



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
22 CHURCH STREET
GOUVERNEUR, NY 13642

FPCGH-2

1817 – A BACKWARD GLANCE – 1992

FORWARD

This monograph is in, no sense, a history of the church. It is composed of impressions and recollections of some of the people I knew or often saw in a church setting. I have tried to include some of the active members, the “movers and shakers,” although I am sure there were others just as important with whom I did not come in contact, or whom I have overlooked.

At any rate, they were founders and members of the early Presbyterian Church in Gouverneur whom I know only through written or oral history, and others who were active in the church after 1900, most of whom I knew personally.

Unlike so many today whose business uproots them from time to time and leads them to distant places, these people enjoyed a life-long affiliation with the church and left it stronger than they found it.

June 1992 Margaret H. Gleason

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I WRITING HISTORY THE HARD WAY

Jane Parker’s husband, Cornelius A. Parker, was a well-known Gouverneur lawyer in the last half of the nineteenth century who had done a good deal of the legal drudgery of straightening out land claims and completing sales records for the estate of Gouverneur Morris. He worked under the direction of the town’s best know attorney, Judge Edwin Dodge, who was the last land agent of the Morris estate.

Mrs. Parker took advantage of her husband’s numerous trips by horse and buggy through the rural areas of the town to meet these early settlers, some of whom by this time were well along in years. She found them intelligent, friendly, with a wealth of information on what it took to survive on this new frontier, and how they had managed to do it. She took carefully organized notes which she kept for years

before she was prevailed upon to use them in a history of Gouverneur. She became well acquainted with these pioneer families and mentions them always with kindness and respect.

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II CRISIS IN CAMBRAY

In 1808 a crisis occurred in Cambray, as Gouverneur was then known, one day when Israel Porter's little girl, Emily, was picking peas in a field with other children. Whether she suffered acute gastritis ("the peas swelled up in her") as was thought at the time, or she got hold of some poisonous vegetation, we do not know; but she became desperately ill and shortly died. Thus occurred the first crisis in the struggling settlement. There was no cemetery!

Someone got in touch with the proprietor, Gouverneur Morris who kindly deeded some land behind the present Presbyterian Church to the community for a cemetery. This area was used as such until 1857 when "no more plots were available."

Meanwhile, little Emily, whose father kept the first inn in Cambray at what is now the corner of West Main and Hailesboro streets, was put in a "coffin of unstained pine" which was taken across the river and buried in a "grave surrounded by stout pickets to keep out wild beasts."

When it was clear that there was no more room in the cemetery behind the church, the community was faced with its first serious political issue: Should a large amount of land be purchased for the new cemetery and should the remains of those interred in the old cemetery be moved to the new? The second question was the basic issue because moving the old cemetery would require infinitely more work than simply closing it. Some of Gouverneur's citizens became more agitated by this debate than they had been over the slavery question which was just then coming to a head. It was finally put to a vote. The people who wanted to move the cemetery won. So the remains of the first settlers went to the new cemetery.

The Gouverneur Cemetery Association bought 36 acres of Pardon Babcock's farm, which was landscaped by Benjamin J. Hathaway from Flushing, Long Island, and provided walk-ways, avenues, and space for 600 plots. The first duty, once the cemetery was opened, was to move the old one. This was done "in a decent and becoming manner" under the supervision of Thomas M. Thayer, Esq. The Rev. B.

B. Beckwith, then pastor of the Presbyterian Church, was president of the Cemetery Association.

I don't know how reliable my sources are, but I have been told that every time an earth-mover is used in the area of the old burying ground, bones are exposed here and there.

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III PATRIARCHS, PIONEERS, AND THEIR PROGENY

Most of the people who settled in southern St. Lawrence County in the years before the Civil War came directly from northern Europe, especially the British Isles (eq., the Scotch) or were transplanted New Englanders who moved in stages – western Massachusetts, Connecticut, eastern New York, the Mohawk Valley – before setting out in small bands into the wilderness of northern New York. Most of the first families who came before 1810 were from one small town, Hartford, in Washington county.

It was a grim trip. When the men who had come to Gouverneur in 1804 to look around brought their families in 1805, they came by way of the Black River Valley and left their horses and families in Boonville, as the rest of the journey could be made by men only on foot. Dr. Richard Townsend, the Morris land agent of that date, is said to have guided the group through the woods. Because of his involvement with Morris, Dr. Townsend had little time to practice medicine, so that Dr. John Spencer, who came with his family from Windsor, Connecticut in 1807, and was the founder of a family line, continuously connected with our church, became the first practicing physician.

He at once found himself challenged by unbelievable difficulties. There were no roads and he had to walk to see his patients, covering more miles and discovering more short-cuts than any surveyor. He often stayed lost in the woods after dark. When he had an epidemic in Antwerp to attend to, he was gone for days. One time he ran into a pack of 11 wolves and took a chance on dispersing them by yelling and throwing sticks and branches at them. He was relieved when the wolves retired from the fray. Incidentally, Dr. Spencer was one of two slave holders in early Gouverneur. Slavery was legal in New York State, for the abolition movement had not yet taken shape.

The second wave of immigration brought the Scotch into our area during the 30-year period before the Civil War. They came singly or with their families and

cleared land for farming, although some were craftsmen and tradesmen. They were a thrifty, intelligent, hard-working, God-fearing group of people who settled in the St. Lawrence valley or contiguous regions all the way from Cape Vincent to Massena. They brought the Presbyterian Church with them, although they did not come to America for religious reasons.

My grandfather with his twin brother came in the late 1850's and settled in the Madrid-Norwood area, not because he could not make a living in Scotland, but because of the restrictions on the land-holding. The aristocracy and large landowners owned every acre. There was no place for ordinary people to go hunting. The last thing the twins did before boarding a ship for America was to go hunting on posted land and shoot everything in sight.

The original George Lockie (actually was the second of that name) emigrated from Scotland with his and many other families in 1818. They landed in Montreal and sailed up the St. Lawrence in sturdy Durham boats searching for suitable places to live and work. The story goes that an agent of David Parish, who had land holdings along the river, intercepted them and persuaded them to settle in a poor rocky part of Rossie where no one but a Scotsman could have made a living.

The father, George I, remained in Rossie. When 8-year-old George II grew up, he established himself on a farm in Elmdale. He was the George Lockie inscribed on the marble plaque at the rear of the sanctuary, along with the other elders at the time the present church was built. His daughter, Anna, was the second wife of my Grandfather Herring, the only grandmother I ever knew – and a very good one.

George Lockie II was active in the affairs of the community, a faithful church member and a well-known participant in the annual “Burns Festival” where he “sat at the head of the table” at the gathering in Rossie and Oxbow. You need to know that all this was in the day when a Scotsman's first allegiance was to the Church and his second to the memory of “Robbie Burns.” If legend can be believed, these festivals were pretty noisy affairs – for men only, of course.

Quite a few of our congregation today should remember the fourth George Lockie, son of Colin, grandson of George II, if for no other reason than that he took it upon himself to collect from each person present at any church meeting, where a collection was taken, his contribution. He always did this on his own initiation with such a big friendly smile that no one would dream of refusing him. He was also the owner of the famous yoke of oxen, show animals that now parade at dozens of fairs and homecomings throughout New York State.

One could safely say that if all the progeny of the Scotch who built and nurtured our church had remained in Gouverneur, in good standing in the church, every pew in the sanctuary would be filled. Be assured, the people who planned the building of our “late Victorian, Madison Square Garden” church edifice did not “overbuild.” They were hard headed, cautious people and they expected to fill it. Fate ruled otherwise.

Besides the Lockies, there were the Thralls, the Armistons, the Taitts, the Taitts, the Stories, the Laidlaws, the Dicksons, the Rodgers, the Brodies, the Hills, and many others. James Hill came with his son, James F. Hill, from Scotland about 1850. The son and his wife, June Storie, were the parents of Edwin Hill, who with his wife, Mary, sat for years in a pew near the main entrance of the sanctuary. There were several different Hill families. I remember also a Fred Hill, who, with his sister, “black-eyed Mary” lived on the Scotch Settlement Road, I think.

