

Father Finney and Oberlin's First Church

Geoffrey Blodgett

The building of the First Church meeting house in Oberlin, the largest religious structure in the Western Reserve when completed in 1844, was a community project largely inspired by the leadership of America's greatest nineteenth-century evangelist, Charles G. Finney, who moved from New York City to join the faculty of Oberlin College in 1835 after a decade on the revival trails of the Second Great Awakening. The size, shape and interior arrangements of the meeting house were a compromise between Finney's desires, as reflected in plans provided by Boston architect Richard Bond, and the frugal democratic habits of his Oberlin congregation, as expressed by majority rule. Despite frequent absences for preaching tours in England and the American East, Finney remained pastor of First Church till his retirement in 1872, and also served for 14 years as president of Oberlin College. His fiery sermons enforced a durable tension between Finney and his Oberlin listeners, a relationship that mixed mutual respect, pride, and growing restlessness under the shadow of Finney's iron judgments.