



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
22 CHURCH STREET
GOUVERNEUR, NY 13642

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THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
GOUVERNEUR NY

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Historical research concerning the First Presbyterian Church of Gouverneur, incorporated first as a Congregational church, and situated at 22 Church Street, almost in the geographical center of the village, is a most interesting subject, both with regard to its early struggles and its down through the years' story.

It has one marked variation from the other religious sects in that it has had but eleven ministers from 1817 until this time, 1954, or 137 years. The Methodists have had 57 ministers in their 126 years of existence and the Baptists 35 in 143 years. The unusual number of Methodist preachers is said to be because in early Methodist history a sort of associate pastor served the church, with some staying but a few months on the charge. The Methodist system also does not allow a pastor to remain indefinitely in any one charge.

Rev. Baruch B. Beckwith served more than 23 years, largely in the Congregational era; Rev. William F. Skinner served for 42 years, and Rev. J. Anderson Schofield jr., more than 23 years, making a total of about 89 years.

Worthy of notice is that the three mentioned church bodies changed from their old fashioned wooden churches to a more stately design in a period of three consecutive years. The Methodists covered their wooden structure with a Gouverneur marble veneer in 1892. The Presbyterians built entirely new in 1893 and the Baptists in 1894. The Baptist decision to build was hastened by a fire on March 26, 1894 that wrecked their old wooden church. The Baptists, however, had complete plans for their present church before the fire.

As already mentioned in the first paragraph of this story, the First Presbyterian church was originally a Congregational church, which had its inception with a organizational meeting on May 24, 1817, which was six years later than the beginning of the Baptist church, the first religious organization to appear in Gouverneur.

The names on this organizational roll were William Cleghorn, Jonathan S Colton, Elijah Hough jr., William Colton, Betsey Colton and Hannah Colton, all from the Congregational church at Champion, and the following were admitted on a profession of faith: Daniel Sears, Horatio J. Cleveland, Isaac Smith, Dorothy Sackett, Cynthia Sears, Cynthia Cleveland, Abigail Smith and Betsey Spencer.

Rev. Nathaniel Dutton of Champion, Jefferson county, supervised this meeting. On Sunday, July 27, 1817, the first sacraments were administered by Mr. Dutton at which time ten members were admitted on their profession of faith, and this made a membership of 24. By 1827, the membership had increased to 176.

The legal organization of the Congregational Society was effected on April 13, 1820, with Rev. Oliver Ayers of Oneida in charge, and the proceedings were attested to before Judge Thomas H. Davis on April 19. The first trustees were Dr. John Spencer, Richard Kimball, William Cleghorn, William Colton, Rockwell Barnes and James Parker.

There was a scarcity of printed sermons and Mrs. Harvey L. Smith in her history written in 1905 at the Gouverneur Centennial states that "Burder's Village Sermons" were read and reread to these original congregational gatherings. The schoolhouse and even barns were used for meetings and occasionally a pastor from other places such as the Rev. Dutton, Ruel E Kimball of Leyden and Rev. Isaac Clinton and others, and missionary preachers, appeared.

In 1820, just after the incorporation, the first place of worship was erected and of this building Mrs. Smith says, "It was enclosed, a floor laid, seats were constructed of slabs with the flat side upward and held up by stool legs. Here in unplastered walls without a stove in winter, services were held for about four years. In carts and sleds, drawn by oxen, these pioneer settlers came to this 'tabernacle' punctually and regularly, with some coming a distance of five miles." Rev. James Murdock was the first pastor and he remained five years. A West Side street in this village beginning at the eastern end of Wilson street and running along the old Route 11 of the state highway for a quarter of a mile before it rejoins the section of the highway into Gouverneur, changed in 1929 to provide a better entrance into the village, is named Murdock street. Whether this street is named from the pastor or a physician, Dr. Hiram Murdock, is not clear. Dr. Murdock was here for over 15 years.

Richard C. Hand succeeded Rev. James Murdock in late 1825 and served until 1832. Succeeding him was the Rev. Jonathan Hovey, 1822-1834; Rev. John Bucknell, supply for six months; Rev. Robert F. Lawrence, supply, 1835-1837; Rev. Simeon Bicknell, regular pastor, 1838-1842; and the Rev. John Orr, listed as a supply for about one year. A new church was erected in 1820 at a cost of \$1,400.

The next pastorate, one of the most important in the Presbyterian history began with Rev. Baruch B. Beckwith, who assumed the Congregational pastorate in 1843. The Scotch settlers were arriving in large numbers during the pastorates preceding that of Mr. Beckwith and although there had been no change in the incorporation status of the Congregational church it had become to be known as the Presbyterian Congregational Church.