Charles Rodger, who left a sizeable bequest to the church, owned a department store that had belonged earlier to James Brodie. Both he and his wife, who survived him by many years, were active in the church.

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IV BUILDERS AND BENEFACTORS

The First Presbyterian Church has been more favored than most in its gifts and legacies. It is unfortunate that as generations of our people come and go, we tend to lose sight, not only of the gifts, but of the givers, whom most of us never knew. These bequests, like every other segment of the church body, need nourishment – the continual attention of people experienced in financial matters. We often take a good deal of trouble to raise modest sums that might be easily realized by timely changes in the church’s financial planning.

I would like to mention a few men important in the history of Gouverneur who were members of the church or whose descendants were.

Rockwell Barnes was a pioneer builder, carpenter and mill-wright from Farmington, Connecticut who was responsible for most of the large buildings – sawmills, gristmills, bridges and many large barns. He and Isaac Austin built the first frame home in town for Dr. Spencer. In 1820 when the First Presbyterian Congregation was organized he was elected a trustee as he was in 1843 with the organization of the Second Congregation. He was the grandfather of the first Gouverneur boy to die in the Civil War, Erwin A. Barnes, for whom the local G.A.R.

post was named. Until about 1940 there were some of the Barnes family living here, including Mrs. Lillian Taitt Sheldon, long-time church organist, and Erwin Cox, who owned a dry-goods store on Main Street.

Stephen B. Van Duzee, a renowned cabinet-maker, owned a furniture factory located near the Main Street bridge which turned out good quality pieces that are now collectors' items. I have a large, well constructed oak kitchen cupboard he made for my great grandfather. His daughter, Lucy Van Duzee Turnbull, bequeathed her home on William Street to the village to be used as a hospital, and it served until the Noble Hospital was built. I believe she also left money to the church. When I was a child I was taken to call on Mrs. Turnbull by her friend and mine, Miss Maria E. Sterling, daughter of William E. Sterling, the first hardware merchant in Gouverneur. I remember Mrs. Turnbull was very gracious, and I was impressed by the fact that she used one crutch and limped, having broken a hip in an accident with a run-away horse while she was traveling in Algeria, of all places!

Harvey D. Smith (1789-1864) was considered, not only by his contemporaries, but by local people of the next two generations, as the all-around outstanding citizen of Gouverneur. I am not sure of his affiliation with our church, but several of his first and second generation descendants were prominent members. One of his daughters, Esther, married Melville Thrall, an elder at the time the present church was built. Louisa, the other daughter, married Charles Anthony whose bank, Charles Anthony and Son, became the Bank of Gouverneur. "Harvery D.", as he was known throughout the county and beyond, had the first pharmacy in town; but he spent most of his time filling public offices that sought him; he did not seek them. He was in turn justice of the peace, surrogate judge, special county judge, and member of the state Assembly. He often sent litigants away with the advice to talk over their problems, settle them fairly, and avoid the expense of a law suit. Jay Corbin describes him as good-humored, sensitive, witty, generous, and conscientious in all his public duties. "When he died in 1864," Corbin says, "he was mourned by all who knew him. We shall not look upon his like again."

In the last half of the 19th century, two men, Newton Aldrich and Orison Dean did much to develop Gouverneur as a center of the lumber and paper industries as well as the economy of much of northern New York. The firm of Weston, Dean and Aldrich had access to large stands of timber and logging areas in the western Adirondacks in the days when trees were something to cut down for burning or building, not something to save. Logs were floated down the Oswegatchie to Natural Dam and later Emeryville where mills were situated that produced wood pulp and other products used in paper making. Around 1900 about 200 men were employed at both sites. After a time Mr. Weston withdrew and Herbert G. Aldrich,

son of Newton, joined the firm, Aldrich, Dean and Aldrich, which became an important employer throughout northern New York.

Mr. Dean seems to have concerned himself mostly with the logging part of the business. He is described as “a quiet unassuming man, a real pleasure to meet in either a business or social setting.” He knew the business thoroughly and he never would send a man out on a log-jam in his younger days unless he was willing to go, too. Even in his later years he would be seen out with his men guiding the drive over the runway.

