

Our Churches' Histories

The history of the building of Benton's churches all have their early ties to Dennis Murphy, son of one of Benton's first permanent settlers. During the first federal government land sale in 1835, Dennis Murphy acquired the land on which Benton now sits. Later Murphy generously donated land to each of Benton's churches—land on which the Primitive Methodist Church, the St. Patrick Catholic Church, and the United Methodist Church stand today. Were it not for Murphy's generosity, the history of the building of Benton's churches might have been written differently.

Benton Bible Church

(Formerly the Primitive Methodist Church)

Baptists were the first religious group to hold organized worship services in what is now Benton. Led at that time by lay ministers, the congregation met outdoors near Coon Creek, a small creek located down the hill from the present red brick church. In the early 1800s, Primitive Methodists moved to this area from England, and the two groups later merged.

Benton's Primitive Methodist Church was formally organized in 1847 by Rev. Thomas Robinson. The congregation at that time was relatively small, consisting of just a few members and their families. Rev. Robinson's church services were initially held in members' homes.

In 1852 the first Primitive Methodist Church was built in Benton. A small, white-frame church, it stood where the present church stands. That early church was named "Happy Jack's Church," for ardent supporter and local minister, John Winder. The church's members worshipped in the frame church until 1863 when it was destroyed by a fire that was said to have been intentionally set. The Civil War was in full swing at that time, and many people in the area had Southern roots. Some of these Southerners fostered resentment against the North for a variety of economic and political reasons. There were those who believed that it was the "Copperheads"—those Southern sympathizers—who

burned “Happy Jack’s Church” to the ground. According to historians, there were also rumors at the time that the Catholics might have had something to do with the fire’s origin. Disavowing those suspicions, Father Mazzuchelli—priest of Benton’s St. Patrick Catholic Church—gave a donation of \$25 to help rebuild the Primitive Methodist Church. That donation was sizeable in that it equaled four months’ worth of offertory collections.

In 1864 the red brick church that stands today was built on the same site as the original frame church. At a cost of \$5,000, it measured 36’ by 36’ and was made of bricks



hauled by team and wagon from Galena, Illinois. *(The picture above shows the 1864 church with the 1905 vestibule addition.)*

To raise money for construction of the church, bricks were sold at \$1 each and donors’ names were carved into them—names that are weatherworn but still evident today. The new church was dedicated on August 21, 1864. The following year, J.V. Trenery became the first minister of the church, ministers having come from the Rocky Ford circuit some years prior to that.

Furniture for the new brick church was selected and paid for by a prominent member of the congregation. The church’s pews had doors on each end that were held closed with a fastener, and pew rental was \$6 a year. At that time, there were just two aisles in the church—one on either side of the row of pews.

In 1903 ladies of the church formed the Martha Washington Sewing Circle. The ladies met every two weeks to sew, quilt, and do various other things that helped the church, both financially and socially. The ladies helped raise \$200 to pay for the addition of a vestibule to the front of the church, and in 1905, the vestibule was completed. The group also purchased at least two of the church’s early parsonages.



In 1940 there was a push to combine the Primitive Methodist Church with the town's Methodist Episcopal Church (now the United Methodist Church). There was a great deal of disagreement, and as a result, nineteen active members left the church. A number of those members were descendents of the church's earliest founders.

For many years, Sunday School was held on Sunday afternoons. In the mid-1940s, however, it began being held before Sunday worship services in the morning, a practice that continues today.

A frame addition was added to the brick church in the early 1950s and housed Sunday School classrooms, a kitchen, and a fellowship parlor. The red brick church served the congregation well for over 140 years; however, because the building is surrounded by cemetery, building growth was impossible at that location. Fortunately the old public school and gymnasium across the street became available, and in January 2003, that large building and its adjoining grounds were purchased by the church. The hard-working members of the church

embarked on a renovation process that is currently ongoing. Some of the classrooms began to be used for the church's resale shop as

early as the summer of 2003, with worship services being moved to one of the building's classrooms in 2004.

Subsequently, the gymnasium underwent renovation as the church's sanctuary, and with its completion in 2006, worship services were moved upstairs to the First Avenue level of the building.



For most of its existence, the church was known as the Primitive Methodist Church. In 1998 members of the church's congregation voted to change that name to the Benton Bible Church. That name is now spelled out in large, green letters across the front of the building, above the church's entrance.

In addition to the church itself, the Benton Bible Church includes additional community and church-related service businesses and outreach programs. The Community Closet Thrift Shop, the Sacred Grounds Coffee House, and the church's food pantry are all run under the auspices of the church. For additional information, please call 759-2001.

