



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
22 CHURCH STREET
GOUVERNEUR, NY 13642

FPCGH-7
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH TO OBSERVE 125TH
ANNIVERSARY, PLAN THREE ANNIVERSARY
CELEBRATIONS AT LOCAL CHURCH
DURING MONTH OF MAY

THE TRIBUNE-PRESS GOUVERNEUR NY
WEDNESDAY MAY 13, 1942

Unveiling of a tablet dedicated to the first elders of First Presbyterian church, Gouverneur, will take place at the morning service of the church Sunday, exactly 79 years following the ordination of the first elders on May 17, 1863. Descendants of the first elders will present the tablet to the church.

The service will precede two observances of the 125th anniversary of the local church, first organized jointly with the Congregationalists on May 24, 1817. Anniversary celebrations will be held on Wednesday evening, May 20, when the 125th birthday party of the church will be held, and at 10.30am Sunday, May 24, 125 years following the church's founding, to the day.

Greetings will be presented from the Presbytery and reminiscences will be given by members of the church, at the "social evening" May 20. Musical numbers to be rendered will include music written by Mrs. Lillian Tait Sheldon, former church organist, and sung by her daughter, Mrs. Gertrude Sheldon Smith of Potsdam. Ministers of other local churches will also bring greetings.

Rev. Joseph A. Schofield, Jr., pastor, announced this week that plans for anniversary observances are nearing completion. William H. Storie and John N. Draper have been appointed a committee in charge of arrangements.

Special music will be presented by the choir under the direction of Mrs. Ora Spencer Fuller, organist, at the dedication service next Sunday. The tablet, dedicated to George Rodger, Melville Thrall, Samuel Wright, James Brodie, Simeon Parmelee, Joseph Howes and George Lockie, first elders, will be unveiled at a special service near the end of regular worship by Mrs. George W. Sisson, Jr., of Potsdam, daughter of Joseph Howes, one of the honored elders. Rev. Schofield will speak on the history of the church and its first elders.

Celebration of the church's 125th anniversary will be curtailed because of the war and the serious transportation situation.

A guest will speak at the 125th anniversary service Sunday morning, May 24.

Another anniversary will be celebrated by the church later in the summer. That is the anniversary of laying the cornerstone for the beautiful marble edifice on Church Street on July 27, 1892. The local celebration is planned for July 26.

When the story of the first churches in Gouverneur opens, the village was little more than a primitive settlement carved out of the forest. Settlers, who left their most valued possessions behind, came to what was then a northern wilderness. They 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 here.

Neighborhood prayer meetings, catechism lessons for the children and community singing were some of the church activities held in Gouverneur's infancy. Some of the pioneers were educated musicians, and their voices rang out through the woods and fields in hymn and song.

Services were held frequently in Israel Porter's dancing hall on the west side at the top of sawmill hill, believed to be the corner of West Main and Hailesboro streets today. Porter's hall contained one of the largest rooms in the village, and it was for this reason that services were held there.

In 1817, following years of desire by Presbyterian and Congregational elements to have an organization of their own, a circular letter addressed to immigrants from New England and others in the new settlement, was sent to this 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.

Following the close of the War of 1812, people became ready to settle down to the useful activities and on May 24, 1817, a Presbyterian or 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. Mr. Cleghorn and Mr. Hough were related by marriage to

the Coltons. Mrs. Spencer was the first person added to the church roll and her children were the first persons baptized in the church. 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, rude building, scarcely meriting the name of house, was constructed in 1820 as Gouverneur's first "meeting house." Location of the building is not known, but it is believed to have stood near 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 church privileges that they traveled long distances over rough trails in ox carts to listen to sermons.

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 Somerville road near the St Lawrence Marble mill supplied the family with vegetables, and his wife practiced extreme thrift to aid the family's welfare. Visiting 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 about this time and deeded to the society through negotiations made by Judge Kent, agent for Mrs. Gouverneur Morris.

The edifice, built at a cost of \$1,400, was 34x39 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 October 1877, the church had been moved to a lot occupied by the Starbuck barn, and later traveled across the street to the lot now occupied by the Gouverneur Marble Works. The building was used as a church, town hall, opera house, paint shop, hose house, village lockup, 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 century, during which time it has pleased the great head of the church at sundry times to visit this branch of Zion with the

gracious effusions of His blessed spirit, and to permit additions to be made to it by profession of faith and by certificate of nearly 500 persons.”