Mr. Newton Aldrich was the only member of the firm who showed much interest in politics or community affairs. He was president of the Bank and trustee and president of the village.

I doubt if either of these men made any personal contribution to the church, but their families did. Newton Aldrich, however, built the village library for the princely sum of \$5,000, a shrewd investment when one considers that the library has paid for itself over and over in the information and pleasure it has afforded thousands of readers.

I never saw either Mr. Newton Aldrich or Mr. Dean, but when I was a child Mrs. Newton Aldrich drove down our street every nice summer afternoon with her driver and “surrey with fringe on top.” She wore “smoked glasses,” as they were called then, and if I was in the front yard, she waved to me.

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V SAINTLY LADIES

There were some notable women in the years when I was growing up who devoted most of their time and talents to the church. Many deserve to be mentioned, but I have reduced the number to three unforgettable ladies whom I came to know well.

Mrs. Ella Brown Lockie, whose parents, John and Betsey Wilson Brown, emigrated from Scotland before 1840, was the widow of John Lockie, and my grandmother’s sister-in-law. When I knew her she lived in her home at 95 Rowley St., which she bequeathed to Mr. and Mrs. Skinner for the retirement years. She was alone, having lost her husband and only child, a son, Weldon G. Lockie. Mrs. Lockie was educated at the Gouverneur Wesleyan Seminary and was the only lay person in the church who was credited with formal training in what we today call “religious education.”

She was a tall, dignified woman, dressed often in black, who turned out to be pleasant and easy to talk to, once you came to know her. I think her job was supervising the curricula of the Sunday School. I will never forget the Christmas day when my mother took Mrs. Lockie her dinner and came back in tears with a small embroidered jewel box and a card addressed to me that read, "Some things that were dear to me in the past." It was my introduction to cancer.

Miss Helen Markwick was superintendent of the primary and intermediate departments of the Sunday School located in what is now the church dining room, excepting that it was a larger space, from wall to wall, divided, like Gaul, into three parts by partitions. Someone kept the "Cradle Roll" which existed in name only, a list of infants and toddlers too young for Sunday School – no nurseries then. And then there were the children ranging in age from kindergarten through grade six, who filled up the three rooms in the basement. Attendance varied, but my recollection is that these three rooms involved eight to ten teachers, each with a class of five or six around a table. The young people were upstairs in what is now the chapel. That is where we saw Mrs. Lockie. Mr. Skinner, our pastor, had a class of adults who met in the rear of the sanctuary. My grandmother never missed it until her final illness. Miss Markwick was a lovely lady. There are many church people who never knew her, although she was a well-known piano teacher in Gouverneur for years and died not too long ago. She was also the sister of Mrs. Skinner, Katherine Marwick, whose wedding was the first one to take place in the present church.

My third nomination for sainthood is Ella Rodger Thrall. She was the wife of James Thrall, who was the son of Melville and Esther Smith Thrall, which made him a grandson of Harvey D. Smith. I was a friend of Alice Thrall, their daughter, who was a victim of polio and confined to a wheelchair when I knew her. Alice was somewhat older than I, but we enjoyed doing puzzles, playing games and piano duets. I considered her mother, Mrs. Thrall, the most genuinely Christian woman I had ever known, and I still do. She was always calm, pleasant and unruffled by worry or fatigue. I was always given a warm welcome even if I had been there the previous week and Mrs. Thrall was always responsive to calls from someone sick or in trouble.

I wonder if many outside the Catholic Church make it their business these days to have a clergyman present at the deathbed of someone in their family. In the days before modern medicine worked its magic, Protestants as well as Catholics wanted their pastor in case of serious family illness or trouble. It was so common a practice that in a town the size of Gouverneur the minister of a church would need one or more "back-ups." Mrs. Thrall was back-up number one in our church. To

insure that you understand the kind of woman she was, I need only say that she named her only child “Alice” for her husband’s first wife, Alice Gleason.

