

[Perinton (Fairport), Monroe Co.]

Transcriber's note: James Cook was born in Marcellus, N. Y., Nov. 24, 1818. Before he was even 19 years of age, he was preaching regularly at Chili, N. Y. In 1838, he went to Churchville where in 1839, he married Sarah Wooden of Chili. In 1841, he became the Universalist preacher in the town of Perinton (formerly spelled Perrinton), which is situated about ten miles east of Rochester on the Erie Canal. The village where Mr. Cook lived is known as Fairport. What follows is an account of his ministry in Universalism there, written by his brother Rev. Theodore D. Cook.

CHAPTER XVIII: Ministry in Perrinton

The Universalist church here is situated about 30 rods south from the canal, and a little east of the principal street. With its white tower or steeple pointing heavenward, lending a charm to the few adornments of the place, it commands a view of the quiet charms of the surrounding country, and is an object of interest alike to "the dwellers in the village" and to the passing beholder.

In this place,—in this humble church,—I think I am fully warranted in saying the subject of this memoir achieved some of the happiest results of his ministry.

On going to Fairport, in the autumn of 1841, he found the society much disheartened, and ready to give up in despair. Faithful and talented ministers had labored there, not in vain, and yet not with that success which shows itself in zeal among the people, delight in worship, and a living regard for personal holiness. Revs. S. [Stephen] Miles, one of the pioneers of our faith in that region, and W. [William] E. Manley, were of the number of his immediate predecessors; and devoted servants of Christ they were... But they had sought other fields of labor, and the society had been seriously affected by a growing apprehension on the part of the members that they possessed not the means to support a stated ministry of the word,—an apprehension most disastrous in its consequences upon the prosperity of any religious organization...

Mr. Cook understood this. He did not, therefore, shrink from a society simply because, at the time it sought his labors, it might be passing through the ordeal of adversity...

Hence, from the first, he regarded the society in Fairport as a favorable field for the exercise of his humble powers, and, consequently, a most desirable charge...

Rev. W. W. Lovejoy discloses the condition of the society in Perrinton [old spelling] when he entered upon his pastoral duties there, in the following words:

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"Mr. Cook commenced his labors in Fairport in the fall of 1841. For some time previous to his settlement, the society had been in an anguishing state and attendance at church was light. The cause of the lukewarmness, I have not been able to ascertain, but the fact is evident. The first Sabbath he preached to Fairport people, his attendance consisted of about 20 persons and for a number of succeeding Sabbaths was small. But when he had been there not to exceed six months, their church, capable of seating some four or five hundred persons, was well filled and from that time forth, while he remained, the congregation was always large and the house often so crowded that many were obliged to leave because of the impossibility of gaining admittance.

"Attracted by the report of his eloquence, individuals would venture to hear him once to gratify curiosity, and having once listened, they found a ready inducement to listen again. Captivated by the earnestness of his manner, by his zeal, his subject-matter, his felicity of illustration, and the full, rich tones of his voice, they would not only come again themselves, but also bring their friends along, that they too might enjoy 'the feast of reason and the flow of soul.' In this way the circle of his influence was rapidly augmented. From all the neighboring towns, for miles around, people flocked to his meeting, and gave him an attentive, intelligent and appreciative hearing."

Rev. M. [Moses] B. Smith, a venerable servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, who has himself preached in Fairport, says:

"...I have not been able to obtain the knowledge of any remarkable incidents in his life which you may be likely to consider worthy of notice in a memoir, *unless I say, what in truth may be said, that his whole career as a preacher was remarkable.*

"In Fairport," he continues, 'his success was wonderful; his preaching seemed to attract the attention of all, and draw into his congregation the whole community, except those who were members of other churches, *and many of them did not keep away entirely.* Very many of the 'world's people' were regular attendants on his ministry, who were not before in the habit of attending religious meetings of any kind. A few of these, I believe, were truly converted, and remained members of the society after he left; while others, released from the attractive force of his labors, p. 222 returned to their former habits, and are now seldom seen in the house of God."

We have thus indicated, in a general outline, the change wrought in the condition of the Fairport society, through the instrumentality of his labors... It would certainly be very gratifying to my feelings.. if I could exhibit, in a just light, the character of Mr. Cook's labors in Perrinton, and explain accurately the conditions of that success which crowned those labors...

