First Baptist Church's third sanctuary was dedicated in 1965.

The sanctuary of First Baptist Church can seat more than 1,000.

Downtown church has been in three buildings in 125 years

By CAROL ANNE BLITZER

On Sept. 30, 1874, the Rev. Walter E. Tyres and 17 Christians founded First Baptist Church. They had plenty of religious fervor but no sanctuary.

The present church was built directly to the east of the old red brick church.

In 1878, the Rev. W.H.P. Edwards, a licensed Baptist preacher, moved to Baton Rouge with hopes of organizing a Baptist church. He left his family to travel by boat to North Louisiana where he planned to raise money for a church building. When Edwards did not return, his family was told that he had drowned. Later, a stranger reported that the minister "went the way men ought to go who preach such damnable heresies." The preacher had been taken prisoner, tortured, and killed for his religious beliefs.


Glass believes that most of the original charter members of First Baptist came from the families of those who prayed at Thomas' home church. Perhaps others were relatives of the Rev. Edwards.

In 1881, under the direction of the congregation's third...
"This is like the mother church. Those congregations are either missions of ours or missions of missions." — Gayrell Watson


The red brick church, located at the corner of Fifth and Convention streets, was dedicated in 1920. It was razed in 1971. The new church playground is located on its original foundation.

Photo credited to First Baptist Church

The most active churches in Batesville. At present the congregation is worshipping with South Bates Baptist Church to create an even larger membership. Over the years, the church has held many revivals often with nationally recognized preachers. Cindy Hail recalls a stormy night when a revival preacher told the congregation that if they did not repent, the church would burn to the ground. "At that very moment, the lights went out and a sulfur smell and smoke was all around," Hail recalls.

Though the years, the church has been most proud of its music programs. "We always had a fantastic music ministry, a long, very wonderful illustrious music history," Williams said.

For years, L. Bruce Johnson, the hand hairstylist at the, led the choir at First Baptist. Today the church has several choirs including the children's choir and a senior adult choir.

Of all the many Activities at the church, the choir rehearsal is especially popular. "We have the need and Southern Baptist "spirit" to make music in our church," Williams said. The choir has been active in the faith community since 1920. In 1973, the choir participated in denominational conventions for 45 years. Mrs. L. Bruce Johnson was a member for the last 17 years. In recent years, Mrs. Warren O. Wattson donated her house to the church for use as the parsonage. The largest single gift in the church's history was $1,000,000.

After Palmer's death, the Rev. J.C. firm, the church's business manager, led the church until the Rev. Donald L. Byrle became pastor in 1972. That same year, Mr. and Mrs. Warren O. Wattson donated their house to the church for use as the parsonage. The largest single gift in the church's history was $1,000,000.

After Byrle's resignation in 1979, the Rev. Russall McIntyre opened an interim pastor until the Rev. Perry F. Chance Jr. became pastor in 1979. After three years, the Rev. Lawrence S. Laswell served as interim pastor. The Rev. Lawrence S. Laswell served as interim pastor until the Rev. Eric J. Leschke became the pastor in 1982. The church has served the community in a variety of ways, from providing a safe place for children to worship, to serving the community through its various programs.