



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
22 CHURCH STREET
GOUVERNEUR, NY 13642

FPCGH-5

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ORGANIZED
TWELVE YEARS AFTER SETTLERS ARRIVE

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The First Presbyterian Church was organized in 1817, just twelve years after the arrival of the first settlers.

In the year 1805, a little hamlet named Gouverneur was carved out of the wilderness. The settlers who left their most valued possessions behind, brought their piety and a stern determination that the new colony should be founded on Christian principles.

Denominational lines were completely ignored in religious services that were held with as much regularity as circumstances would permit.

Neighborhood prayer meetings, catechism lessons for the children and community singing were some of the activities held in Gouverneur's infancy. Religious services were held frequently in Israel Porter's dancing hall, on the West Side, at the top of saw mill hill, believed to be the corner of West Main and Hailesboro streets of today.

In 1817, following years of desire by the Presbyterian and Congregational elements to have an organization of their own, a circular letter, addressed to the immigrants from New England and others in the new settlement, was sent to the community. The letter urged local settlers to renewed "Christian Activity" and may properly be called the beginning of the Gouverneur Presbyterian church, because it increased the demand for a Presbyterian Society.

On May 24, 1817, a Presbyterian Congregational church was organized. William Colton, James Parker, William Cleghorn, Richard Kimball, Rockwell Barnes and John Spencer were trustees of the first organization.

Six names were placed upon the church roll. William Cleghorn, Elijah Hough, William Colton and his wife Hannah Colton, Jonathan Colton and his wife Betsy Colton, first appeared on the roll.

Mrs. Elizabeth Spencer was the first person admitted on profession of faith and her children were the first persons baptized in the church. Two months after the birth of the church, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was administered to 22 members.

During the first three years, the church had no settled pastor and services were irregular, but in 1820, the church was legally constituted a society, with corporate power.

A rough crude building scarcely meriting the name of church, was constructed in 1820.

The location of the building is not known but it is believed to have stood on the present church site. Rough boards formed seats with no backs and no method of heating the church was provided. People were so eager for Christian privileges that they traveled long distances over rough trails in ox-carts to listen to sermons.

The First Pastor. The Rev. James Murdock was engaged as stated supply in 1821. He served the church faithfully for four years although he earned but a small salary.

The little farm he tended on the Somerville road, near the St. Lawrence Marble Mill, supplied the family with vegetables, and his wife practiced extreme thrift.

Visiting his parishioners required Rev. Murdock to take long horseback rides. For muscular development he sawed wood. During the last year of Rev. Murdock's pastorate here, 1824, the original church building was replaced with a more appropriate structure.

The present Presbyterian church site was procured in 1820 and deeded to the society by Mrs. Gouverneur Morris. The edifice, built at a cost of \$1,400 was 34 by 39 feet in size, with no architectural beauty. It had a balcony around three sides and no steeple. However, a square cornice, ornamented with four small spires, decorated the front of the church. Before the building burned down in 1877, the church had been moved to a lot occupied by the Starbuck barn on William street, and later moved across the street to the lot occupied by the "Gouverneur Marble Works."

The building was used as a church, town hall, opera house, hose house, village lock up and marble shop.

Before the church was removed from its site the following resolution was placed on the church records, "Resolved, that the church will enter upon its records the expression of its gratitude to God for all the great mercies, experienced by the church in this house for nearly a quarter of a Century and to permit additions to be made to it by profession of faith."

A protracted meeting was held in 1825 by the church and through the work of the noted evangelist Rev. Charles G. Finney, a great revival was experienced. Approximately 80 persons were received into the church at that time.

Successor to Mr. Murdock, the Rev. Richard C. Hand was installed in September, 1826, and remained a faithful pastor until 1833, a period of seven years. No services were held during a greater part of five years following Rev. Hand's resignation. However, the church was supplied by the Rev. Jonathan Hovey, the Rev. Bucknell and Robert F. Lawrence. These men served for short periods.

