

ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY
THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH OF ELIZABETH,
NEW JERSEY

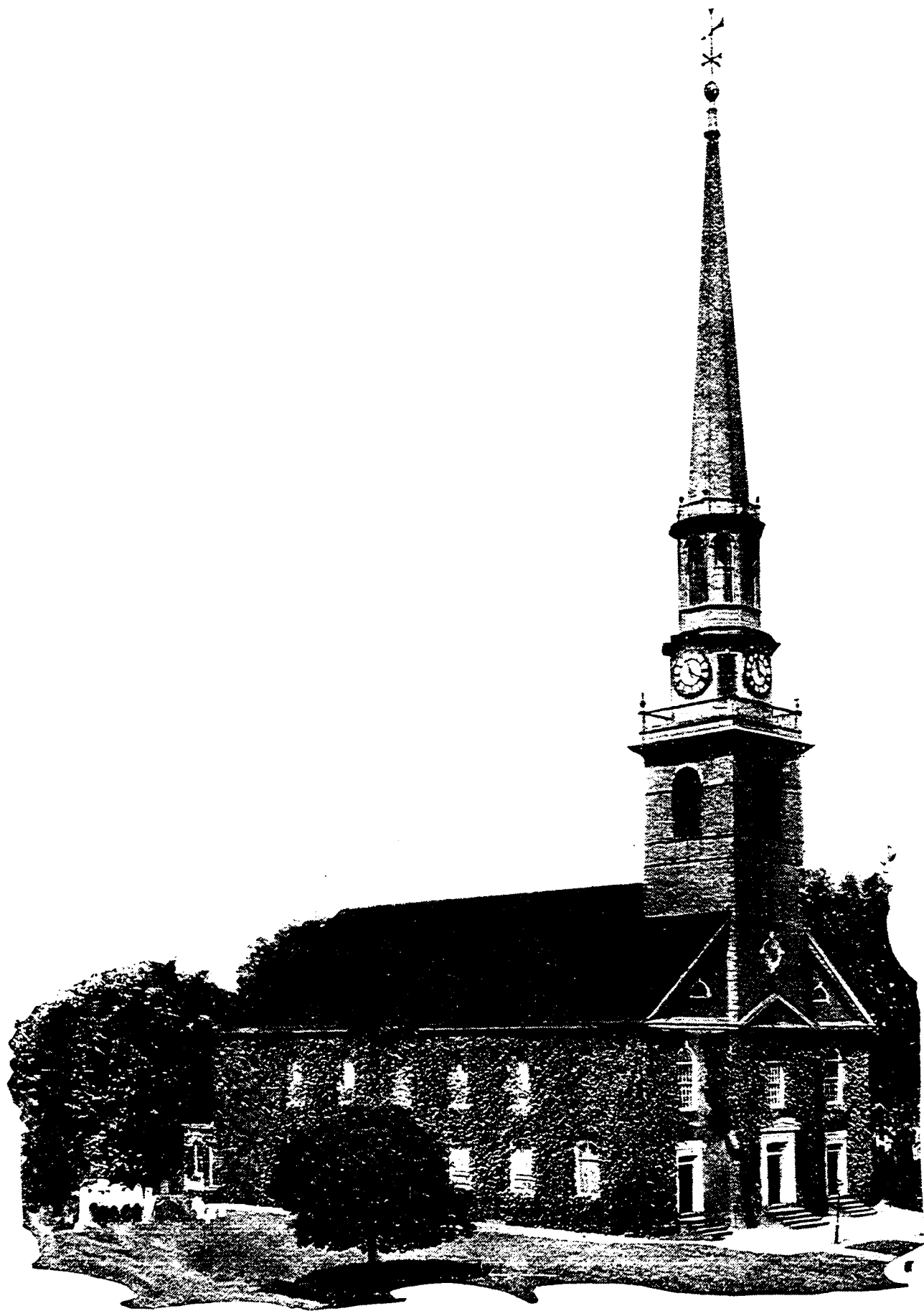
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PREPARED BY THE OFFICE OF
GUGLER, KIMBALL AND HUSTED

