

The Dime Tabernacle - 1878 to 1922

GLP

The fourth church building marks a significant turning point for the Adventist Church, particularly in Battle Creek. By 1878, the growth of the denomination was nothing short of remarkable, especially when compared to the handful of believers who gathered in David Hewitt's home just 25 years earlier.

However, it would be misleading to assess this growth solely by membership numbers, which rose from fewer than 2,000 to 13,000. In contrast, the Millerite movement in 1845 boasted around 50,000⁶¹ adherents, highlighting that the Adventist Church, though expanding, remained relatively small compared to its early counterparts..

This growth has been both quantitative and qualitative. Beyond the numerical increase in Battle Creek and elsewhere, Adventism began to spread across the United States and internationally. The operations in Battle Creek⁶²—home to the General Conference, the Review and Herald Publishing Association, the Sanitarium, and the college—were extensive, attracting numerous visitors for denominational work, education, and health services.

Qualitatively, the Adventist organization underwent profound changes that were unprecedented among similar denominations.



Figure 19: James White (c. 1879), main promoter of the Dime Tabernacle. Source. EGW Estate

⁶¹ In 1845, there were 50,000 believers scattered according to William Miller's own estimates. Bliss, *Memoirs* 327.

⁶² The General Conference was located in the Review's West Building, and the President's office was on the second floor. RH 01/06/1903

A cohesive theological framework centered on the Sanctuary and the Great Controversy emerged, alongside a sophisticated and efficient organizational structure shaped by *new principles* from Ellen G. White. This evolution necessitated the establishment of new communication channels to manage the increased complexity of operations and to facilitate better interaction within the church community.

Both the quantitative and qualitative transformations indicated that the Church was at a pivotal moment. To sustain its progress and embrace the future, adequate resources were essential, including a worthy headquarters church building.

This led to the construction of the Dime Tabernacle, which became the largest church building in Michigan.

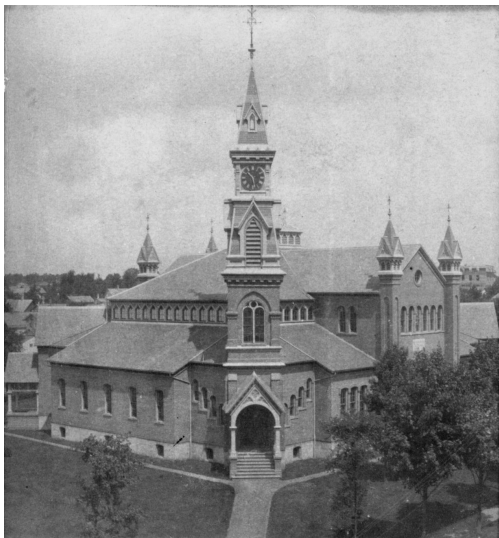


Figure 20: Exterior of the Dime Tabernacle

Decision to build and Building Process

James White understood the situation better than anybody else. It's not clear why the decision to build a new church was made in early 1878, but to make his case and gather support, James White appealed very vividly to the space inconvenience that everyone felt when in Battle Creek!

... the house thus packed is always uncomfortable, so much so that feeble persons from the Sanitarium seldom attend worship, and the citizens of Battle Creek do not attend, even on funeral occasions, from the fact that they know that there are no seats for them. During the past winter some of the College students were literally driven from the house after Sabbath-school to give room for the resident congregation.⁶³

⁶³ RH 07/25/1878

Evaluation of the situation was given attention early in 1878 and brought to the General Conference Executive Committee on July

3, which unanimously approved “to build a tabernacle ... of sufficient capacity to convene the growing congregation, and to receive the crowd at our General Conferences, and on other special occasions”⁶⁴.

James White stated the project requirements that the architect needed to achieve,

*The construction was to be solid: The building is to be substantial and warm ... The house will be of sufficient size to convene three thousand persons. It will be of respectable height with plain belfry in which our good bell will be placed. The inside will be finished in a plain, neat style, and the ceiling above will be in height to compare with the seating capacity of the house ... This house will be one-third larger than any house of worship in Michigan, as we are credibly informed that the largest in the State will seat only two thousand persons.*⁶⁵

A building with capacity for 2,500 to 3,200 could accommodate half of the population of Battle Creek which in 1878 was around 6,800!

The Battle Creek church did not need such a massive building, but with the addition of Battle Creek College student and the Sanitarium staff, the space needs were doubled and so the building was “absolutely necessary”.



⁶⁴ The committee convened “...at 8 A.M., July 3, 1878, at the residence of Eld. James White, corner of Washington and Champion Sts., Battle Creek, Mich”. RH 07/11/1878

⁶⁵ RH 07/25/1878

Figure 21: A beautiful rendition Southeast view of the tabernacle (Library of Congress 1880)

As for the financing, James White brought a very creative and far reaching idea, the project would be funded by a monthly amount suggested of “ten cents from each contributor”. Stories have it that the dime idea was actually from his 24-year old son, Willie White!⁶⁶ All who had a stake in the mission of the Remnant church, “men, women, and children”.

