

A History of Religion in Seneca County Before the Civil War

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Religious Beliefs of the Iroquois Indians

The Cayuga and Seneca tribes of the Iroquois Indians occupied what is today Seneca County. The supernatural world of the Iroquois included numerous deities, the most important of which was Great Spirit, who was responsible for the creation of human beings, the plants and animals, and the forces of good in nature. The Iroquois believed that Great Spirit indirectly guided the lives of ordinary people. Other important deities were Thunderer and the Three Sisters, the spirits of Maize, Beans, and Squash. Opposing the Great Spirit and the other forces of good were Evil Spirit and other lesser spirits responsible for disease and other misfortune. In the Iroquois view ordinary humans could not communicate directly with Great Spirit, but could do so indirectly by burning tobacco, which carried their prayers to the lesser spirits of good. The Iroquois regarded dreams as important supernatural signs, and serious attention was given to interpreting dreams. It was believed that dreams expressed the desire of the soul, and as a result the fulfillment of a dream was of paramount importance to the individual.

Full-time religious specialists were absent. There were, however, part-time male and female specialists known as keepers of the faith whose primary responsibilities were to arrange and conduct the main religious ceremonies. Keepers of the faith were appointed by matrisib elders and were accorded considerable prestige.

Religious ceremonies were tribal affairs, concerned primarily with farming, curing illness, and thanksgiving. In the sequence of occurrence, the six major ceremonies were the Maple, Planting, Strawberry, Green Maize, Harvest, and Mid-Winter or New Year's festivals. The first five in this sequence involved public confessions followed by group Ceremonies which included speeches by the keepers of the faith, tobacco offerings, and prayer. The New Year's festival was usually held in early February and was marked by dream interpretations and the sacrifice of a white dog offered to purge the people of evil.

Illness and disease were attributed to supernatural causes. Curing ceremonies consisted of group shamanistic practices directed toward propitiating the responsible Supernatural agents.

In early historic times the dead were buried in a sitting position facing east. After the burial, a captured bird was released in the belief that it carried away the spirit of the deceased. In earlier times the dead were left exposed on a wooden scaffolding, and after a time their bones were deposited in a special house of the deceased. The Iroquois believed, as some continue to believe today, that after death the soul embarked on a journey and series of ordeals that ended in the land of the dead in the sky world. Mourning for the dead lasted a year, at the end of which time the soul's journey was believed to be complete and a feast was held to signify the soul's arrival in the land of the dead.¹

European Missionaries

The first white (European American) men to penetrate the wilderness region of what is today Seneca County were French Jesuit priests with missionary objectives. Between 1656 and 1684, these Jesuit missionaries established stations among the Cayuga Indian nation. One such missionary station was called St. Stephen, at the Indian village of Tiohero situated on the east side of the Cayuga Outlet, a short distance from the north end of Cayuga Lake. A second such missionary station was established at St. Rene (Onontare) near the present village of Savannah. The work of these missionaries extended to the Indians residing on both sides of Cayuga Lake and to the Seneca tribe farther west. One of these French Jesuit missionaries was a Father Rene Menard. The bridge known by local folks as the Free Bridge is formally named in honor of this Father Menard.²

There is documentation that Bishop John Frederick Christoph Cammerhoff and the Rev. David Zeisberger, two Moravian missionaries from Pennsylvania, came through what is today the town of Fayette on June 27, 1750.

The Rev. Samuel Kirkland conducted much missionary work with the Seneca Indians, starting in January 1765. Even though he was adopted by the chief sachem at Kanadasega (now Geneva), the then capital of the Seneca Nation, while sojourning with the Senecas he was subjected to many perils and sufferings, and attempts to take his life. In his eighteen months at Kanadasega, he became familiar with the language and the surrounding area. General George Washington called upon Rev. Kirkland often in the American Revolution to obtain information as to Indian intentions and activities. He served as the chaplain in General John Sullivan's expedition in 1779.³

Religious Beliefs of the Early European American Settlers

The Introduction of the *Manual of the Churches of Seneca County with Sketches of Their Pastors, 1895-96* begins with these words:

