

First Baptist Church

Est. 1836

“On the fourteenth day of August in 1836, an Ecclesiastical Council of Baptist brethren assembled in Peoria with a view to the recognition of certain resident brethren and sisters as a Baptist Church.” (History of the First Baptist Church, 1936).

The First Baptist Church of Peoria was duly recognized with 10 members—six men and four women. On Aug. 14, 2011, First Baptist Church of Peoria will be 175 years old.

The church met in the Peoria County Courthouse until 1846 when its members built their first church on Hamilton Boulevard across the street. The church grew steadily until 1859 when *“There arose misunderstandings and dissensions, which together with the excitements of the Civil War, caused trouble confusion, division and almost destruction of the church.”* (History of the First Baptist Church, 1936).

The church split and membership fell from 208 to 104. By 1864, the two churches were back together, and the church continued to grow. In 1865, First Baptist sold the church on Hamilton Boulevard and purchased a building at the corner of Madison and Fayette streets, the current location of the Peoria Women’s Club.

In 1878, dissension again visited First Baptist Church. *“The adoption of a new church covenant, embracing a pledge to abstain from and use of intoxicating drinks as a beverage, occasioned discordant discussions and dissensions.”* (History of the First Baptist Church, 1936). Several members left the church and formed the Peoria Baptist Church. For the years of this church’s existence, they were referred to as the “Whiskey Baptists.”

By 1890 the church had outgrown the building at Madison and Fayette streets, and in 1892 the congregation built a new church at the corner of Hamilton Boulevard and Glen Oak Avenue. The congregation worshipped in this facility until 1957. In 1954 this church was sold to Methodist Hospital, and in 1956 construction began on the current church at 411 W. Lake Ave. The congregation moved into the new facility in 1957, and was dedicated the following year.

First Baptist has always been proud of its outreach to the community, the country and the world, including some of the following notable good works:

- Is among the top American Baptist churches in mission giving.
- Sponsored resettlement of Polish and Vietnamese families.
- One of the founders of the Friendship House of Christian Service on the north side of Peoria and a strong supporter of Common Place and South Side Mission.

- Sponsor for the Rebuilding Together home remodeling
- Built Habitat for Humanity houses.
- Adopted Hines school, provides tutors, and participates in special projects for which First Baptist Church has received the Outstanding Community Service Award from District 150 and is the only area recipient of the Illinois State Board of Education's Award of Excellence for its programs at Hines.

Notable Firsts for First Baptist Church

- The "*first*" Baptist church in Peoria and the fourth oldest church in Peoria.
- The first church in Peoria to have a bell and the first building in Peoria to have gas lighting.
- On a more humorous note, believed to be the only church in the history of Peoria to have a church choir strike. It happened in 1855 when, according to the Peoria Daily Record, First Baptist's choir director was "*well known to use goose grease to slick up his black hair and some said they had smelled perfume.*" The director led the choir in a strike to register their displeasure with the pastor. It appears the strike lasted two Sundays.