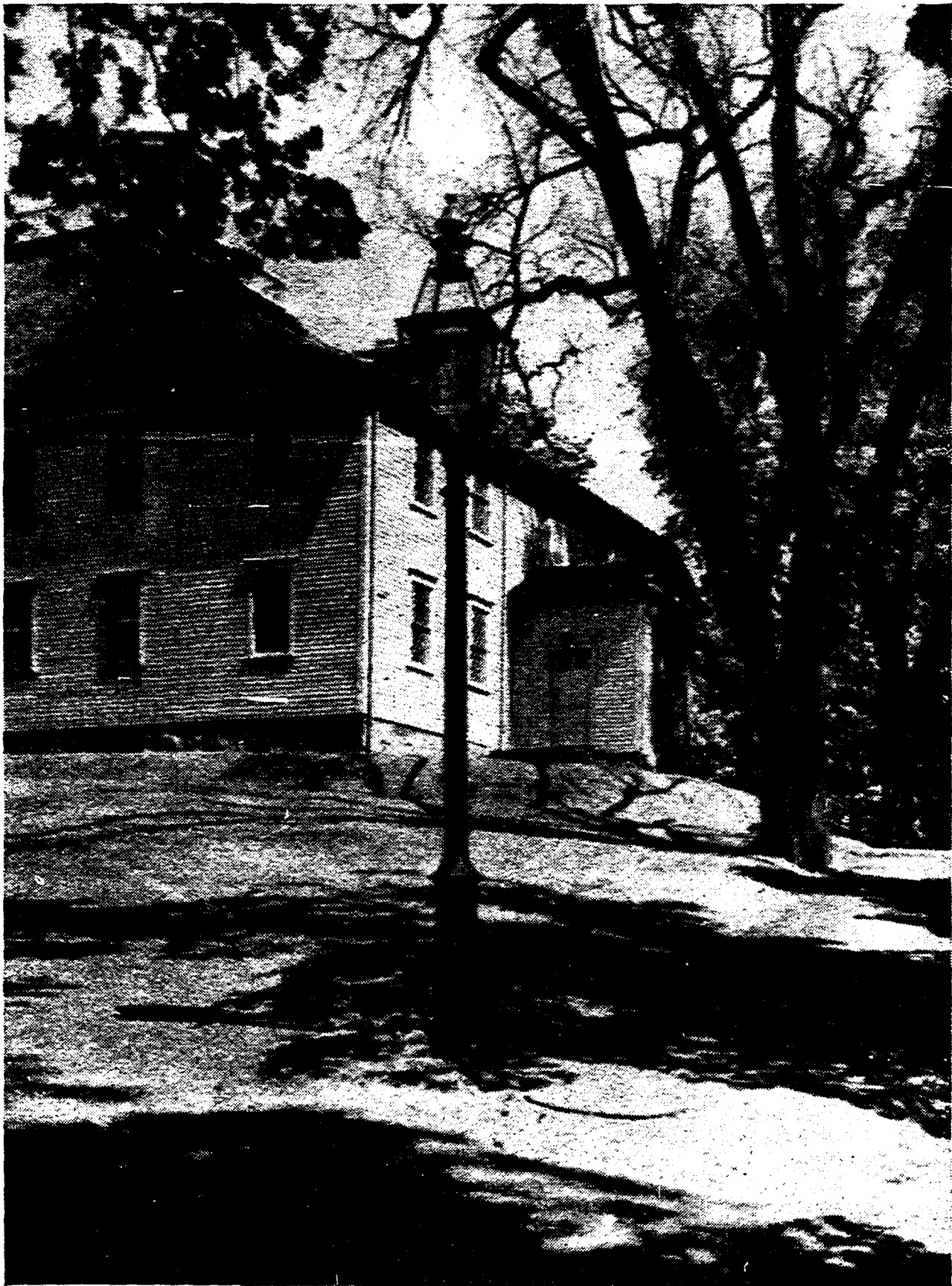
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The picture on the opposite page shows the church as it was immediately preceding the fire of June 25, 1946. It is the aim of the building committee to duplicate the outside of the church in the restoration. In accordance with the wishes of the campaign and building committees, and with popular demand in as far as it has been possible to ascertain, the architects have pledged themselves to restore the interior, as far as modern convenience and usage will permit, to Colonial design, which preceded the Gothic alterations of 1851. The latter obtained until the time of the fire. The following pages comprise the efforts of Gugler, Kimball and Husted to obtain the necessary information to carry out this pledge.



*"Ship Meeting House," Hingham, Mass.
Contemporary With First Church*

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REFERENCES to the First Church of Elizabeth are numerous in the early annals of New Jersey. The influence of the church in the life of the Colonists, and its role in the Revolutionary War have recommended it to the attention of historians. The original building, first place of worship constructed by the English in the State, served as Church and Town Meeting House for the New Jersey founders and their descendants. Within its walls were held the first sessions of the General Assembly. From its pulpit, the Reverend James Caldwell, "the fighting parson," delivered his fulminations against the British.

Although there is considerable available literature describing the ecclesiastical and political importance of Elizabeth's First Church, surprisingly little information about its architectural history has been included. The purpose of the following report is to analyze and clarify, as far as the documentary and physical evidence permit, the architectural evolution of the three church buildings which First Church successively inhabited.

The evidence, in general, has been obtained from five sources:

1) The old church records, preserved in iron safes in the South vestibule of the church, which survived the fire of 1946.

2) Illustrations and allusions to the Church in historical works and books of travel.

3) Drawings of the Church after the Victorian alterations, prepared by the Historic American Buildings Survey.

4) Pictures, diaries and letters preserved in library or private collections.

5) Physical evidence obtainable from the ruins.

Information derived from inspection of the ruins has been more extensive than might be expected from a superficial examination of the site. Details of construction still discernible from examination of the charred timbers, supported by documentary evidence and analogy to other structures of the period, make the task of reconstruction a rewarding undertaking. Extensive research has regrettably failed to produce old drawings showing the interior exactly as it looked in its heyday at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, but the general outline emerges clearly. While some details, like the design of the ceiling and exact arrangement of the platform and pulpit cannot be fixed with certainty, definite indications of the general type of each exist.

The following is a list of the names of the persons who have been admitted to the church since the last meeting of the church, and the names of the persons who have been expelled from the church.

Admitted		Expelled	
1841	1842	1841	1842
1843	1844	1843	1844
1845	1846	1845	1846
1847	1848	1847	1848
1849	1850	1849	1850
1851	1852	1851	1852
1853	1854	1853	1854
1855	1856	1855	1856
1857	1858	1857	1858
1859	1860	1859	1860
1861	1862	1861	1862
1863	1864	1863	1864
1865	1866	1865	1866
1867	1868	1867	1868
1869	1870	1869	1870
1871	1872	1871	1872
1873	1874	1873	1874
1875	1876	1875	1876
1877	1878	1877	1878
1879	1880	1879	1880
1881	1882	1881	1882
1883	1884	1883	1884
1885	1886	1885	1886
1887	1888	1887	1888
1889	1890	1889	1890
1891	1892	1891	1892
1893	1894	1893	1894
1895	1896	1895	1896
1897	1898	1897	1898
1899	1900	1899	1900

Admitted		Expelled	
1901	1902	1901	1902
1903	1904	1903	1904
1905	1906	1905	1906
1907	1908	1907	1908
1909	1910	1909	1910
1911	1912	1911	1912
1913	1914	1913	1914
1915	1916	1915	1916
1917	1918	1917	1918
1919	1920	1919	1920
1921	1922	1921	1922
1923	1924	1923	1924
1925	1926	1925	1926
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1973	1974	1973	1974
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1977	1978	1977	1978
1979	1980	1979	1980
1981	1982	1981	1982
1983	1984	1983	1984
1985	1986	1985	1986
1987	1988	1987	1988
1989	1990	1989	1990
1991	1992	1991	1992
1993	1994	1993	1994
1995	1996	1995	1996
1997	1998	1997	1998
1999	2000	1999	2000

