

## **A Brief History of Our Church**

The First Presbyterian Church of Wilkes-Barre has its roots in the Christian lives of members of the Connecticut Susquehanna Company. The company claimed land in Northeastern Pennsylvania, disputed land because it had also been granted to William Penn by Charles II of England. The conflicting claims of Connecticut and Pennsylvania were ultimately resolved, but only after warfare and adjudication, giving Pennsylvania the land and recognizing the personal property of Connecticut individuals.

Even before the Susquehanna Company settlers arrived in Wyoming Valley, several missionaries visited the area, including Congregationalist John Sergeant in 1741; Moravian Count Zinzendorf, 1742; Presbyterian David Brainard, 1744; and his brother, John Brainard. The missionary activity seems to have been interrupted by the French and Indian War. When the war ended in 1763, the Susquehanna Company sent its first settlers to Wyoming Valley, including the Reverend William Marsh, a Baptist.

The Mill Creek colony was decimated by Indians. Twenty settlers, including Reverend William Marsh, were killed, but survivors were able to return home. Three years after the tragic experience of the first Susquehanna colonization, the second contingent of the Connecticut Susquehanna Company homesteaders arrived in Wyoming Valley on February 8, 1769. With them came the Congregationalist Reverend George Beckwith, Jr., of Lyme, Connecticut, who remained for one year. Four years later on September 11, 1772, the Reverend Jacob Johnson, a Yale graduate and a pastor of Groton, Connecticut, was induced to accept the call of the new settlers, which included a grant of land. A year later at a town meeting on August 23, 1773, the official call was issued "to Reverend Jacob Johnson who has been some time laboring for us." Reverend Johnson's Congregational members worshipped at a meeting house built on the corner of East Market and North Washington Streets where the Wilkes-Barre City Hall now stands. Many of those who worshipped with Reverend Johnson before and during the Revolutionary War became victims of the Wyoming Massacre. Reverend Johnson, a survivor,

was one of the several chosen to arrange terms of surrender to the British, and he officially recorded the terms. He accompanied survivors of the Wyoming Massacre on their arduous journey back to Connecticut in 1781. Later, he returned to Wyoming Valley to minister, using various homes as places of worship. The original church at the corner of East Market and North Washington Street had actually survived the massacre, and was used by General John J. Sullivan as a hospital as he “stabilized” the area.

From worshipping in private homes, Reverend Johnson moved to the Court House on Public Square. Ardently desiring a church building, he energetically supported endeavors to build an edifice. He died on March 18, 1797, before the building was erected, and was buried in a grave he himself had excavated.

The Congregational Church, first envisioned by Reverend Johnson and known as Old Ship Zion, was completed in 1812, twenty years after Johnson’s first effort. The site committee were men whose names are dominant in early Wyoming Valley history. They were Timothy Pickering, Zebulon Butler, David Gore, Paul Schott and Nathan Waller. Despite a failed lottery and three lightning strikes, the church was completed. The huge 680-pound bell, cast in Philadelphia, rang out, calling forth the Congregationalists, then the Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Methodists, as they shared the edifice, and finally, when sold by the Congregationalists, it rang out only for Methodists in 1845.

Following the demise of Reverend Johnson, three pastors served for short periods: Dr. Nathaniel Thayer, Reverend Jabez Chadwick, and Reverend James W. Woodworth.

A dedicated minister who lived in dire poverty with his family in Wyoming Valley, the Reverend Ard Hoyt, served the Wilkes-Barre and Kingston Congregational bodies between 1806 and 1811. Reverend Hoyt left to become a missionary among the Indian tribes of Tennessee and Alabama. He was succeeded briefly by two ministers, Hutching Taylor and D. Moulton. They were followed briefly by the minister Cyrus Gildersleeve, born in Long Island,

who with his son William, a fervent abolitionist, were voices of Christian conscience in Wyoming Valley during the pre-Civil War era.

In July 1814, while the Americans and British were still fighting the War of 1812, the church voted to establish a church school to meet the first Tuesday of each month. Noting the necessity for parents to be with their children, they established places for gathering “if in providence it should be ordained they can.”

In 1818, the Church manifested its leadership by helping to organize a Union Sunday School of all denominations. Judge Oristus Collins was Superintendent. Sessions were held in the Wilkes-Barre Academy. Later in 1825, two Philadelphians, Mary Gardner and Susan Mitchell, came and managed the Sunday School, holding classes at the site of the Hotel Sterling.

The year 1829 marks the beginning of historic changes in the congregation. First, Dr. Nicholas Murray assumed the pastorate; next, adhering to the suggestion of Dr. Murray, the Congregational Church initiated the change to Presbyterianism; and finally, after many embarrassing un-Christianlike confrontations with the Methodists over the privileges and usages of the shared Old Ship Zion, the congregation began constructing a new frame church on South Franklin Street on land donated by Matthias Hollenback.

Dr. Nicholas Murray, born in Ireland and raised as a Catholic, did not see the completion of the new church. He departed and was succeeded by the Reverend John Dorrance of Kingston, Pennsylvania, possibly the only native son to be called to minister here. He not only saw the building completed, but officially finalized the denominational change to Presbyterianism. Reverend John Dorrance was the only minister to serve during the occupancy of the earliest Presbyterian Church built in the Wyoming Valley, by today’s standards a small church. The church grew perceptibly under the Dorrance pastorate, undoubtedly assisted by such elders as William C. Gildersleeve, Henry C. Anhouser, and Oristus Collins.