The growing Congregational Church, according to some historical records, got a spiritual and financial uplift through the efforts of the evangelist Charles G. Finney, who in that particular period, 1825 to 1830, held protracted meetings in other places such as Watertown, Adams, and other Jefferson and St. Lawrence county towns.

Construction of the third building on the church lot, which was at 22 Church Street, the same place as the present Presbyterian edifice, was accomplished in 1843 at the beginning of the pastorate of Mr. Beckwith. The influx of Scotch Presbyterians and their influence caused a dissent among the Congregational members in 1843, and the dissenters erected a small church building at 34 Grove Street, the site of the First Methodist church.

This was incorporated as the Second Congregational church, and had the following trustees, John Leach, M.W. Smith and Rockwell Barnes. The dissenting movement gained but partial support from Congregational church members and of course none from the Scotch element whose thrift and financial ability was above par. Unable to pay for the services of a regular pastor the Second Congregational Church was one somewhat of misfortune and it disbanded, with some of its members returning to the Presbyterian church and some going to other religious bodies. The Second Congregational church building was sold to the Methodist church in 1862.

To complete the history of this small church building, it was sold by the Methodists in 1870 to St. James Roman Catholic church. The St. James Society moved it to what is now approximately 9 Park street and it was destroyed by fire in the fire of 1875 that burned from the Park street corner for several stores west in East Main Street.

The Congregational church building was erected in 1820 and replaced with a larger building 1843 as recorded previously, had a final story of interest. It was moved from 22 Church street across William street to what is now No. 12 William street and services were held in it by the Universalists for a short time. Idle for some time, it was then moved back across William street to what is now about No. 9 William street and first used as a town hall and printing shop. It later became the paint shop of the Stephen B. Van Duzee Manufacturing company, a furniture manufacturing company with a waterpowered mill on the Oswegatchie river just below the West Main street bridge at the east end of the bridge.

In 1877 the original hall building at the corner of Church and William streets burned. The origin of this fire was in the paint shop. The Gouverneur Times account of that fire stated that the four small spires on the four corners of the building maintained their erect position, pointing heavenward for quite a long time after the main part of the structure was destroyed. The waterworks system at that time was a private concern and inadequate to cope with a large fire.

Mr. Beckwith continued as a Congregational pastor and with others had tried to avert a serious split over the discord between the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians. The 1843 wooden church had fallen into the need of heavy repairs by 1862. The congregation had become predominantly Presbyterian, including some other faiths, and in February, 1863, the membership voted on the question of becoming wholly Presbyterian. The vote was practically unanimous to become Presbyterian and the first board of elders was George Rodger, Melville H. Thrall, Samuel Wright, James Brodie, Simeon L. Parmelee, Joseph Howes, and George Lockie. Mr. Beckwith continued as pastor until early in 1866 when he resigned due to ill health and advancing years. He built a home at what is now No. 194 East Main street, and part of the residence of Mrs. Grace Freeman. After his death July 4, 1870, the present Beckwith street was named from him, the original name being Sterling street.

Mr. Beckwith was succeeded by Rev. Newton J. Conklin, who prepared for college at Genesco Normal and graduated from LaFayette College in 1861 and finished his religious education at Princeton Theological school. The Presbyterians built a parsonage on the site of the present parsonage, 28 Church street, just to the east of the church building. Mr. Conklin continued on the local charge until 1879 at which time the church enrollment neared the 300 mark.

Rev. Tyron Edwards came here in 1880 and closed his pastorate in 1886. He was a grandson of the well known American theologian, Jonathan Edwards. He was 71 when he came to Gouverneur.

Rev. William F. Skinner, a young Princeton Theological student and a resident of Cambridge N.Y., was installed as Gouverneur pastor here in June 1887. The village growth in 1880 to 1895 was about 1,500 and the Presbyterian growth climbed to about 400. Consideration was given to rebuilding the old wooden church in 1890 and as the Methodists had remodeled their wooden church with a Gouverneur marble veneer in 1892, the Presbyterian society decided to rebuild.

A new building on the site of the old building was erected in 1893 at a reported cost of \$50,000. Dedicated on October 3, 1893, the stately new marble church was designed by architect Yardley of New York. The style is Romanesque, with arches and circles predominating. A spacious marble porch occupies the central portion of the front of the edifice, wherein the arches and circles are most effectively shown.