(Sources: "1847-1947 Benton Primitive Methodist Centennial Program;" various copies of vertical-file documents; documents from Swindler's Ridge Museum; articles reprinted in the *Benton Advocate 100th Anniversary Edition*; and information supplied by members of the Benton Bible Church. Night photo courtesy of Dave Driscoll.)

St. Patrick Catholic Church



The history of Benton's St. Patrick Catholic Church is notably entwined with that of its founder, pioneer priest Father Samuel Mazzuchelli. Father Mazzuchelli, who designed and built the Catholic Churches of Benton, served the parish for the last fifteen years of his life, and is buried in St. Patrick Catholic Church

Cemetery. In 1993 Father Mazzuchelli was declared venerable by Pope John Paul II, the first step toward sainthood. If the venerable Father Mazzuchelli is declared a saint, his gravesite in Benton could become a national shrine.



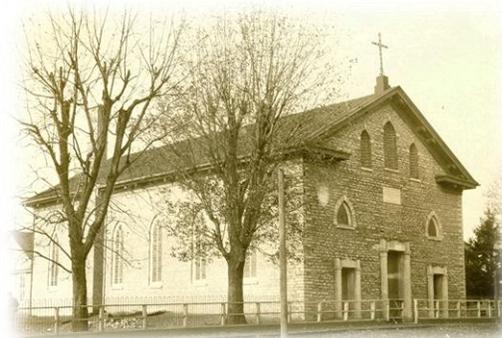
[Father Mazzuchelli](#) was born of wealthy parents in Milan, Italy, in 1806, the 16th of 17 children. He entered the

Dominican order in 1823 and in 1827—at the age of 22—came from Italy to America. Following his 1830 ordination in Cincinnati, he was assigned to be a missionary priest for the Northwest Territory.

Later Bishop Rosati of St. Louis temporarily assigned him to the missions of Galena and Dubuque, missions that had been without a pastor. That temporary assignment led to a permanent one, and Father Mazzuchelli became the pastor of a “mostly Irish” congregation. The congregation affectionately named him “Father Matthew Kelly,” their Irish version of his Italian name. Father Mazzuchelli was highly admired and earned the respect of all to whom he ministered, including those in his missions, as well as settlers, miners, and the area’s native tribes.

Father Mazzuchelli was not only a priest but also a builder of churches, schools, and civic buildings. He designed and built 25 churches in the upper Mississippi Valley area—including Benton’s St. Patrick Catholic Church and New Diggings’ St. Augustine Church.

In 1845 Father Mazzuchelli built Benton’s first Catholic Church, the St. James. The St. James was a frame church that stood where the present-day church stands. A rectory and stable were built next to the church in 1849-1850—the stable becoming home to Father’s horse, Napoleon.



Father Mazzuchelli designed and began work on Benton’s stone Catholic Church in 1852. The stone church was built around the frame St. James Church, allowing services to continue uninterrupted as long as

possible. With all but the front stone wall erected, the frame building inside was moved across the street, and the front of the stone church was then completed. The church—the same church used today by St. Patrick parishioners—was completed and dedicated in 1854. The original frame St. James—moved to where the Village Park is located today—became the St. Clara Female Academy (later known as the

Benton Female Academy). The building was altered to include the front addition of a veranda; tall, white pillars; and the gold inscription “St. Clara Female Academy” stately displayed in large letters across the top. Additional acres of land were purchased for the academy, and the school was ultimately surrounded by large shade trees and gardens, with a grapevine arbor in front.



Girls enrolled in the academy took courses in religious study, science, history, English, French, Italian, music and—as stated in the catalogue—“every study suitable to their sex.” Father Mazzuchelli was an ardent believer in the study of science and had a modern, complete lab that rivaled those of the finest schools—a lab for which he purchased physics and astronomy equipment from New York. Students of the academy were taught by Father Mazzuchelli, the Dominican Sisters, and by lay assistants from Galena. Phoebe Tierney, who arrived in Benton in 1848, was among the first students attending St. Clara. Before her marriage to James Kearns in 1864, she taught for a short time at the academy. It is conceivable that other girls, who upon completion of their studies, might have taught at St. Clara’s, as well.

With an increasing number of additional students, Father Mazzuchelli planned a new school and convent. Work began on a three-story limestone structure surrounding the wooden school. The addition was only about half completed when, on February 23, 1864, Father Mazzuchelli died of pneumonia. Shortly after his death, St. Clara Academy was relocated to Sinsinawa Mound, 12-13 miles away on Cty. Rd. Z between Hazel Green and Dubuque. The convent of

the old academy in Benton was used as a mission home until it was destroyed by fire in 1896. The land on which the academy and convent stood was sold to the village and subsequently became the Village Park.

Father Mazzuchelli's limestone church is the same church parishioners worship in today, many of them descendants of the church's original parishioners. The exterior of St. Patrick Catholic Church remained unaltered until 1922, when a



generous donation by George Grotkin helped to build the current entrance and belfry.

