

Cortland, Cortland Co. NY

Cortland Universalist Church—Universalism was first preached in Cortland county by Nathaniel Stacy, who wrote: "In 1807, on my first visit to Cortland county, I delivered one address at Homer, and one at Port Watson. The latter was a new place but contained as many inhabitants as Homer. There was but one solitary house where the flourishing village of Cortland now (1850) stands, and that one was a residence of a friend of ours by the name Hubbard." (Stacy's Memoirs, page 190.) In the oldest record book of the parish extant, is the following reminiscence written apparently from memory, by the first clerk of the parish, John Chamberlain:

"According to early records of Universalism in Homer, it appears that a society of the name of 'The First Charitable, Universal, Religious Society of the Town of Homer,' was organized at the court house, Homer, (now Cortlandville) the 16th of Nov., 1813. Samuel Ingalls and Mead Merrill presided at the above meeting. The following persons were elected trustees: Moses Hopkins, Allen Barry, John Chamberlain, David Merrick, Mead Merrill, Roger Edgcomb. A society of the name of 'The First Universalist Society of the Town of Homer' was organized Jan. 19, 1829, at the house of David Merrick. The last meeting of the above society was holden on the 18th of Jan., 1831."

The "House of David Merrick" stood on the present site of the Cortland Opera House. In the early days there seems to have been no settled pastor, services being held occasionally, whenever a preacher came this way. This continued until 1831, when Rev. Nelson Doolittle settled at Cortland and Homer, as the first permanent pastor. For a number of years services were held on alternate Sundays at these places. His pastorate lasted two years, when Rev. George Sanderson, in 1833, became pastor, and served the church in that capacity for three years. It was during this period that the permanent foundation of the present society was laid. At a special meeting of the parish in the Baptist meeting house, held Sept. 17, 1834, a committee of seven, of which the pastor was first named, was appointed "to draft a new code of by-laws for the benefit of the society." The committee reported the next month; the report was adopted, and arrangements made for a grand meeting when the new Covenant should be signed. The two days' Conference meeting was held in February, 1835. Rev. Dolphus Skinner gives a very interesting account of it in the "Magazine and Advocate" of that year, he preaching two sermons. Nine ministers, whose names he mentions, were present. In conclusion he says: "At the close of the service, the Constitution, Declaration and Covenant were read, and signed by thirty-five sisters and sixty-six brethren, making an aggregate of one hundred and one members." The Baptist meeting house was still used as a place of worship. Late in 1835 or early in 1836 a committee was chosen relative to "building a meeting house." On February 9th, 1836, this committee was empowered "to fix upon the size of the house, form and materials of which it shall be built, the plan of raising the money, and the site where it shall stand." [On] February 23, the committee reported "That the meeting house be built on the lot offered by Calvin Bishop. That the size of the house be 60x44 feet. That the walls be of cobblestone and such other materials as are necessary for the purpose and that the funds be raised by subscription." This was not quite explicit enough, for this was followed by a motion that "the committee agree on a level floor, a gallery on three sides, west, north and south, two tiers of windows, and a desk in the east end of the house." About this time the Rev. Walter Bullard became pastor and served in that capacity for two years, being

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followed by Rev. A. C. Barry in 1838. During his pastorate the society was re-incorporated, the legal name, "The First Charitable, Universalist, Religious Society of the Town of Homer," was changed to "The First Universalist Society of the Town of Cortlandville." This was done May 7, 1839. The new church was dedicated July 10, 1839. At the annual meeting Jan. 10, 1840, Rev. T. J. Whitcomb was called to the pastorate. The following year his predecessor, Rev. A. C. Barry, wrote in the "Magazine and Advocate" (page 141) regarding this society: "There are now (1841) probably between seventy and eighty members. Their meeting house (the best in the county) is located at Cortland village—the county seat—which contains rising of a thousand inhabitants." On Jan. 11, 1842, Rev. Mr. Whitcomb received twenty-two new members in the church, among them being our honored and beloved deacon, Ebenezer Mudge, the only survivor of that company. We will pass over the pastorates of Rev. Messrs. Charles S. Brown and D. H. Strickland and others, until the year 1857, when the church called to minister to it Rev. William H. Fish. Mr. Fish came as a non-sectarianist. His creed was temperance and the abolition of slavery. His pastorate extended through five years, 1857 to 1862. This was the golden age of the Lyceum and public lectures, and Mr. Fish was the man to make the most of every opportunity. To the platform of this church came Thomas Starr King, Theodore Parker, Henry Ward Beecher, Edward H. Chapin, Charles Sumner, Wendell Phillips, Wm. Lloyd Garrison, Ralph Waldo Emerson and others. With considerable Yankee shrewdness Mr. Fish quite often managed to have the lectures take place on Saturday night, so that the guests would have to remain over Sunday, and the people would have the privilege of two or three more lectures the next day, free of charge. Rev. Mr. Fish's stirring pastorate was followed by the ministrations of the Rev. Stephen Crane, who remained with the church for four years, being followed by Rev. John M. Austin and Rev. F. B. Peck, Rev. E. F. Pember and Rev. H. W. Hand, the latter remaining one year, doing excellent work in the way of reorganization, and furnishing a new set of bylaws. This church has a good constitution else it never could have survived the numerous by-laws!

Rev. George Adams was the next pastor, from 1883 to 1886. He was followed by Mr. H. E. Gilchrist, who was ordained in the church. Rev. Ure Mitchell assumed the pastoral duties Feb. 1, 1889. Under his energetic administration the church edifice was entirely remodeled, giving it its present modern appearance in the interior. He was succeeded by H. W. Carr, who graduated from the Canton Theological school in June, 1891, and who assumed the pastoral duties of the church at once, which proved to be a successful and prosperous one, and the longest in the history of the parish. During his pastorate the church was further modernized by placing a new organ in its present position, cutting out the original solid stone wall and building the organ loft. Mr. Carr was ordained to the ministry and married in the church while pastor. Since his resignation the church has had two ministers—Rev. John Kenyon, from April 1, 1897 to Oct. 1, 1898, who was also ordained in the church, and the present pastor, Rev. U. S. Milburn, who commenced his duties Oct. 1, 1898. This church has given to the Universalist ministry four clergymen—Rev. Messrs. A. C. Barry [Barray], J. M. Peebles, G. A. Kratzer and H. E. Newton.

Grip's Historical Souvenir of Cortland (1899), pp. 28-30

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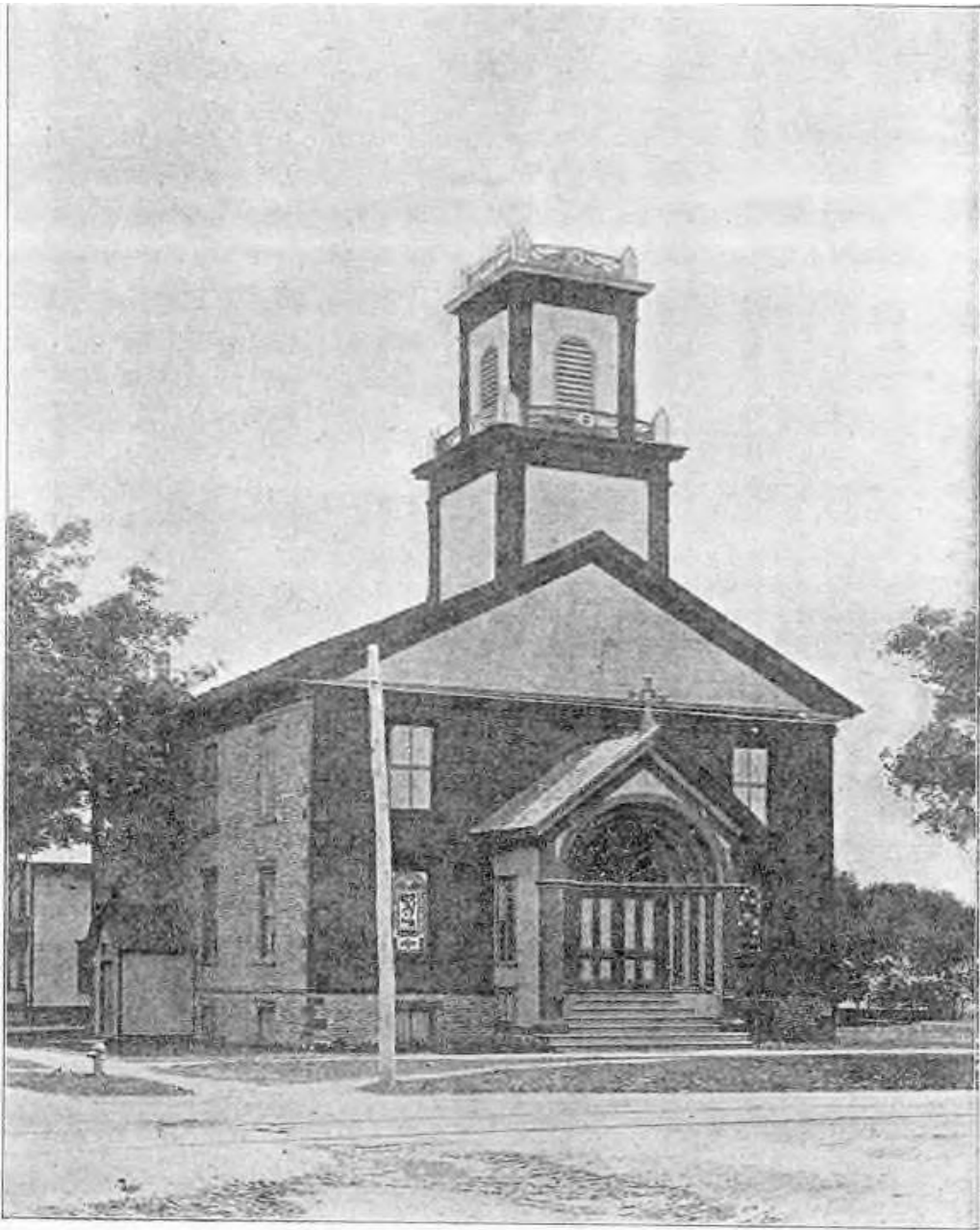


Photo by Butler. UNIVERSALIST CHURCH—Sk. P. 28. "Stand. Ind. Ed."

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