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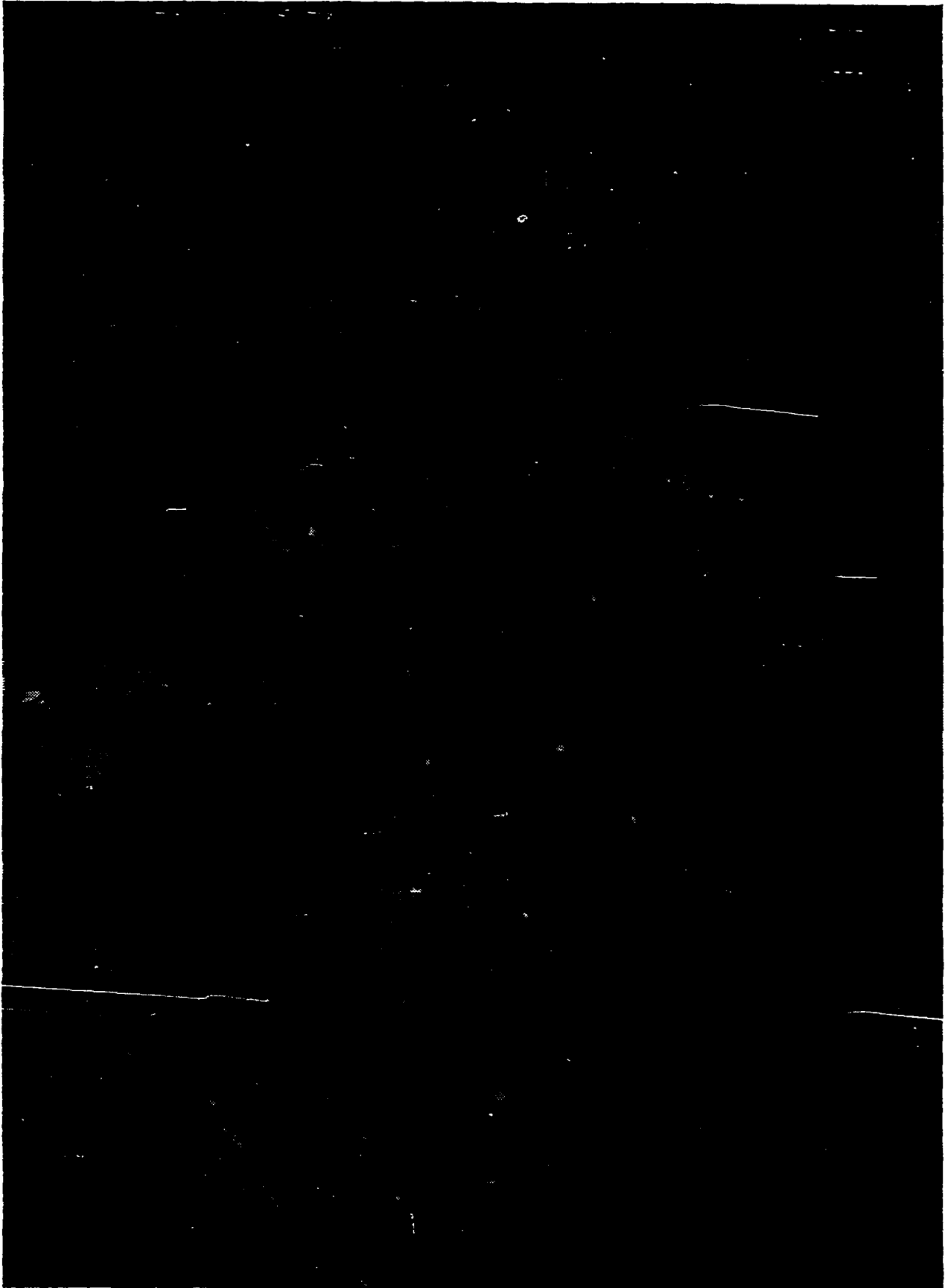
Pew Plan of 1841

THE OLD FIRST CHURCH

The original building on the site of the present church was a modest structure framed in wood and finished with shingles. It was built shortly after the settlement of Elizabeth Town. Since the land was bought from the Indians late in October of 1664, it is probable that the building of the church was not commenced prior to 1665. The form of worship was Congregational. But even from the beginning there must have been a leaning toward Presbyterian forms, which was encouraged by the presence among the settlers of men from Long Island, where churches of Presbyterian tendency had already been established.