In 1969 the interior of the church was redecorated and a new front altar was added. The restoration company for the project was the Murphy Company of Dubuque, Iowa. Father DeRocher was St. Patrick's parish priest at that time. John C, Kaiser Restoration of Dubuque completed a subsequent renovation in 2001, when Father Cy Weisensel was parish priest. The renovation was very extensive and included painting and trim work; replacing the old, damaged wainscoting; refinishing all the pews; and installing air-conditioning, fans, and four new furnaces.

Like its churches, St. Patrick rectories are also filled with history. The earliest rectory was built in 1849. The original rectory served Father Mazzuchelli and was subsequently replaced by a larger one. At that time, the small, frame rectory was moved to a location on Bean Street and became home to a number of families throughout the years. In 1989 George and Joanne Pickett spearheaded a drive to

purchase the building, remove the section that had been added to the original structure, and move the rectory back to



St. Patrick Church grounds. The original rectory was restored and is now preserved as the Mazzuchelli Rectory Museum.

The parish's second church rectory was a large two-story building with an upper and lower porch extending the full length of the parish house. This rectory, in use until 1911 or 1912, was moved a short distance away on Cty. Rd. J South. It became the private residence of several families and was ultimately destroyed by fire



on New Year's Eve of 1962. The current rectory, built in 1912, is the third parish house built for the church.

Many priests have faithfully served St. Patrick Catholic Church since Father Mazzuchelli. Today's shortage of priests, however, has resulted in changes in the way many churches are currently served. Some Catholic churches must now be "linked"—a term used when two neighboring parishes are



served by one priest. St. Patrick's is now linked with Cuba City's St. Rose Church, with Father Flanagan serving both parishes. Father Lenars was St. Patrick's last full-time parish priest.

(Sources include: "St. Patrick Catholic Church Directory, circa 1972;" *Always on Call: Samuel Mazzuchelli of the Order of Preachers*; various copies of vertical-file documents; documents from Swindler's Ridge Museum; articles reprinted in the *Benton Advocate 100th Anniversary Edition*; and information supplied by members of St. Patrick Catholic Church. Winter night photo courtesy of Dave Driscoll. St. Clara Academy photo courtesy of Sinsinawa Dominican Archives.)

United Methodist Church (Originally the Methodist Episcopal Church)

The Methodist religion was originally founded in 1729 in Oxford, England, by a group of University of Oxford students who routinely assembled for worship and study. Among that group was preacher of social consciousness, John Wesley, considered to be the founder of Methodism. Known initially as the "Holy Club," they were subsequently referred to as "Methodists," a name given as the result of the "methodical" manner in which they performed their church practices and religious obligations. Immigrants from England and Ireland ultimately brought the religion to New York, Philadelphia, and Maryland in 1766. Missionaries and new immigrants carried the movement to other locations in the country.

Methodism was particularly suited to the ways of the early pioneers in wilderness regions of the United States. During those years, circuit riders were, oftentimes, the only link a pioneer settlement had with the outside world. Circuit riders performed marriages, baptisms, and funerals, many of which had to be postponed until the rider came back around the circuit again. Methodist congregations were born out of the pioneer resilience of that time.

Benton's early Methodists had come from England to mine and later to farm. They organized the first "Benton Methodist Class" and became part of the Council Hill circuit in 1844. That group was later transferred to the Hazel Green and Providence circuit; however, in 1859 the Benton circuit was created, with Enoch Tasker being appointed its first pastor.

Early Methodist services were not conducted by a minister but by local "preachers"—ordinary men (and sometimes

women) of the area who, although not trained in ministry, had deep spiritual convictions and were able to inspire others through their religious zeal.

Because early records of Benton's Methodist Church are somewhat fragmented in nature, church historians have held to the arbitrary convention that the church's origin would be dated from the earliest record showing documented payments for the construction of an organized church. Consequently, the date of origin is recorded as August 5, 1848, when the church purchased the Baptist Meeting House for their services. By 1847 or 1848, the Baptist congregation in Benton had decreased considerably, and they no longer had a need for their meeting house. The meeting house, which stood where the present church stands, was purchased by the Methodists and



modified to become the congregation's first formal church building. The alterations to the building cost \$27.25 and were paid by William H. Calvert, one of the organizers of the church. It is this documented financial transaction that was used to date the origin of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The first church had two doors in the front; one entrance was used exclusively by the females and the other used only by males. Once inside, the men sat on one side of the aisle, and the women sat on the other. Records indicate that a cemetery was begun behind the church in 1863. Burials prior to that period were made in Providence, a small enclave located in the country between Benton and Hazel Green on what is now Jefferson Road.