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VI “SACRED MUSIC”

“In the beginning” we had a pipe organ with a bellows that was manually operated by boys in the church. Charlie Tait, later an organist, is said to have started pumping it when he was 10 years old. The organist soon came to know which boys could be counted on never to miss a beat and which she would have to keep an eye on. With the installation of the Dean organ, those worries were over.

I am not sure of the chronological order of the organists and may have omitted some who considered themselves substitutes. Charles M. Tait was an early organist, but Lillian Tait Sheldon played the organ for many years before her death in 1925 and is the first one I remember well. I don’t know about her musical training, but she was well-known as a composer of sacred music and, I believe, wrote music occasionally for special soloists or musical events. Her music was widely used in Protestant churches throughout the country. Helen Markwick took over for a time after Mrs. Sheldon died. Mrs. Ora Spencer Fuller, another descent of Dr. John Spencer, was organist for many years after her return from California. If I’m not mistaken she was the first to have been a student of Julia Etta Crane, the founder of the Crane School of Music, later merged with SUNY Potsdam.

I think Mrs. Foster followed Mrs. Fuller as organist and, with Mrs. Bette Farley as choir director, set about building a strong choir.

My memory of singers is spotty because I missed a good deal of church during the war years and was not in Gouverneur for a long time. The only singer I can remember as someone special in the twenties and thirties was Bessie Lee Green, whose husband at that time owned the St. Lawrence Inn. I don’t remember that Mrs. Green was active in other church affairs, but she was a godsend to the choir, which makes me wonder if she was a professional soloist any of the time. She had another asset, her beauty, and I have a vivid mental picture of her standing in a pretty summer dress – no gowns then – all by herself on a balmy spring Sunday and singing the offertory solo. Bessie’s sister, May Lee Band, contralto, and Mr. Band, baritone, both professionals, visited in Gouverneur once or twice a year and the three of them with Dr. Connor, tenor, from the choir, sang a quartet that was something to remember.

For years after World War II, through the combined efforts of a number of people, including Mrs. Fuller, Mrs. Foster and Mrs. Bette Farley, the choir grew considerably – it was good people wanted to sing in it. Two singers, Helen Crowner, soprano, and Sally McAllaster, contralto, did much to promote the choir and were responsible for many never-to-be forgotten solos and duets. When Helen and Sally moved away the church and the town lost two of their favorite singers.

VII SNAPSHOTS AND VIDEOS FROM MY MEMORIES

- Morris Davies trailing the rest of the choir into the choir loft and closing the door behind him.
- Mr. Skinner entering the pulpit in his formal black broadcloth suit with cut-away coat, starched white shirt and black bow-tie, the traditional attire of the Presbyterian clergy.
- Andrew Laidlaw opening and closing the stained glass ventilator windows on the south side of the sanctuary.
- The arrival of the “regulars”:
 - The Dean sisters; Cora, with her cane, Jennie walking
carefully with her toes turned out
 - The Van Slykes, who sat in front of us
 - The rest of the Skinner family, who sat up front
 - Fred Hill and his sister, Mary, just to our left
 - Will Scott and young family, way to the left,
and a little late, as usual
- Two episodes involving my Sunday School class of second graders when I was in high school
 1. Bobby (asking permission to recite the “memory text” for the day): “For God so loved the world He gave his only forgotten son.”
 2. Barbara, stepping on Mary Ann’s new white shoes and the ensuing hubbub.
- Easter Sunday service with the primary students decked out in Sunday best, the little girls all in starched pastel organdy dresses, ready to sing and lined up behind a white picket fence bordered by pots of Easter lilies and hyacinths – a pretty sight.

VIII QUESTIONS AND PARTIAL ANSWERS

Question 1. – Are there any among our membership or congregation today who are descended from early Presbyterians in Gouverneur?

Answer – Yes. A few we know; there may be some we don't.

There are:

- Dorothy Best, great granddaughter of Newton Aldrich
- Jean Bartholomew, granddaughter of Edwin Hill and great granddaughter of one of the early Scotchmen, James Hill
- David Spencer, great great grandson of Dr. John Spencer
- William Griffith, great grandson of George Lockie II.

There are other members of this family who are not, so far as I know, connected with this church.