Architecturally, little is known of the first church house. According to local tradition, it occupied the ground covered by the eastern portion of the present church. Behind it, in the area comprising the western portion of the existing building, were buried the early settlers of Elizabeth Town. Later, when the extension of the church westward necessitated building over the old burying ground, the tombstones were moved to their present location at the western end.

From the origin and known character of the Elizabeth settlers, it can be assumed that their church had the traditional form of the New England meeting house of the time, of which the "Ship Meeting House" at Hingham, Massachusetts, is the best example surviving from the Seventeenth Century.



The Old Bell Will Ring Again

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THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY CHURCH

In 1724, for reasons which are not clear, the original church building was replaced by a more pretentious structure,—“a fine church with steeple and bells,” according to the wording of the Trustees’ minutes. The new church was constructed of wood, like its predecessor, and was also “covered with shingles.” However, its architectural effect was more imposing, in keeping with its character as the First Church of the leading city of the Province.

The interior was forty-two feet wide, fifty-eight feet long, and twenty-four feet high, and was equipped with “partial galleries.” The exterior was originally unpainted.

In 1717 the First Church was placed under the authority of the Presbytery of Philadelphia. Thereafter “Old First Church” became the First Presbyterian Church of Elizabeth. But the appellation “Old First” has been affectionately retained in popular parlance.

During this period there was a parsonage for the use of the pastor on Pearl Street. In the parsonage the Rev. Jonathan Dickinson, pastor of the church, instructed scholars for the ministry, who should be properly indoctrinated in the new spirit of Calvinism. In 1747 the College of New Jersey, later to become Princeton University, was established in Elizabeth, with the Reverend Mr. Dickinson as its first president.

Sixteen additional feet in the rear, and “galleries on the sides,” were added in 1766 to accommodate the rapidly

growing congregation. Pews were provided for two hundred and forty-four families, almost twice the previous number.

On January 25, 1780, the church and parsonage were burned by loyalists in retaliation for the patriot preaching of the Rev. Mr. Caldwell. For sometime thereafter, a storehouse in town was used for services with occasional recourse to the facilities of St. John's Episcopal Church across the street.

THE POST REVOLUTIONARY CHURCH

In 1783 enough subscriptions had been pledged to enable the building committee to commence laying the foundations of a new church. The building, completed in 1793, was a handsome structure of brick and red sandstone with a belfry and steeple. The interior was about sixty feet square, exclusive of the belfry and the flanking vestibules. The architectural character of the interior, which was attractive and dignified, preserved the tradition of the New England meeting house. There was no indication of the more pretentious innovations being introduced at the time by the builders of Episcopal churches. This fact has been established by old pew plans and old records, in the absence of any pictures or prints of the interior.

The church had a gallery on three sides with two tiers of super-imposed columns, the lower to support the gallery, and the upper to give intermediate support to the huge roof trusses above.



Colonial Pews Flanked by Gothic Arches

Two plans dating from 1818 show the arrangement of pews and the plan of the pulpit platform. A later plan, 1841, gives the disposition of the columns.

When the Gothic elements of the Victorian interior were recently removed, it was discovered that they had been super-imposed upon the older structure, which, though mutilated with adze cuts and charred with fire, gave clear indication of its original form. By selecting and combining portions which had escaped the worst effects of the fire, it was possible to reconstruct the old trusses, the gallery, and the shape, size and position of the "Colonial" columns supporting the gallery and roof.

