

In the early 1870s, Protestants in Wilmette were eagerly discussing the need for a local place of worship. Prominent in all these deliberations was Alexander McDaniel, Wilmette real estate developer and civic leader. Yet in a tiny lakeside hamlet of barely 300 men, women, and children, it seemed impractical for each denomination to build its own separate church. The solution they hit upon was to pool their resources to erect a “union” church, in which all Protestant faiths who contributed could share the use of the building. In an 1872 agreement signed by representatives of five denominations (Methodist, Congregational, Baptist, Episcopal, and Presbyterian), the Wilmette Evangelical Association came into being, gathered donations, and acquired a parcel of land. By the summer of 1874, a beautiful white frame church with steeple had arisen at the northeast corner of Wilmette Avenue and Lake Avenue.



*The Evangelical Union Church at Lake Avenue and Wilmette Avenue, later the First Methodist Church of Wilmette*



*Alexander McDaniel*

The cooperation so proudly begun did not last. The money raised proved insufficient and there were problems paying the builder, who put a lien on the property. Because of conflicting schedules, some church services had to be held at the little Central School schoolhouse. The Methodists, who as the largest denomination had contributed more money than anyone else, grew dissatisfied with the whole

arrangement. The Congregationalists, equally restless, formally organized their own church at Andrew Sherman’s house on June 13, 1875. The Baptists could not agree with others about the running of the Sunday school. By the middle of 1876, the Wilmette Evangelical Association had formally dissolved amid lawsuits and acrimony.

The Methodists wound up renting the original union building from McDaniel’s business partner, Henry Dingee, at last buying it from Dingee’s heirs in 1890. The Congregationalists met at Central School until they were able to build their own church, on 11th Street near Lake Avenue, in 1883. Other denominations followed suit, although for some the effort to build took many years. Wilmette’s Protestant churches would in later eras find other ways to cooperate, but the failure of the early union church experiment showed just how keenly the local members of each faith, however small in number, wanted and needed a church of their own.

*Patrick Leary*