

[Perry, Wyoming Co. NY]

HISTORICAL SKETCH
of the First Universalist Church of Perry, New York

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Properly speaking, the history of Universalism in Perry dates back to 1808, when Josiah Williams and family dragged their belongings in a rude ox-cart thru an almost unbroken wilderness and located on what is now commonly known as the Edgar Matthews farm.

They had come from Vermont where the Universalist idea had been gaining strength for years and it is only natural that they should desire to worship according to that faith upon their arrival here.

Mr. Williams was not only our pioneer Universalist but came very close to being our first settler, he having arrived here only six months after Josiah Woodard, who holds that honor.

Mr. Williams' son was Perry's only representative in the war of 1812 and his daughter's death was the first which occurred among the settlers.

Other Universalists began to come in and we find the name of Amos Otis, destined to be the first clerk of our first primitive organization. Dan Dickerson and James Bolton, two of the original trustees; Noah Bacon, who gave more than 20 years service as an officer of this church; James Edgerly, the Atwoods, Samuel and Truman Benedict and others. All staunch Universalists and intent upon forming a society as soon as a sufficient number could be gathered together.

This object was attained on October 8, 1831, and a meeting called on that date affected [effected] an organization.

A constitution was adopted and signed by 42 persons. Of these 42 signers I know of but four who have descendants attending church here at the present time.

For some time meetings were held at each other's houses but in 1833 they purchased the old Methodist meeting house which stood just about where Dr. Brownell's office stands on Shortt street today. This building was used for 19 years or until the time when the present church was erected.

The old meeting house was afterwards used as a rooming house and finally destroyed by fire.

During the period between 1831-43, Perry had no settled pastor but we have the names of 13 ministers who preached here during that time. Some of these ministers preached to both the Perry and Covington societies but only one, Seth Brown, is credited to Perry in the Universalist registers.

This arrangement was anything but satisfactory and the members realized that a permanent organization must be formed if anything like progress was to be made.

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On June 18, 1843, the First Universalist Church of Perry was finally organized and the Rev. Daniel Ackley installed as the first resident pastor. Nine months later the Rev. Ackley died at the age of 38. He and Rev. J. F. Gates are the only two of our pastors to be buried in Perry. Rev. Ackley was the first of 22 ministers to hold pastorates in this place during the 70 year period which has followed the organization. Rev. Clara E. Morgan holding the record for the longest pastorate, her pastorate lacking but 2 months of being 17 years.

The amount of the salaries which we have paid our ministers during this period serves as a most accurate barometer in registering the financial conditions during that time. In 1844 the church paid Rev. J. [John] S. Brown \$350 a year and he found his own parsonage, but gradually the amount increased until 1871, the boom period following the Civil war, at which time Rev. [Stephen] Crane received \$1,200.

From this point there is a steady decline until 1898 when Rev. Chas. Palmater was asked to support a large family on \$500. Since that time there has been a steady rise right up to the present year.

In 1849, a movement was started to build a new church and three years later the present building was erected at a cost of about \$4,000. The lot was purchased of Capt. Wm. Dolbeer and the furniture which cost about \$300 was paid for by the Ladies' Aid society.

Incidentally, I would add that I have found many reports which show only too plainly that this church would have gone on the rocks financially many times had it not been for the timely aid rendered by that society.

The pipe organ which was installed by the C. E. Morey Co., of Utica in 1854, at a cost of \$800, was not only the first organ to be turned out by that company, but was also the first one to be installed in Perry, antedating any other Perry organ by 21 years. Mrs. Samuel D. Phillips and our present organist, are the only two organists we have had in the last 46 years. A truly very remarkable record.

In 1886 many changes were made in this church building. The gallery which ran around three sides of the auditorium was taken down, the floor which had been level, placed on an incline, the organ taken down and installed in its present location and many other improvements made. About \$3,100 was expended.

During this same year the present parsonage was built on a lot donated by Mr. George Tomlinson, Rev. J. E. June being the first pastor to occupy it.

For many years after the church was organized it seems to have had a very difficult struggle for an existence. The village was in its infancy, the parishioners scattered and the roads, during the major portion of the year, must have been well nigh impassable. It took courage under those conditions to keep the machinery moving and only by dint of conscientious

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loyal effort on the part of members was the little church enable[d] to live. It was at a period when Universalism was comparatively new in this section and denominational lines most rigidly drawn. The Baptists were fighting the Methodists; the Methodists were fighting the Presbyterians and they were all fighting the Universalists.

I remember reading of the 4th of July celebration held here sometime during the '40s. A parade was to be one of the features of the day and the ministers were to take part. When the signal to start was given, the three Orthodox pastors locked arms and started off down the line, leaving our J. S. Brown standing on the side lines alone. Old Judge Gilman noticing his embarrassing position, stepped up, offered his arm and the two took their places in line.

I have often thought how much Rev. Brown would have enjoyed being here at the Union Thanksgiving service held in 1881 during J. Clarence Lee's pastorate[,] [t]he first to which the Universalists were invited. He would have also enjoyed taking part in the first Union Communion service held in 1918.

These two events were long steps forward in the uplifting of Protestant effort and were a public acknowledgment of the fact that in the final analysis our goal is the same and in most ways our interests are identical.

This church leaves an interesting history behind, a history which tells of sacrifice, loyalty and perseverance under, many times, most discouraging conditions. It has rendered a splendid service in the past and I believe will continue to render that service in the future.

The degree of success which we are destined to enjoy will be largely in ratio to the degree of individual initiative employed.

I believe that our church is today in the healthiest condition it has known in years and if each one will get behind and do his or her part in promoting the welfare of the organization, we can continue to enjoy the present prosperity and incidentally justify the trust placed in us by the old pioneers who kept the faith and made Universalism in Perry possible.

—F. M. [Frank Merriam] CROCKER

Empire State Universalist, Carthage NY, November 1923

Transcribed on 11 Mar 2013 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY