

VILLAGE CHAPEL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
75th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION
“SNIPPETS OF HISTORY”

“A church is people as they live, love, hate, marry, worship and die.”

A BIT OF RELATED HISTORY:

The above description of a church is from the History of the Presbytery of Kanawha, 1895-1956, Forward, p. 39. On March 23, 2025, Village Chapel Presbyterian Church celebrated its 75th Anniversary. An integral institution of Kanawha City, Charleston, and the Kanawha River Valley, this church, the Village Chapel Presbyterian Church, has a colorful and community contributive history!

Kanawha City, a suburb of Charleston, West Virginia, is located on the south side of the Kanawha River--the river separating it from the Charleston city proper. The Kanawha River is a result of the confluence of the New River and the Gauley River at Gauley Bridge located about thirty-five miles east of Kanawha City. It is interesting to note that the New River, with headwaters in Blowing Rock, North Carolina, flows north and is the oldest river in North America and the second oldest river in the world. It is estimated to be between 250 and 375 million years old and was already flowing when the Appalachian Mountains were formed.

Kanawha County, the site of Charleston, the state capital, and Kanawha City, a suburb, was originally created on November 14, 1788 from the western portions of Greenbrier and Montgomery counties, its borders stretching from the Ohio River to the west, to the summit of Sewell Mountain to the east, the Big Sandy River to the south, and the headwaters of the Little Kanawha River to the north. Today, Kanawha County is much smaller than the original version, with an area of 913.38 square miles, and is the fourth largest county in the state of West Virginia.

The name Kanawha is thought to have evolved from the Indian name of a branch of the Nanticokes, a native American tribe who lived in the area bounded by the Potomac River on the north and the New River on the south. As the tribal name evolved over time, it was known/pronounced/spelled as the Conoys, Conoise, Canawese, Cohnawas, Canaways, and Kanawhas. On a 1770 map of the British Empire, the river is labeled as the “Great Conoway” river. In a 1789 survey, the name was spelled Kenhawa and Daniel Boone, an early settler in Kanawha County, in one of his surveys, spelled it Conhawway. The Indian translation of Kanawha is said to mean “The Sheltered Valley”. (Stan Cohen, Kanawha County Images: A Bicentennial History 1788-1988, p. 1)

The largest expanse of flat land in Kanawha County lies parallel to the Kanawha River on the south side of the river and southeast of the city of Charleston and became known as Kanawha City. It is interesting to note that the first permanent residents in the area were Daniel Boone and his family, who established a log cabin about 1788 near what is now the upper or eastern end of Kanawha Avenue. Over the early years as Charleston developed as a city, Kanawha City remained mostly farmland until the opening of the Kanawha City Bridge in 1915 providing easy access to Charleston. A streetcar system provided transportation to and from Kanawha City to downtown Charleston.

During the 1920s, the flat land which today houses much of Kanawha City including the area where Village Chapel Presbyterian Church is located, was used as an airfield. During the 1921 Miner's Strike, General Billy Mitchell used the field to station his Army bombers that were heavily engaged in dealing with labor unions and coal strikes in southern West Virginia.

The Libby-Owens-Ford sheet glass plant and the Owens-Illinois Bottle Plant were located at the eastern end of Kanawha City. The Libby-Owens Company built the first six units of its plant in 1916 and 1917 and added six more units in 1918 and 1923, making it the largest sheet glass plant in the world. Ford Motors purchased an interest in the company in 1929, and it was thereafter called Libby-Owens-Ford. The plant made plate window, windshield, and non-shattering glass. Most of its raw materials - white silica, sand, salt and natural gas, were available within a seventy-five-mile radius of Charleston. In 1917, the Owens Bottle Company located its factory in the same area – just across MacCorkle Avenue. This plant merged with the Owens-Illinois Company in 1929 and became the largest bottle making plant in the world, manufacturing bottles, fruit jars, and after the end of prohibition in 1933, beer bottles. Both plants attracted hundreds of workers to the area and resulted in the building of many “company” houses in Kanawha City. The bottle plant closed in 1964 and the glass plant in 1980. Following closure of these plants, the structures were torn down and the area now is occupied by a shopping center, Kanawha Mall, on one side of the main highway and a Lowes and multiple restaurants on the riverside. (Kanawha County Images. A Bicentennial History 1788-1988, p. 160)

For many years, Kanawha City was the site of national guard encampments. The 2nd West Virginia Infantry Regiment of the West Virginia National Guard used the area during World War I and in 1925 they camped in the area encompassed by the Kanawha River, MacCorkle Avenue, 35th and 50th streets.

The Charleston - Kanawha City bridge was located at what became 35th street and to the east of the bridge, toward Morris Harvey College, now the University of Charleston, was the Capital View Golf Course and driving range. This area now is the site of the Memorial Hospital of the Charleston Area Medical Center (CAMC).

Across MacCorkle Avenue, at the 35th street intersection, was Exhibition Park that opened in 1916. This facility was replaced in 1949 by Watt Powell Park to house a minor

league baseball club for the Charleston community. Popular names for these teams included the Charleston Senators, the Charleston Charlies, the Charleston Wheelers, and the Charleston Alley Cats. This facility was demolished in 2005 and currently is the site of the CAMC Cancer Center.

At the corner of MacCorkle Avenue and 39th street and continuing east to 40th street are the Kanawha Village Apartments. This apartment community was built after World War II to accommodate veterans. With multiple buildings of three stories and 174 units, this complex continues to provide housing adjacent to the site of Village Chapel.

While the Kanawha City area had many interesting and diverse activities and services, it gradually became a popular residential area. Kanawha City was incorporated into the city of Charleston in 1929.

KANAWHA CITY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES:

To better appreciate the history of Village Chapel Presbyterian Church, it is helpful to look at aspects of the development of its sponsoring Church—the First Presbyterian Church of Charleston. Founded in the early 1800's, First Presbyterian Church is the second oldest Presbyterian Church in the “The Sheltered Valley” second only to Kanawha Salines Presbyterian Church located in Malden, West Virginia. The first deed for land on what is now Charleston, and the site of First Church was dated November 1, 1821. (History of the Presbytery or Kanawha 1895-1956, Forward, pp. 40-45).

Located in downtown Charleston on the Kanawha River in Kanawha County, the First Presbyterian Church, largely through the work of the Reverend J. Moody McNair, became the founding sponsor of several churches in the area, including four churches in the Charleston suburb of Kanawha City--South Ruffner, South Park, Westminster and Village Chapel.

Reverend McNair came to Charleston May 1, 1940, to accept the pastorate of the Presbyterian Church at Belle, West Virginia, and to give part of his time to the work of the Cabin Creek Mission. In the course of time, Mr. McNair was installed as an Assistant Pastor at First Church. As a true missionary, he soon became involved in organizing missions which over time, grew into self-supporting churches. South Park and Village Chapel both began as “McNair missions” and evolved into Kanawha City Presbyterian Churches – both are still serving the Kanawha City area as active Presbyterian Churches. South Ruffner and Westminster are no longer active.

SOUTH RUFFNER CHURCH was originally opened as the Lick Branch Church Union Sunday School sometime prior to 1890. The school began with an attendance of 25 to 30 individuals composed of Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians who worked together in “great harmony”. By 1890 the attendance had reached 75 to 80. Over the ensuing years, the Church was housed in several structures and by 1946 had evolved into the Kanawha City Presbyterian Church with a membership of over 300. In 1947, a permit was granted to build