

[Perry, Wyoming Co. NY]

## History of Perry Universalist Church

By Dr. Frank M. Crocker

The building now occupied by the First Universalist Church of Perry was dedicated in 1853.

As the 75th anniversary of that event rolls around and brings that long-ago occasion once more to our minds, it is only natural that our past history should become of more than usual interest and we should think back to those days when that little band of Universalists met in the infant village and built up the temporary organization which, during the past century, has developed into the church of today.

It was in the Spring of 1807 that Joseph Woodard, Perry's first pioneer, came into this section and settled on what is now known as the Thomas Wright farm, one-half mile east of Perry Center.

During the next few years, many families emigrated to the present sites of Perry and Perry Center. Among the early settlers were Josiah Williams, 1808; Amos Otis, 1810; Dan Dickerson, the Atwoods, 1811; James Edgerly, 1812; Almon Hart, David and Jesse Moss, Noah Bacon, Greenleaf Clark, Samuel and Truman Benedict and the Wiles families.

Josiah Williams opened the first log tavern on the so-called Matthews property on the north end of Main Street. The death of his daughter Nancy was the first among the settlers, and his son Elias was Perry's one representative in the War of 1812.

Dan Dickerson's son was a monument maker, and many of the older stones in our cemeteries bear his name. Dan's daughter married Noah Bacon, who became one of the leading members of our church. His record of a 30-year period of service as a church officer speaks volumes for his loyalty. His grand-daughter, Addie Bacon, is now a regular attendant at our church services.

Samuel Waldo taught the first district school; Nathan Chichester was a charter member of the Masonic Lodge, and Truman Benedict was Supervisor of the town from 1834 to 1842. His brother Samuel was also Supervisor. Truman Benedict had two sons—Charles G. and William. The daughter of William (Mrs. Edith Hull) was the efficient treasurer of the church for 19 years, beginning in 1908, and continues to attend regularly. The daughter and grand-daughter of Charles G.—Mrs. Marion Addie Welch and Miss Anna Welch—are today regular attendants. Joseph's Abbot's granddaughter, Mrs. Gardner Chamberlain, and grandsons—Elmer, Lloyd and Charles—have been faithful supporters of the church for years.

The above-named pioneers made up part of the nucleus from which sprang the First Universalist Society. There were few of them, but the village was also small, and the same spirit which caused the little hamlet to survive such names as Shacksburg, Bushville and Ninevah, must have existed in the little band of liberal thinkers which became so determined to have a church of their own faith in Perry.

Other denominations had already obtained a foothold—the Congregationalists in 1814, the Baptists and Methodists in 1816 and the Presbyterians in 1834. The Universalists had been meeting from house to house, but it was evident that such an arrangement must necessarily be a temporary makeshift, and on October 8, 1831, the first steps were taken to create a Universalist Society in Perry.

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The Rev. J. [John] S. Flagler was chosen moderator, and Amos Otis, clerk. The trustees were Josiah Williams, James Bolton and Dan Dickerson. A confession of faith and a constitution were adopted. Some of the clauses in the latter would, in this day and age, be considered peculiar, at least. For instance, Article 2 denies the right of holding office or having a voice in meeting to females. We wonder if they really managed to keep them quiet.

It is extremely difficult to substantiate records of the various pastorates during the following years, but with the aid of the Universalist Registers, we believe that we have approximated correctness.

J.S. Flagler was the first minister in point of service, and preached here more or less during 1831. He died in 1860.

It is probable that the second pastor was L.L. Sadler, who divided his time between Perry and Covington. The last record of him is in Boston in 1853. It was during his pastorate that the old Methodist meeting house, standing on the present site of Dr. Brownell's home at 10 Short Street, was purchased and occupied. On October 7, 1833, this building was dedicated, with a number of visiting ministers present. It had been the first Methodist church in Wyoming County, but now served as a church home for the Universalists for 19 years, or until 1852. It was then turned into a boarding house and later destroyed by fire.

A little later, we find Rev. Sampson Skeele preaching here. He was located at Freedom, and undoubtedly alternated with W. T. Reese in filling our pulpit. Rev. Skeele afterward went to Cowlesville, and 17 years later was still located there.

C. Moreton, Benjamin Luther and Alfred Peck were the names of other ministers officiating here at various times.

Rev. T. [Townsend] P. Abell was registered as pastor here in 1838. In 1883, his address was Lafayette, Ind.

Orren Roberts preached here at intervals. He was ordained in 1833 and held the pastorate of the Lakeville church for 17 years. He was afterward pastorate at Nunda and died in Montrose in 1882.

Seth Barnes was pastor in 1839, coming here from Salina. He retired from the ministry at Galena, Ill., on account of ill health.

Rev. [Jacob] Chase supplied the pulpit at times during 1839-1843.

Rev. Alanson Kelsey also supplied the pulpit a number of times. He was afterward pastor of the Washington (D.C.) church, and our record of him ends in that city in 1881. He was the last of the itinerant preachers who served our Perry society during the first 12 years of its struggling existence.

On June 18, 1843, the society met and organized the First Universalist Church of Perry. Rev. Daniel Ackley was pastor and presided at the meeting. Noah Bacon was elected clerk; Eliakim [Belsford?], treasurer, William Ferris and David Tallman, deacons. Thirty-one people were enrolled. The following Spring, the Rev. Ackley died at the age of 38. He and Rev. Gates are the only pastors of our church to be buried in Perry.

Rev. [Stephen] Miles was here for a short time. He was followed by Rev. J. [John] S. Brown, the husband of "Aunty Brown" of "Old [?]" fame. He came in 1844, and the following year, his salary was raised to [\$260?].