Rev. Simeon Bicknell, a Dartmouth graduate, was ordained in October, 1838, as pastor of the church and remained here until January, 1842, when he was succeeded by the Rev. John Orr. Mr. Orr began his service in February, 1842, staying until August, 1843, when the church observed its 25th anniversary. For a long time, perhaps 20 years, there had been a division in the church. The result of these years of struggle was that a Congregational church was organized in 1843, taking from this church 27 members.

When the division finally culminated, the following resolution was placed upon the church record, "Resolved, that when any of those persons shall see the error of their ways, and be ready and willing to confess their errors and shall desire to return to the church, the doors of the church and the hearts of the members are open to receive them."

The Congregational society bought the lot where the Methodist church now stands and erected a plain edifice which they occupied until 1862, when the organization was dissolved and the members returned to the parent fold.

Rev. B. B. Beckwith The church next extended a call to the Rev. B. B. Beckwith who commenced his labors in the fall of 1843 and was installed February 14, 1844. Here seemed to have ended the troubles of the church, and it now entered upon a career of steady growth.

Mr. Beckwith's pastorate covered a period of 23 years of prosperity in the church.

In 1843 a new "meeting house" was raised and finished in 1844, the one some of us remember as the "Old Church." This was a building 60 by 40 feet, with a seven foot projection for lobby and belfry. It cost about thirty-five hundred dollars.

The Square Church The Gothic or Romanesque in church architecture was slow in reaching these wilds, and this meeting house was perhaps the squarest building ever designed.

One entered a square lobby or vestibule from which two doors opened into a square audience room, containing 44 rectangular pews, with square doors that fastened with wooden buttons. Near both entrances were square platforms on which stood big square stoves, which were supposed to heat the building, but sometimes failed to do so.

Across the rear of the church was a square gallery in which was a wonderful pipe organ, also square. The windows were square and contained 240 square panes of glass. There were green blinds through which the sun shone and painted square bars on the walls.

In front of the pulpit was a square mahogany table; the platform and pulpit were square and on either side of the pulpit were square columns which held the lamps. The collection plates were square boxes, fastened on long wooden handles. The floor was covered with a green carpet, marked off in black squares.

Previous to the dedication, the following resolution was recorded. "Resolved that Thursday the 29th day of August, 1844, be fixed upon and set apart as the day on which the new "meeting house" shall be solemnly dedicated to the worship of Triune God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."

Fully Presbyterian For a long time a change in the church government had been under consideration. In February, 1863, a motion was passed that, "the church become fully Presbyterian, by electing a board of ruling elders." Accordingly seven elders were elected by ballot and were ordained on a Sabbath afternoon, May 17, 1863.

Their names were George Roger, Melville Thrall, Samuel Wright, James Brodie, Simeon Parmelee, Joseph Howes and George Lockie.

In 1865, the resignation of Mr. Beckwith, leader of the church for nearly a quarter of a century, was accepted though he continued to serve another year.

A call was extended and accepted by the Rev. N. J. Conklin, Utica, and he began his work in March, 1866. During the year 1866, a new parsonage was constructed to the east of the church.

During the ministry of Rev. Conklin, the church was enlarged and 20 pews were added. The old stoves were exchanged for a furnace and improvements were made in the lighting system. Doors were removed from the pews and the slams that announced the arrival of families in their pews, were heard no more.

Rev. Tryon Edwards In 1879 Rev. Conklin resigned his charge. He was succeeded by the Rev. Tryon Edwards, a grandson of the Rev. Jonathan Edwards. For six years Dr. Edwards led the prospering and united church, after which the church had no regular pastor for a year. The pulpit was supplied by visiting candidates.

William Skinner Dr. Edwards was succeeded by the Rev. William Skinner, who came to Gouverneur immediately after his graduation from Princeton Theological Seminary. Ordination services were held July 9, 1887. He preached his first sermon in the "Old Presbyterian Church" on June 19, 1887.

