



First Presbyterian Church FAMILY HISTORY SERIES



Why God selected our FPC family for centuries to be and remain a powerful beacon of light we do not know. We only know what Christ tells us.

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last." JOHN 15:16

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Seeking Christ; Sharing His love

PART TWO

FPC CRISIS – EPIDEMIC AND WAR

The information below is a combination of excerpts from the December 3, 1911 Norfolk Landmark newspaper article ('1' below), Historical Sketches of FPC by Helen Warren ('2' below) and Dr. Armstrong's last sermon at FPC ('3' below).

Of the crises during the history of the First Presbyterian Church, a sketch prepared by the Rev. Dr. E. B. McCluer, for many years pastor of the Park Avenue Presbyterian Church says; "In 1855, during the summer of the pestilence, she was brought almost to desolation. In April, out of her 296 enrolled members, about 250 lived in the city. By the first of September only eighty-seven remained in Norfolk. Some had died, but the large part had fled. The pastor remained. Of this small number of eighty-seven, but few escaped the pestilence, and thirty-two died." ¹

"Doctor Armstrong was a young man then – faithful and unselfish in his work, as one ripened by years of experience. At a time when there were 1200 to 1500 cases of this fever, when deaths registered as high as eighty in one day, when eleven out of eighteen physicians had died, there was much to be done. Not only to his own congregation, but to the community at large, he was truly a ministering angel, hiding his own sorrows that he might lighten the sorrows of others. Death came several times to his own home, taking his wife and three of his children. At the close of this epidemic, when services at the Church were resumed, a much depleted and sorrow-stricken congregation, ranging from 60 to 80 in number was in attendance." ²

After the epidemic of yellow fever had been checked, the survivors of the congregation of the First Church, undaunted by their losses, resumed their fight for Christianity and prospered until the outbreak of the Civil War, when their ranks were again depleted and their troubles multiplied, their pastor, Rev. Dr. Armstrong, being removed under an arbitrary military order and exiled for fifteen months. ¹

"Five years after this terrible siege, the next shadow to cast gloom over the Church and the community was the "War Between the States." Doctor Armstrong was still here. Calamity awaited. The town was overrun by enemies. Through some personal grudge borne by the officer in charge of the Federal forces, Doctor Armstrong was forbidden his own pulpit, which part of the time was filled by the order of this officer. Resenting this unjust treatment, none of Dr. Armstrong's congregation attended these services through loyalty to their pastor. It was fifteen months before he was allowed to return to his home and Church. During this time he suffered long imprisonment at both Old Point and Hatteras." ²

In Dr. Armstrong's last sermon before retirement in 1891 at First Presbyterian Church, he provided his perspective on the yellow fever epidemic and his imprisonment in the Civil War as follows:



"I would refer first to the year 1855, when that pestilence – yellow fever – raged among us. In the midst of that time of trial the people became panic-stricken. I believe that panic was sent of God. I don't blame those who left, for in such a time I would advise those who can go to do so. But there are many who cannot go, and it is needful that some should stay and care for others. The panic was due in part to the fact that our means of communication was being cut off, and it seemed as if we were to be left grappling; starving, with the fever. I believe it was all sent for a wise purpose. I was urged to go, but concluded my duty was here. Out of seven Protestant ministers who remained four died, and every one of us had the fever. God gave me the grace to remain, and I can testify to you that in some particulars those months of the fever were among the most blessed of my life. The pestilence brought many to a decision, and it was my privilege to lead many of them to God. It was a time of a great spiritual peace: never was I enabled so cheerfully to go about my work; heaven never seemed so near. They were months of blessed communion with God – "man doth not live by bread alone."

Six years later came the time of the war. During three of those years Norfolk was a conquered city. Most of our men, especially the young men, were away, in the army; and many others not finding it pleasant to live here left. I at first thought of going but concluded to stay, and I preached every Sabbath till finally I was imprisoned. I enjoyed those months of trial while I preached in this house, and I never preached to larger or more attentive congregations – the other preachers being away – some of them in the army as chaplains. When I was imprisoned, only one other minister was remaining here. As the other ministers left, the people gathered around those who remained. When General Butler took charge of this department I expected to be imprisoned. I was told by one person that if I would leave a go North they would gladly give me a pass. They wanted to get me out of my pulpit. I couldn't do it, I staid here and preached, till by a foolish order of the commanding officer I was deposed and imprisoned. History hardly furnishes a parallel – a minister deposed. My sentence was solitary confinement.

The only book I had was my Bible, which I studied more than ever, and I enjoyed those months of confinement. After I was banished I was assigned to the Southern army, and it was a blessed service – that ministry to the soldiers in their log cabins, daubed with clay. The earth floors were covered with pine tags, and the soldiers sitting on those floors looked up into my face, and the light from the fireplace – the only light we had – as it shone on their faces, made a weird congregation. A piece of tallow candle we had could only be kept lighted long enough to read the text, after which it was extinguished, as a matter of economy. I have often wished for pictures of these scenes, that I might show them to my children. Those were trying times, but I came out of the war in better health than I went in – for "man doth not live by bread alone."³

End of Sermon – Back to Newspaper Article

After the close of the war prosperity again returned to the church and has continued under the ministry of a number of distinguished divines.

Dr. Rennie Advocates New Church More Centrally Located.

During the nine years the Rev. Dr. Joseph Rennie has been pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, the congregation has prospered greatly, though frequently the membership has been reduced by the organization of other churches of the same faith in rapidly growing sections of the city, but the church has suffered more from deaths in the past two years, especially of members of wealth, than by removals.



As compared with ten years ago, the congregations which attend the morning service have reduced to 10 percent on an average, but the attendance at the evening services has increased at least 100 percent.

The First Presbyterian congregation has often been referred to as being a thoroughly organized working body. The ladies' societies, the Men's Brotherhood and the Sabbath school are all contributing their share to the advancement of the work of God. The Sunday School is especially active in its campaign in behalf of Christianity, although its membership is smaller by half than it was nine years ago.

First Church a Liberal Contributor to Foreign and Home Missions.

The reports of the presbytery for 1910-'11 show that one-fourth of all of the money contributed by Norfolk Presbyterians to foreign missions was collected through the First Church, which also enjoys the distinction of raising a fifth of the total amount received by the presbytery for synodical and home missions.

FORMER PASTORS:

- James Porter, died in 1683.
- Rev. Francis Makemie, 1683-1692.
- Rev. Jonas Mackie, 1693-1716.
- Rev. Benjamin Grigsby, 1801-1810.
- Rev. Dr. Rice, 1811-1814.
- Rev. Dr. John D. Paxton, 1814-1819.
- Rev. Joshua T. Russell, 1820-1824.
- Rev. Dr. S. K. Kollock, 1825-1834.
- Rev. Dr. John D. Matthews, 1835-1840.
- Rev. Samuel J. Cassells, 1841-1846.
- Rev. Dr. S. J. P. Anderson, 1846-1851.
- Rev. Dr. George D. Armstrong, 1851-1891.
- Rev. Dr. James I. Vance, 1891-1895.
- Rev. Dr. J. R. Howerton, 1895-1896.
- Rev. Edward Mack, 1897-1901.
- Rev. Dr. Joseph Rennie, the present pastor, since October, 1902.

CHURCH COLONIES ORGANIZED BY FIRST CHURCH:

- The Second Presbyterian Church.
- Park Avenue Presbyterian Church.
- Armstrong Memorial Presbyterian Church, Berkley.
- Colley Memorial Church.
- Lambert's Point Presbyterian Church, organized by Colley Memorial.

We should leave no less a legacy for future generations than was left for us.

"For the Love of Christ urges us on..." 2 CORINTHIANS 5:14