

The Journey Begins

In the million-year history of humanity, or in the two millennia of the Christian church, what are 150 years?

To us at Mason First Presbyterian, in the year 2009, one hundred fifty years loom large, as a milestone of achievement. They represent great improvement over what 'we' had in 'pioneer days.'

In the larger scheme of things, in time, and in the world as a whole, geographically, we are not far from our origins as people of the soil however. We are heirs to a human character which has been granted to us, as we have improved on it (or not), and from God hopefully have drawn a vision of where we will go, and what we will do with it. We share much with all of humanity which, like our country, struggles to raise itself up and live up to its better nature.

Perhaps the true history of our church is one of moments of grace--- ones that we have witnessed, borne, and been able to share with our fellow travelers in the life of a church. In what way has such grace manifested itself as Presbyterianism, a practice of churchly, democratic governance, in Mason town? First, we need to look at its context, and also go back 165 years to our earliest written record of a Presbyterian "Society," insofar as we know of it.

Imagine that you are a young person in the Mason area, in the spring of 1844. You are so glad that a harsh winter--- one of wolves howling in the woods, cold seeping in through door jams and chinks in the logs, plus other hardship--- is mostly over. Your family has lost chickens, a rooster, and a calf to the freezing temperatures, on nights when the shed wasn't warm enough and there wasn't enough straw or blankets (needed indoors) to cover them.

Upon awakening this morning, you quickly throw on as many layers of long-johns, clothes and coats as are available, and you cling to a spot by the fireplace to warm up, and gulp down your breakfast of porridge, salt pork, and buttermilk. You are among the lucky, to have such good fare. In the outlying woods there are Indians who, every few days, make their way through town to beg at the homes which, by either custom or charity, offer them something--- a chunk of Johnny Cake, a slice of smoky venison wrapped in bacon, perhaps a cup of coffee. (A 'town' is rural in the New English definition of things, and often includes the township around, based on a voting and participating assemblage of farmers, mostly.)

The blended tribes of Odawa and Ojibwe are nomadic, and think of the land differently from how 'we' do. In this area, in 1844, an old chief who has fought in many wars against what he and his people knew to be an invasion, still lives, though he and his extended family are struggling. He has been named "Chief Okemos" by the white people although his real name, Ogemahs, is a title which already means "chief". His son Johnny will look into agriculture as a means of adapting to things, and think of settling somewhere to the north of us.

Soon you will be off to school, recently built in Mason Center (for a few short years it was called The Center). Miss Lucy Rolfe started it with eight pupils in 1837, in a cabin. In 1838 it moved into a frame building, and it's located on E. Columbia near Main Street (later to be called Jefferson). On your way to school, you will note the town's scattering of houses, many of them log-built and resting on knolls overlooking the Sycamore. Some of them are done up in the desirable frame and clapboard style, of course, thanks to the saw mill down by the creek, essential to the construction of more homes. It was the developer, the Chas. Noble Co., who planned and now manage the saw and grist mills.

At the corner of what will become Jefferson and Ash Streets, there is a two-story hotel with tavern below, important for welcoming newcomers and lodging those who pass through on their way north or west. George Shafer is its owner, and he allows heated political discussion, from Democrats (Jackson's party, from the 1820's) and the Whigs. A tavern-cabin once stood in the middle of the road going north to Okemos, but it has been torn down.

In the middle of the hamlet, a 'commons' serves to pasture goats, cows and sheep, and there is a watering hole on its southeast side. All of this lies where once native people gathered for bonfires and celebration--- after a harvest or hunt for example, with much dancing and conviviality--- and so much drinking that the women were wise to hide the men's guns.

In Mason Centre there are a few businesses to serve your family's needs: among these the mills (a 'grist' one grinds corn and also the wheat you need to survive), and a general store or two.