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 with other churches in the community also benefitting from the services.

Successor to Rev. Murdock, 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 Revs. Jonathan Hovey, John Bucknell and Robert F. Lawrence. These men served for short periods.

In 1835 the church was impoverished by the removal of several families, among them the Jonathan, Colton and Smith families. These families joined a colony from Northampton, Mass. and emigrated to Princeton, Ill.

Rev. Simeon Bicknell, a Dartmouth graduate, was ordained in October 1838 as pastor of the church, and he remained here until January 1842 when he was succeeded by Rev. John Orr. Rev. Orr began his service to the local church in February of 1842, staying here until August 1843 when the church observed its twenty-fifth anniversary.

In spite of conscientious efforts of both parties involved to come to an understanding, for a long time, estimated to be 20 years, there was a division of the church which grew ever wider. Letters of dismissal from the church were asked for by several members, but they could not be granted, and a futile effort was made to keep them in the church.

The result of years of struggle was establishment of a second Congregational church here in 1843, taking from the parent church 27 members and also embracing a number of persons from Richville. Most members of the second Congregational society returned to the parent fold following dissolution of the group which had erected a plain edifice where the First Methodist church now stands. They occupied the church until 1862.

The second Congregational was purchased by the Methodist society and was occupied by them for a few years, when it was removed to the rear of the Elliott

store, Park street. At its new location it was used for a short time as an opera house and later purchased by the Catholics. However, the building burned in 1875.

Rev. B. B. Beckwith was the next pastor of the church. He was installed February 14, 1844, although he began his labors during the preceding autumn. Rev. Beriah Hoachkin, Potsdam, preached the installation sermon. Mr. Beckwith's pastorate covered a period of 23 years of prosperity in the church. He was an energetic, quick and brisk man.

Rev. Beckwith purchased the west half of the square bounded by Main, Sterling, Beckwith and Depot streets and on the lot he built his home, now part of the Freeman home.

A new church was constructed in 1843-44, the one remembered by most older church members now as the "Old Church." The edifice which cost approximately \$35,000 measured 60x40 feet with a seven foot projection for lobby and belfry.

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

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 May 17, 1863. Names of these men are mentioned earlier in this story.

In 1865 the resignation of Rev. 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 Rev. N. J. Conklin, Utica, and he began his work in March 1866. Installation services were held in July of the same year. During the year 1866, a new parsonage was constructed to the east of the church by the society. The parsonage housed the ministers until the present home was constructed.

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.

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

In June 1887, Rev. William F. Skinner came to Gouverneur upon graduation from college to assume pastoral duties. Ordination services were held on July 9, 1887, and Mr. Skinner set out upon a 50-year career as leader of the church.

Members had long realized the need for a new church, and the old church was formally closed with an historic sermon by Rev. Skinner. Work of demolition began at once, and on May 4, 1892 ground was broken for the new edifice and the church passed its seventy-fifth milestone.

Cornerstone of the beautiful marble structure now used by the church congregation was laid on the afternoon of July 27, 1892, when Rev. 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 Rev. Henry H. Stebbins, D.D., of Rochester preaching the dedicatory sermon.

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

The church property was enriched in 1904 with a gift of a brick parsonage with marble trim by Mrs. Myra Dean and her daughters, Miss Jennie Dean and Miss Cora Dean. The old parsonage was removed to John street and is now known as the Fox house.

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 has passed from father to son.

In 125 years of service to the community, the church has had only nine regular pastors, among them being Rev. B. B. Beckwith and Rev. William F. Skinner, who

served 23 and 50 years respectively. Many names have been entered on the church roll for over a half century.

Rev. Skinner was succeeded by Rev. Joseph A. Schofield, Jr., the present pastor, in May, 1930. Mrs. Ora Spencer Fuller, church organist, has served in that capacity for 14 years. The present church organ was given anonymously by a lady, a member of the Congregation many years and was installed in 1920 and played for the first time September 5, 1920 by Mrs. Lillian Tait Sheldon.

Present elders are: Dr. Samuel W. Close, James O. Sheldon, William H. Storie, Roy W. Bush, George A. Lockie, Morris B. Davies, George E. Beaman, John D. N. Draper, Earl E. Laidlaw.

Elected May 3, 1942: C. V. Wilcox, M. Warren Taylor.