

1817-1942

One Hundred and Twenty-Five Years of The Western Presbyterian Church

Palmyra, New Yorkⁱ

125th Anniversary Hymn

(Tune—"The Church's One Foundation")

The church our fathers founded
Began with fifty-six
Who heard the Father call them
To strength and vision mix.
They gathered those about them
Of Christian cult and creed
And built a tabernacle
To serve the Spirit's need.

From Pastor Jesse Townsend
Along the path of time,
Good shepherds led this people
To love the Spirit's clime.
Good men of faith and vision
Shared joys and hopes and fears;
And Pastor Horace Eaton
Kept watch for thirty years.

Devoted men and women
Of honest Christian mind
Have always brought her honor
And helped men God to find.
Unselfish, kind and thoughtful,
They lived from day to day
Were unashamed of Jesus
And not too proud to pray.

The church our fathers founded
Goes on from year to year;
In Christian doctrine grounded,
In faith that knows no fear.
Rise up then Christian children!
Your fathers' places fill!
You have a great tradition.
Now, make it greater still!

--Lyric by Donald B. Blackstone

One Hundred and Twenty-Five Years

of

The Western Presbyterian Church

Any attempt to compile a history of our church, new or different from what has already been written, is not an easy task, so I would ask you to consider with me, briefly, to-night, the life of our church from its organization down to the present time.

I am told that the records covering the first eleven years of the church cannot be found and there is no one living to-day who can tell that story.

Religious services were first held in 1792 in private houses among the members of the old Long Island Colony at East Palmyra. Until December, 1793, the meetings were held in the annex of David H. Foster's house, where a church society was organized under the Congregational form of government by the Rev. Ira Condit, and on November 10th, 1806, the sum of \$1026 was subscribed by 51 members for the erection of a church building.

There was much discussion as to the location of the new church, some favoring the north side of the creek where the old No. 7 school house now stands, and others the spot on the south side of the creek where the present East Palmyra Presbyterian Church is located. The south side won and the church was commenced, Gideon Durfee and Humphrey Sherman donating the land on March 23, 1807. Each member was allotted his portion of the work, the building was 54 by 64 feet, one hundred and thirty men were necessary to raise the frame and the raising was completed without an accident.

The church was opened for public service in September of that same year, before the building was finished; the lumber was used up, pockets were empty and the society felt that what they had done was well done and that time would finish.

The first sermon in the church was an hour and a quarter long, and the prayer twenty minutes.

The church was used in an unfinished condition for thirteen years. In 1827 the church was sided over but never painted, and after thirty-three years was taken down to be replaced by a new church.

This church adopted the Presbyterian form of Government in 1807, and was attached to the Geneva Presbytery, being the first church built and the first society organized in the state west of the pre-emption line.

In 1811 the citizens of Palmyra had erected a building on the west side of Church Street just south of where now lies what is commonly known as the "Old Cemetery," the land having been donated by Gen. John Swift. In this building erected by the villagers, services were held each Sunday. No one was refused participation in the services because of his creed, but the majority of the congregation were Presbyterians who had heretofore been in the habit of attending church at East Palmyra, usually traveling by boat on Ganargua Creek or on horseback.

And so it came about that on February 26, 1817, 56 members from the mother church at East Palmyra separated themselves and were organized as the Western Presbyterian Church of Palmyra, the certificate of incorporation being filed in Ontario County Clerk's Office at Canandaigua on May 13, 1817.ⁱⁱ

The Rev. Jesse Townsend was the first installed pastor of the new society. There can be none living to-day who can remember that white rectangular, many windowed meeting house with its gilded weather vane, where on the right hand and on the left a stairway led to the gallery above, its three aisles and its high pulpit

which was of primitive fashion. In this church on every Sunday, the people listened to a long discourse, usually the discussion of some doctrinal theme, in the morning, and another equally as long in the afternoon, and here a large congregation continued to worship until the present church was built in 1832.

In 1831 the Society proposed to build a new church, plans were drawn and submitted by Abner Lakey, a lot was purchased at the northeast corner of Main and Church Streets, and Asa Millard was engaged as contractor to put up the building. The work was begun and carried on so that the corner stone was laid on August 30th, 1832. In that stone is deposited a leaden box containing a Bible presented by E.B. Grandin, a copy of the Presbyterian Confession of Faith presented by M.W. Wilcox, Esq., the 8th annual report of the Sabbath School Union; the then last number of the Wayne Sentinel; the last number of the Missionary Herald; an account of the church and society, the statistics of the village; the names of the Governor and President and the heads of the Departments.

