Presbytery — especially Oberlin’s desire for autonomy of the local church. In 1836, Oberlinians led the way in creation of the Association of Congregational Churches of the Western Reserve; at that time, First Church left the Cleveland Presbytery.

When the Meeting House was completed in 1845, it was the largest building west of the Allegheny Mountains. With Charles Grandison Finney as pastor, this Meeting House held the largest congregation in the United States, second only to the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York whose pastor was Henry Ward Beecher. [Side note: Beecher’s sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe (author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) provided financial support at the Oberlin Institute for Emily and Mary Edmonson who had been rescued from the slave ship *Pearl*. The Edmonson sisters would doubtless have worshiped at First Church.]

Peter Pindar Pease, well-known first settler in Oberlin, moved his family into a log cabin near the southeast corner of Tappan Square on April 19, 1833. One month later, on May 19, 1833, Rev. E.J. Leavenworth of Brecksville preached the first sermon ever heard in Oberlin to an audience of 50 — the Pease family, possibly one or two other new settler families, and farmers from the surrounding communities: Brownhelm, Amherst, and Pittsfield. Why Leavenworth? Because John Shipherd was traveling in search of teachers and money to support the Oberlin Colony’s mission.