

Fall - 1968

A History of the  
First Congregational Church (U.C.C.) of Berkshire, N.Y.  
by Miss Mildred Brown

The history of a church is the account of the people who made it; it is a review of names as well as of dates and material improvements; it is an account of the sowing of the seeds and the growth of the plant - of purposes, plans, and of achievements.

In the Historical Gazetteer we <sup>1781</sup> read that the settlement of Berkshire was begun on April 1, 1871 by five men who left Stockbridge, Berkshire Co., Massachusetts and spent 37 days on the way, bringing their tools and provisions on sleds drawn by teams of oxen. These pioneers came neither 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. We read, further, "of the integrity, character, and intelligence for which the citizens of Berkshire are so justly celebrated. No where have the high sense of duty, strict observance of the Sabbath, love for school and church been stronger than in the township of Berkshire.

So we are not surprised that one of the first acts of the early settlers was to establish a church - and, in accordance with their New England heritage, to establish a Congregational Church. The first church was organized in 1803 by the Rev. Seth Williston, a missionary from Connecticut. The first church building - or "meeting house" - was erected on land owned by Beulah Patterson Brown near her house which is now in the town of Newark Valley at the intersection of Route 38 and Brown Road. Services were held every Sunday morning and afternoon.

The building, a small, barn-like structure, was built of oak timbers covered with clapboards. It was never finished inside, but left open from floor to rafters. Furniture consisted of a pulpit made of rough boards and formed into a plain table, and of seats made of planks. There were no stoves in the "meeting house", but the women carried tin footstoves which kept their feet from freezing. Most of the congregation carried their lunch and went to Beulah Brown's to eat it. She always had a hot drink, "rye an' Injun bread", doughnuts, and cheese to supplement the lunches. Also she had a fireplace full of hot coals so that the women could refill their little footstoves for the afternoon service.

In 1833 - 135 years ago - 72 members were dismissed from the original congregation to form the First Congregational Church of Berkshire, and the following year, 1834, the brick "meeting house", built of brick made in the brick yard on the Ball farm and located on the site of the present building was dedicated. Among those 72 members we find the names of Olive Akins, Josiah Ball, Drodatus Royce, Deacon Luther Andrews, and Ebenezer Cook, an ancestor of our Amy Cook Andersson. The deed to the lot was signed by Phoebe Wilson, Mehitable Wilson Brown - sisters of one of the first arrivals in this territory - F. H. Brown, Stephen Ball, and Elijah Belcher.

The first pastor of the Church was the Rev. William J. Bradford who remained here five years. After him there was a succession of pastors, most of whom served for about five years until The Rev. J. J. Hough, D. D. who was here from April 1885 until September 1897 - 12½ years. It was during his pastorate that the old brick "meeting house" was torn down, and the present building erected in 1889. At the dedicatory service, December 19, 1889, the sermon was preached by The Rev. Thomas K. Beecher of Elmira, brother of The Rev. Henry Ward Beecher of Brooklyn.

In recent years the pastors - or ministers - most of us can recall are: The Rev. Eugene B. Smith 1915-1918 to whom we owe, among other things, our present Constitution and the incorporation of the Church; The Rev. Ralph E. Gould, grandfather of Joanne Niles, who served from 1943-1955; The Rev. Hugh S. Tigner who can, in the truest sense of the words, be described as a "gentleman and a scholar"; The Rev. Edgar M. Shaw who remained until his retirement from the ministry; and our faithful Rev. George A. Paboojian, beloved by old and young. Now we have The Rev. Benjamin Huang who received his early education in Formosa, studying under Dr. James I. Dickson in Taiwan Theological College at Taipei, Taiwan, and uniting the ancient culture of the East with the West.

In material matters we have made great gains. Instead of the primitive, rough-hewn barn-like structure, we have a Gothic building with stained glass windows and a tall, slender spire traditionally pointing toward heaven; instead of portable stoves, we have an oil-burning furnace; we now have a motor for the organ, and wall-to-wall carpeting. As memorial gifts we have received the cross and candlesticks; altar vases, the pulpit cloth, new collection plates, ever-burning candles, and the baptismal font. We have been enabled, thanks to the legacy of the late William Freeland, to build a new parsonage on the lot presented by Dr. David Patch. And today we are to dedicate the recently completed addition to the rooms for the Church School.

It is impossible to write a history of the Church without some mention of finances. It is recorded that in 1805 a certain Jeremiah Osborn was called to the ministry here at a salary of \$275.00 for the first year with an annual increase of \$25.00 until it should reach \$350.00, at which figure it should remain at the pleasure of the Society. There was no mention of a parsonage, a vacation, or oats for his horse. In contrast to this, our budget for 1969 will be approximately \$11,000.00, and there is definite mention of a parsonage, a vacation and an allowance for gasoline.

There are two events in our past history which are of special importance. In the early 1800's two missionaries, Mr. & Mrs. Abner Dewey Jones, members of this Church, were sent to the Choctaw Indians. Secondly - in the year 1848 The Rev. Julius Yale Leonard went out from this Church as a missionary to Marsovan, Armenia. For years we sent to Marsovan an annual gift of \$30.00 which was then sufficient to support a student in college there for one year. Though we no longer send money directly to Armenia (as our Benevolence program is conducted through the New York Conference,) we still follow the custom of devoting the Sunday School offering of the first Sunday in the month - Marsovan Sunday - to the Missions. The children in the Sunday School should be familiar with the story of Julius Leonard, and know how and why the custom originated. This is one of the most important and most satisfying traditions of our Church.

If the brief review of our history, from the humble but glorious beginning made by our ancestors 135 years ago, to the present is at all significant it must make us pause to reflect and to ask ourselves: Have we kept the faith? Have we lived up to our responsibilities? Have we, the heirs, continued the traditions which they established? Have we preserved the legacy of "integrity, character, and intelligence" which they bequeathed to us? Have we maintained a high sense of duty, observance of the Sabbath, a love for Church and God and - what must inevitably follow - a love for our fellow man? What new chapters will be added to the history of The First Congregational Church of Berkshire in the next 135 years?