At the laying of the corner stone, the procession was formed between ten and eleven o'clock at the old meeting house and escorted by the officers and non-commissioned officers of Col. Horton's cavalry, proceeded to the site of edifice, where, after laying the stone, an able and appropriate address was delivered by the Rev. S.W. Whelpley, then pastor of the church and society, prayer was offered by the Rev. Jesse Townsend and the benediction pronounced by the Rev. B.H. Wilcox. Everything else was laid aside, men who knew what it was to use an ax and how to use it, were engaged to help and in four days the timber was ready. Work progressed until the building was completed, with its massive pillars, its tall wooden steeple surmounted by a weather-vane which still stands, and in which at one time was placed the town clock so many years cared for by the late Giles Crandall, and which remained there until 1868, when it was removed by the village trustees who in later years had assumed its care.

The solid brick walls of the church, the doors and windows, in fact, the exterior of the main church building, are the same today as when erected 110 years ago. Indeed, a most pretentious building for those days, and was dedicated on May 7th, 1834. The old meeting house on the hill then still owned by the village, was used by the Baptist Society for some time, and was destroyed by fire on November 14, 1838.

The Rev. F. Pomeroy assisted in the organization of the church. Stephen M. Wheelock, a young man not yet ordained, ministered to the new society for a few months. Rev. Jesse Townsend was the first installed pastor. His term of service extended from 1817 to 1820.

[If Hopkins started in 1822, who was there from 1820 to 1822? Check any minutes I can find.]

Following him in succession came:

Rev. Daniel C. Hopkins, stated supply	1822-1824
Rev. Benjamin B. Stockton	1824-1828
Rev. Stephen Porter, stated supply	1828
Rev. Alfred E. Campbell	1828-1830
Rev. Samuel E. Whelpley	1831-1834
Rev. G.R.H. Shumway	1835-1841
Rev. N.W. Fisher	1842-1847
Rev. N.W. Goertner, stated supply	1848
Rev. Horace Eaton, D.D., and Pastor Emeritus until his death in 1883	1879-1886
Rev. Warren H. Landon	1879-1886

Rev. Herbert D. Cone	1887-1889
Rev. Stephen G. Hopkins	1890-1896
Rev. Angus H. Cameron	1897-1904
Rev. Peter McKenzie	1905-1914
Rev. Boyd McCleary	1915-1921
Rev. Thomas Tighe	1922-1930
Rev. Robert G. Higinbotham	1931-1937
Rev. Willard A. Page	1938-1941
Rev. Donald B. Blackstone	1942-

All the pastorates have been brief, with the exception of that of Dr. Eaton, whose term of faithful, efficient service lasted 30 years.

In all the years of its history the church has been loyal to the faith once committed to the saints. Cases of discipline were frequent at first. Members were suspended and excommunicated for intemperance, infidelity, gambling, profanity, neglect of church ordinances and withholding their financial support, while committees were appointed to labor with those guilty of attending the circus or dances, betting on election and riding for pleasure on the Sabbath Day. Letters of good and regular standing were refused to those who left town with unpaid bills, until all obligations were met, or satisfactorily adjusted upon sound moral principles.

Periods of depression as well as interest marked the growth of the church from 1828 when the membership numbered 161, to the present time with 386 names on the roll.

From the first the elders and deacons were intelligent, devoted and zealous men. At one time there appears to have been eleven elders in the Session. Their office was far from being merely advisory or honorary. Each felt the responsibility of his position, and with the pastor took the spiritual oversight of the flock. They visited the members, labored with the erring and encouraged the weak. At times the parish was divided into districts and each elder had charge of a district. He was held in a measure responsible for the walk and conduct of all within his jurisdiction.

The rotary system in the election of elders was introduced in 1876 and the number of elders limited to nine.

The society records date back to 1838. At that time the church funds were raised by a poll tax of one dollar levied on the members, and the balance assessed upon the male members "taking into account the matter of production, property, age, general health and profession." Consent to this system was a part of the church covenant. This system was never satisfactory or successful. Efforts were made at various times to "free the house" as it was called, by the purchase of the pews, they being owned as real estate. This was at last completed in 1861. Meantime, the tax system gave way to a subscription, supplemented by an assessment; later, to pew rentals, in 1891, to the present system of free pews and weekly offerings.

