

History of the Church

History of the Berkshire Church

The following brief history of the Berkshire Congregational Church, as prepared by Miss Harriet Johnson, was read by Mrs. S. S. Dewitt Saturday evening, preceding the pageant.

When Berkshire comprised the three towns of Newark Valley, Berkshire and Richford, a Congregational church which was a small, barn-like structure, was built at a spot just south of the present William Ball house at North Newark. The building was not heated and the only way for the worshippers to keep at all comfortable in cold weather was by the use of foot-stoves—a small metal box filled with coals with little holes for the heat to come through. This was filled with coals from the fireplace at noon. My mother often told me her family would go up to cousin William Ball's (the first white child born in Berkshire) to get warm, eat their lunches, refill the foot stoves and go back through the snow for another long afternoon session at the church. In the winter it was often dark before they reached home.

This was called The First Church in Toga, and organized Nov. 17, 1803, by Rev. Seth Williston, a missionary who organized many Congregational churches in New York state. I have read that he went no further west because it was so sparsely settled and but little civilization there.

Later several secured dismissal from this first church to found the church here in Berkshire, on July 21, 1833. The church building was of brick and a really fine structure for that day. Its lines were good and today some city churches are built on the same plan; the old Colonial. The church was founded as a Congregational Church and it has always been so, though at one time it united with the Presbytery for some years, then gladly withdrew.

The church was built on ground my grandfather, Stephen Ball, gave for the purpose. Stephen Ball and his sons made the brick from what is known as the old brick yard, just south of the village. The first church was made of brick and when it was torn down some of the brick were so good they were used in building the seventeen pillars which support the present structure.

When the first brick church was built it had a dome instead of a spire, more appropriate in architecture. It was sheathed with tin, and when the sun shone on it, it was a thing of beauty and could be seen for a long distance, appearing like silver. In the latter part of the '60s decay had set in and the dome was removed and a spire put in its place.

Quoting from Dr. Patterson, the Newark Valley historian, who was thoroughly conversant with the history of this town: "From the pioneers of the Puritan East much has fallen on their descendants and to them is due much of the prosperity, the integrity, character and intelligence for which the citizens of Berkshire are so justly celebrated. Nowhere have the manners of a people, their customs, their high sense of duty, their strict observance of the Sabbath, their love for the Church and the School followed the line of descent more closely

These pioneers came not empty-handed nor empty-headed, for, aside from their native New England thrift, they were possessed of some means and had availed themselves of a fair opportunity in the school-room."

The new church was built in 1889. Edward O. Eldredge, a grand-son of Stephen Ball, was chairman of the Building Committee, although the youngest member of that committee. The front foundation wall is granite cut from a boulder from the farm of Stephen L. Horton at Richford and given by him and his sisters.

The first pastor of the original Church was the Rev. Wm. J. Bradford, who came in December, 1834. There is no further record, but he performed the marriage of my father and mother, in February, 1836.

From January, 1839, to March, 1841, Rev. Wm. Bradford, a brother of Dr. George Bradford of Homer, N. Y., was the pastor. I remember him well, being his namesake. He went to New York City and was for many years editor of the New York Evangelist.

Rev. Peter Lockwood was the next pastor; the length of his pastorate unrecorded. Then, in 1849, followed Rev. O. P. Conklin, an old school "blue" Presbyterian; a good man, but hard an inflexible. Rev. C. T. Mills, a Ceylon missionary, came in 1856 and he was followed by Rev. Samuel Jessup. Then Rev. Wm. Bradford was again the pastor for a few months, but resigned because of failing health. Rev. O. P. Conklin then returned for five years. Calls were next extended to six pastors, but none accepted. Rev. Edward Hitchcock acted as supply for four months. Rev. S. R. Griffiths, Rev. E. S. Palmer, Rev. S. A. Whitcomb, Rev. Frank H. Coffran and Rev. Jas. W. White followed in order as pastors. Rev. J. J. Hough, D. D., became pastor in 1885. He died on Sept. 24, 1897 and was buried here. He was the first pastor I ever had. He and his wife were very helpful to me and I hold them in loving remembrance.

The present edifice was built during Dr. Hough's pastorate and we had a fine dedicatory service on Dec. 19, 1889. The service opened with voluntary, invocation, anthem by the choir, and an address and delivery of the keys by Edward O. Eldredge. Response and acceptance of the keys on behalf of the Society was made by Junius Collins. The dedicatory sermon was by the Rev. Thomas K. Beecher of Elmira.

The special service of dedication included scripture reading by Rev. D. W. Teller of Owego and prayer of dedication by Rev. Dr. Edward Taylor of Binghamton. In the evening Dr. Taylor gave an address on "A Visit to the Pyramids and the Great Sphinx."

The next pastor was Rev. Fred L. Luce and he was followed by Rev. I. N. Steelman, Rev. Wm. Doidge, Rev. Theodore W. Harris (supply), Rev. John R. Gee, Rev. Arthur H. Smith (who died on Nov. 24, 1914), Rev. J. W. Cowan, D. D., (supply.) He was followed by Rev. Eugene B. Smith, who left town for Chaplain's Training School at Fortress Monroe and for war service in Feb. 21, 1918. His subsequent resignation was accepted on July 14, 1918. Then followed Rev. J. N. Atwood; Rev. A. L. Messinger, who died in 1928 and was buried here;

This Church and the Congregational Church of Richford united in the Rev. Messinger and since that time the pastor has served both churches, and living in Richford.

My father spent a great time and money for this Church. The first lamps ever used in the church were given by him, the first musical instrument used, were originally used for light. I think the first lamps must have been a fluid called camphine, but used in our home from my recollections, many years before.

The new church has had many stained glass windows. The first was given by Mrs. Hannah Waldo in memory of her husband Joseph Talcott Waldo. The next was given by Wm. A. R. Buffalo in memory of his wife Mary Leonard Rogers, a sister of W. Leonard and related to me. The north window, for my father, was given by Hon. Carlisle P. Johnson, was given by my mother, Caroline Ball. The two in the north vestibule were given by Elizabeth C. Moore, mother, Mrs. Caroline Moore. Communion table was given by Mrs. Haight Stagg for her mother, Mary Haight. The large pulpit was from Mrs. Anson Ball. The clock was from Mr. and Mrs. Cowles of New Haven, Conn. Cowles was formerly Harrie Leonard, a sister of Deacon C. Leonard. They had previously given the clock in the lecture room to Rev. Julius Gale. Rev. Gale went from this Church as a prominent missionary at Marquette, Turkey.

The Church is very dear to me. It is my earnest prayer that it may grow more and more in the hearts of the people, that they may realize their responsibilities to the vows made to God and the Church. I hope to be a power of great blessing around, knowing our Heavenly Father will greatly bless all who do for Him.