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### **Interview Transcript**

*Sacred Spaces of Greater Cincinnati*

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### **Jean Hodge**

Church Historian, Covenant-First Presbyterian Church

Interview conducted by Meg Hanrahan, Producer, Voyageur Media Group, Inc.,

at Covenant-First Presbyterian Church 2007

The initial settlers to the city came down on a flatboat, as everybody knows, and among them was the famous Israel Ludlow, who was city surveyor. And he was one of the founders of the Presbyterian Church in this area. Israel and the other initial seven founders of the church formed what was initially called Cincinnati-Columbia Presbyterian Church. So that was the beginning. Actually the church began as two branches: at the river and the downtown area, they were called Cincinnati and then the other group formed, (another handful of worshipers at the Lunken Airport Area) that was called Columbia. One of the famous pioneer preachers of renown, and the name is a familiar one around here, was Kemper, James Kemper. He came in 1793, ordained to be the first pastor. He was a young man, very dedicated and endured all the hardships, and his family as well. And, of course, he built his property up on the Walnut Hills area, which led to some of that becoming Lane Seminary. But he would go on horseback between the Cincinnati riverfront, where the church formed and the branch, which was in Columbia. He'd go on horseback between the two and he would try to not use his firearm. He would try to get off the path sometimes to avoid any confrontations, because at that point, there were still the Indian skirmishes, but it's a very interesting beginning, because it has to do with the pioneers.

The name, Covenant First was not the original designation of course. We know that it was Cincinnati-Columbia, and then the downtown church just became First Presbyterian. The building that we're standing in began as Second Presbyterian, which had branched off from "Old First," and the name now is Covenant First. So, what that indicates, is that there developed, from the beginning in 1790, a handful of downtown churches. Now, in the times of say 1940's, 50's, 60's and so on, there was a dwindling of congregations, so in order to maintain vibrancy, some of the churches rejoined together and therefore, they became Covenant First in this building. "Old First," the gothic structure that was on Fourth Street, which was their third structure, became somewhat unstable and so in the 30's, that congregation came back and rejoined with the other churches here, and that's when it became Covenant First. So, therefore we're able to say that we link back to the oldest church, the oldest [Presbyterian] city church congregation.

I'm sure all the historic churches have interesting names. Some Influential figures in Cincinnati's history in our church were, for example, Nicholas Longworth, very historic name -- Martin Baum, Jacob Burnet. Also as we go along a little bit in time regarding this particular church structure, John Shillito was very significant. A couple of items from his mansion are now in the sanctuary, but he was on the building committee and William Henry Harrison III (the grandson of the president,) was on the building committee, I believe as well. They were very dedicated and successful in bringing forth a Christ honoring building and a beautiful place in which to inspire our worship. So those were key names that are of interest, I think people would recognize.

Lyman Beecher, of course, he had a galvanizing personality in that he had a lot of fervor and dedication and drive that made him of note in New England. Now, he spent most of his life in New England, but he was, along with Presbyterians, very desirous to bring the Christian worship to the westward movement and the doctrines of the Presbyterian Church. That was foremost in his desire, and it required sacrifice to leave the comfort and the support that he had in New England. So he did decide to come to Cincinnati, and he was very thankful to be a part of the Lane Seminary, which would raise up, according to the doctrines of the Presbyterian faith, the ministers to spread out. He was very proud because all of his sons became ministers. And of course his daughter was Harriet Beecher-Stowe, and her husband Calvin Stowe was a preacher. The slavery issue was boiling up to a height of turmoil at that time. Primarily, it was in the Lane Seminary, where Beecher was installed as President, that the most fervor was evident. You had a lot of young men there who were impatient, and they did not want to be moderate in their approach to this issue. So, [Harriet Beecher-Stowe] was definitely influenced by their fervor; and from that point,

she did take her trips down to view conditions and on which to base her writing. Of course she was imbued in the Presbyterian heritage, and of course the seminary was the place of that spreading of the Church doctrine, and that was where she was most influenced about the issue. So that was the reason that he came here primarily: the Lane Seminary. At the same time, he did for ten years, (this is in the mid 1800's,) pastor Second Presbyterian Church. Now, this was the Greek Revival structure on Four Street, where McAlpine's building is, and so he was not in this structure. But he was in the Second Presbyterian, and you know, I'm thinking that he was probably influential in the church obtaining the Paul Revere Bell, because they're very rarely out of New England. But the Paul Revere Bell is something that I'm conjecturing, I think it's a pretty good conjecture, that it did come to the church through Second Presbyterian, and of course this building started as Second.

