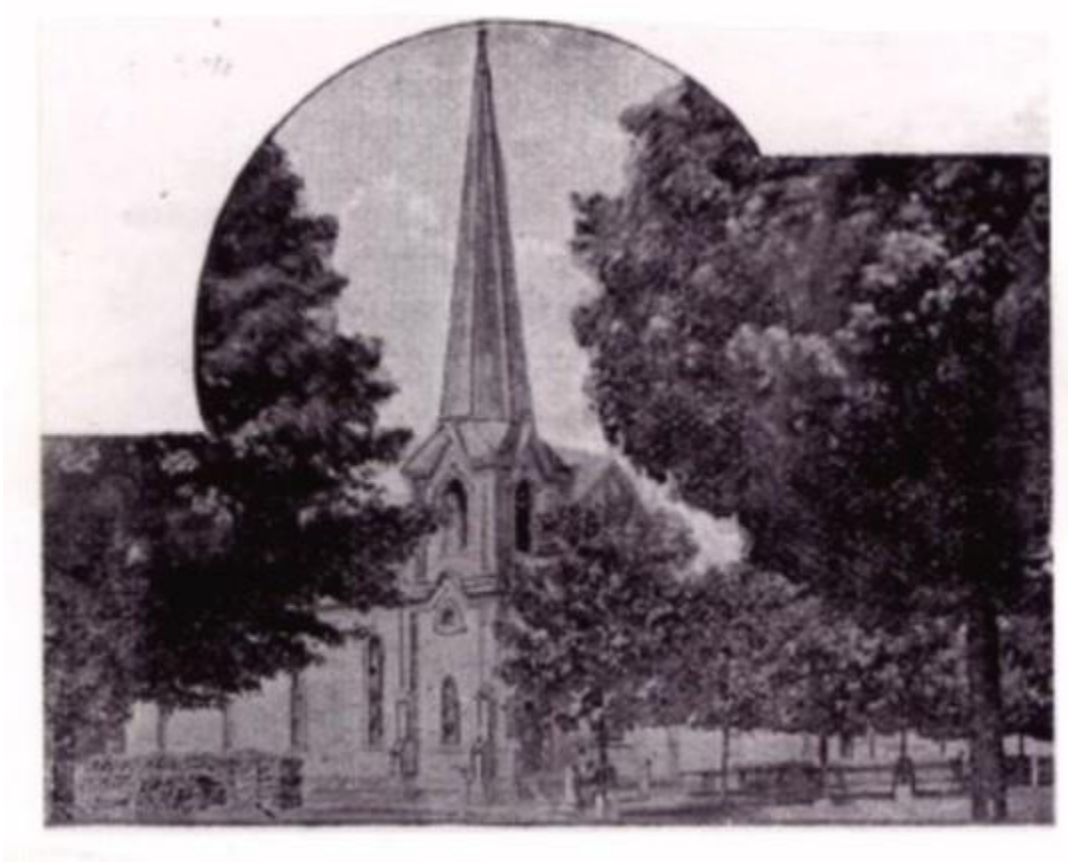


Churches – Montague Methodist Episcopal

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Rendering of the first Montague M.E. Church 1872-1897

The Montague Methodist Church is the oldest Methodist congregation in Muskegon County, tracing its roots to Abner Bennet, an African American lay preacher. He organized Sunday School classes at the Mouth of White Lake in 1853. He served for two years, which was the normal length of the appointment period. Several other preachers then succeeded him over the years.

By 1866, lumbermen were beginning to build mills at the head of White River to be closer to the timber resources further up the White River. The Ferry family had sold the mill at the Mouth and the new owners later moved it to Maple Grove. Within a few years the only settlers left at the Mouth were a colony of Irish fishermen south of the bridge, a handful of storekeepers on the other side of the bridge and a few farmers to the north. In the meantime, the towns of Montague and Whitehall were growing.

The Montague German Methodist Church was established in 1868 by German and Swiss immigrants who moved to Montague from the Mouth. They first worshiped in the public school building located on the north side of Sheridan street between Knudsen and Williams. When Montague built a larger school in 1873, they sold the older school building to the German Methodist Church.

The first Montague Methodist Episcopal Church was built in 1872. It was a little wooden church that was built on the corner of Meade and Church streets. It was a typical two-story, structure with a reaching spire at the corner of the building. It looked like most of the other small, wooden churches of that era. The first minister to serve the new church was Rev. Andrew J. Sensbaigh.

In 1881, a parsonage was built next door to the church on the corner of Meade and Dowling streets. It was owned by the church until 1969 when they sold it when the congregation moved into their new sanctuary. The house still exists today and is now a private residence.

On the afternoon of 29 September 1897, fire from burning rubbish near a shed behind the church caught the building on fire. It also caused a barn on W. J. Mason's property to be partially destroyed with a lot of the Franklin House belongings which had been stored there by George M. Dodge, hotel proprietor.

The wooden church structure burned slowly enough from the rear that the crowd was able to save the organ, seats and other contents. The flames leapt high into the air and the firemen had all they could do to save the parsonage next door. The wind was blowing from the burning church toward it and at times it was enveloped in flames. The fire finally reached the tall steeple and burned a long time before wavering and falling to the ground.

The paster at the time, Rev. Wellington Earle Burns, was just moving his goods out as a new preacher, Rev. Robert J. Slee, was expected to arrive the next day. Burns dumped some old straw and rubbish into the alley and set it afire to get rid of it, and it was from this that the disastrous fire resulted. The original wooden church was built in 1871 and had been freshly painted and roofed.