Man has been termed a religious animal. Reverence for the unknown and fear or hope of the hereafter, characterize him, whether he be a savage or a sage. Wherever man exists, there is found religious worship. The Red men of the forest, who for centuries had inhabited this Lake region, had their religion, and after their own manner worshipped the Great Spirit. When the white settlers came, a century ago [about 1790], they brought their religion with them. They were a Christian people, and when they built their homes in the wilderness, they endowed them with their Bibles and consecrated them with family altars. They were, at first, scattered for religious services, but as their numbers increased ministers of the gospel, pioneers of the churches, found them out and gathered them together for religious instruction, in dwellings, barns, or the open forest.⁴

These early white (European American) settlers of this county were not without religious convictions. They came from different portions of states already settled to a considerable extent, where a strong feeling of dependence upon the Supreme Being had been inculcated from their early childhood. They, therefore, after having determined upon the location of their earthly homes, soon began to make preparations for instruction in the religious duties of themselves and their posterity.⁵

Methodist Circuit Riders

These early settlers were pre-occupied with the basic "settling in" tasks—erecting a rudimentary log cabin, building a barn, clearing enough trees from a plot of land so that crops

could be grown, etc.—that the building of a church structure simply had to wait for a few years. To help meet the need for some kind of religious service, preachers traveled on horseback as “circuit riders.”

The 1876 history of Seneca County begins its chapter on early church history this way: Wherever the smoke of the settler’s cabin rose, there soon came the circuit rider, bound on his mission of good. Traversing swamp, trail, and forest path, he found cordial welcome everywhere. Arousing strong opposition, he had power in the truths of the gospel, expressed in plain speech, and illustrated from the boundless volume of nature. The first ministers who visited this region were Methodists. Upon mules or horses they went upon their extended circuit, preaching day and evening. The early circuit embraced a journey of four hundred miles. Private house and school-house were used wherever the people could be called together.⁶



Some of these early itinerant preachers were James Smith (1793), Alward White, Joseph Whitby and John Lockby (1795), Hamilton Jefferson and Anning Owen (1796), Johnson Denham (1797), James Stokes and Richard Lyon (1798), Jonathan Bateman (1799), Daniel Dunham and Benjamin Bidlack (1800), David James and Joseph Williamson (1801), Smith Weeks and John Billings (1802), Griffin Sweet and Sharon Booth (1803), and Roger Benton and Sylvester Hill (1804). “But what a life was theirs! A pair of saddlebags contained their wardrobe and their library. Often their sleep was in the woods; reckless of the wolf, they laid them down, and rising, journeyed on to preach in school-house, barn or wood.”⁷

First Formal Religious Services and Early Churches in Seneca County

In time these settlers were ready to establish and build “churches” for their community. It is difficult to be 100% factually correct about the history of various churches in Seneca County in its very early years. Part of the problem is that the term “church” is sometimes used to mean a particular congregation of worshippers (such as when saying “the church was organized” on some particular date), while at other times the word “church” is used to refer to the actual building of a place of worship (such as when saying “the church was built” in some particular year). Another part of the problem is that the geographic boundaries of Seneca County and its towns have changed over the years. When Seneca County was created on March 24, 1804, it stretched from Lake Ontario to south of Ithaca, and consisted of only four towns (Ovid, Romulus, Washington, and Junius). By 1829, northern and southern parts of Seneca County had been taken away to be parts of other counties (Wayne, Schuyler and Tompkins), and various towns had been broken up to form other towns (such as Ovid town becoming the towns of Ovid, Lodi, and Covert). Still another part of the problem is that in some cases a church was organized as one denomination and then later became another denomination. Given these problems, this account of early churches in Seneca County will rely upon information presented in the 1876 history of Seneca County and the 1896 *Manual of Churches*, trying to reconcile their conflicting information where possible.



Given all that, it is probably safe to say that the first organized church in Seneca County was in Romulus. In 1795, the Presbyterian General Assembly sent the Rev. Daniel Thatcher of Virginia to the Romulus area to help get a “church” organized. The church was

organized officially in 1796, with John Fleming, Alla McNath and Henry Wharton as three of the original four elders of the church. There were occasional services held in private houses, barns and school houses. In the absence of a pastor, sermons were read. The present Romulus Presbyterian Church was organized on April 4, 1802. The first church building was dedicated on October 22, 1809. The present church structure was dedicated in February 1838.⁸

A Presbyterian church of Ovid was organized in 1800 by the Rev. John Lindsley. It was situated in the southeast part of the town of Ovid, was transferred in June 1808 to the Reformed Dutch Classis, and became extinct well before 1895.⁹ The location of this church was probably in what is today the town of Covert which was created out of the town of Ovid in 1817.

