

1701 Quadra

932 Balmoral

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LANDMARKS

Presbyterian pioneer hustled to organize his flock

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When the Rev. John Hall of the Irish Presbyterian Church arrived in Victoria on Sunday, April 14, 1861, there was no one to welcome him. As a missionary he had to search out others of the faith. There were already two Anglican churches and one church each for the Roman Catholic, Congregational and Methodist groups.

The first service was held a week later with 30 worshippers in attendance at Moore's Music Hall, on the south side of Yates Street at Langley Street, but the First Presbyterian Church of Vancouver Island really began Feb. 3, 1862, when 14 men and two women met at Smith's Hall on Government Street, opposite W. & J. Wilson's. Later that year they purchased a lot for \$1,100 at the northeast corner of Blanshard and Pandora. Thanks partly to outspoken Amor de Cosmos and to Bishop Hills, who refused to accept funds, the colonial government ceased to provide financial aid to churches.

Two church trustees, architects John Wright and John H. Sanders, designed the new church, which was completed at a cost of \$6,000 in October, 1863. The nave measured 30 feet by 70 feet and the spire had a height of 100 feet.

With his mission completed, the Rev. John Hall left for New Zealand. Unfortunately, a schism developed over church dogma when his successor, the Rev. T. Somerville, and two-thirds of the congregation split away, leading to the formation of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church. This resulted in the closing of the First Presbyterian Church on Pandora, opposite the Jewish Synagogue, in 1867.

When Christ Church Cathedral burned on Oct. 1, 1869, the Anglicans accepted the offer of the trustees of First Presbyterian Church to use their vacant place of worship until the new cathedral was completed in 1872. Again, a schism in the Anglican church in October, 1874, saw Dean Cridge and his followers using the First Presbyterian Church until the Church of Our Lord was completed in 1876. Later that year, the First Presbyterian Church was opened again under the ministership of the Rev. John Reid, who brought many of the old congregation back together. Younger and more vigorous than most, the members became well known for their basketball team and prize-winning choir group.

After a fire in 1883 which destroyed part of the church, architect John Teague supervised the reconstruction, but the church became inadequate for a growing congregation and was sold. The building was used variously as a public market, auto paint shop, and a second-hand store before it was demolished in 1928.

Meantime, the last service was started May 11, 1913, at the old Pandora Avenue Church and concluded in the new Quadra Street building which architect J. C. Malcolm Keith designed.

With the union of the churches in 1925, this Presbyterian church became the First United Church of Victoria. After surviving fires and changing times it is now celebrating its 125th anniversary.

Geoffrey Castle is president of the Victoria section of the B.C. Historical Federation.