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Though there was an acknowledged charm about his manner of preaching, and a degree of fascination in his personal intercourse with his charge, which served to some extent to multiply the number of his hearers, and thus to crown his efforts with the outward indications of a successful ministry, yet he knew but too well that it would be perfectly futile to rely upon these influences for permanent prosperity. He knew that religious societies, once familiar with them, soon became weary of them, and, in the absence of anything better, became listless and indifferent. He therefore addressed himself with great energy to the work of preparing the minds of his charge in Fairport for the introduction among them of those means of grace which God has ordained, and which the experience of Christians has so fully approved.

In his former fields of labor...he had sought to bring his hearers to a just appreciation of church organization, as a means of spiritual improvement. But...he never accomplished this desire of his heart. The touching and suggestive ordinance of the Lord's supper was never administered to his people in Churchville or in Chili. Though frequently alluded to in his discourses, as a means of grace too little regarded now, because the past has often witnessed its abuse, he was compelled to deplore the indifference and the prejudice which doomed this appointment of Jesus to neglect; and, deprived of its influence, to labor more arduously for the promotion of truth and righteousness. But, with a larger experience, and with a more intimate acquaintance with the peculiar adaption of this heaven-appointed ordinance to the religious wants of man, he could not consent to tolerate these groundless prejudices which had too long kept it from the society in Fairport; and therefore made it one of the first objects of his ministry, on going there, to organize a church, and to establish its stated observance. This result he accomplished under God; and it proved to be all that he anticipated as a means of spiritual growth to his people.

"As to the result of his efforts," says Mr. Lovejoy, "a church organization was effected the ensuing summer (1842), and twenty-two persons subscribed their names to the articles of agreement, and became members of the church. This number was subsequently increased until it amounted to upwards of eighty." His widow puts the number of members that united with this church during his ministry at "over one hundred." But either statement exhibits an example of prosperity which the history of our larger societies have seldom furnished. Indeed, very few churches of our denomination number one hundred members...

"In the spiritual welfare of this little body of believers," writes Mr. Lovejoy, "Bro. Cook manifested a deep and biding interest. This was shown in various ways: by a constant endeavor to establish a unity of spirit among the members; by his touching comments and feeling allusions at the period

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of communion; by the daily relations he sustained towards those composing it; and finally, by his petitions for its prosperity on the day he delivered his farewell discourse before leaving for a distant field of labor [Providence, RI.]”

“During his stay in Fairport—I quote again from Mr. Lovejoy, “a Sabbath school and Bible class were formed, and much interest taken in both. I well remember the pleasure which his presence and remarks in the Sabbath school gave the children. The sudden lighting up of countenances on his approach, and the beaming, sparkling expression of the eyes, clearly revealed the happiness within. Children loved him. The power of winning the affection of young hearts was one of his marked peculiarities. Among the more advanced class of youth, it was recognized in the frequent calls he had to celebrate marriages. No other clergyman in the place was so often selected for these occasions as Bro. Cook. The inference is clear that he had, by some means, succeeded in touching the golden cord of sympathy within their hearts, and these were some of its fruits.”

A correspondent writes me from Fairport:

“In the winter of 1843-44, if I remember correctly, a debating legislature or society was established in the place, for the purpose of mutual improvement to all concerned. In this association Bro. Cook was one of the most prominent speakers. During the winter several important questions were discussed, and the mental contest was at times exceedingly spirited. When present he was always in the van of the conflict... Each question was decided on the merits of the discussion, by a vote of the house; and at every vote Bro. Cook was pronounced victor. His success in these discussions, it is thought, assisted him materially in extending the circle of his influence; the interest felt in his labors as a disputant overthrew sectarian prejudice, and induced gradually a deep interest in his labors as a Christian minister...”

During the same winter, great excitements prevailed in some of the partialist [orthodox] churches in Fairport, which, for the want of an appropriate name that did not betray the motives of those engaged in them, were usually called “revivals of religion...” As usual, the Universalists came in for their full share of abuse. The “wire pullers,” knowing the influence which Mr. Cook had acquired in the place, the respect accorded to him by the young, and the generous tone of sentiment that characterized the utterances of all classes in speaking of him, very wisely concluded that little could be accomplished for the resuscitation of their churches, and for staying the progress of Universalism, while he retained the hold he then had upon the kind regards of the people. Classing him, therefore, with other preachers of the great salvation, they very charitably denounced the whole fraternity as emissaries of the devil, and called upon their hearers to shun *him* as they would the very father of lies. They were “*exceedingly mad*”

*against*” him, and verily thought they ought to do many things to rid the earth of such a monster. They therefore...prayed with a fervor that must have moved the pity, if not the wrath of Heaven, that the voice of this “arch-deceiver might be stopped, and his breath taken from his nostrils!” We are not to doubt the efficacy of the prayers of “*the righteous*,” though these prayers did not prevail... And, to convince them that they had prayed in vain, he went into “*their solemn meetings*,” and sought opportunities to “speak on God’s behalf.”