The Covert Baptist Church was constituted February 16, 1803, being known as the Baptist Church of Ovid and Hector. Minor Thomas was chosen as this church's first pastor on April 21, 1804, with his compensation "to depend upon the liberality of the church and congregation." On March 9, 1805, the name of the church was changed to the Second Baptist Church of Ovid. In 1809, meetings were held one-half of the time at the home church in Thomas' settlement; one-fourth of the time at the Samuel Hanley's in Hector; and one-fourth of the time at Peach Orchard, or other stations.¹⁰ Thomas' settlement was about three miles north of Trumansburg. Probably the first actual church building in Seneca County was built there at Thomas' settlement, probably around 1809 or 1810.¹¹



The Presbyterian Church in Ovid was organized under the name of the Seneca church on July 10, 1803, by the Rev. Jedediah Chapman. During the pastorate of the Rev. Stephen Porter, the church was reorganized and incorporated in 1817 as the First Presbyterian church in Ovid. A wooden meeting house was built on the western outskirts of the village.¹²

The first Methodist church in Seneca County was built at Taunton (Townsendville) about 1810, while Isaac Teller and Amos Jenks or John Rhodes and Daniel Baines were on that circuit. Its first house of worship was built about 1813.¹³ A Methodist Episcopal presence in what is today Ovid began in 1820 with the appointment of the Rev. Jonathan Hustis as preacher in charge of this portion of the so-called Seneca circuit. William Fowler organized the first Methodist class in the village in 1827.¹⁴

Years that Churches of Certain Denominations Were Established in Seneca County Prior to the Civil War

By the time of the Civil War there were these Methodist societies operating in Seneca County: Taunton (Townsendville), Canoga (c. 1810), Sheldrake (1811), Tyre (1817), Varick (at McDuffietown) (1820), Ovid (1820), Seneca Falls (1829), Waterloo (1833), Lodi (1837), Stone Church in Junius (1838), West Junius (1848), and Bearytown (now Fayette) (1859)

Several Presbyterian churches were organized in Seneca County prior to the Civil War: Romulus (1796), Ovid (1803), Seneca Falls (1807), Junius (1811), Waterloo (1817), Canoga (1825), and West Fayette (1825).

The Baptist Churches included Covert (1803), Junius and Tyre (1807), Farmer (Interlaken) (1819), Waterloo (1825), Ovid Center (1827), and Seneca Falls (1828).

There were few Episcopal Churches in Seneca County prior to the Civil War: Waterloo (St. Paul's) (1817), and Seneca Falls (Trinity Episcopal) (1831). Several other Episcopal churches will be established after the Civil War.

With the arrival of Irish immigrants, some Catholic Churches were established prior to the Civil War: Seneca Falls (St. Patrick's) (1835), Waterloo (St. Mary's) (1846), and Ovid (Holy Cross) (1857).¹⁵

Churches for the German (Pennsylvania Dutch) Settlers

So many immigrants of German or Pennsylvania Dutch ancestry settled in Seneca County that it is not at all surprising that there would be many churches established to serve them. There were Reformed churches in Farmer (Interlaken) (1830), and Tyre (1835), but the bulk of the German Reformed churches were located in the Fayette area.

What local folk commonly refer to as the Stone Church in Fayette was originally the Christ Reformed Church at Bearytown. Early church records (written in German) show that prior



to 1809 German Evangelical Christians were holding preaching services in school houses, barns or private houses. At least as early as 1804 there was a pastor by the name of the Rev. Anthony Houtz. On December 26, 1809, the first attempt at formal church organization was made at a meeting of German Reformed and Evangelical Lutheran residents at the Burgh school house. These two denominations resolved to build a church for worship for both of these congregations. It was a log church 22 by 28 feet. The church was probably dedicated about January 7, 1813, at the time that the church's constitution was adopted. A German week-day school was taught in the church building from time to time until after 1830. It was in April

1821 that the Rev. Diedrich Willers began his pastorate in this church. (see separate section on him below). The present stone structure of Christ Church was erected in 1823 and dedicated June 6, 1824. Its dimensions are 45 by 35 feet and it cost about \$3,000.¹⁶