A portion of the capitals and bases, and the entire shafts of two columns in the lower tier were uncovered, and enough of one column in the upper tier, to establish its diameter and length. References in old documents to the installation of an organ in the gallery in the 1840's led to the discovery of an elliptical arched opening in the tower, which once contained the pipes. In 1891 a new organ was placed in the west end of the church, and the space in the rear gallery was filled in.

Prior to this, the members of the choir sat below the organ in front of the pews of the central balcony. They were protected from view until they stood up to sing, by the paneled rail which ran around three sides of the gallery, and a damask curtain surmounting the railing before their pews.

Originally the stairs to the balcony were not in their present location (where they survived the fire of last year) but probably were against the outside lateral walls of the vestibules flanking the belfry. They were moved to their present location in 1842, when substantial repairs were made to the church. These entailed the rebuilding of the floor on new foundations, rearrangement of pews, repairing of columns, and reinforcing of the roof trusses, whose pinned joinings showed evidence of strain. At this time the pews on the first floor were provided with "new ends and doors," and the gallery pews were "decorated with scrolls."

The church bell, originally cast in 1784, was subsequently cracked "in two places" and replaced by a new bell cast in England in 1822. The bell is still functioning in the belfry.

Two magnificent chandeliers, presented to the church by Elias Boudinot in 1800, originally hung in the center aisle. Later they were removed to a position over the rear galleries. The metal work and some of the glass decorations of these chandeliers were recovered from the wreckage for preservation with other items of historical interest in a proposed museum of church antiquities.

The original pulpit was replaced by a new one in 1824. This must have been a raised pulpit, for the records state that two pews on each side of the old platform had to be removed to make space for new stairs. The pulpit had an eight-sided canopy or sounding board over it, apparently

suspended from the roof construction overhead. The pulpit was subsequently decorated by the ladies of the congregation with curtains of damask.

In 1830 the choir had requested, and been assigned by the Trustees for their use, two pews at the "front of the gallery with the seats on either side." At this time the church still contained two-hundred and forty-four pews. The interior was heated by two stoves, one on either side of the church, provided with flues to convey the smoke out the windows. The arrangement did not work satisfactorily, as only one stove could be used when the wind blew from the north or south. Improved flues, presumably to the roof, were added in 1832.

Removal of plaster indicated that two doorways, which formerly connected the belfry to its flanking vestibules, had been blocked up when the stairs to the gallery were moved to their present location.

Although the shape of the ceiling prior to the Gothic phase cannot be defined with certainty, it seems probable from documentary and structural evidence that the ceiling over the side galleries was flat, and came down not far above the arched heads of the balcony windows. The line where the old lime and hair plaster stopped on the sidewalls is still clearly apparent.

The ceiling over the central nave portion of the church may have been in the form of a large flat rectangular panel with coved sides. The probable height of the central flat



Sketch From Nicholas Murray's "Notes"

portion may be deduced by the horizontal line of the old plaster on the west wall of the tower, although it must be admitted that such a deduction leaves certain points unanswered. If the ceiling were of the coved type, coved sections would be expected at the ends as well as at the sides, which the plaster level on the tower seems to preclude. If the ceiling were elliptical, the central portion should not be flat, but perceptibly arched. Further investigation is needed to establish with certainty the form of this portion of the church.

THE GOTHIC ALTERATIONS OF 1851

During the pastorate of the Reverend Nicholas Murray, it was decided to make enlargements and repairs to the church. Accordingly an English architect, Mr. James Martin, was called in to make a survey and recommendations. He prepared plans and specifications which called for extending the church twenty-seven feet to the rear, remodeling the interior by installing "massive pillars to support Gothic arches in place of the old flat ceiling," re-decorating the front of the gallery rail, reinforcing the trusses, which were in a dangerous condition, and generally transforming the interior of the church from an American meeting house of the old type to a Victorian Gothic interior, in the popular style of the age.

