

West Union Baptist Church (Washington County)

By Liz Carter

The West Union Baptist Church, established in 1853, is one of the earliest surviving examples of a pioneer-era church in Oregon. Located in the unincorporated community of West Union in Washington County, north of the Sunset Highway and adjacent to Hillsboro, the meetinghouse is recognized as a prime example of the Classical Revival church buildings built in early Oregon.

Founded by members of the Great Migration in 1843, the West Union congregation gathered in 1844 in the log cabin of David Thomas Lenox and Louisa Lenox to form the first Baptist church west of the Rocky Mountains. Eventually, according to the National Register nomination, the congregation “invited families from throughout the area to form the Willamette Baptist Association, the oldest Baptist association on the West Coast.” Until the church was built, the small group met in members’ houses.

Although a building committee was organized to arrange for the construction of a church building as early as 1848, construction was delayed until 1853. That year, David Lenox offered land on part of his land claim for a church building and burying ground. Subscription papers were circulated and funds were raised for a 30-by-40-foot building constructed of lumber milled in Milwaukie. The contract was let to Forest Grove carpenter William Kane, a New York native who had come to Oregon in 1850. He worked with church members to construct the building for a little over \$1,500.

The West Union Baptist Church is an elegant example of the Classical Revival style applied to the simple meetinghouse form that was common in the eastern United States. The building retains its original belfry, windows, weatherboard siding, doors, and fine eave detailing, as well as interior features. Still surrounded on three sides by farmland, the setting evokes an earlier time.

Dedicated on Christmas Day 1853 by Reverend Ezra Fisher, the church served parishioners in the region for thirty years. The congregation was dissolved in 1878, the National Register nomination reports, and for several decades the building “stood idle, with shutters over the windows, its well-being as a historic structure cared for by the Oregon Baptist Convention.” The church became active again in the 1980s, and regular services are now held in the building. The adjacent cemetery of about three hundred interments is one of the oldest in Oregon.

The West Union Baptist Church was included in the Historic American Buildings survey in 1934, one of forty-seven buildings and the only church to be recorded at that time. It was listed on the National Register in 1974. The Oregon Baptist Convention owns the building and maintains the building, cemetery, and grounds.

Sources

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The Oregon Encyclopedia

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