The beginnings of an Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bearytown can be traced back to the preaching of the Rev. Lot Merkel on December 26, 1809, in Hoster's school-house. For many years the Lutherans made use of the so-called Stone Church (the Christ Church building discussed in the previous paragraph). On the first Thursday in January 1847, its new brick church building was dedicated.¹⁷

The Evangelical Association Burgh Church was organized in 1816 by the Rev. Jacob Klemfelter. It was then called the Lake mission, Canaan district. It was in 1835, that its brick building was completed and dedicated. During the first forty years, the preaching was done entirely in German.¹⁸

The German residents of the central and western parts of the town of Fayette organized a religious society known as the "Trustees of Zion's Church" on August 3, 1811. Its original log church was destroyed by fire on February 7, 1835. A new church—named the Jerusalem Church—was dedicated on November 13, 1836.¹⁹

The Rev. Diedrich Willers

Diedrich Willers, Sr. was one of the most noted preachers in Seneca County. He became pastor of Christ's Reformed Church in Bearytown (Fayette) in 1821. At one time he had the

pastoral supervision of eight German Lutheran congregations--Christ's Church in Bearytown, Jerusalem, Seneca, Lyons, Dansville, Scipio, Lansing, and Salmon Creek—situated in five counties! In his early life, he was a soldier and fought in the battle of Waterloo. He was the pastor of the Fayette church for a consecutive period of sixty years and eight months (1821 to January 1, 1882). One source reports that “during his ministry he preached about 5,800 regular Sunday discourses, almost equally divided between the German and English languages, besides many funeral and special discourses, and performed a large amount of ministerial labor, in the solemnization of marriages, and in the administration of the rites of baptism and confirmation.”²⁰



He was the father of the Hon. Diedrich Willers, Jr. who became a Secretary of State. Peter Whitmer, who was one of the first converts to the Mormon faith, was a parishioner of Willers. Apparently Rev. Willers did not approve of Whitmer's conversion. One Sunday when Rev. Willers noticed Whitmer sitting in the congregation, Willers quickly inserted into his sermon these comments: “Upon learning that the wolves were among his sheep, preached to his flock from Galatians 1:8—‘Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed!’”²¹

Seneca Falls Churches

The first church in what is today the town of Seneca Falls was the Presbyterian Church of then Junius, organized on August 10, 1807, in a framed barn owned by Colonel Daniel Sayre, on the north side of the turnpike, a short distance west of the old Cayuga Bridge. (The town of Seneca Falls was created out of a portion of the town of Junius in 1829.) The first Presbyterian church building in the village of Seneca Falls was built about 1817. That wooden building was sold in 1842 and was moved to State Street, where it was long known as the Concert Hall and is now a barber shop and apartments. In 1842 a new brick Presbyterian church was built on the Cayuga Street site. That brick church structure was replaced by the current brick church building in 1878.²²



The Methodist Episcopal Church of Seneca Falls was organized and incorporated on January 6, 1828. Its first church structure was built in 1830-31 and remodeled in 1857. That building was torn down and a new church was erected in 1871.²³

The Trinity Episcopal Society in Seneca Falls was organized January 13, 1831. The first church structure was completed in July 1834 on East Bayard Street. The society built a new church on lower Fall Street in 1885.²⁴ (picture at right shows this first Trinity Episcopal Church)



The First Baptist Church of Seneca Falls was established on June 5, 1828. Services initially were held in the Presbyterian “meeting house.” Rev. Orsamus Allen was its first pastor, with a salary of “\$200 per year plus firewood.” The first church edifice was dedicated on March 4, 1869, located at the corner of Center Street and West Bayard Street.²⁵

The Wesleyan Chapel was dedicated on October 14, 1843, on what was the western edge of the village in 1843. This Wesleyan Methodist Church was established as an anti-slavery church and is discussed more fully in the Slavery Issue section below.



The beginnings of the Catholic Church in Seneca County can be traced back to the organization of the Catholic Society of Seneca Falls in October 1831 by eight members, under the supervision of the Rev. Francis O’Donohoe, who occasionally visited the village from Syracuse. In 1835, these Seneca Falls Catholics built a small frame church on a lot on Swaby Street. In 1848, the congregation built a church forty by sixty feet.²⁶ It was located next to the current St. Patrick’s Church.