As indicated previously, the new Gothic elements were merely applied to the ancient structure by nailing and plastering on of decorative elements. The roof truss was reinforced with iron stirrups; the arched window heads were furred with pointed arches of plaster and wood; a new ceiling with imitation beams was hung under the old ceiling; new triple piers in ingeniously fashioned shapes in lath and plaster were superimposed on the old structural wood columns to support the new arches. Owing to an inadequate building fund, the original structure was not discarded. The old columns were reshaped with adzes and replaced to meet the requirements of the new design. But they were



Gothic Interior

not thrown out, and have sufficiently survived the ravages of axe and fire to indicate their original form. The columns of the lower tier were supported by short Doric columns, with turned mouldings and set on square pedestals. The North Reformed Church at Dumont, New Jersey, built eight years later, contains similar columns.

The columns of the upper tier were considerably longer, on a square pedestal, three feet high. These columns were cut down to a smaller square section above the cap, which extended up to a longitudinal beam giving intermediate support to the lower members of the trusses above. There were five bays along the sides and two columns supporting the central gallery.

The old stone foundations of the original columns and the mortises of the gallery lintel into which they were doweled and pinned were discovered and photographed during the course of demolition. Samples of the columns and typical members of the gallery and roof timbers, together with other characteristic structural and decorative items, were preserved for future examination. The most interesting of these will be preserved for display in the proposed Church Museum.

LECTURE ROOM, CHAPEL AND PARISH HOUSE

Records on these various buildings are not clear. As far as can be ascertained, a "lecture room" for the use of the church was built in 1813 on Washington Street, now Dickinson Street, and was called the "Old Session House." At this time, and dating from 1766, The Academy had stood on the site now occupied by the parish house, at the corner of Broad Street and Caldwell Place, formerly Murray Street. Erected originally in 1766, the Academy was burned during the Revolutionary War, along with the other buildings in the neighborhood. It was rebuilt at about the same time that the new church was erected.

In 1835 the famous Academy, where both Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr had been students, was given up, and the church took over the building to house the Sunday School and for other parish activities. The Sunday School had been started in 1814 by the Rev. John MacDowell, pastor at that time.

Sometime in the 1860's, during the pastorate of the Rev. Everard Kempshall, the building was remodeled into a brick structure with twin brick towers. This building was usually known as "the chapel."

In 1915 this edifice, after fifty or more years of continuous service was considered inadequate. It was demolished a year later to make way for the present "parish house," as it came to be known, erected in 1917.

THE TORNADO OF 1899

The exterior of the church, which had suffered no architectural changes since its completion in 1793, was notably altered by the destruction of the spire in the tornado of 1899. When the spire was replaced a few years later, the proportions were slightly altered and the height was increased. The design of the railing at the foot of the spire was changed from a Chinese fret design to vertical balusters.





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June 25, 1946

THE FIRE OF 1946

The wooden portions of the tower above the square brick portion, the entire roof, and the interior of the church were destroyed by fire on June 25, 1946. During the summer of 1947 the major part of the debris was removed after careful measurement and check of all members not burned beyond recognition. The exterior brick walls, which were still standing, were tested and found to be sufficiently sound to justify keeping them virtually intact. Part of the rear south wall was removed to permit removal of the debris.

During this process some of the old foundation walls were uncovered. It is anticipated that future excavations for the cellar may uncover further foundation work, possibly definitely establishing the outlines of the earlier churches. It has been suggested that some of the more interesting of the headstones which were removed to the rear of the church when the extension of 1851 displaced them, be moved to the interior of the church, where they will be preserved against the action of the elements.

Elizabeth, N. J.
November, 1947



Before the Tornado of 1899

ARCHITECTURAL CHRONOLOGY

The facts herein contained have been gathered from the following specific sources:

1. Church records referred to in text.
2. Paper prepared and read by Miss Mary E. Alward before the Union County Historical Society.
3. "Brief History of 250 Years," by Rev. William Force Whitaker, D.D., pastor 1907-1916.
4. "Caldwell and the Revolution," by Rev. Everard Kempshall, D.D., pastor, 1861-1898.
5. "Notes, Historical and Biographical, concerning ELIZABETH TOWN," by Rev. Nicholas Murray, D.D., pastor, 1833-1861.

