



1869-1895

“With rarest devotion”

Robert G. Brank

*Dr. Brank,
called “St.
John of the
Pulpit.”*



As they had done eighteen years before, Central elders immediately began the search for a new pastor by writing to a prominent Southern clergyman; in this case, Dr. Moses Hoge of Richmond, Virginia. Hoge declined and the Session then wrote to Dr. W. J. Lowry of Selma, Alabama. In November 1868, Dr. Lowry also declined the call. Rather than call a third man right away, the Session deferred the matter and gave it further prayerful consideration. Two months later, they invited Robert Brank to visit the church and he accepted the invitation. He preached to the congregation and met with the Session, but declined to entertain a call. Just as the Session was preparing to write to yet another minister, Dr. Brank reconsidered and in May, 1869 became Central’s third pastor.

Robert Garland Brank, born in Kentucky in 1824, was a lawyer and surveyor before attending New Albany and Princeton Seminaries. He served as pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church of Lexington, Kentucky for fifteen years before coming to Central. He came to St. Louis with a heavy heart, having been unable to hold his own church together during the war. Brank would face difficult circumstances at Central, but his ministry here would last for the rest of his life.

*Ruth Smith
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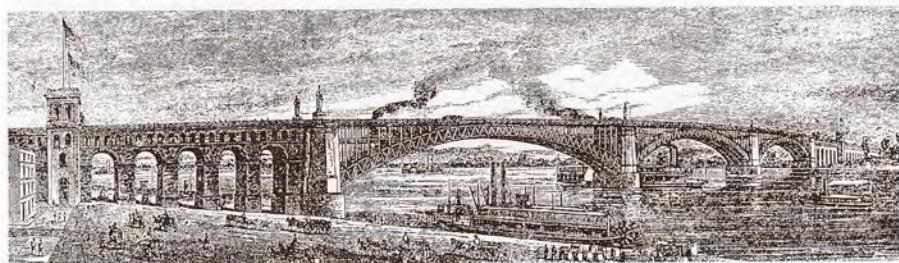
Central slowly began to grow again in spite of economic uncertainties and the still unsettled relationship with either the northern or southern General Assemblies. In a document developed by Dr. Brank in 1872, the church systematically set forth a plan of action to reach others. The congregation was again divided into districts headed by elders and deacons who were expected to visit each church family at least once every three months. Both men and women were encouraged to become involved in missionary work and tract distribution. The young men of Central were called upon to visit other young men, “to caution them against temptation, invite them to church, and endeavor to lead them to

Christ.” Businessmen were to seek out fellow workers, especially the unchurched and those new to the city. The women of the church were to aid the deacons in the relief of the poor and the sick within the congregation. Committees of ladies were to arrange for church “sociables” under the direction of the pastor. When greeting at the church doors, officers were to “pay particular attention to strangers, when possible speaking to them.” This plan was Central’s first effort to codify its mission. It expressed an expanding understanding of the nature of church life and recognized the contributions of both women and men.

The post-war period marked the beginning of a specific women’s ministry at Central. Women had met for prayer and service projects during Dr. Anderson’s pastorate, but the organization of the first women’s program at Central is generally credited to Ruth Smith Brank, Dr. Brank’s wife. At a time when a woman’s “sphere of influence” was becoming increasingly circumscribed, Mrs. Brank was described as “much more than a helpmeet.” In 1873, she organized a group of women who met monthly to study the Bible and missions. This group came to be known as the Ruth Brank Missionary Society and would continue for a number of years. The society supported Mrs. Brank’s brother, Rockwell Smith, a missionary in Brazil. Ruth Brank’s name also appears in the deacon’s records whenever she requested money for the poor. (It appears she was never turned down.) A Ladies Sewing Society was also established, with profits from the sale of garments contributed to the church. These two groups, as well as three others begun after the turn of the century, would form the nucleus of the Women’s Auxiliary in 1920.

Throughout the 1880’s and 1890’s Central established specific ministries: mission Sabbath Schools and a sewing school, a Young People’s Missionary Society, Christian Endeavor Societies for youth, a “Ladies Working Society,” and aid committees.

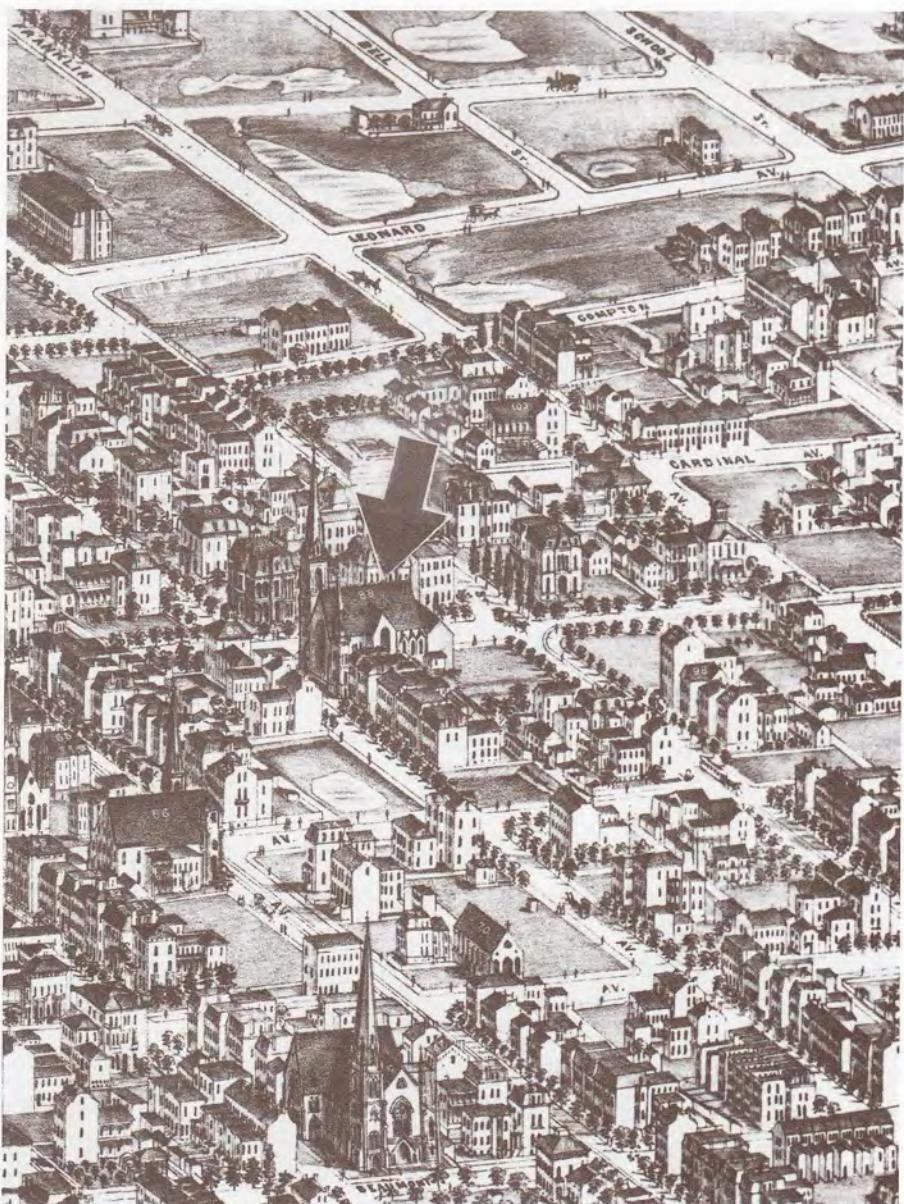
Despite expanding programs and the fact that by 1880 Central was the largest Presbyterian church in Missouri, its membership did not exceed



The Eads Bridge, the symbol of St. Louis during its Gilded Age.

the pre-war high of 423 (in 1859) until the 1890's. Like other colonial denominations, Presbyterians were losing ground to newer denominations, especially Baptists and Methodists. Central increasingly took on the appearance of the archetypal Southern Presbyterian Church, urban and upper middle class.