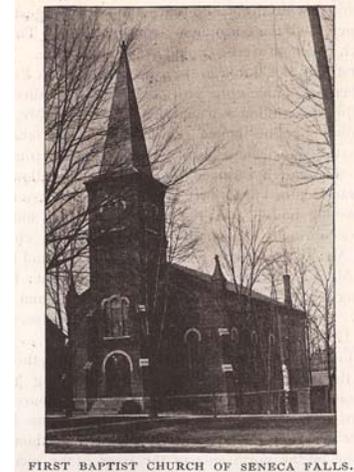
The Congregational Church of Seneca Falls was formed on December 19, 1869. The church building was dedicated on September 21, 1871.²⁷ When the church disbanded, the organ was donated to the Seneca Falls School District and placed in the auditorium of Mynderse Academy. The building today is the facility for the House of Concern.

The Christodelphian Society of Seneca Falls was founded in 1872. The Christodelphian Hall was located in the Daniels block before the disastrous village fire of 1890. The denomination had no specially ordained priests, instead taking its authority for its teachers in the divine injunction “Let him that heareth say, Come.”²⁸

The Mormon Church

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (commonly referred to as the Mormon Church or LDS church) was organized on April 6, 1830, by Joseph Smith at the Peter Whitmer farm in the town of Fayette, about three miles southwest of the village of Waterloo. It was there that Joseph Smith translated the plates containing the Mormon bible that he found at Hill Cumorah in Wayne County. The first convert was baptized in Thomas’ Creek, just south of Waterloo, and the first Mormon Conference was held in the town of Fayette, in June 1830. Brigham Young, whose father lived near the source of Glen Creek, in Schuyler County, used to come to Seneca County to work in the harvest, and it was in Fayette that he first met Joseph Smith, whose follower he became in 1833. “The moral atmosphere of Seneca County, however, did not agree with Mormonism, and Smith took his newly formed church to the West.” Joseph Smith, his wife, and some followers moved to Kirtland, Ohio, in January 1831.²⁹

In his *Centennial Historical Sketch of the Town of Fayette, 1800-1900*, Diedrich Willers, Jr. is very careful to point out that “at the time of its organization in Fayette, and while the members of the Mormon church remained in this county, polygamy was neither avowed, preached nor practiced, nor until about thirteen years afterwards (1843).³⁰



The Quaker (Society of Friends) Church

There were Quakers (Society of Friends) in Seneca County at least as early as 1803. Unlike most Christian religions, Quakers do not have a specific creed. Quakers typically believe that religion is a personal encounter with God rather than ritual and ceremony. Quakers tend to emphasize the virtues of moral purity, integrity, honesty, simplicity and humility. Unlike many churches at the time, Quakers tended to emphasize true equality of the sexes.



On the Nine Foot Road in Waterloo, one can today see the site of the Junius Monthly Meetinghouse. Today there is only the cemetery and an open lot. The meetinghouse was built by Henry Hyde in 1817-18 and consisted of a two-story frame meetinghouse, 32 by 42 feet. It was very similar to other Quaker meetinghouses in New England and New York. The structure was sold in 1893 to Edward Buck, who moved it to another site to be used as a barn. Shortly thereafter it was burned to the ground.³¹ Quakers at this Junius meetinghouse included reformers that had a national impact in the areas of abolitionism, Seneca Indian land rights, peace, temperance, and woman's rights.

Friends (Quakers) would come to this Junius meetinghouse monthly for a worship service and to conduct business. It was associated with the Farmington meetinghouse, where quarterly meetings were held each year, and the Genesee Yearly Meeting of Friends. There was a split within the Quakers in 1828, leading to two separate branches—the Hicksite and the Orthodox. In June 1848, the Junius monthly meeting separated from Genesee Monthly Meeting of Friends, asserting its belief in the total equality among all people. In October 1848, members of the Junius monthly meeting, such as Thomas and Mary M'Clintock, were key leaders in the organizing of the Congregational Friends (later known as the Progressive Friends or Friends of Human Progress). The Congregational/Progressive Friends held annual meetings at the Junius meetinghouse for many years, with speakers such as Lucretia Mott, Frederick Douglass, and Susan B. Anthony. Members of the Junius monthly meeting helped to organize the nation's first woman's rights convention in Seneca Falls, in July 1848, and several members were signers of the Declaration of Sentiments and resolutions adopted at this convention. Elizabeth Cady Stanton gave her first speech on woman's rights after this July 1848 convention at the Junius meetinghouse.³²

Nature of These Early Churches

When a church society or congregation was first organized, worship services were often held in people's homes or a barn or a school house until a church structure was built. In Waterloo, several different church groups, including the Presbyterians, Methodists, and Disciples of Christ, held their services initially at the Court House. Sometimes the very first church building was a log structure that in a few years was replaced by a brick or wooden structure.



