

First Presbyterian closes its doors

Historic landmark at Main and Scotland ends religious services after 291 years

By Chris Sykes
Staff Writer

After a history which spanned nearly three centuries, the First Presbyterian Church in Orange has hosted its final service.

Although there were almost 50 people filling the pews during Sunday, most of them were members or former church members who had regularly attended services at the Orange landmark. Many had moved to other areas and churches, but they all said they came back because they wanted to pay their respects to a historically significant institution.

Even though the church was closing, they said it will live in their memories.

"I was an elder in this church up until four or five years ago, when I moved my membership," said Calvin Gibson, who attended the last service at the church with his wife, Lillian. "I don't live in Orange any more, but I'm still a Presbyterian elder. What has happened to this church is that a lot of the older members, like myself, move away. If there is not a program to attract young families, there's no room for growth."

This lack of growth, Gibson said, is what doomed First Presbyterian. He said it is a somewhat sad occasion for both him and his wife because they were married in the church. Now that it will no longer be in operation, it is the end of an era in Orange.

That doesn't mean that the larger church that is the Presbyterian faith is not going to go on. Gibson said it means it will happen somewhere else even though the principles and rites will stay the same.

The fate of the church building and grounds, at Main Street and Scotland Road, is less certain, though.

"It's always sad to see a congregation disband, but this is not the only congregation that has voted to disband," said Gibson. "The building does not belong to this congregation. It belongs to the denomination. The Board of Trustees of the Presbytery of Newark will make a decision on what will happen to it."

That means that the future of Charles Christian, the custodian of the church building and grounds, is also uncertain. He said he has worked at the church for the past 20 years.

Christian added he was sad to see its closure, and not only because it might mean that he will be out of a job soon.

"There were four or five more churches in the Orange area that have closed their doors in the past year," said Christian. "Those congregations disbanded and merged together to form the United Presbyterian Church of West Orange in the former St. Cloud Presbyterian Church building. They held their first service on Easter Sunday this year."

Christian agreed with the Gibsons that the "death" of any church is always a sad thing, but he said its demise has been a long time coming. He said the writing was on the wall when it came to the church's fate once people and families like the Gibsons began moving out of Orange and their ranks were not replaced by newcomers, who brought their own religious beliefs and institutions with them.

The membership exodus became so bad, Christian said, that there had not been a full-time pastor at First Presbyterian for four years. During that time, he said, a series of guest ministers and invited speakers filled in for the dwindling congregation by giving sermons when services were held.

That pattern continued up to and including Sunday's final service that the Rev. Herbert Huffmon presided over. He gave a sermon, "Only One Thing is Necessary," about the fact that faith in God and His plan for His people is the only thing that is important, not the transitory buildings and structures that people construct to facilitate their gathering and meeting.

"My family have been members of this church since the 1920s, so we're going on three or four generations here at First Presbyterian Church," said Stephen McNally. "It's a very sad day for all of us. We saw the end coming with the issues, with membership and monetary considerations, and it's just been a tough day for everybody involved. It's a difficult transition for me because this church was our home. I was brought up in this church; my parents were married in this church, and I was married in this church. It's a rough road, but spiritually I think everybody will recover. The building will be gone, but the congregation lives on."

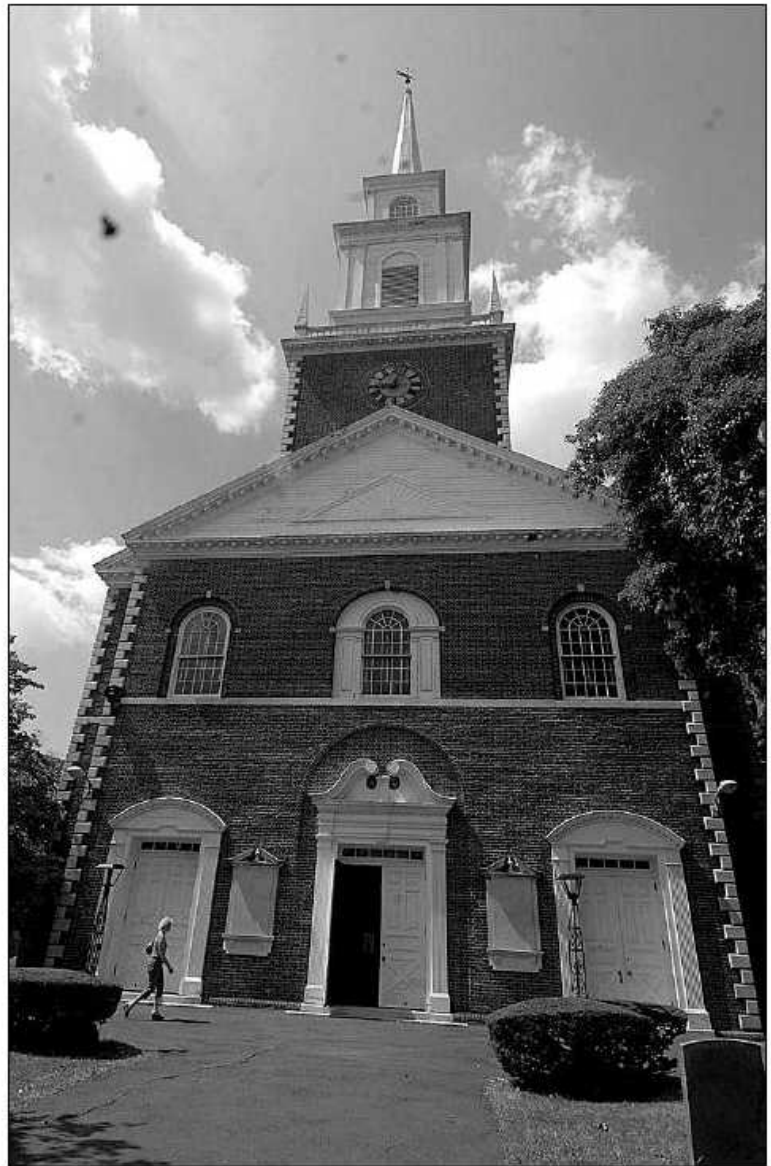


Photo By Barbara Kokkalis

A congregant of the First Presbyterian Church of Orange walks toward the front doors Sunday morning as the church hosted its final service. The church, at Main Street and Scotland Road, had been active for 291 years.