In the early days the women literally kept silence in the church. A woman's voice was never heard in prayer, nor was she permitted to vote at church meetings. To-day, what would our church be without the women's organizations.

The first missionary society in our church was organized September 13th, 1875, during Dr. Eaton's pastorate, and was called "The Ladies' Foreign Missionary Society of the Palmyra Presbyterian Church." The society was re-organized October 14th, 1881, and is now known as the Women's Missionary Society." Its object from the first has been to awaken an interest in and raise money for both Home and Foreign Missions.

Through the influence of Dr. Warren H. Landon, then pastor of the church, our first Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor was organized in 1882, with thirty charter members. This was the second society to be formed in the state of

New York, and for many years was one of the active organizations of the church, among other things, contributing to various missionary objects. As is often so with other organizations, this society has had its periods of inactivity, but at the present time our church is proud to have an active Young People's organization.

The Ladies' Aid Society has always been a prominent and active organization of the church, having been organized some time prior to 1865. Its objects are the raising of funds to be used as the occasion may require; the promotion of mutual acquaintance and the development of the social life of the church. Ever since its organization the society has been ever ready to purchase necessary equipment and furnishings for the church and the manse, and to assist the trustees financially whenever necessity arose. For some years now the Society has been known as "The Church Aid Society." We now also have a very active and helpful Junior Aid Society of some 70 members, which was first organized as The Young Women's Sunday School Class, later changing the name to the Junior Aid Society.

At a meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Church on December 9, 1839, it was moved that the trustees procure a site for the erection of horse sheds for the accommodation of the members of the society. It was found that the property north of the church could be purchased for the sum of \$1950. This was done in 1866 and the sheds were built where they remained until removed by the society in 1921.

A subscription was taken in 1828 for the purpose of procuring an organ. Mrs. Eliza (McIntyre) Lamson, followed by Mrs. Burnette, were among the first regular organists. The present organ was purchased in 1855. Georgianna Newton (Mrs. John Drake) was the first whose name appears as presiding at the new organ. And on April 1, 1922, permission was granted by the Board of Trustees for the installation of a motor for the organ. And in 1938 the organ was again overhauled, enlarged and remodeled into the modern up-to-date church organ as we see it to-day.

In 1847 the bell which still calls us to worship, weighing 1200 pounds, was purchased and placed in the tower.

The first cushions for the pews were put into use in about 1863, and the book racks installed at about that time.

The church was repaired, remodeled, and the present Lecture Room built in 1868, at a cost of \$12,500. Previous to that time the pulpit had stood between the doors at the south end. The north gallery was removed, a recess built for the choir loft, the pulpit placed in front of it and the pews reversed.

In 1873, the room back of the pulpit was repaired and put in to use for Sunday School purposes and it was in that room that Mrs. Eaton and her able assistant, Mrs. George S. Johnson and Miss Martha Root listened to the "Beginners" recite their Golden Texts, the Beginners then being known as the Infant Class. This room was later remodeled into a well equipped kitchen.

It was not until 1889 that the vestibule doors were put on swing hinges, the sidewalk built on Church Street, and in about 1900 the old open gas jet burners were first replaced by electric lights.

In about the year 1916, during the pastorate of the Rev. Boyd McCleary, the last large two-story addition was erected on the north side of the church, which provided large, light and airy rooms for Sunday School use, and the room on the ground floor, which when thrown open, together with the lecture room, afford ample room for any gathering which the society might wish to entertain. The church auditorium having the largest seating capacity of any of our village churches, its doors have been thrown open to the public on many occasions. In recent years probably one of the largest assemblages was gathered to do honor to a native born son of Palmyra, Rear-Admiral William T. Sampson, on October 27, 1899. Memorial services for President McKinley were also held in our church. One other occasion when the church was filled to capacity was the occasion of the visit of Miss Helen

Keller, with her teacher, Mrs. Macy and her private secretary Miss Peggy Thompson, whose brother at the time was minister of the Northleith Presbyterian Church in Scotland.

In 1921 when it became evident that a new carpet would be needed for the church auditorium the matter of a hard wood floor was brought before the Board of Trustees and the Ladies' Aid society and on July 14th, 1921, a resolution was presented and adopted that the Board be authorized to enter into a contract in the name of the Western Presbyterian Church, to lay hard wood floors, the expense attached thereto, however, to be met by the Ladies' Aid Society of the church.