It's a large bell. It is 44 inches in diameter and 1700 pounds of weight, that has on it raised letters, "Revere Boston." It's not easily accessible but we have an historic rubbing that shows "Revere Boston." It's a very wonderful artifact to have, dating to the beginning of the country. Our church bell is renowned because it's the manufacture of Revere Boston, of our famous revolutionary hero Paul Revere. The date of that manufacturer is not documented. I conjecture that it came at the time of Lyman Beecher, as he was a New Englander, but the exact time of the bell coming to the church, to Second Presbyterian, is not really documented. These bells are rare outside of New England, and perhaps in that period of 1833 to 1843, in that structure down on Fourth Street, the Greek Revival that had a tower. And perhaps that bell initially was there but installed here from the beginning of this structure in 1875.

The wonderful thing about the Paul Revere bell is, of course, that anyone who comes to a service can hear the bell before the service. For example, we have a Wednesday noon service. It's just a half hour and it starts at noon, so one could come in and rest for a half hour and hear the bell.

The memorial windows here are, of course, a very eye-catching, beautiful attraction and they originally were the geometrics that are still above the balcony. But as you see on the lower areas, they are primarily pictorial representations of various parts of the Bible. And one of our pastors in the 1920s had visited Europe and wanted to implement something like what he saw and so, many of the families or Bible classes endeavor to contribute so that they could have memorial windows of their favorite parts in the Bible. One of the most remarkable windows is the Shillito window. It represents a figure of a knight in the center. Be thou faithful unto death and receive a crown of righteousness, from Revelations - talking about sustaining faith. But it's a grand window with a lot of figures in it and the Shillito family donated that one as a memorial to the family. So, that's one example. The stained glass windows are designated as Munich glass.

The organ is an Austin organ. It was, as are many of the artifacts and windows and so on, a dedication from a particular family. And it was in 1915 that the organ was dedicated and has subsequently been upgraded or technologically brought up to the state-of-the-art.

The sanctuary design reflects, as always the case in the Presbyterian Church, the centrality of preaching based on Scriptures and I know that the architects were also desiring to make a unique sanctuary. So, you do see the semi-circle, which is kind of a wonderful surprise when you come in - as opposed to a lot of churches where you have the long central isle. So, it's the warmth and the gathering around the Word and the preaching of the Word, and that's the primary basis for the layout but it does also afford a wonderful surprise when you come in. And then they had such skill to bring such warmth and to add elements that are of such a high sophistication in terms of architectural detail, which we enjoy.

The foresight of those who designed the space was just great because this facility accommodates whatever we need to do. Of course, the sanctuary is timeless. But a couple of other great things... we have the most beautiful fellowship hall behind the sanctuary. It's very multifunctional for many, many types of events. And then, of course, we have a smaller chapel that has been beautifully restored. We have educational rooms that have been restored in the basement area. And then some other work that's being considered in the upstairs above the fellowship hall. So, true to the foresight of these wonderful architects and designers, it stays incredibly functional to our needs and we're not lacking or missing anything. In regard to a contemporary approach or slant, it's completely relevant.

One of the benefits of this facility, this sanctuary has wonderful acoustics. And as part of outreach to the community and a presentation of our mission to present the power of Jesus Christ through song and through chorale works, we've been able to have wonderful organizations such as the Music Mission Kiev, led by Roger McMurrin, a tremendous powerful chorus and orchestra. I personally think it was the best concert that I had seen. It's just the power and the fervor; they're just world-class. So that was an example of the wonderful venue that this is for music

for a specific purpose. And then we also have had for the last few years a music series, “Music at Covenant” where we've been able to present a lot of excellent artists from UC College-Conservatory of Music and related artists so the people can come in, in a welcoming way to enjoy this heritage that has been here in downtown Cincinnati. There are wonderful acoustics, and that's just another blessing that is a part of the original structure.

A lot of our involvement with the community around is in volunteerism: outreach, to the schools, to the children, City Gospel Mission, various organizations across the river, the feeding program where we participate in meals.

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