

[Otsego (Fly Creek), Otsego Co.]

The Fly Creek Universalist Church

(A Historical Sketch by Pastor E. A. Perry.)

This church, the oldest in continuous existence west of the Hudson River, has a history eminently worthy of being written, read and studied. It was the pioneer organization in Central New York, has remained steadfast all these years to the faith once delivered to the saints, has wielded and is still wielding a powerful influence in behalf of the Abrahamic faith that "In thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed."

In response to the request of his former neighbor and friend of many years, Rev. Anson Titus, and the editor of *The Convention at Work*, the present pastor of this church, already entered upon his 13th year, prepares this sketch of the life of this religious organization.

The Village of Fly Creek

To many the name seems peculiarly unfortunate, mean, degrading, but it is appropriate, significant, meaningful in a good way. A Vlei, or Vly, a word probably of Dutch origin and allied to valley, is a swamp or marsh of that condition that grass, but not trees, will grow upon it. With care the hay may be gathered and at certain seasons cattle may be pastured thereon. This word requires a twist of the tongue not readily secured by English people, hence was changed to Fly. Along certain streams in Otsego County were found in the old day marshes of this sort, some of which are still known by the name of Flies. They were found along a certain small stream, which joining another, flowed into the Susquehanna River not many miles below Cooperstown. This stream naturally received the name Fly Creek, and with equal naturalness the village built along said stream was called by the same name. The name is one of dignity and good sense.

It is to be further noted that the village was relatively of much greater importance in a former day. Neither Oneonta, 20 miles away, nor Richfield Springs, 12 miles distant, nor Cooperstown, 3 miles eastward, existed. It should not be forgotten that a hundred years ago every stream in Otsego County flowing rapidly southward to join the Susquehanna, turned wheels of mills, saw, grist, paper, and later, cotton. The little stream known as Fly Creek was no exception. Many of these flourishing towns were left one side by the railroads, so gradually ceased their manufacturing.

But it is time we turned to

The Church and Its History

The Rev. Stephen R. Smith records in his *Historical Sketches* that in March, 1803, was organized a Universalist Society of about 25 members. It

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was suggested by him that Rev. M. [Miles] T. Wooley was in the vicinity at this time of Hartwick, Otsego County, N.Y., where he located a year later, hence undoubtedly had somewhat to do with this organization. The meeting was held in a log schoolhouse and religious services were often held for a number of years in such buildings, likewise in homes of members. Those making up the membership were residents of the towns of Otsego [and] Burlington, as well as of Hartwick, without doubt of other towns round about. It is in this connection to be further noted that this part of Otsego County was settled by immigrants from Connecticut from places wherein Universalism had been preached. They brought their religious convictions with them.

[On] January 9, 1820, in a schoolhouse in Hartwick a meeting was held for the purpose of taking preliminary steps for incorporation. On the 15th of the same month the members of this society gathered at the house of Stephen North for election of officers and final action on incorporation. It is to be observed that only "male members of full age" were entitled to vote at said meeting. The names appearing as officers are: William Sprague, Henry Beadle, William Buttenber(?), Shadrack Steel, Samuel Morris, also Dwight Jarvis, as witness. Among the families early identified with this First Universalist Society at Otsego, for this is its title as incorporated, in addition to those already named, were the Williamses, the Taylors, the Robertses, and somewhat later the Hindses, the Colemans, the Pierces, the Potters, the Nileses, the Gibbises, the Babbits, the Jenkses, etc.

The church building was erected at Fly Creek soon after the society received its articles of incorporation. The members were widely scattered over the various towns, some of which have been mentioned, and Flycreek was the most convenient center, the most accessible location for the house of worship. This house of worship originally had galleries [balconies] running around the auditorium. In the '60s it was remodeled, but retains something of its antique quaintness.

Services have been maintained with rare lapses all these years. For much the greater portion of the time the pastor of the Cooperstown [sic] has been pastor, not supply, of the Fly Creek Church. During recent years once has the latter church had a resident pastor. During the years 1886-87 Rev. C. F. Dodge ministered to this church as resident pastor.

During the pastorate of Rev. W. C. [DeWitt Clinton] Tomlinson, [on] January 20, 1859, a church was recognized, starting with 29 members. It is to be noted that all members of the society signed, thus accepting the Winchester Profession of Faith. It was customary to appoint Committees of Discipline, even though there was no church organization. The society was in many particulars a church, a body of Christ.

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This historic religious body holds services each Sunday afternoon. During the past dozen years many have dropped out of life, many young people have married, moved away; still others have gone to other localities; few new families have made their homes at Fly Creek. As a consequence of this, numerically it is smaller than even a decade ago.

However, humanly speaking, the perpetuity of the church is assured, unless there shall be very bad financial management. It is endowed by two different funds. One of these came to the church from one of the Taylor families, so long and numerously identified with the church. The other was received under the present pastorate, and is known as the Kellogg Sisters' Fund. The latter is held under conditions, and it is to be presumed likewise, as is the former, the church always remaining of the Universalist Faith and Form. The income alone shall be used for the maintenance of public worship and the property passes into the possession of the State Convention should the church be closed for a period of two years.

It is true that often endowments mean the death of the church, for the simple reason that the members depend upon the fund to support public worship, and refuse to contribute. As attendance costs nothing they come to the conclusion that it is worth just what it costs, and drop out. The people of the Fly Creek church are not contenting themselves with doing nothing, thus giving promise that they will not die from surfeit and inaction.

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