In 1925, by means of a free will offering at the annual meeting, the bulleting board which stands at the corner of the church upon which may be seen the hour of service, or any other notice of special interest, was made possible.

In 1928 or 1929 the new heating system and present electric lights were installed.

In 1939, the women of the First Philathea Class were inspired by the idea that our church should have a Church Parlor and began the task of remodeling, refinishing and furnishing their Class Room to be used as such, and through their hard work and generosity, and contributions made by interested friends of the church, we have to-day our beautiful Harriet Clark Reeves Memorial parlor, which was dedicated on March 22, 1939, in loving memory of Mrs. Reeves who had been their teacher for fifteen years.

Early in the year 1938, a Men's Service Club was organized in our church, for the purpose of recreational and social activities, but since it was conceded to have no connection with the Religious life of the church, it did not prove to be very successful. A few years later, the organization was revived and thru their efforts with the financial backing of one of our interested members we have our completely equipped modern kitchen and dining room in the basement. This work, from the excavation to the last coat of paint, was all done by our own church men. This left the room behind the pulpit vacant, where to-day, thru the untiring effort of our present pastor, the Rev. Donald B. Blackstone, we find our beautiful Robert G. Higinbotham Memorial Chapel.

To-day a service flag with forty stars hangs in the front of the church in honor of the young men of the church who are serving their country. This flag was dedicated on September 13th, 1942.

October 2, 1942

-- (Mrs. J.F.) Sarah Lines

125th Anniversary Hymn
(Tune—"The Old Rugged Cross")

In a village that's fair
Stands an old pillared church.
I worshipped there when but a child.
And I love that old church
That has guided my life
In a world that seems carefree and wild.

Chorus:

So I'll worship my God in this church
Through the years that are granted to me.
I will pray and sing out the old hymns
Of salvation that once set me free.

And this old pillared church
Has its memories dear
It lifts up my heart when I'm weak,
Like a dear happy home
For both sinners and saints,
For all who are humble and meek.

In this lovely old church,
I shall find my soul's peace,
My Savior and friends by my side.
It's a bulwark that's strong
'Gainst the sins of the world
Where faith, hope and love all abide.

So I'll ever be wending
My steps, though afar,
Toward this beacon that lights up my way.
When the struggles of life
Seem to burden me down,
I will kneel at its alter and pray.

--Lyric by H.C. Fletcher

125th Anniversary Committees

General Chairman—Miss Myra Smith

Dinner—Mrs. Fred Cable, Mrs. Earl Salem, Mrs. Harold Gilman, Mrs. Elmer Cambier,
Mrs. G.R. Milligan

Invitations—Mr. E.L. Hargrave, Mr. H.G. Chapman, Mrs. Anna Hurlburt, Mrs. Charles
R. Harrison, Miss Jean Foster

Program—Mr. and Mrs. J.F. Lines, Mr. and Mrs. C.C. Rumrill, Mr. and Mrs. J.L.
Stoddard, Miss Prudence Warner

Music—Miss Lillian Orlopp, Miss Helen Smith, Mr. G.R. Milligan, Mr. A.D. Trautman

Exhibits—Miss Crandall, Mrs. W.M. Parson, Mrs. R.P. Bloom, Mrs. Leon Cator, Mrs.
Charles Sawyer

Official Boards of the Western Presbyterian Church

The Session
The Rev. Donald B. Blackstone, Moderator

Elders

Harry G. Chapman James L. Stoddard

Henry D. Runterman Charles C. Rumrill
Andrew Y. Earl Edward L. Hargrave
Jacob W. Crookston Bert F. Cleason
 Warren H. Wilcox

The Board of Trustees

Charles H. Johnson, Pres. Frank H. Granger, Sec'y
George E. Bernhard Henry W. Griffith
Edgar Congdon Robert M. Waples

Deacons

Frank H. Granger James L. Stoddard
 Henry D. Runtermanⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Booklet. 7 1/2" x 5 1/2" printed with tan cover, stapled spine. 8 pp not including covers. AFC2:manilla envelope.

ⁱⁱ Wayne County, of which Palmyra is now part, did not exist in 1817. Palmyra was part of Ontario County and Canandaigua was the county seat.

ⁱⁱⁱ This electronic and printed version was compiled by Western Presbyterian Church historian, Betsy Lewis on January 3, 2007. Original is in the church archives.