

First Presbyterian Church, Leonard Texas

In 1870 the Cumberland Presbyterian Church organized a congregation in the Grove Hill community (also known as Oak Hill) four miles northeast of Leonard on Farm Road 1553. Ulysses S. Grant was president of the United States.

The Cumberland Presbyterian Church began in 1810 as part of the 'Second Great Awakening', a revival movement in the 'Cumberland country,' a newly settled region of Kentucky and Tennessee. Its ministers and members were among the first of the frontiersmen to move further west. In 1837 the denomination organized the Texas Presbytery, the first Protestant church governing body to be formed in Texas. By 1861 the Cumberland Presbyterian Church had 6,200 members and 155 places of worship in Texas.

Five years later under the auspices of its Board of Home Missions, the Presbyterian Church, USA, established in Philadelphia in 1706, founded a church in Valley Creek, three miles due north of Leonard on Farm Road 896.

The Valley Creek colony was planted by eleven pioneering families from Poughkeepsie, New York led by grocer, Howard L. Parmele and stock broker Tom Murphy in association with their brother-in law Samuel F. B. Morse the inventor of the telegraph. A prerequisite for joining the colony was membership in the Presbyterian Church, USA.

Settlers arrived via the "immigrant train." Household effects occupied the front of the railway car while passengers lived in the rear for the long journey from New York to Texas via Canada, Detroit and St. Louis. The railroad ended in Sherman, so colony members had to travel overland by wagon to Fort English (Bonham) and then Valley Creek.

The head of each family was trained in a different trade or profession. Soon after the community was established, a school was built. Classes were taught for three months in the winter, and Sunday school classes were held weekly.

In 1880 the Grove Hill and Valley Creek communities were excluded from the new Fannin County route of the Denison and Southeastern Railroad. A new town was to be established on land owned by the heirs of Solomon Langdon Leonard. Parmele, by then a prominent businessman, was chosen as agent for the Leonard heirs in negotiations with the railroad. Parmele Street commemorates his role in local history.

A location 3 miles south of Valley Creek was chosen as the site for the train depot and the new community of Leonard.

Within 3 years a tornado-like storm devastated Valley Creek, and the Elders of the Presbyterian congregation, led by Parmele, decided to relocate to Leonard, population 350, and construct a new building, on the NE corner of Houston and Main streets 3 blocks north of the town center. It would be the first church to be erected in the fledgling railroad town.

The Presbyterian congregation was to play a significant role in the development of education in Leonard. In 1890, the church's pastor, Decosta H. Dodson launched the Leonard Collegiate Institute in a two-room building on Connett Street. The principle instructor, Lucy Alexander, was a former Presbyterian missionary to China. In 1906 a three story building was opened under the name,

Dodson College. Several years later the Paris Presbytery took formal possession of the school and gave it its third name, Manton College Institute (Cumberland College). It continued to educate students until the outbreak of the First World War. The building continued as a site for education, serving as Leonard's first high school until the 1950s.

In 1898 the Grove Hill congregation also moved to Leonard and built a new church on the NE corner of Connert and Thomas Streets, an edifice that has continued to serve as home for the congregation until the present.

In 1905 the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church, USA congregations in Leonard merged, and selected the name still in use today, First Presbyterian Church. Rev. Dodson was pastor of the Leonard Church and Rev. Kirkpatrick led the Cumberland congregation. Elders representing the USA church were A.L. Melton, James Shiels, J.R. Wilson, and J.J. Conklin. W.E. Cox, J.C. Christian, F.P. Wilson, and H. C. Mitchell represented the Cumberland church. The combined membership was 100. The union proved to be a harbinger of the future, as the following year their respective denominations voted to unite.

The church remained small and had to contend with a rapid turn-over of pastors. Between 1905 and 1958, twelve different ministers led the congregation.

However, an increase in attendance in the early 1950s encouraged the Session to add an educational building in 1953. Howard Holland was pastor. In addition to several church activities, the building was used by various civic groups and clubs for their meetings.

Unfortunately pastors continued to come-and-go. During the next three decades six different ministers and several lay-leaders held the pulpit.

Throughout it all members of the congregation was generous and faithful. In 1979 Cella Grider Arnold and Helen Ferguson Parker were honored for their 60 plus years of faithful service as church pianist and organist.

Mollie E. and John W. Egbert, C. J. Hares, D. H. Leonard, J. R. Wilson and Hattie Wilson, Rev. Dodson, J.C. Christian, Joe Sam Wright, John Arnold, Flora McTaggart Wright, Allison Taylor Latimer, R.C. May, Anna Louise Baker, William Brown Pearce, Sam H. and Nancie J. Jones; and the Gibson, Chapman, S.W. McLarry, J.R. Wilson and Hattie Wilson, and the A. L. Brown families are all memorialized in the church's windows.

In 1963 a brick manse was built from funds given by Blanche Ferguson Giles (Mrs. Ellis Giles). The original church bell, believed to be one of the oldest west of the Mississippi, and part of the mission church at Valley Creek and all subsequent generations of the Leonard church (and "town-crier" for the city of Leonard in its early years), was permanently installed in the church yard in her memory.

Unfortunately such loyalty and devotion did not result in church growth. In 1982 the congregation numbered 22. It had never regained the numbers it experienced early in the century.

In spite of its small numbers the congregation remained active in the wider church, several members of its last generation holding leadership positions in Grace Presbytery.