Canvassers (librarians) would collect the money through the territory and forward it to Battle Creek.

*... on account of the manner of raising funds for it, [the church building will] be called The Dime Tabernacle.*⁶⁷

A couple of weeks later, construction began in earnest with Henry

⁶⁶ Hook, 78



Figure 22: Henry W. Kellogg. Source: GC-EGW Estate

⁶⁷ RH 07/11/1878

W. Kellogg chairing the building committee. Here's an outline of the construction progress:

- July 3: GC executive committee vote to build the Dime Tabernacle. The form of funding specified, *10 cents*.
- July?: Prominent architect Henry T. Brush from Detroit, hired.
- July 25: Removal of third church, "on wheels"! to the lot of the Review. ⁶⁸
- August 20: Foundation work begins⁶⁹. The completion date was initially set for December 1, 1878⁷⁰.
- Late October: exterior nearly finished and steam heating pump installed⁷¹
- Nov 20: platform installed, plastering of walls, dedication postponed to January 1879⁷²
- Nov 25: the bell removed from the third church and "has given its first utterances from the tower of the Tabernacle". Beautiful description!⁷³
- March 6, 1879: after few months silence from the construction progress in the R&H, Tabernacle is set to be dedicated on March 29⁷⁴
- March 27: building has been completed and used for Sabbath Schools for the "last few weeks"⁷⁵
- April 20: Dedication of the building (building complete in roughly seven months).⁷⁶

Stephen Haskell, as member of the General Conference Executive Committee, accepted the report of the building committee and dedicated the Tabernacle. "*I will say in behalf of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, that [...] we are very much pleased ... And we now, in behalf of the Seventh-day Adventists, dedicate this Tabernacle to the service of Almighty God*"⁷⁷. The dedication sermon was preached by Elder John N. Andrews.

A significant accomplishment had been reached.

Meanings conveyed by the Structure of the Tabernacle

The Tabernacle had several layers of meaning that afford fascinating information about the state of the Adventist church by 1878. This can be divided in the building's exterior, interior, and its objects.

To start with, the configuration and elaborate architectural style marked a radical departure from the austere style and size of the previous three Battle Creek churches. For the first time in the design of a Battle Creek church, a renowned architect was hired, Henry T. Brush, who had designed notable buildings such as the Detroit Public Library, important private residences, and other salient buildings. The Tabernacle became the largest church building in Michigan and possibly one of the most beautiful.

The Tabernacle was a sample of a imposing building with a beautiful neo-gothic style crowned with a prominent tower, that gently guided people's gaze heavenwards. This issued a calm statement of progress, respectability, and stability, from a young denomination

⁶⁸ The church was moved to the lot of the R&H! George Amadon said in his diary "July 27 [1878]. The church is on wheels ready to be moved" and in a letter to W.C.White, dated Aug.6, 1878 "the old church is now in front of the Office" possibly facing Washington St. In Hook, M. (1977). *Flames over Battle Creek*. Review and Herald, p.77.

Already the old building is removed, and masons and carpenters are on the very site at work, where God has been worshiped by the Battle Creek church during the past twelve years. RH 07/25/1878

⁶⁹ RH 05/08/1878

⁷⁰ RH 08/08/1878

⁷¹ RH 11/07/1878

⁷² RH 11/28/1878

⁷³ RH 11/28/1878

⁷⁴ RH 03/06/1879

⁷⁵ RH 03/27/1879

⁷⁶ RH 05/08/1879

⁷⁷ RH 05/08/1879

whose members had sustained the ridicule leveled at the Millerites a mere three decades earlier. In stark contrast now the young Adventist church had reached an international scope and had built a nation-wide operations and had several other buildings, e.g. Review and Herald, Battle Creek College, and the Sanitarium. By extension, this also embodied the conviction that the denomination was prepared for a great future in the fulfillment of the Church mission and relevance for society. Also, the imposing presence of the Tabernacle was also a token of the national optimism proper of the American westward expansion of the 1870's.

The austerity and simplicity of the Tabernacle's interior was in somewhat stark contrast with its beautiful and majestic exterior. Far from being a contradiction, however, this was the deliberate laying out of the complementary component of the Adventist movement, its philosophical and theological cores. The building exterior (majestic) and the interior (austere focused on study) somehow is parallel with the quantitative and qualitative growth of the church mentioned earlier.

The first impression conveyed to a visitor was the prominence and uniqueness of the Bible. In fact, the *focal point* was the pulpit, elevated in a platform, from which the Bible was preached. The Bible presenter was surrounded by the congregation and immersed in an enormous interior space virtually empty. Every location in the sanctuary was geometrically pointing towards the Bible. There was more. The Tabernacle ambiance was inundated in light. The use of light was remarkable. An unusually large number of windows ubiquitously distributed, and translucent sliding partitions, managed the flow of abundant light into the sanctuary reinforced the prominence of the Bible and invited the study and exposition of the Bible. This seems as a reminiscence of the *Sabbath Conferences of 1848* where the Bible was studied intensely and openly by the pioneers, many of them still around in Battle Creek.

