

DR. ARMITAGE'S CHURCH.

THE FIFTH AVENUE BAPTIST CHURCH AND ITS HISTORY.

THE BAPTIST DENOMINATION IN THIS CITY—

THE OLD NORFOLK-STREET EDIFICE—

THE PRESENT CHURCH—SKETCH OF DR.
ARMITAGE—THE SERMON YESTERDAY.

The history of the Baptist Churches in this City may be said to commence with the arrival from England, in 1709, of Rev. Mr Wickenden, the first clergyman of that denomination who settled within the borders of the State. This was two years after the first preaching of a Presbyterian minister in the Dutch Church in Garden street, and thirteen after the erection of the first Trinity Church on its present site. In those days, the popular idea of religious tolerance was a confused one, though the dimness of vision does not appear to have been confined to any one Church or party. It was the fault of the times, not of the people. Mr. Wickenden had hardly delivered his first sermon before he was arrested and imprisoned, on the ground that he had no royal license permitting him to preach. He was discharged after three months' confinement, but his name is not mentioned in any of the subsequent records of the time. In 1712, Rev. Mr. Whitman moved from his home in New-England and settled in New-York. By him services were celebrated in the house of a Mr. Ayres, who, roused by the example of his Pastor, himself soon afterward became a preacher. In this primitive little church it was at one time suggested that the converts be baptized at night, for fear of molestation by the mob. The majority, however, opposed this, the result being the carrying of their complaints by Mr. Ayres and several other members to Mr. Burnet, the Governor of the province. Fortunately a Hanoverian King sat on the throne of Great Britain. Had the Stuart interest been in the ascendent there would have been little hope for them. The Governor heard their grievances with patience, and then promised them the royal protection to the fullest extent, a pledge which he caused to be carried out to the letter. At the first baptism, afterward, he appeared at the water-side with several friends, and took much interest in the ceremony. Henceforth the infant church was permitted to dwell in peace, and full religious liberty for the first time established in the colony. The first church was organized in September, 1724, with Mr. Ayres as Pastor. Shortly afterward a small meeting-house was erected on "Golden Hill," a few hundred feet from the Baptist Church, which existed in Gold street within the memory of many of our readers. At the end of a ministry of seven years Mr. Ayres resigned, subsequently removing to Newport, R. I., where he died. A gentleman named Stephens occupied his place for a few months, but, the congregation having become dispersed, the church organization was abandoned and the property sold. Services were then kept up at short intervals in private houses, Rev. Benjamin Miller, the clergyman at Scotch Plains, N. J., coming down to the City (an hour's ride now, but a day's journey then,) as often as possible. Once in every three months he administered the Lord's Supper at the house of some prominent member. In 1759 a church of scanty dimensions was erected on Gold street, and three years later, in 1762, the first regular society was formed under the title of "The First Baptist Church." This organization still exists, and is one of the largest Baptist Churches in this section of the State, and the second in size in the City.

The next in direct line of succession to the Fifth Avenue Church was that on Fayette (afterward Oliver) street, founded in 1791 by members from the parent body. From this developed a movement which in 1809 resulted in the formation of the Mulberry Street Church, of which Rev. Archibald Maclay, formerly a Presbyterian minister, was Pastor. When this gentleman joined the Baptists the greater part of his flock followed him. The number of members in the new organization was now 737. From this was formed in 1823 the Stanton Street Church, with originally but twenty-five members, over which Rev. Samuel Eastman presided. By 1840 this small beginning had increased to nearly 700, and it became necessary for a portion to colonize. A committee, consisting of John N. Wyckoff, Richard C. Ackerly, James Cowan, Abial Miles, and David Ludlam, was appointed to select a location for the new edifice. A church on Norfolk street, corner of Broome, formerly occupied by a Christian society, was found vacant, and purchased for \$12,000. The new society, on setting up for itself, contained 361 members, many of them leading ones in the old society. Rev. Geo. Benedict, their clergyman in Stanton street, was chosen Pastor, and the name of the Norfolk Street Baptist Church adopted. This was on the 13th of February, 1841. New-York contained a population of 300,000. The locality around Eighth street was known as the "Bowery Village." Union square did not exist; Madison square was beyond the limits of the imagination. As for Fifth, Madison, and Lexington avenues, they had not been laid out even on paper. Crooked and narrow streets were the rule, broad and straight avenues the exception. Comparatively few buildings were lit with gas. In the best houses Crotton water had just supplanted the old-fashioned wells and pumps. The Hudson River Road had not been begun, and but a few miles of Erie track stretched to the westward of Jersey City.

At the session of the Hudson River Association in the Summer of 1844, Mr. Benedict was elected Moderator. His labors, covering altogether a period of twenty-five years, seventeen in New-York, and seven in the pulpit of the Norfolk Street Church, were abundantly blessed, and though disabled by illness for a considerable portion of his last charge, he had the satisfaction of seeing the church over which he presided one of the most flourishing of its denomination in the City. But it was a deceitful security.