1664-1666 Founding of Church; original building erected. Evidence: Deed of October 28, 1664, showing lands purchased from the Indians; homes built shortly thereafter, then Church. "Meeting Court" held in 1666. "Town Meeting House" mentioned in 1671. *Sources, 2, 3*

1724 Second building erected; no evidence of fate of first 42 x 58 ft; height of ceiling, 24 ft. Wood construction, shingle-covered, unpainted, containing galleries which did not extend all the way along the sides; a steeple, with bells. *Sources, 2, 3, 4, 5*

- 1748 Steeple ornamented with ball and weathercock.
- 1759 Town Clock placed in steeple. *Sources 1, 2*
- 1766 Building enlarged. *Sources 1, 2, 3, 4, 5*
Galleries added on sides. Pews added, filling space completely.
Source 2
- 1780 Building, destroyed by fire, January 25. *Sources 2, 3, 5*
- 1783 Work begun on foundation of new building. *Source 1*
- 1784 Floor laid. Joists and shingles added. Church bells cast. *Source 1*
- 1785 Plans for seating with location of pews. *Source 1*
- 1787 Earliest pews built. "Plastering overhead." *Source 1*
- 1788 "Gallery floor laid." Steeple built. *Source 1*
- 1789 "Plastering finished." Bells installed. *Source 1*
- 1790 Spire completed. *Source 2*
- 1793 Work on interior of church completed. *Source 5*
- 1800 Two crystal chandeliers presented by Elias Boudinot. *Source 3*
- 1814 Fourteen new pews installed in the gallery, seven on each side
of the belfry. *Source 1*
- 1822 Bell recast, having been broken in two places. *Source 1*
- 1824 New pulpit erected. Two seats on each side of old pulpit
removed to make room for new stairs up to pulpit. *Source 1*

- 1830 Two short trustees' seats in front of the gallery remodeled into one large pew for the use of the choir. Pews on either side also for the choir. A curtain put up in front of two middle seats in the gallery occupied by the choir. Cushions for the pews installed. Church contained 244 pews, 104 of which belonged to the trustees, 140 owned by individuals. Ninety of these payed double annuity and fifty single annuity. *Source 1*
- 1832 Two improved flues or chimneys for stoves added. *Source 1*
- 1836 Roof mended, ceiling repaired, outside woodwork and steeple painted. "Front wall oiled in red." *Source 1*
- 1838 Plans made for collecting material and compiling an "Historical Sketch" of church for publication. *Source 1*
- 1842 Extensive alterations: Columns repaired, stairs altered, floor relaid with new timber throughout, and three solid walls 19,570 bricks laid for contract at the wall. *Source 1*
- Replastering done. New doors cut out of the wall, fitted with curbstone, scraper, and stone coping. Church reseated with new doors and ends on first floor, with scrolls on gallery. Pews altered, narrowed, redecorated. *Source 1*
- 1851 "Building extended for 27 feet at the rear," "interior remodeled." Gothic arches installed instead of "old flat ceiling." New pillars installed supporting the galleries. *Sources 1, 2, 3*
- 1890-1891 Recess for organ added. New organ installed behind pulpit. *Sources 2, 3*

- 1896 Doors removed from pews. Pews rebuilt, widened. Timbers raised in steeple and cleaned. *Sources 1, 2*
- 1899 Spire blown from steeple by tornado, at a point just above the clock, completely overturned, and tip buried in ground in front of church. *Sources 2, 3*
- 1901 Bill for following items: "Setting window frame and inclining floor in gallery. Hanging sash and casing frame. Taking up old base and laying new base. Repairing doors, benches and trap door. Patching doors, repairing cornice on church." *Source 1*
- 1908 Pastor's room and choir room added.
- 1909 Pews re-upholstered, composite floor laid, new pulpit decoration, new stained glass windows.
- 1923 Re-wiring, new walls, organ pipes redecorated, electric control of organ installed.