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In 1851, \$3,000 was raised for the purpose of erecting a new church building. The lot on which the present church stands was purchased of William Dolbeer, and the building was finished in the Summer of 1852, at a cost of \$3,775. On February 9, 1853, the church was dedicated, with a sermon by the Rev. D. [Dolphus] Skinner of Utica.

Rev. Brown had resigned the previous Autumn, on account of failing health after an eight-year pastorate, and could not be present at the service. He died in 1855.

The first pipe organ to come to Perry was installed in our church in 1854 by the company now known as the C.E. Morey Co. of Utica.

It was also the first organ to be turned out by that company and must have received especial attention, for today, after 74 years of service, it is still serving its mission. We have had but two organists during the past 50 years—Mrs. S.D. Phillips playing from 1877 to 1900, and Miss Isabelle Cole since that time. Truly, the old organ has a unique record in many ways.

Rev. Eben Francis resigned in 1855, after a two-year pastorate, and was succeeded by A.B. [Aaron Bort] Grosh, who also served two years.

Rev. Phineas Hathaway came in 1858, but he lasted only a year, being followed by Rev. D.C. [DeWitt Clinton] Tomlinson, who resigned in 1864. Rev. Tomlinson's son Vincent was born here and is now pastor of the Worcester (Mass.) church.

Rev. L.B. Bennett came for one year and left rather abruptly—shortly afterward leaving the ministry.

In 1866, the Rev. Stephen Crane began his 11-year pastorate. He found a difficult task ahead of him, for the Civil War and other causes had brought church affairs to a low ebb, and no parish meeting had been held in five years. Rev. Crane died at Sycamore, Ill., in 1899.

In 1873, Rev. W.B. Randolph came to relieve Rev. Crane, who was suffering a breakdown. The church kept up the salaries of both ministers during this period. In 1877, both ministers resigned. Mr. Crane's daughter and son visited in Perry during the Summer of 1927.

Rev. George Adams came in 1877, and Rev. Sisson in 1878. The latter died here on March 8, 1880, and was the last of our pastors to hold a separate Thanksgiving service.

On July 1, Rev. J. Clarence Lee began his three-year pastorate. He was ordained here and is, at this date, preaching in Gloucester, Mass.

During this year, the church property at Gainesville was sold, and about \$250 turned over to the Perry church.

Rev. J. [John] F. Gates was pastor for about two years and resigned to enter the field of journalism. He died here on April 23, 1892, aged 61.

Following his resignation, the church was closed for some time while undergoing repairs. The floor of the auditorium was placed on an incline, the gallery taken down, and the organ placed at the other end of the church. About \$3,000 was expended. The church was re-dedicated on April 7, 1886, with a sermon by the Rev. W.E. Gibbs of Buffalo.

Rev. J.E. June came in 1886, and was the first to occupy the new parsonage donated by Mr. George Tomlinson. He is one of the five former pastors living today.

Rev. S.A. Whitcombe came in 1889 and remained nearly two years.

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Rev. H.C. Munson of Hammondsport began his pastorate in 1891 and on April 3, he administered communion to Rev. Gates and Levi Morey at their homes. Rev. Gates passed away on April 23; Mr. Morey, the day following. During this year, J. Frank Tomlinson was elected deacon and began a long period of service, which lasted until his death in 1924.

Rev. Asa Countryman came in 1892 and stayed until 1894. Perry was his last charge.

In 1894, Rev. Charles Palmatier began a nine-year pastorate. He was a musician of unusual ability and became a big factor in the musical life of this community. He was active in all community affairs, and, in conjunction with C.G. Clarke, brought the Winter Chautauqua courses to Perry. In 1899, Mr. M.H. Olin presented the church with an individual communion set. Rev. Palmatier resigned in 1903 and is, at this writing, residing in Newark, N.Y.

Rev. John Evans came in June of the same year and was ordained here. He resigned in 1906, entered the Harvard Theological School and afterward went over to the Presbyterians. He is living at Bay Shore, Long Island.

On April 1, 1906, Rev. Clara Morgan began a pastorate which lasted nearly 17 years. She was a good executive as well as an unusually capable preacher, and her talks on the countries at war, in 1914, drew crowded houses. She was well liked by the other Protestant ministers, and on March 29, 1918, the Universalists united with the other churches in a union communion service, for the first time.

In 1919, the Million Dollar Drive for general convention work and our own local budget was staged. The campaign began at 2 p.m., and at 5 p.m., the chairman phoned Miss Morgan that \$4,200 had been pledged—an excess of \$200 over our quote. The Easter collection that year amounted to \$500.

Miss Morgan brought her pastorate to a close on December 31, 1922, to accept a call to the church at Hornell.

She was succeeded by the present pastor, Rev. William J. Metz, who came in May, 1923. During that year, the Eleanor Richard memorial bulletin board was erected, and the Social Circle, with Mrs. E.V. Jenks as first president, was organized.

Mr. Metz has been with us now for nearly five years. He has been president of the New York State Universalist Sunday School Association, president of our local Welfare League, has had charge of the fresh air children's work for several years, is chaplain of Constellation Lodge, F. & A.M., secretary of the Perry Rotary Club, and Scoutmaster of Troop No. 45, B.S.A. Both he and Mrs. Metz have proved to be tireless workers, and as a result, the work grows through their efforts and the unselfish service of the church workers, many of whom are descendants of that little band which gathered together back in the long-ago days of 1831 to insist upon having a church of their own faith.

It is 75 years since our present church building was erected, but it is nearly a century since the first meeting of the clan was held. They say that the first 100 years are the hardest—if so, our troubles should now begin to lessen.

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