In June, 1848, a heavy misfortune befell the society. In that month its church edifice, then a very valuable piece of property, was burned to the ground, and the members were left for a time without a place in which to worship. Meantime the failing health of their Pastor had compelled his resignation, so that they were now without either church or clergyman. In this emergency the parent society came to the relief of the unfortunate congregation with a kindly tender of the use of their basement as a place of meeting. This was thankfully accepted, and, for a time, the services conducted in what had once been the lecture-room of the united societies. Still another blow was in store for them. Within four months after the disastrous fire which had destroyed the church, death put an end to the sufferings of their beloved pastor. His character was laborious, conscientious, and unselfish beyond that even of the most devoted. The close of his life was darkened by suffering which would have overwhelmed a less intrepid spirit, but to the end his patience never wavered nor his trust in the Saviour failed. A self-denying Pastor, a tender-hearted friend

and an ardent sympathizer with the weak and down-trodden of every name and race, his memory is cherished by the Fifth Avenue Church as one of the most honored in its annals. Previous to his death he had already designated Rev. Mr. Armitage as his successor, a choice was confirmed by a unanimous vote of congregation and a committee, with Hon. George H. Andrews as Chairman, appointed to visit him at Albany and present the call. On receiving from Mr. Armitage an assurance of acceptance, they withdrew, that gentleman returning them a few days later. His installation occurred early in the ensuing month, his first sermon being preached on a Sunday morning in July, 1848. For several years after the commencement of his pastorate the projected church was still *in esse*, though at the close of the second year well under way. Dedicatory services were held in the large auditorium of the completed building in January, 1850. It was, and is now, situated on the east side of Essex street, between Broome and Grand, a handsome brown-stone building in the Gothic style, with square towers at the sides, and a seating capacity of nearly 1,000. But by this time a large portion of the congregation had participated in the general migration. Comparatively few of the old members residing in the neighborhood were left, and the future interest of the church plainly pointed toward the early securing of a proper site in some up-town locality. Years of discussion elapsed before the project took definite shape, but by the Summer of 1859 the final removal had been agreed upon, and a committee deputed to examine lots in the vicinity of Murray Hill, and report to the society. The result of their mission was the purchase of five lots on the south corner of Fifth avenue and Forty-sixth street—three on the avenue and two on the street. For these \$27,500 was paid. The old church on Norfolk street was sold, and the congregation worshiped in a lecture hall, corner of Broadway and Thirty-ninth street. Meantime a chapel had been erected on their property, fronting on Forty-sixth street, at a cost of \$10,000. The capital with which this enterprise was begun was less than \$3,000. On May 1, 1860, divine service was celebrated under its roof for the first time.

In October the corporate name of the society was changed to the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church. Some slight alterations in the creed of the church was also effected. This was that the Bible alone should constitute their articles of belief, and the adoption of the ordinary parliamentary rules in the transaction of church business. In 1861 came the war, with its financial distress, alienation of families and homes, and general gloom and distrust. The society persevered through all, and though compelled to part with their property on the avenue to secure the necessary funds for the erection of a church, retained the original investment on Forty-sixth street, and added two additional lots on the west side, making a total front of 100 feet on Forty-sixth street. Plans for a modest though elegant and substantial edifice were prepared, and ground broken in the Spring of 1864. A portion of the chapel was incorporated in the new building which was finished in June, 1865, and dedicated in the same month. Its cost, including the chapel, was about \$80,000. The text of the Pastor's dedicatory sermon was the same as that of Dr. Cone at a similar occasion twenty-five years before—the allegory of the golden candlesticks, in Revelations, first and second chapters. In the year following a three-story brown-stone parsonage was erected on the east side of the church, at a cost of some \$14,000 exclusive of land. To-day the whole property is valued at not less than \$200,000. Soon after their occupancy of the new church a revival was inaugurated, under the charge of Rev. A. B. Earle, in which fifty converts were added to their ranks. On the 26th of March, 1871, a thirtieth anniversary was celebrated, at which the Pastor reviewed at length the work since the foundation. The aggregate was a most creditable one. In the space of thirty years 2,250 persons had been admitted to membership, of whom 703 still remained. One thousand five hundred and sixty persons "had gone to other churches on earth, or to swell the membership of the Church above," and a still greater number had been brought within the influences of religious lives and religious associations. The following is a list of the officers of the society for the current year: Deacons—C. T. Goodwin, Geo. H. Hansell, John C. Baxter, J. L. Jones, B. F. Judson, J. F. Coney, Geo. H. Andrews, L. M. Lawson; Trustees—C. T. Goodwin, W. N. Wood, J. A. Bostwick, J. W. Mason, L. H. Niles, Peter Balen, Wm. Rockefeller, H. C. Calkins.