Plans for a new church building were quickly put into place. With the \$2,000 insurance settlement, donations of money and volunteer labor from the members of the small congregation, they went to work and built a new building. During the rebuilding process, services were held at the Ferry Memorial Presbyterian Church. On 21 August 1898 the new church was dedicated.

The new church was built of pale-yellow bricks, probably made from local clay and purchased from the Ruggles Brick Works in Whitehall. It featured eight stained glass windows, which added to the beauty of the interior. About half of the windows were donated by church groups and the others by individuals. The beautiful round window was donated by the Epworth League. At the rear and to the right side of the sanctuary were three windows, a large one in the center flanked by smaller windows on each side. The center one was donated by Elmer F. and Edward D. Longnecker, and the smaller windows were donated by the Ladies of Montague and the Ladies of Claybanks respectively. Windows at the left rear of the sanctuary balanced those on the right. The large center window was donated by the Ladies Aid Society and the smaller windows on each side were donated by Jacob Gee and Mr. & Mrs. James Seaver. In the vestibule of the church was a small window which was donated by H. S. Palmer.

In 1921, the congregation of the German Methodist Church joined with the Methodist Episcopal Church.

In December 1927, fire once again threatened the destruction of the Methodist church. Smoke could be seen coming from the roof of the church building. Firemen were alerted and responded promptly with a chemical apparatus which proved to be inadequate. Three streams of water were eventually started on the interior and exterior of the building. Despite the dense smoke inside the building, the blaze was extinguished in a short time and there was minimal damage. It appeared that the fire started in the wall

between the kitchen and another room. When it was discovered, the fire had broken through the roof and the wall into the church auditorium. A piano near the wall and some books and seats were burned. While repairs were being made, morning services and Sunday school were held in the Masonic Hall.

Many churches and parsonages that were built in the nineteenth century were in dire need of renovation and modernization by the 1940s. Some had been neglected due to economic conditions during the Depression and manpower shortages during World War II. Churches and parsonages in rural areas were often quite primitive, with a path running out the back door to a small, odiferous building in the backyard.

By 1945 the little yellow brick church on the corner of Meade and Church streets had survived the Great Depression and two world wars. Within less than fifty years, the Montague Methodist Church had grown from sixty-five members to over three hundred. Within the next twenty-five years the congregation would nearly double in size.

With an increasing membership over the years, the Montague Methodist Church was enlarged and remodeled in July 1949. About \$5,000 was spent building an addition to the church, digging a new basement, adding an indoor bathroom off the kitchen, and redecorating the sanctuary. The addition included a new room, next to the League Room, and a smaller one at the rear of the building. The larger of the two new rooms was designated to be used for Sunday School, but could also be used for choir rehearsal, committee meetings, and as a small chapel. The room in the rear was used as a library and space for Sunday School class. The new basement entailed digging under part of the existing foundation, shoring it up, and laying a new foundation. The basement extended under the newly built rooms and was used for additional classroom space and dining, plus a larger kitchen and two more bathrooms.

In 1950 some of the new space was being used by the Montague Public Schools to relieve overcrowding at the school building a couple of blocks away.

In 1957 the church decided to build a new modern parsonage and renovated the old parsonage for Sunday School use. The new parsonage was located kitty-corner from the church with much of the work provided by the men and women of the church. The brick ranch with an attached garage had three bedrooms and one and a half baths, a dining room, and a large living room with a fireplace. The full basement contained a laundry area, shop and large recreation room.

The church steeple and belfry, which for many years was in need of repairs, was severely damaged in a storm in 1957. Years of rain and melting snow had seeped through to such an extent that weaknesses in the general construction were evident. There was concern that someone might be hit with a falling brick, should that happen. An architect was consulted and came up with a plan. A complete replacement of the steeple was more costly than was budgeted for. The other option was to cut down the tower and remove the belfry. This meant losing the bell which had rung for so many years.

Just having completed the new parsonage and having indebtedness against it, the decision was made to go with the second option of cutting down the steeple. The bell was removed and placed on the ground behind the church. A group of concerned people thought it should be housed. An attempt to move the bell resulted in it becoming cracked in such a way that it was unlikely to ever ring again. At the time bronze was bringing a very good price, so the bell was sold.

Three years later, the church completely renovated the old church parsonage. The upstairs bath was eliminated, and another was added in the lower level. An outside stairway to the second story was installed, all the rooms were painted, bulletin boards and black boards were installed resulting in eight new classrooms for the Sunday School program. As the need for classroom space continued, the minister allowed the recreation room in the parsonage to be used as a Sunday School classroom as well.

In the 1960s a new modern-looking church was built on the corner of Cook and Hancock where they have been conducting services ever since. The old Methodist church building on the corner of Meade and Church Streets became the Montague Museum in 1969.

The Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) was the oldest and largest denomination in the US from 1784-1939. In 1939, the MEC reunited with two breakaway Methodist denomination (the Methodist Protestant church and the Methodist Episcopal church, South) to form the Methodist Church. In 1968 the Methodist church merger with the Evangelical United Brethren (EUB) church to form the United Methodist church.

In 2017 the United Methodist Church of Montague and the Whitehall United Methodist Church merged into one congregation. In 2019 the congregations voted to change the name of the church to White Lake United Methodist Church. The Whitehall location was given the name of "The Praise Center". Traditional services are held at the Montague location and contemporary worship in Whitehall.