Father may go hunt today with a group of men, and bring ample venison, bear meat, and waterfowl to replenish winter's spare larder. The men will swap stories of accidents, from flintlocks and muzzleloaders misfired by fellow hunters, or from worse things--- axes that slipped, a tree that fell on a man and led to his demise. Perhaps the men will murmur of one, Mr. John Rayner (wife Emily, and children) who came from Auburn, New York, and bought 320 acres to the east of town: wealthy enough to spark envy. It isn't enough that in 1840 he had a fancy, Greek revival style house of brick built, past the limit of town by a few blocks, but he plans to harvest ice from his ponds and sell it at a good price!

Or the men might sing praises of Dr. Minos McRobert, who has helped so many through their diseases and wounds, and been active in civic leadership--- the only doctor for miles around.

Your second mother is called a "step" mother. Your birth mother expired while she delivered her third baby (the sister who came after you). Dear Mother cooks, washes, sews, knits, gardens, and looks after the small animals, children and household, all day long. She calls on you and your siblings (the two of her own are yet too small) to help her whenever you are needed. You must do chores if all are to survive, and if the family is to improve its life.

Mother has joined a newly formed "Society" of Presbyterians, which consists of several families devoted to worship, Bible study, and prayer. Among them are several families who feel the benefit of shared song and meditations, along with the congregant's participation in governance. Some of her friends are proud to count the Puritans of Massachusetts among their ancestors.

The first settlers to Mason area came in 1836. Nearly all of us are of "York State" extraction (possibly Pennsylvanians or New Englanders, too), most having come over perilous Lake Erie by steam ship. The Canal from Albany to Buffalo really opened this Territory up, when it was completed in '25. Then it is through Ann Arbour, and either Dexter, Stockbridge or Jackson, that creaking wagons have brought us. Some have taken "the long way around" by ox cart, north through Canada (where former slaves are urged by that country and by the "underground railroad" to locate and farm, after their escape from bondage). Others have come via Erie's southern shore, along roads of cultivated and long settled Ohio--- its statehood was attained over forty years ago, in 1803.

The name of "societies" indicates a camaraderie and concern for their members; and there are several of them, of different denominations, in Mason. In spite of the names, all are Protestant. In the fall of 1839, for example, a Rev. Jackson of the Methodist Episcopal "Dexter Mission" came to Mason, a 'station' along the circuit he served, and he began a society of five families; it was registered in 1842, under the name of "Ingham County Circuit." In 1839 also, an itinerant named Rev. David Hendee began a Baptist Church with six members, including the Mr. and Mrs. Wright Horton. Our own Presbyterian efforts in that year did not result in the formation of a society or church, though there was a group who wished to have one, and tried.

Societies. *Benevolent* societies in the New York homeland had been formed to serve many of the same tasks which Deacons, for example, assume in reaching out to the poor, indigent, sick, and aged. They addressed social needs, but at heart they were of religious inspiration. Let me to explain a little of our history, which you may know already: "York State" emigrants were settling in Central and Western New York for some decades, from the 1790's and into early 1800's; the highly civilized, agriculturally advanced Seneca and others of the Iroquois Six Nations had been pushed out. The settlers' parents were primarily New Englanders of Puritan and other extraction (English, Scots and some Irish, etc.)

Something amazing, or even miraculous for many, began working on the people of upstate New York, in the 1820's.

Charles Grandison Finney was training to become a lawyer when, like the apostle Paul, he saw a great light in 1823; it was not on a dusty desert road but in the woods of America. He, like Paul, let it alter his life and stir him to action. (You probably will not read the details of his conversion in a standard history primer.) He became one of the leaders of revivals, whose influence was felt all over the two dozen states of the union, and even overseas, known as the Second Great Awakening.

Like many a Presbyterian clergyman of the era, Finney became firmly committed to salvation news of Jesus, standing opposed to slavery, ignorance, and adultery. He was in favor of individual development, marriage counseling, temperance, Sabbatarianism (keeping Sunday holy, a bit like the Pharisees), and a life led by prayer--- many of the things which we take for granted as part of our culture. Presbyterianism had been on the rise in America, since it was formed as a national church about the same time as the American Revolution, whether this was in the revival style, or in the more plodding, educated style of leadership and organization, building slowly. (Although perhaps less fervently than the Baptists and Methodists, eastern Presbyterians sought to keep the pioneers on the frontiers 'churched,' and faithful.)