On one occasion he found the principal performer, the Rev. Mr. Kingsly, engaged in an effort to show the inconsistencies of Universalism. He had previously pledged himself to do this, and assured his audience that for this purpose he “should [would] read from one of their *own* books.” Many were attracted by this notice, and the house was full. After naming his text and indicating the object of his discourse, he commenced reading from a work entitled “UNIVERSALISM AS IT IS,” the authorship of which, by implication, he most unblushingly ascribed to Universalists, and also hinted that it contained an epitome of its doctrines. Alas for the orthodoxy of that system of faith which recognizes the necessity of such defences, and the endorsement of the author of “Universalism not of God,” for its support!

No sooner had Mr. Kingsly said amen, than the familiar voice of Mr. Cook, in a very earnest tone, was heard in the following questions:

Mr. C. “Permit me to ask, sir, if the book from which you have just read was published by Universalists?”

Mr. K. (with evident confusion). “It was not.”

Mr. C. “Is its author *at present* a Universalist?”

Mr. K. “He is not.”

Mr. C. *Was he ever a Universalist?*

Mr. K. (hesitated, the whole audience, meanwhile, intensely excited, and seeming to demand a prompt answer, finally whimpers out, “*I believe not!*”

...The traducer was rebuked, and soon after left the place, while Mr. Cook had added another trophy to those already won in the cause of his Master...

It was one of Mr. Cook’s peculiar weaknesses to loathe that affectation of piety which cants about the *simplicity of worship*, with no higher object than to save a trifling sum demanded occasionally for improvement...

In other words, the subject of this memoir sincerely believed that the sanctuary where men [sic] gather for worship should, of itself, possess attractions for the young heart, and rather appeal to the love of the beautiful which dwells in all devout souls, than present a scene of confusion and disorder most repulsive to the cultivated mend. He insisted upon these things as a condition of success to the efforts of the society.

In Fairport the house of worship showed evident signs of neglect. the lot on which it stood was thrown open to the public [e.g. unfenced], and, at his

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suggestion, it was neatly enclosed and ornamented; thus lending a new charm to the whole exterior of the building. Many persons, residing at a distance from the church, were unwilling to attend, because no place had been provided for the accommodation of their teams. This evil was remedied by the erection of new sheds on the rear of the lot. The internal arrangements of the church were far from being interesting. The aisles were not carpeted, the wood-work needed painting, and the walls whitening. The ladies belonging to the society were encouraged to organize a sewing circle, and to direct their efforts to the accomplishment of these desirable improvements. They entered into the spirit and purposes of their pastor with alacrity and zeal, and in a few months the work was done; and as they contemplated their achievement, and contrasted the present with the past, they realized, more than ever, the beauty and significance of the words of the Psalmist, "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts!"

These improvements awakened a new interest in the society, not only on the part of those who wrought them, but served also to stimulate the male members of the society to new zeal and activity. Watching the progress made in them till the favorable moment arrived, the pastor proposed that a new organ should forthwith be placed in the gallery, to take the place of the stringed instruments that had previously discoursed music there, to the no great delight of pastor or people; and appealed to the pride and magnanimity of his brethren to emulate the spirit of the ladies in this work of improvement, and to contribute the amount necessary to procure one. The appeal was successful; and thus, in a very short time, his people had succeeded in beautifying the sanctuary of the Lord, and making it a desirable resort on the Sabbath. They now felt that lively interest in the place, and in the services thereof, which brought them out in great numbers, when it was open for public worship; and the zeal born of these never waned while he continued his pastoral connection with them.

Theodore D. Cook, *Memoir of James M. Cook* (Boston: James M. Usher, 1854), pp. 214-219, 221-223, 225-6, 228, 232, 234-5, 243-4 *passim*

Transcribed on 19 Jul 2015 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY