

founded 1890

Fifth Avenue United Presbyterian Church was founded in 1890. Dr. L. L. Downing, born in Lexington, Virginia only a few months before the Emancipation Proclamation, and educated at Lincoln University and School of Theology, was commissioned by the "Northern" branch of the Presbyterian Church to establish a Presbyterian church among former slaves and the sons and daughters of slaves. Two Sunday School missionaries, Rev. P. R. Twine, followed by Rev. Moses Spurlock, had managed to organize a small Presbyterian study group before Dr. Downing's arrival. This beginning congregation of seven grew rapidly under Dr. Downing's leadership and, with some financial assistance from the Freedman's Board, property was purchased and a church building erected. Today's church stands on the original site, on Patton Avenue (formerly Fifth Avenue) at the corner of Third Street N.W., in the heart of the Gainsboro neighborhood.

Although not the oldest Presbyterian congregation in the Roanoke valley, Fifth Avenue has the distinction of being affiliated with the original body of Presbyterianism in America. (Now referred to as the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.) The other Presbyterian churches disaffiliated with this body to become the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States of America. (Now referred to as the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.)

Fifth Avenue became a landmark in the black community during the ministry of Dr. Downing. [Miss Lucy Addison](#), for whom Lucy Addison Middle School is named, taught Sunday

School here. And Dr. I. D. Burrell, for whom Burrell Hospital was named, was an elder in this church.

In November 1959, a fire destroyed the church building. The congregation had different feelings as to where the new church building should be located. Some felt that the congregation should rebuild at a new site, further out in Northwest Roanoke, where many of the churches members were now living. Others, including the family of the late Dr. L. L. Downing gave both historical and sentimental reasons for rebuilding in the same location. The majority of the congregation voted to rebuild on the original site, which is where the church stands today.

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