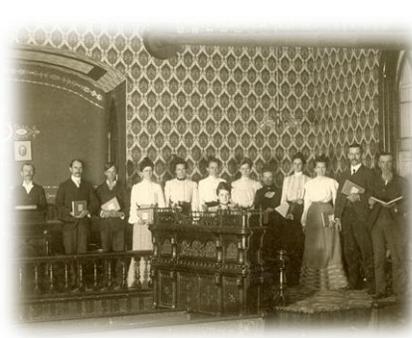
The first church served the congregation for 35 years, and in 1883, the building was moved across the street and used as a private residence. It was later moved to the corner of Galena and Frontier streets and has been home to several Benton families since that time.

Beginning in 1880, church members started raising funds to build a new church, and in 1883 subscriptions totaling \$2,075.30 were used to begin construction of the present

Methodist Church. Other fundraising efforts at that time included a “pink tea” and an accompanying program presented by Emma Winder and Carrie Calvert, as well as the collection of 10¢ per person to pay for the church’s shingles. Names of those contributing to the shingle project were recorded and—along with a poem written by Esther Calvert and James Murphy—were sealed in a bottle and buried in the church’s masonry. The bell for the new church was purchased from the Baltimore Bell Foundry at a cost of \$105.56. Dedication services for the newly constructed Methodist Episcopal Church took place on October 8, 1883. Sometime during that year, the Ladies’ Sewing Society was formed, helping to raise funds for the church through sewing and quilting projects. (The Ladies’ Sewing Society went through several name changes throughout the history of the church, including the Guild, the Ladies’ Aid Society, the Women’s Society of Christian Service, and the United Methodist Women.)

When the Methodist Episcopal Church was built in 1883, it included only what is the present-day sanctuary. High wainscoting covered the walls, and the ceiling held two chandeliers for kerosene lamps. There was a double row of pews down the center of the church, with a single row of pews on each side. Two wood-burning stoves furnished much-needed heat in the winter and were stoked by wood from large wood boxes behind each stove. The windows on the exterior of the church were originally flanked by long, gray shutters.

In 1898 (although one history shows 1889 instead), interior renovations were made, and a parlor and kitchen were added to the church. Matt Murphy, son of the first permanent settler in Benton and donor for the building of the Lafayette



County Courthouse, gave \$500 for the church’s renovations; the Ladies’ Sewing Society also made a \$500 donation.

Additional renovations totaling \$2,500 were made in 1906 when the entrance was changed to its present location, and a new belfry and bell were installed. A new altar rail, new pews,



and the installation of carpeting were also part of the renovation, as was the addition of the church's first furnace. The stained-glass windows in the church were gifts donated by families of the congregation and honor founders and early leaders of the church. Ten years later, in 1916, the present pipe organ was purchased at a cost of \$2,600.

The fifteen years from 1907 to 1922 were part of what some refer to as the church's "Golden Era." The congregation had grown substantially between those years, due in large part to the prosperity of the mining industry in the area. Two worship services were held each Sunday, both being "well attended" and, oftentimes, requiring that the parlor be used to seat additional members of the congregation. The church's choir (originally organized in 1871) and the church's Sunday School memberships were quite large at that time; additional prayer and class meetings were attended regularly by church members; and organizations such as the Ladies' Sewing Society, the Epworth League, and the Junior League were all flourishing. Spanning part of that time period, too, was World War I, and 23 members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, both men and women, served their country in the armed forces—all returning home safely.

The Methodist Church itself had remained much the same from its 1906 building renovations until a major renovation was completed in 1992. Between those years, there were several minor repairs and normal upkeep and maintenance of the building, including re-lettering the names on the stained-glass windows in 1971. Following an October 1961 vote, the old parsonage was sold and a new one built next to the church. A major renovation and construction project took place in 1992 through the generosity of a large bequest by Peter Allen, a former Benton resident and member of the

church who had moved to New York and had become a very successful businessman. The 1992 renovation included



substantial construction and remodeling, including the addition of several classrooms and meeting rooms, a pastor's office, new restrooms, a new kitchen, and restoration of the church's sanctuary.

The most recent change to the church is the 2006 addition of new front doors, a gift made in honor of Ilene Cherry by her family.

From the date of its origin in 1848 to over a century later, the Methodist Episcopal Church had retained the same name. In 1968, however, that name was changed to the United Methodist Church; locals, on the other hand, have always referred to it simply as "the white church."

(Sources include: Microsoft Encyclopedia Encarta ("Methodism"); "The Methodist Episcopal Church of Benton, Wisconsin 1848-1933;" *United Methodist Church 1848-1973*; "The United Methodist Church 1848-1998;" various copies of vertical-file documents; documents from Swindler's Ridge Museum; articles reprinted in the *Benton Advocate 100th Anniversary Edition*; and information supplied by members of the United Methodist Church.)