The interior finish is of chestnut and a matched wood ceiling, with the side walls tinted. The pews are arranged in a series of semi circles and the ceiling is enhanced by attractive ornamental beams. A spacious Sunday school room opens into the auditorium from the rear by means of huge glass sliding doors. The combined auditorium and Sunday school room will seat about 1,000 people.

The speakers platform or pulpit is located on a dais well out in front of the choir loft and pipe organ, with the organist and choir director located between the speaker's platform and the choir loft, which has a seating capacity of more than 50 singers. The entire church is about 100 x 90 feet and a four story square tower ornaments the northeastern corner of the building.

In 1904 Mrs. Mira Dean and her daughters, the Misses Jennie and Cora Dean, donated a light yellow tapestry brick parsonage. The old parsonage was purchased by Homer A. Drake and moved to his lot at 43 James street.

A highlight event was the observance in 1912 of the 25 years of the pastorate of Mr. Skinner.

People from all sects attended the observance and Rev. D. A. Ferguson, pastor of the Hammond church, gave the main address at the union services held in the church.

The centenary of the First Presbyterian Church was held in the summer of 1917, the story of which is ably told by Miss Sarah Parker in a pamphlet, copies of which are available.

In the early summer of 1920, a new pipe organ of the most modern type was presented to the church by an unknown donor. Three men, James O. Sheldon, Charles M. Tait, and Dr. William R. Conner were entrusted with the name of the secret donor. As the Dean family had always permitted the use of their names when public contributions were made, some believed the new organ benefactor was some other party than the Dean family. However, before the death of Miss Jennie Dean in November 1943, it had become known that it was her personal gift, and on her death full public confirmation was made that Miss Jennie Dean had been the donor. Dr. Conner died in 1933 and Mr. Tait in 1950, but Mr. Sheldon, born April 7, 1863, is at this writing, 1954, still living and resides at Potsdam.

The description of the pipe organ details that it has three manuals, besides a complete pedal keyboard and that it actually consists of four separate and distinct organs, with each one tied in electrically with the other, which permits each unit to be played independently or with one or more of the other organs. The four organs are the Great Organ, the Swell Organ, the Choir Organ and the Echo Organ. There are hundreds of pipes both seen and unseen behind the speakers platform and the choir loft. The echo organ is situated over the large doors at the rear of the auditorium leading into the Sunday school room. In 1943 the organ was equipped with a complete set of tower chimes, which can be played inside the building or piped to the tower, to be sent out into the air as tower chimes. Recorded music as well as singing or speaking can be provided through the tower.

On September 22, 1929, Mr. Skinner at the morning service announced to the congregation that owing to health considerations he was compelled to end his pastoral duties. He had completed 42 years in the local pastorate in June 1929.

His resignation was accepted with regret by the congregation and he was given the title of pastor emeritus and retired to a home at 95 Rowley street. He was spending the winter of 1939 in Florida when he died there at the age of 82 on January 29, 1939.

His long pastorate of 42 years in the First Presbyterian Church of Gouverneur, which also was his only charge, may be a record for the entire North Country pastors. He was born April 13, 1856 at Cambridge, N.Y., the son of Cortland, and Rhoda Sherman Skinner. After graduation from Cambridge Academy at the age of 19, he taught school for one year and then went to Iowa with his brother George H. Skinner and attended for a year and one half the preparatory school connected with the University of Iowa, from which he graduated in 1881. Probably to gain funds to continue his education, he worked for three years for a lumber company at Audubon, Iowa, and then entered the Princeton Theological Seminary from which he came to Gouverneur immediately after his graduation.

He married Miss Katherine K. Markwick, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Markwick of Gouverneur, on October 16, 1895, the first wedding in the new Presbyterian church. Mrs. Skinner died October 5, 1945, aged 75.

Three sons and a daughter were born to Mr. and Mrs. Skinner. The oldest, George D. Skinner resides in New York with N. W. Ayer & company in their public relations department.

The other two sons entered the Presbyterian ministry and the daughter married a minister. Rev. Robert M. Skinner, D. D., after pastorates in Washington, D. C. and Pottsville, Pa., and Westerfield, N.J., is at this time, 1954, pastor of the First Presbyterian church at Amarillo, Texas.

Rev. W. Sherman Skinner, D. D., has held pastorates in Bethlehem, Pa., Philadelphia, Pa., and at this time is situated at East Liberty church, Pittsburgh.

Rhoda Katherine Skinner, the youngest of the four children, is the wife of Rev. E. Scott Byers, associate pastor in the Presbyterian church, Buffalo.

