

THE BRISTOL CENTENNIAL
Harry M. Wright

As long ago as 1811, the voice of one crying in the wilderness against the blighting doctrines of a narrow Partialism with its attendant horrors was heard within the boundaries of Ontario County. The pioneer preacher of glad tidings was the Rev. Nathaniel Stacy who made annual pilgrimages thru the central and western sections of New York State and established preaching stations wherever he went. In 1811, he preached in the courthouse in Canandaigua and in the following year in LeRoy, Batavia, Buffalo, Lima, and Bloomfield. These communities were in the frontier district known as the Western Association of Universalists. Mr. Stacy attended the annual session of this association in 1816 and among the places where he held services was Bristol. Just where the services were held we cannot be very certain but as the first church building was not erected until 1836 these meetings and the one for organization¹ were doubtlessly held in dwellings or groves.

We find that the Rev. Oliver Ackley from the church in Hopewell held meetings in the school house at Baptist Hill during the winter of 1828, and in the summer in a grove near the residence of Mr. J. W. Nichols. Others preached in Bristol during this early period and among the visiting clergymen was the Rev. J. W. [William Isaac] Reese who in 1833 was pastor of the Universalist church in Bloomfield.

A church edifice was erected by the Universalist Society of Bristol in 1832 but with the disbanding of the society, the building was sold to St. Peter's Episcopal church and then in 1859 to the Methodist Society. It was built of stone, the lower floor used for a school room and the second floor for religious meetings.

Mr. Reese was assisted in his work by the Rev. George W. Montgomery and they went as far as Buffalo on their missionary tour where in 1832, they organized the First Universalist church of Buffalo. Mr. Montgomery became the first pastor of the Buffalo church, later having pastorates in Auburn and Rochester where he was the predecessor of Dr. Asa Saxe.

In the early thirties, the Rev. William Quiel [Queal] became pastor of the Bristol church, the first resident minister. He was followed by the Revs. Samuel Goff, J. R. [James Riley] Johnson, C. A. [Charles Heman] Dutton, U. M. Fisk and George Gage. In 1857, the pastor was the Rev. James W. Bailey

¹ The Bristol incorporation record begins: In conformity with the statute concerning the incorporation of religious societies, we the subscribers do certify that at a meeting of the members of the First Universalist Society, held at their meeting house in the town of Bristol, Ontario County, on the tenth day of April 1837, called for the purpose of electing Trustees preparatory to being legally incorporated as a society...

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in whose memory a window in the church was installed. For six years he served the church most constructively. His son, Murray, and daughter, Emma, both became Universalist ministers. From this pastorate, there is an unbroken record of pastorates down to the present. The list to 1872 is as follows: Revs. J. R. Sage, W. W. Lovejoy, D. C. Brown and S. P. Blackford.

At the annual meeting on November 26, 1860, a special committee was appointed to solicit funds for the building of a new church. Subscriptions amounting to \$2,700 were secured. On January 4, 1862, at the annual meeting, it was reported that the edifice was completed and paid for. On February 21, 1872, in the pastorate of the Rev. S. P. Blackford, a committee was appointed to procure a site and build a parsonage. The Sunday School was organized in 1862 and Richmond Simmons was the first superintendent.

Following Mr. Blackford, the ministers serving this church were the Revs. H. [Henry] R. Jewell, 1872-74; John Gates, 1874-82; S. G. Davis, 1882-84; F. B. [Francis Benson] Peck, 1884-86; George Cole, 1886-88; E. B. Barber, 1888-91; H. J. Orlup, 1891-97; T. F. May, 1897-99; F. F. Bucker, 1899-1903; L. D. Boynton, 1904-08; George Babbitt, 1908-12; J. L. Wolbach, 1912-1913; J. H. Flower, 1913-1917; O. F. [Otis Fries] Alvord; G. H. Campbell, 1924-1931, who was succeeded by the present pastor, the Rev. H. M. Wright.

Several years ago, this church received a bequest from the late Isaac Newton, a native of Bristol, and tho removing from Bristol he never lost his interest in his native village. By this liberal bequest, this church with two other churches receiving like amounts has been able to carry on, and as this fund is conditioned upon a certain amount to be raised annually by this society for this year's budget it becomes a greater incentive to unceasing activity on the part of the local parish.

Other bequests have been made in the passing years manifesting an undying interest in and love for the Universalist church in Bristol, on the part of those whose earthly tasks have been completed.

But this is not all that we would recall on this occasion nor is it of itself sufficient to produce the gladness of heart which marks this centennial.

Problems have come like those of all churches in the rural sections in which parishes face conditions unlike those of the city and small village. In the main, this church has faced its problems bravely and in spite of a shifting population and the departure of many of its young folk to the larger fields of business opportunity, this church has not lost sight of the fact that religion has had some of its most challenging events in the rural districts.

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As long ago, men were called from the rugged country of ancient Judea to go forth that in a larger sense they might serve their God and advance the interests of their holy faith, so from among the hills scenes of Bristol one heard the call of a noble service in far away Japan. For more than a score of years, our own Agnes Hathaway, a native of Bristol and an honored member of this church, whose parents were among the pioneer workers of this parish, gave full measure of her devotion to a people who have come to love her as their own and with whom she is spending the afternoon of her earthly life.

For many, many years the calls upon the pastors of this church to carry the message of hope and comfort in its satisfying faith to darkened homes and sorrowing souls have been great in number. In this, our church has ministered to a multitude who have come to rejoice in its gospel of the Eternal life.

...

We shall long remember this anniversary day. But now we are in the new century. As we turn to tomorrow, we are certain to feel the force of truth so well expressed by Whittier:

All the good the past has had
Remains to make our own time glad.

This day shall have been worse than wasted if it shall not have given to each of us a spiritual vision of that vast throng who have served to make this closing of a century of progress so significant to us, a vision in which we shall see their standard going on before us...

Empire State Universalist, Cortland NY, Jul-Aug 1933
[abridged]

Transcribed on 30 Mar 2013 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY