

Fulton Dutch Days 2013

“Churches: Steeped In History”

FIRST REFORMED CHURCH OF FULTON



This photo shows the present sanctuary and educational unit located at 510 15th Avenue.

The history of First Reformed Church is significantly related to immigration from the Netherlands to Whiteside County in general, and Fulton in particular. The first known Dutch immigrant to investigate the “Fulton City” area was Thomas Smith in 1856. He returned to Michigan, and the following year other Dutch folk immigrated and began to write friends and relatives about settling near “Fulton City”. Soon several Dutch families had settled in the area and religious gatherings were held. In the “pre-organization” days, Folkert Dykema, Fred Sterenberg, and Garrett Nannenga helped shape and mold the spiritual life of the immigrant families. Early meetings were held at a schoolhouse located at what is now (2013) the southwest corner of 9th Avenue and 4th Street. Once a year or so the Reverend H. G. Klein would come to Fulton from Chicago, and the families would gather at the home of John Munnike for meetings, at times lasting all day and into the night. On October 28, 1866 the families organized the Dutch Reformed Church in Fulton, Illinois. The Reverend H. G. Klein guided them in their organizational meeting. The first elders were Garrett Nannenga and Fred Sterenberg, and the first deacon was John Tillema. Two lots were purchased and a wood frame building erected in Blake’s Addition, Lots 5 and 6, Block 4. The building was dedicated December 19, 1869. This location is what is now (2013) the southeast corner of 19th Avenue and 4th Street, the site of the Harbor Cafe.

The Dutch influx and the natural growth of families continued, and the first building required an addition which was dedicated September 12, 1877. In 1885, a city block bounded by what are now 5th Street and 6th Street, and 15th Avenue (at that time Genesee) and 16th Avenue was purchased. A new, larger wooden frame structure was built on the north half of the block, and the existing home on the block was used as parsonage. In 1886 the church body known as the Dutch Reformed Church in Fulton incorporated legally and it received the ordinal number “First” at that time, becoming the First Reformed Church of Fulton, Illinois. Although there have been building alterations and additions, the church building has been located on the same block since that time.

Over the years, several congregations have branched from First Reformed Church. Significant differences arose within the overall Dutch Reformed Church in the 1880’s centered mainly around pastors, worship, and church supported private schooling, and resulted in two denominations; the Reformed Church, and the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). In February 1886, the First Christian Reformed Church of Fulton withdrew and was established. Increasing numbers in geographic areas led to other church bodies organizing. In 1896, the Ebenezer Reformed Church was established in Morrison, IL. In 1909, rural churches were established in nearby locations; Spring Valley Reformed is located north-east of Fulton in Ustick Township, and Newton Zion Reformed is located south-east near Erie, IL in Newton Township.

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Two congregations formed for other reasons: in 1916, 54 communicant members and their families (180 people total) and Pastor Martin Koster withdrew and incorporated Second Reformed Church of Fulton, desiring to conduct worship services in English rather than Dutch. In 1929, Trinity Reformed Church of Fulton organized.

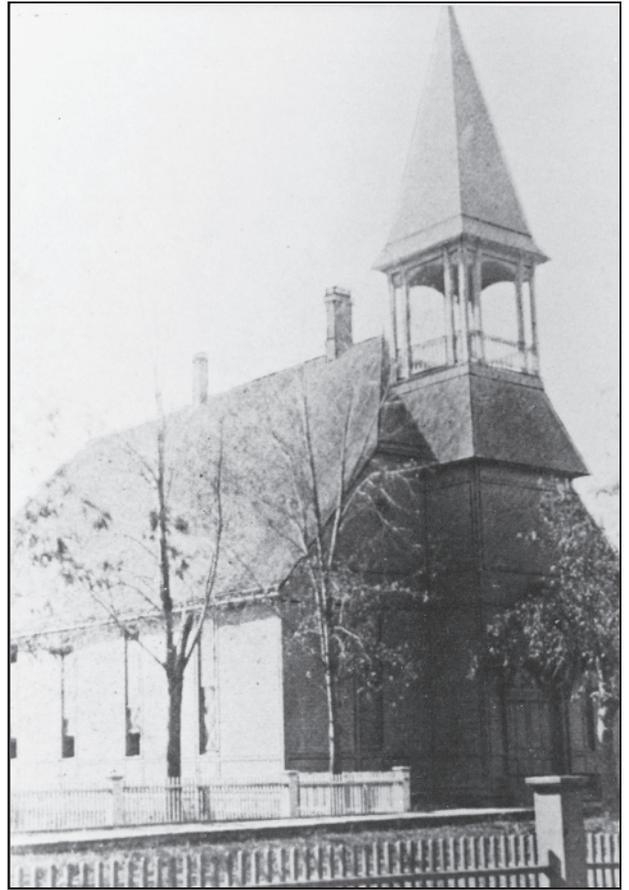
The Reformed Church and the Christian Reformed Church have shared values concerning care of religious community members. A Dutch saying is "In unity there is strength." In 1876, in response to a community need, twenty-nine plots were purchased from the Fulton Cemetary by the Dutch Reformed Church for the use of members. Over the years, some 157 (identified) were buried on these lots in unmarked graves, with the last recorded burial occurring on July 13, 1956.

The location of the original church building (19th Ave and 4th Street) was used from 1892 to 1952 as a "poor house". It began as a single dwelling, but was later expanded to serve two families. In 1958, discussions began around the possibility of constructing a "home for the aged" of the community. As a result, Harbor Crest was completed and an open house was held May 30, 1966. The local churches continue to be involved on the directing board for the facility.

First Reformed has had a long history of involvement and support of missionaries and mission activities, including supporting local members serving in the Phillipines, both long term and short term. Most recently, mission activities and work trips to Alaska have been supported by the congregation.

Throughout the years, the members at First Reformed Church have sought to glorify God and act as His people, as best they were led to understand. Today, seeking for God's direction continues as we embrace the mission of "Loving Jesus and Others".

Information gathered from church records, anniversary histories, and a historical presentation prepared by long time church secretary Millie Heun. Submitted by Carol and Eric Janvrin.



First Church building on 15th Avenue (Genesee Street) was built in circa 1885. It was originally named the Dutch Reformed Church.

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