After the resignation of Mr. Skinner, the church was without a pastor for five months, in which interim Rev. Robert Hastings of the Auburn Theological Seminary was a frequent preacher, as well as some other pastors of the St. Lawrence Presbytery. In February 1930 Rev. Joseph A. Schofield, jr., then preaching at Hobart, N.Y., was heard by a delegation which resulted in a call being sent to Mr. Schofield to assume the Gouverneur First Presbyterian pastorate. He was then unmarried and arrived here in April and began his pastorate, with installation ceremonies occurring on June 20, 1930. Three months after Mr. Schofield's arrival here he married Miss Mary A. Lewis of Delhi at that village. The Schofields have two sons, Lewis and Lemuel.

Mr. Schofield, a native of Warren, Pa., graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1922 with a B.A. degree and with a Th.B. degree from Princeton in 1925. In March 1951, recognizing some friction in church circles, Mr. Schofield asked to be relieved of the local charge, but a largely attended meeting held in the municipal building in the same month, resulted in the meeting requesting him to remain in Gouverneur. On September 6, 1953, Mr. Schofield at the Sunday morning worship service told the congregation that he had accepted a call to the Goodwill Presbyterian church at Montgomery, N.Y. His official ties with the St. Lawrence Presbytery were ended at a September 22 meeting of that body, and his final sermon here was preached on September 27 after 23 years and four months, ending a pastorate of practically the same length of Rev. Mr. Beckwith, but much short of the 42 years of Mr. Skinner.

In 1950-51, the main roof over the church had to be repaired. The wooden beams were damaged to the point of being dangerous if not attended to. With the large sum left from the funds of the Dean sisters, the roof was repaired and the basement of the church was completely made over. The floor was lowered more than one foot, and the old dining room enlarged so that recreation was made available for a large crowd. It is now possible to seat over 500 at one time. A new heating system was installed and a kitchen complete in all details was provided. A nursery room was also built into the southeast corner of the church. While no serious argument was ever reported over this outlay of around \$80,000 for the entire work, there was some difference of opinion about the elaborate expense of the church basement improvements.

After the departure of Mr. Schofield, the Presbyterians had several guest pastors on succeeding Sundays. On Sunday, December 6, 1953, a congregational meeting was held in the church in the afternoon at which time a unanimous of over 200 was recorded to request Rev. Merritt W. Updyke, pastor of the Hitchcock Memorial church of Scarsdale, N.Y., to accept a call of First Presbyterian church here. Dr. Walter W. Cavert of the Synod of New York opened the congregational meeting and Dr. Halbert W. Campbell of Hammond presided. Mr. Updyke accepted the call and preached his first sermon here on Sunday, January 10, 1954.

Mr. Updyke is a native of Pennsylvania. His college training was divided between Syracuse university college extension and Hobart college, and he received his theological from Auburn Theological seminary in 1939, after which he was pastor of the Memorial Congregational church at Seneca Falls and in 1942 he came to Watertown to assume the Hope Presbyterian charge. He left the Hope Presbyterian church at Watertown to take a position of associate pastor of the Hitchcock Memorial church at Scarsdale. He married Miss Leona M. Brink of Penn Yann in 1932 and in 1954 is the father of two daughters, Dorinda Agnes and Thelma Jane.
END

Addendums: The death of Rev. Mr. Schofield at Montgomery was reported here in April 1955. Mrs. Schofield returned to Gouverneur to reside in September and at this time, 1959, lives at 47 Trinity Ave., the corner of Trinity Ave. and Park street.

The Mens Club of the Church began holding bi-monthly meetings in the winter of 1959 as a noon day lunch with the youth movement as an objective with the Boy Scout development in mind. The Presbyterian scouts have quarters in the enlarged church basement where there is a shuffle board available. It is to be noted here that the United Fund has taken over the St. Lawrence County Boy Scouts as a part of their fund drive which began on Nov. 13th, 1959.

In 1957 Charles I Ruderman donated some dwarf shrubbery set out in front of the church on both sides of the main entrance. A rough faced Gouverneur marble was built about 15 inches high to contain the shrubbery. The shrubbery is of the evergreen type.

Mr. Updyke continued as pastor until Aug. 1, 1961 and then took an assistant pastorate post in Wichita Falls, Kan. He remained on this charge only a short time, dying in Watertown the spring of 1962.

Rev. Frank N. Hoffman of Philadelphia came here as the local pastor in February 1962, succeeding Mr. Updyke after six months, and preceding Mr. Updyke's death by a short period of time.