

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
10th January 2010
Epiphany 1, Founders' Day Evensong

Why did it happen?

What sort of need was felt by people – a need that resulted in the founding of an institution such as St. John's Episcopal Church?

Settlers had first arrived in what is now Mount Pleasant after the Graduation Act of 1854, which allowed people to purchase land from the government at discount rates. The Treaty of 1855 relocated the Native American Ojibwa (Saginaw Chippewa Tribe) from Saginaw, Swan Creek, and Black River to land in Isabella County, including the land on which our church stands. Many non-natives soon moved to Mount Pleasant predicting prosperous relations with the natives – I'm not sure how wealthy they wanted the Native Americans to be, but for themselves, they saw prosperity. The Homestead Act of 1862 brought many new settlers to Mount Pleasant to live on the free land that the government allowed them. Farmers, lumbermen, service business owners began to form a community.

In 1875 a fire started at the Fancher Building on the north corner of Broadway and Main; it moved east down Broadway and destroyed several buildings.

In 1879 the people of Mount Pleasant got their first library, The Library, Literary, and Musical Association of Mount Pleasant. It started with the personal book collections of the board members.

And in 1884, one hundred twenty six years ago today, St. John's was consecrated as *The Protestant Episcopal Church in Mount Pleasant*. In fact, we are still *the* Episcopal Church in Mount Pleasant. In fact, we are the only Episcopal Church in Isabella County!

What had happened? What would bring together a dozen people and cause them to believe that they could actually start a church? Whatever were they thinking?

Let your imagination wander a bit back to about 1880.

You've just come to Mt. Pleasant for the offer of free land. You've been a subsistence farmer for your whole life, and here's a chance for you to actually have acres and acres of land, all for free, thanks to the United States Government.

You arrive and see... trees. Trees, trees, and more trees. They didn't tell you you'd need to clear the land before you could plant corn.

So you and some neighboring farmers have gotten together, you've felled the darn trees, and – hey! There's a lumber mill in town owned by a Mister Brown – maybe he'd buy the trees from you! So you make friends with Willie Brown and a few other nice people in town and you all discover that you all had been members of an Episcopal Church back home.

You've missed the church – the Baptists and Methodists just didn't appeal to you, and the Catholics, well, they were *Cath'licks* – people your mama had warned you about.

So in the course of a couple of years you and a few of your new friends have gotten together and prayed from a Book of Common Prayer someone had brought with them to Michigan. It was comforting to be with other Episcopalians, but it sure would be nice to have a church, a proper building to worship in instead of people's front parlors, a place where your kids could learn right from wrong from an Episcopal minister. Maybe you could all sing hymns and have an organ playing!

And so you all came together. Had bake sales. Pledged offerings. Donated things – things like land and wood and glass, nails and tools and shingles, things like time and talent as well as treasure. And at the corner of Washington and Maple, thanks to Mr. May's donation of the land, the Episcopal Church of St. John the Evangelist arose – and in 1884 the church was consecrated by the Episcopal Bishop. What a day that must have been!

People came to Mount Pleasant by horse and buggy and by a special railroad car! They had a special bang-up service in the morning with more clergy than should ever be allowed in one place, a ten-course dinner at the hotel, and then they all went *back* to the church for more evening worship! Not unlike what you all have done today! (Of course, this morning's sermon would have been over an hour long, and this evening you would be treated to more words of holy wisdom...)

It seems to me that there is a universal yearning for community. We tend to find like-minded people wherever we go – and when we find them we want to get together with them regularly. It may be politics that draws people together, or a hobby, or a sport – or it may be a shared faith. It was this last that pulled enough people together to create this institution, this church – a shared faith and a practice of common worship, inspired, one hopes, by the Holy Spirit, and willing to do the hard work of forming an intentional community.

This parish has seen some downtimes – years without a priest (though there have been moments, perhaps, when you’ve wished the darn priest would just leave you alone!), years when it looked like St. John’s would close. But even through the very lean years there were people not unlike you and me who believed in the importance of being a visible presence in Mount Pleasant, who believed they could be the hands of Christ in a broken world, who believed they were called to minister to one another and to the larger community.

St. John’s Episcopal Church is alive today because of our founders – because of our founders and their children, and the great cloud of witnesses, the host of saints who have come before us.

We are the founders who will be honored in the year 2134, when the parish celebrates two hundred and fifty years of ministry.

May we leave them a legacy of love, a legacy of hope – may we leave them a legacy of courage and steadfastness, and may we leave them a challenge: It is *your* turn to be the hands of Christ – for the world is still broken. But the Kingdom is closer.

Amen.