Even at a more fundamental level there was a *background gravitational point* that all attendant saw: explicit references to the core Adventist tenets. The imposing background wall of the sanctuary was traversed by a beautiful triple glass window with the verse of Rom. 3:24 on the left, the words of Rev. 14:12 on the right, and at the center, a drawing of the ark, the cherubim, and the words THE LAW OF GOD. Hence, the second visual focus displayed prominently basic pillars of Adventist belief system: 1) *righteousness by faith*, 2) *intercession of Christ in the heavenly Sanctuary*, and 3) *the Remnant church that keeps the Ten Commandments and has the Faith of Jesus*. Impossible that they were made more central.

To complete the symbolism, a hybrid construct bridged the *exterior-interior* structure: the plan layout was divided in four entrances that symbolized the Adventist mission. James White explained the mean-

☞ Henry W. Kellogg, building committee chair and R&H manager informed that "...after an examination of several plans, made with reference to the seating capacity demanded, that of Mr. H. T. Brush, of Detroit, with some modifications, was finally adopted, and work was begun upon the foundations August 20, 1878." RH 05/08/1879

☞ **Sabbath Conferences of 1848**
More soon.

ing as “gathering into its fold precious souls from the four quarters of the earth symbolic message”⁷⁸, a clear allusion to Isaiah. Possibly, though difficult to prove, is that the layout of the Dime Tabernacle may have been inspired to some extent in the *Second Advent Millerite Tabernacle* tent in Boston pastored by Joshua Himes⁷⁹. The Millerite like the Dime Tabernacle was also traversed by four corridors, with two entrances, and had the pulpit as focal point.

⁷⁸ RH 03/27/1879

⁷⁹ Sears 119-139

Architectural Style

The Tabernacle’s exterior style was imposing but not opulent. The guiding philosophy of the project imposed frugality, because “the faith of Seventh day Adventists [dictated] to build a plain tabernacle”. A “fashionable house” to sit 3,000 persons would be twice the cost. As a matter of fact, the interior configuration of the Tabernacle was simpler than comparable Protestant church buildings.



Figure 23: Original architectural drawings of the Tabernacle. Henry T. Brush Architect. Detroit

The style is an impressive ornate instance of Victorian neo-gothic with elements of Ruskinian style. Brick with stone trim (windows etc), cast iron decorative ridge cresting. The exterior wall structure was wood studs, with brick veneer. Inside there were galleries supported by iron pillars.

Some items reveal the style from the architect. For case, the finials and cresting in the roof, similar to the old Detroit Public Library; and the tower, reminiscent of that in Hillsdale College.

The completed project differed from the original design in certain respects, more prominently the configuration of the tower⁸⁰. Sadly, it was destroyed by fire on January 7, 1922⁸¹.

⁸⁰ The tower of the Tabernacle that Brush projected somewhat resembles that of Hillsdale College’s Main Hall, which he also designed and is still standing.

⁸¹ RH 01/19/1922

Important events that took place during the period of the Tabernacle

- 1881: Funeral of James White 2,000 people in attendance.
- 1885-1887: Ellen White mission to Europe.

- 1888: Minneapolis GC Session
- 1890: Pitcairn missionary schooner built.
- 1893: Discussion to buy a pipe organ for the Tabernacle discussed and addressed by Ellen White⁸²
- 1891-1900: Ellen White mission to Australia.
- 1902: Destruction of the Review and Herald by fire Herald⁸³
- Exodus out of Battle Creek
 - 1901: Reorganization of the General Conference
 - 1901: Battle Creek College moves to Berrien Springs, MI.
 - 1903: General Conference and Review and Herald moved to Takoma Park, Maryland.
- 1906: The “shortest testimony” from EGW was in relation to the Tabernacle. ⁸⁴
- 1915: Funeral of Ellen G. White.

Summary

The Dime Tabernacle was a beautiful icon of denominational growth, dedication of the members that contributed even by small amounts, and the leadership of James White. It remained as the main landmark in the denomination for almost four decades and was the largest church in Michigan. By the time of Ellen White’s passing, the Dime Tabernacle had been standing for half of the life of the Adventist church! As such, countless important events including General Conference meetings, Battle Creek College commencements, had happened during this time.

⁸² GCDB 01/27/1893, p.15

⁸³ The General Conference was situated in the “West Building” of the Review, but interestingly, it suffered no damage by the fire. RH 01/06/1903

⁸⁴ Since in 1906 Dr. J.H. Kellogg, A.T. Jones, and unfaithful trustees had been conspiring to secure ownership of the Tabernacle away from the denomination. Despite that “*there was a persistent and unreasonable opposition to every step taken*”, Elders Malcolm N. Campbell and George Amadon led the charge and the Tabernacle remained Seventh-Day Adventist. 6BIO 125-129. In 1909, as a minor aftershock, the pastor and some trustees attempted to sell the Tabernacle for \$40,000, probably by the conspiracy of Kellogg (*Detroit Free Press*, 12/04/1909, p.2). This didn’t last long as shortly after Eugene Farnsworth was installed as pastor of the Tabernacle (RH 04/21/1910).