The church growth, from 1833 to 1849, necessitated a larger structure. Demolishing the old church, which had survived sixteen years, the congregation employed John Darkin, an English architect, to design a new church. During construction, the building collapsed. Consequently, Darkin was dismissed.

Just who picked up the pieces and completed the church, which is today the Osterhout Library, is debatable. Because of its beauty and distinctive Gothic style, it was marked as an Upjohn church, if not actually built by Richard Upjohn himself, built in the Gothic style he introduced into the United States. Architect James Renwich submitted plans resembling the plan of the church. However, Renwich was never employed. The late historian, Dr. Edward Hanlon, noted Thomas Parker and Ashbut Bennett, with Daniel Fell as the builders of the completed church. Harrison Smith, in 1972, gave credit to Henry Blackman, assisted by J. Taylor Bennett. The beautiful new church building of 1849 was dedicated February 11, 1851.

Reverend John Dorrance's pastorate extended over one of the most excruciating periods of American history during which the nation was convulsed by the issues of the extension of slavery and states' rights. He died, coincidentally, as the sectional differences led to physical combat, on April 13, 1861, the day Fort Sumter surrendered to the Confederacy.

The Church, under the Dorrance leadership, established the Wilkes-Barre Female Institute in 1854, erecting the building across from the church on Franklin Street, establishing one of the first such institutions in the United States.

The Civil War touched church life in another way when the Reverend Archibald A. Hodge, influenced by his conscience, left his pastorate in Fredericksburg, Maryland, and accepted the northern pastorate at our church, serving until 1864.

A new minister, the Reverend Samuel B. Dod, arrived on November 10, 1864. During Reverend Dod's ministry, a church organ, manufactured by Joseph Buffington of Philadelphia,

was installed in the north tower at a cost of \$1,800. The Dod residence was located at 242 South Franklin Street. When Mr. Dod resigned in October 1868, to become a trustee of Stevens Institute of Technology, an institution started by his brother-in-law Edison Stevens, the church purchased the Dod residence as a parsonage, and it was used until 1930. In 1930, the parsonage was sold to the Ohav Zedek congregation who used the site to build the Ohav Zedek Synagogue.

The growth of the First Presbyterian Church in the post-Civil War period paralleled the development and changes in Wyoming Valley. The burgeoning anthracite coal industry and a flood of immigrants turned Wilkes-Barre into a thriving city. Church membership increased to 420 persons contributing about \$200,000 annually. Something of the Christian commitment of these members is seen in the expenditures of the church. In 1880, they allocated \$104,000 for benevolences and only \$66,339 for their own congregational purposes.

During this expansive epoch, Dr. Francis Hodge, the younger brother of former pastor Archibald A. Hodge, ministered for 35 years, one of the longest ministries in our church history. The church, during the era, was served by many committed men and women. Among those who left a lasting mark on our church and community were George Loveland, Louise Brower, John Hollenback, Andrew Todd McClintock, Mrs. George Hollenback, Oristus Collins, Mrs. Stanley Woodward, Calvin Parsons, Nathaniel Rutter, Colonel G. M. Reynolds, Harrison Wright, Dr. George W. Guthrie, Mrs. Edward Loop and others. These leaders effected the creation of new Presbyterian churches in Ashley, Nanticoke, Pittston and three churches in Wilkes-Barre, Westminster, Memorial, and Grant Street, marking the First Presbyterian Church as the mother in Wyoming Valley Presbyterian history.

A new awareness of world responsibility led to the organization of the Women's Missionary Society in April of 1871. The outreach of the church was extended with the formation of the Needlework Guild organization in 1894 by Mrs. J.R. Coolbaugh. Over its first 50 years, the Guild distributed nearly 150,000 articles of clothing here and abroad.

The expanded membership and the development of Christian programs necessitated a larger church. Recognizing the need, the church purchased the large Hollenback home on the corner of Northampton and Franklin Streets for \$30,000 from H.H. Welles of Wyalusing, demolished the house, and began the construction of a new edifice. The brick church building, constructed in 1849, was sold for \$28,000 to the trustees of the Isaac S. Osterhout Estate. The brick church, acquired as a temporary structure for the Osterhout Library in 1889, still houses the library which in 1989 celebrated its one hundredth anniversary.

The cornerstone of the present church, to which we are heirs and custodians, was laid on July 11, 1887. Reminiscent of early practice, church pews were auctioned. Rental for these pews produced income of \$14,000 a year.

The new church, replete with electric lights and gas jets, was not dedicated until it was free of debt on March 18, 1894. After the dedication, the minister, Reverend Francis B. Hodge, served ten more years until 1904. (Ellis W. Roberts, Ph.D.)

We have published two books on the history of First Presbyterian Church and its pastors. Also included is information about our stained-glass windows, among which are many Tiffany windows! Please contact the church office if you are interested in further elaboration of our history in the Wyoming Valley.