The watchword for St. Louisans during this "Gilded Age" was "progress" and the symbol of that progress was the Eads Bridge, completed in 1874. In addition to the bridge itself, a railroad tunnel was constructed



1875 artist's rendering of St. Louis. Although the building spires seen on Central were never built due to a lack of funds, they are, nonetheless, graciously incorporated into this drawing. (Missouri Historical Society)

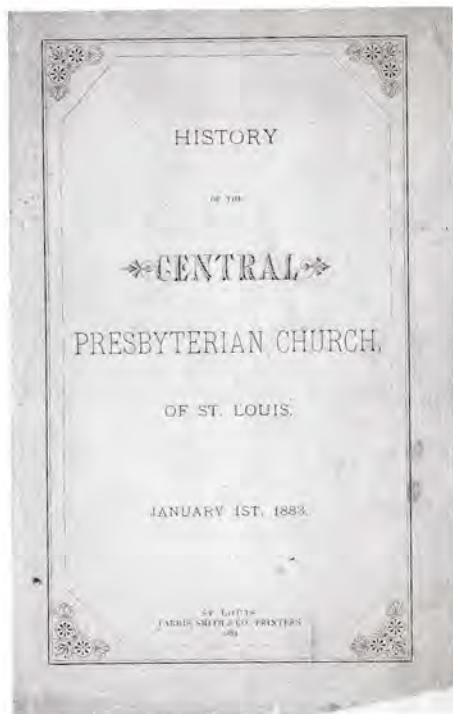
to facilitate the movement of trains through the city. The tunnel ran under Eighth Street and turned east under Washington Avenue, one block north of Locust. Central, located at the corner of Eighth and Locust Streets, literally felt the effects of progress: the constant pounding from the construction cracked the walls of the church and so weakened its foundation that the building was deemed unsafe.

A few years earlier, in 1870, Central had purchased a lot on the north-east corner of Lucas and Garrison Avenues and built a chapel on the site to accommodate members who “needed Church privileges more convenient.” Wednesday evening meetings and afternoon Sabbath School were held at the chapel, but regular church services were still conducted at the downtown location until that building was condemned. In the spring of 1873, the whole congregation moved to the chapel and plans to build a new church began. The old church was sold for \$40,000 and soon thereafter torn down.

The chapel was moved to an adjacent lot so construction of a new building could begin. The Building Committee had to borrow funds, and by the time the structure was completed in 1876, the total cost of \$145,000 significantly exceeded anticipated expenditures.

The formal dedication of the church took place on October 1, 1876, with an address by B. M. Palmer of New Orleans, reputedly one of the greatest pulpit orators of the day. Dr. Palmer ended his seventeen page sermon by noting that “now that He hath ‘enlarged the place of your tent,’ what remains but the prayer that He ‘may lay your stones with fair colors, and lay your foundations with sapphires...that all your children may be taught of the Lord, and that great may be the peace of your children.’”

Peace was hard to come by. A boom and bust national economy coupled with increasing church debt left Central in turmoil. By 1878, one of the Methodist churches was offering Central the use of its facilities “in the event of a sale and transfer of your present house of worship.” The Unitarians thought they had made such a purchase. In July, 1879, William Glasgow of the Church of the Messiah wrote that “Mr. Brank’s Church was offered for \$70,000 and our people accepted...It needs only the confirmation of the pew holders.” That confirmation did not come. Although a large number of Centralians were in favor of selling out,



The first official history of Central Presbyterian Church, written 39 years after its founding. Only one of the 32 original members remained in the church.

equally strong opposition prevented the sale. An effort to unite with the Pine Street Church was also rejected.