P.S. If anyone knows of others descended from people mentioned in connection with the early church, please call the church office 287-0560. We'd like to know about them.

Question 2. – What were the notable pastorates?

Answer- For the first quarter century there was a rapid succession of pastors along with years when there was no minister, with the result that the church grew slowly and at times seemed to be at a standstill. Then came an extended period of longer and stronger pastorates:

B. B. Beckwith, 23 years; N. J. Conklin, 13 years, and Tyron Edwards, 6 years, during which much was accomplished.

Rev. William F. Skinner came in 1887 and resigned in 1929, a period which may be regarded as the high watermark in the life of the church. Ours, like thousands of other churches, has been competing ever since with trends that have drawn people away from religion.

Question 3. – Are the loss of members and the decline of the Sunday School, fairly recent developments, or do they go back, say, before World War II?

Answer – I am not a sociologist and can make only a general statement. The falling off of attendance in many churches goes back a long way and is probably paralleled by decreased Sunday School attendance, but I have no figures to prove it. In the case of our own Sunday school we do have a bit to go by. Mrs. Harvey L. Smith, who wrote the monograph on our church for the 1905 Centennial History, said the Sunday School at that date numbered “over 300”. I doubt very much if it was over half that in 1950, and we all know it is much less today. World War II, no doubt, had something to do with it, but there have been many, many causes – social and economic changes that affected the nation as a whole. Some, such as a breakdown of family life, have been going on a long time, and are partly due to other changes like those in transportation.

Question 4. – What has become of the Skinner family?

Answer – Mr. Skinner died, I think, not too long after his retirement when he and his wife moved into the home Mrs. Lockie had given them on Rowley St. Mrs. Skinner was alive in 1945, but I don’t think lived long after the end of the war. Of the children, George was a lawyer who preferred to write fiction; Robert and Sherman were both Presbyterian ministers who held important pastorates in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and the Midwest. Rhoda married a Presbyterian minister and died three years ago in retirement in New Mexico. The three “boys” are no longer living.

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IX MR. SKINNER

When I think of the church as I knew it, I think of Mr. Skinner. He married my parents, baptized me, admitted me to membership, and did not retire until the year I graduated from college. After that I was gone for 15 years, during which Mr. Schofield was pastor. I noticed a few people who called him by his given name, (no one ever did that with Mr. Skinner) but I felt I didn’t know him well enough, although Mrs. Schofield and I in later years were good friends.

The succeeding pastorates went by so swiftly that I have trouble remembering their order, and like to return to my memories of Mr Skinner and the people in his congregation.

Granted that the minister occupied the highest pedestal in a Scottish community and that Mr. Skinner was circumspect in what he said and did, I still think his ministry was remarkable for the rapport between minister and members as well as within the membership. Mr. Skinner came to Gouverneur Church, his life-long charge, as a young man, well-bred, well-groomed, and well-educated – a product of Princeton, both the university and the theological school. He was well received by the Scotch who admired these qualities in their minister at the same time that they approved of his theological position, which, for that time, was a bit right of center.

This is not to imply that all was smooth sailing. Mr. Skinner was willing to defend his principles and did in a notable difference of opinion with a local newspaper when the congregation stood with him.

He also was fortunate in his family. His wife, Katherine Markwick, of the Markwick and Dickson families, was a role model of a minister's wife, as he was well aware. He occasionally complimented her from the pulpit, and once remarked that she was a better minister's wife than he was a minister.

The Skinner children, three boys, George, Robert, and Sherman, and one girl, Rhoda, were also exemplary. What is more surprising, they managed to enjoy their association with people in the church and community as they were growing up without feeling the deprivations of being minister's children.

The 42 years of Mr. Skinner's pastorate were a wonderful foundation on which to build and broaden the church. Sadly, that was not to be. Our church, nearly every church, has fallen victim to forces and changes we only partly understand, that have produced this civic and social breakdown we face as a nation today.

Editors note: This is the final episode of the "Backward Glance" series.

We have heard from so very many of our readers – how they have enjoyed Margaret Gleason's sharing her memories with us. With grateful hearts we say, "Thank you, Margaret."