At that time the church was a beautiful New England type building, standing on the same site as the present marble church.

The manse which stood beside the church was a wooden building, later replaced by a brick and marble residence.

In the first month as pastor in Gouverneur, Mr. Skinner preached the baccalaureate sermon to the last graduating class of the old "Gouverneur Wesleyan Seminary." Two members of the class, Dr. Frederick F. Drury and Miss Julia Foster, later were married by Mr. Skinner.

In 1887, when Mr. Skinner assumed his duties as pastor, there were about 220 members in the church. When he resigned in 1929, there were more than 550 members.

Mr. Skinner performed over 500 wedding ceremonies, and one of the first couples to be married by Mr. Skinner was the late Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Bigarel.

Members had long realized the need for a new church, and the old church was formally closed with an historic sermon by the pastor. Work of demolition began at once, and on May 14, 1892, ground was broken for the new edifice, and the "Old Church" passed its 75th milestone.

The cornerstone of the beautiful marble structure now used by the church congregation was laid on the afternoon of July 27, 1892 when Mr. Skinner swung the huge stone into place. The group then gathered at "Union Hall" to hear an address by Rev. L. M. Miller of Ogdensburg. Dedication ceremonies of the new edifice were held on October 3, 1893, with the Rev. Henry H. Stebbins, D.D. of Rochester preaching the dedicatory sermon.

The church needs little description. It is a magnificent structure of Gouverneur marble, with interior finish of chestnut and seats 500. It is a substantial, convenient, luxurious and graceful building, the old squares having given place to arches, curves and circles. Its cost was approximately \$50,000.

By coincidence the farm property, formerly owned by one of the first elders, Samuel Wright, finally produced the marble which the St. Lawrence Marble Co. used in the building of the church.

On October 16, 1895 Mr. Skinner married Miss Katherine Markwick of Gouverneur, a daughter of the late Robert Markwick, then elder in the church. The ceremony, performed by the Rev. James F. Brodie, was the first wedding in the new church, which had been completed in 1894.

Parsonage The church property was enriched in 1904 by a gift of a brick parsonage with marble trim from Mrs. Myra Dean and her daughters, Miss

Jeanie Dean and Miss Cora Dean. The old parsonage was removed to John street and is now known as the Fox house.

In 1907 a Union Evangelistic campaign was conducted by the Rev. M. S. Reese and party, of Rochester. Fifty-eight members were added to the church, at this time. In 1912, the local church entertained the "Synod of New York." Dr. Mark Mathews, then "Moderator of the General Assembly" of the Presbyterian church, U.S.A. was the speaker for the occasion.

Gouverneur was on flat electricity rates at that time and in his opening remarks he said that as he came down Main street from the station, every home as brilliantly illuminated from top to bottom. Naturally he thought the village was celebrating his arrival in Gouverneur.

Evangelist Campaign In 1916 a Union Evangelistic campaign was conducted by Dr. John H. McComb and party. At this time there were 111 additions to the church.

A total membership of 550 persons belonged to the church in 1917, several of the members being direct descendants of original members. In three cases the office of elder had passed from father to son.

Anniversary During the year 1917 the 100th anniversary of the church was celebrated. In 1920 a new organ, three manual with echo, was given anonymously. The name of the donor, Miss Jennie Dean, was not revealed until after her death. It was installed and played for the first time September 5, 1920 by Mrs. Lillian Tait Sheldon.

In 1929 Mr. Skinner resigned after 42 years as beloved and honored pastor. In 1930 Mr. Skinner was made "Pastor Emeritus."

In 1940 a Baptismal Font was given by the congregation and dedicated to the church as a memorial to Mr. Skinner.

He was succeeded by the Rev. Joseph A. Schofield who came here in May, 1930, from Hobart, N.Y., where he had been pastor for five years. During Mr. Schofield's pastorate, he was very active in the affairs of the Presbytery of St. Lawrence, having been moderator of the Presbytery for two terms 1939-1941.