The crisis point came in November, 1879. As explained in the 1883 church history:

So sharp had the controversy become, that the Pastor, thinking his usefulness here had well nigh ceased, tendered his resignation, and asked the congregation to join him in an application to the Presbytery to dissolve the pastoral relation. A meeting was held, but instead of joining in the request, [the church] voted unanimously to refuse, and earnestly requested Dr. Brank to withdraw his resignation, which he did.

Strengthened by this vote of confidence, Dr. Brank made a special appeal for funds. Members understood that the future of Central depended upon this effort. They needed twenty thousand dollars and over twenty-one thousand were raised. "Then was a good time to be in that Church, to see the joy depicted in the Pastor's face, and some of the people actually weeping for joy," wrote one observer. A financial crisis had been averted, but only temporarily. Central would take another sixteen years to finally pay off the debt.

In spite of its own economic woes, Central continued to consistently contribute to all denominational benevolences. The church relied heavily on pew rents for funds but was not reluctant to employ "questionable methods," such as church fairs and "sociables," to raise money. The 1888 General Assembly advised "against such means for securing money to be used in the Master's work," but the practice here - and throughout the denomination - continued.

Central apparently ignored other denominational recommendations as well. For example, the use of instrumental music in the worship service was questioned, especially the use of the organ. Thought by some to be "the peculiar choice of the papacy," Central had one as early as 1852. Like other fashionable urban churches, it employed a professional quartet - a practice also frowned upon.

Dr. Brank's health deteriorated, and in 1893 an assistant pastor, Edward Mack, was hired. The following year, Central celebrated its own 50th

Auctioneers. Valuable and Central Property

FOR SALE.

The trustees of the Central Presbyterian church offer for sale that valuable property situated on the north west corner of Eighth and Locust streets, fronting 97 6-12 feet on Locust, by 114 feet on Eighth street. The property, fronting as it does on the block oppo- site the location of the new post-office and United States building, is conceded to be one of the most eligible and centrally located pieces of property in St. Louis, and affords a fine opportunity for investment.

Apply to either of the undersigned:

B. H. BATTE, No. 16 North Second street.
S. H. LAPLIN, No. 218 North Second st.
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ISAAC M. VEITCH, No. 419 Olive st.
Committee of the Board of Trustees.

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The sale of Central's Eighth and Locust Streets location was announced with this ad in the Missouri Republican, 1872.

anniversary and Dr. Brank's 25th anniversary with the church. In an anecdotal history of Central written in 1931, Miss Alves Long recalled the event:

The congregation and the ministers with their wives met in the auditorium to celebrate the occasion after which a reception was held...A presentation was made of the basket containing \$50 [collected dime by dime from persons baptized by Dr. Brank] and a silver certificate for \$1,000. Mr. Charles Thompson said, "I am going to kiss Mrs. Brank" and did. Mrs. Thompson said, "I am going to kiss Dr. Brank" and did. Others pressed forward but Dr. Brank who, overcome by emotion, was standing speechless and helpless holding the basket in one hand and the certificate in the other, said "Oh, I can't have all these women kissing me," and backed off against the wall. But Mrs. Brank said, "Oh, I am so happy I'll kiss anybody," a permission which everyone availed of.

Dr. Brank's health failed rapidly and he died in the summer of 1895. The Session noted his passing:

On the 21st of August 1895 Rev. R. G. Brank, D.D., third pastor of Central Church, entered into his immortal rest. For more than twenty six years he had served this congregation, faithfully, tenderly, and ably; and in the calm evening tide of life, full of years and good work, surrounded by loved ones and cherished in the affections and prayers of a grateful people, his spirit passed into the presence and reward of his Master.

Dr. Brank's obituary declared that he served "with rarest devotion," giving "heart and mind, service and means" to this church. His was the longest pastorate of Central's first 150 years. He would be remembered with great fondness for years to come, "the devoted pastor, who standing by the shores of the crystal sea, still casts the sweet influence of his godliness, as a mantle, over his flock."



Interior of the church at Lucas and Garrison. The ornate structure seated 1000, more than our current capacity at Hanley Road.