Religious revivals swept upstate New York for nearly twenty years, beginning in the early 1820's, but then they "burned out," leaving a similar name to the entire region along the Erie Canal: the "Burned-Over District." The Second Great Awakening revivals exhorted people to come to the Lord, to battle whatever demons 'possessed' them even if they had to sweat them out through "the jerks," or thrashing about in a sort of "corral" located to the side of the backwoods pulpit, in front of the split log benches of the saved. Some of the revivalists focused on a second coming of Christ, which for the Millerites was supposed to have happened last year, in March of 1843. (They have postponed it,

because their leaders claim to know its date precisely.)

Like Finney, many in the revivals sought to overcome social ills said to stem from disbelief-- poverty, public inebriation (with "demon rum" consumption being terribly high), family destruction, and health issues in an often mosquito-infested, cholera-ridden environ. (Ague, or yellow fever, was and still is, in 1844, a curse of the frontier, though it is not as bad as the smallpox, which swept away much of the native population.) Inactivity on the part of more established churches--- Congregationalist (direct spiritual heir to the Puritans), Presbyterian, and Methodist, for example--- has been blamed by revivalists on uninspired preaching, and half-hearted efforts to reach out to the 'frontier,' the poor, and people of color.

All of this is background to spiritual and societal efforts here in Mason Centre. Soon Father will join the "Presbyterian Society," and you will be proud that he takes his place as a leader in it. Of course women are at the heart of it, for they crave the stability, comforts, and support that a 'society' provides, seeing this type of society as a foundation for the other society at large, which in the U.S. we refer to as "the people," hoping that it includes a broad range, though women and black people can not vote.

Mother and Father's Presbyterian Society promises great things for our family (ahem, whether this be in 1844, or any other year): they include known standards of behavior, regular church school, and weekly worship! In the meantime, we share services with Methodists and Baptists at the schoolhouse (see the picture) or at the courthouse on Ash St. (where today there is a law office/stock broker). The latter two denominations, as we have said, enjoy sermons by itinerants who live from the generosity of their congregants, when they are able to travel here on horseback, to visit every few weeks, and preach and sing among us. Sometimes we use the building in one week, and another denomination uses it for another Sunday. (We may say hopefully that a Mason tradition of sharing between churches, a foundation for our area, has been established. In struggling together and for each other, we will see how something new is being created, which is an ecumenical society, yet where each is free to worship as he sees fit.)

"Hark, but for the moment hark, young believer!" I understand that in a few months your Father will arrive home one chilly night "in fine fettle," with a brace of grouse under his arm: he'll have heard that the Presbyterian Society has been officially organized, and has registered itself at the courthouse. His friend James Turner (who will go on to create businesses in the state capital after it is founded) and others are co-founders and promoters of it.

Some of the language may be archaic, and the capitalization and spellings not what you are used to, but this is what the document (attested to by Justice of the Peace J.B. Packard, and Peter Low, Country Clerk) shall leave for posterity:

"Appointment of trustees for the First Presbyterian Society of Mason. To the Clerk of Ingham County. Sir this may Certify that William H. Horton, James Turner and Ira Hubbard were duly elected trustees of the First Presbyterian Church of Mason at a meeting of said society. Held this day . . . to call and we do further Certify that the said trustees and their . . . in office are to be known . . . as the Trustees of the first Presbyterian Society of Mason. Given under our hands this fourth day of December AD Eighteen hundred and forty four. Signed in presence of Jas. Turner, Peter Linderman, and J.B. (Jonathan B.) Chapin, presiding officer at the above meeting and deacons of aforesaid Society."

[Fellow traveler in time, in our next episode we will see what church life will become for you as a believer who attends church with the new congregation to be organized in 1859. In January of that year, you see, the First Presbyterian Church of Mason will be officially organized, through the Synod headquartered at Marshall.]