Mr. Schofield authored a number of books among them "Fifty-three Sunday Talks to Children." He was contributing editor for "Christianity Today."

In 1942, the Presbyterian church observed its one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary with three separate celebrations.

On Sunday, May 17, 1942, a marble tablet was unveiled in honor of the first ruling elders of the church, after it had become fully Presbyterian. The

dedication of the tablet marked the 79th anniversary of the first elders election on May 17, 1863.

The tablet, a gift of three descendants of the first elders, was unveiled, after appropriate ceremonies by Mrs. George Sisson, Jr., of Potsdam, daughter of Joseph Howes, one of the original elders.

Another celebration was held on Wednesday evening, May 20, 1942, to commemorate the observance of the 125th anniversary of the local church, first organized jointly with the Congregationalists, on May 24, 1817.

Later in the summer, on July 26, 1942, a celebration was held, marking 50 years, since the laying of the first cornerstone of the new church.

Tower Chimes

In 1943, the tower chimes and sound system was installed, as tribute to World War II participants, and in memory of those who gave their lives.

In 1949, Mr. Schofield started the "New Life Movement," in the church and 60 new members were added to the roll. In 1950 an extensive repair and remodeling program was inaugurated, with a new boy scout room and recreational room added and a complete redecorating program.

At the annual meeting of the church, in 1951, special tribute was paid to Mrs. Ella Woodworth, chairman of the flower committee for over 20 years. The congregation voted, that in the future, the flower fund of the church should be known as the "Ella A. Woodworth Fund" in recognition and tribute to Mrs. Woodworth, who has for many years headed this work, who has built up a large amount of equipment for decorative purposes, who has encouraged gifts and memorials for similar purposes and who is still an active, interested and devoted chairman of the fund."

Charles M. Tait (deceased) had a record of 41 years of service with the choir of the Presbyterian church. He started at the age of ten, pumped the pipe organ in the "Old Church" and became a member of the choir seven years later. He afterward became director of the choir and held this position for 25 years, resigning in 1919.

Lillian Tait SheldonMrs. Lillian Tait Sheldon, a composer of note, was organist of the church for nearly 40 years. Mrs. Sheldon began organ lessons when she was 14 years old and began to play in the church as soon as her feet could reach the pedals. According to Mrs. Howard Smith (daughter of Mrs. Sheldon) she began playing in the old church about 1880.

Then Catherine McCloy Sweet played for a few years, with Charles Tait as director of the choir. Mrs. Helen Markwick played the organ from 1916 – 1919.

Altogether Mrs. Sheldon composed 22 anthems and 20 sacred songs. Some of her compositions are used by the church choir at the present time.

Mrs. Sheldon passed away in 1925. She was succeeded by Charles Tait, who played the organ for about a year.

In 1926 Mrs. Ora Spencer Fuller became organist and choir director and served until 1951, when she resigned.

Mrs. Fuller was succeeded by Mrs. William H. Foster, who is organist at the present time with Mrs. Thomas Farley as choir director.

Special tribute should be paid to Morris B. Davies, member of the choir since 1909, a period of 46 years and who is still singing in the choir at the present time.

Mr. Davies also has a record of continuous service as treasurer of the Sunday school since 1911.

In 1953 Rev. Joseph A. Schofield resigned to accept a call to the "Good Will Presbyterian church" at Montgomery, N.Y. Mr. Schofield was succeeded by the Rev. Merritt Updyke, who began his pastorate, in January, 1954. On looking back over the past year, the attendance at our services of worship has shown a steady growth, with a membership gain of 54.

Since Rev. Updyke came to be pastor, he has organized a discussion group and coffee hour which has proven to be very popular and informative. There has been a steady increase in the numbers present each Sunday.

A bright future of usefulness is ahead of us, the extent of which will be measured only by the degree of our faithfulness to the church.