These early church buildings were far different from the "comfortable" facilities we have today. "At that time there was no arrangements for heating the churches, and each sat out the sermon as best he could, and the 'in conclusion' were welcome words, especially

to the younger portion of the congregation.” Some women carried with them to church a “foot-stove” whose use is indicated by its name. “Winter’s attendance upon divine service was a kind of penance, although not intended as such.”³³ Many churches had a half-door to each pew, so that the pew could be closed off to help prevent drafts along people’s feet.

In many churches, families would rent out a particular pew for that family’s own exclusive use. Sometimes, the location of your pew within the sanctuary became a kind of status symbol. To give some idea of what it cost to rent a pew, in 1842, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Waterloo charged a fee of \$21 for a pew ((\$10.50 for half a pew) for the period April 10th to October 10th.

Another major difference was due to the scarcity of hymn books. Because so few worshippers owned a hymnal, the hymns were “lined” or “deaconed” by the leader or chorister and then sung by the congregation. When the congregation had an organ, however, the organist typically needed to be paid. In 1837, St. Paul’s Protestant Episcopal Church in Waterloo paid its organist \$40 for the year.³⁴

Of course, back then there were no padded cushions, fans or air conditioning, etc. that seem to be considered “essentials” today. Like today, however, churches back then had to be kept clean. The sexton of the Presbyterian Church of Romulus was paid \$7 in 1810 (for the whole year) to take care of the meeting house which he “was to wash twice a year, and to sweep it once a month.”³⁵

There is only some sketchy information about the typical salary for the pastor. The Rev. Charles Mosher of the Presbyterian Church of Romulus was given a salary of \$300 a year in 1807, given that the “church then had only twenty-seven members, and these were very poor.”³⁶ When Minor Thomas became the first pastor of the Covert Baptist Church in 1804, it was established that his salary “was to depend on the liberality of the church and congregation.”³⁷ The salary of the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Seneca Falls on October 25, 1828, was set at “\$200 per year and firewood.”³⁸ Salaries for the pastor at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Waterloo increased from \$250 in 1826. to \$500 in 1834. to \$700 in 1837. but then only \$650 in 1839.³⁹

There might be the common saying that “lightning never strikes twice in the same place,” but you would not have been able to convince the parishioners of the Evangelical Association Burgh Church in Fayette (organized in 1816) of the truth of that saying. Why? Their church steeple was struck by lightning on three different occasions!⁴⁰

At least some religious prejudice existed at that time, as evidenced by a threatening comment directed to James Murphy at Denton’s Corners. Rev. Father Gilbride had organized a catholic congregation in Ovid and was saying mass in the house of James Murphy. After a short time, Mr. Murphy was ordered by his landlord Mr. Denton not to allow the priest there anymore, or, if he did, then he could no longer rent the house, and Murphy would not get any work from Mr. Denton or others in the neighborhood.⁴¹

Of course, holding a church service in a private home could be a problem if the numbers of worshippers was very large. This is illustrated by what happened when the first catholic mass was being celebrated in Seneca Falls on October 4, 1825. The mass was being held in the home of Henry Graham, but apparently too many people had crowded into the home. As one history book described the event, “In the middle of the mass, the floor gave way and all were precipitated into the cellar but no one injured. The priest held on to the chalice and walked out through the cellar window and finished the mass across the street at James Hurley’s house.”⁴²

The Second Great Awakening and the Burned-Over District

In 1800 only about 10% of the nation's population were church members. Between 1825 and 1835 at least 1343 "revivals" take place in upstate New York State as part of the so-called Second Great Awakening of the 1820s and 1830s. A key preacher in New York State was the Rev. Charles Grandison Finney. He broke with the traditional Calvinist doctrine (such as predestination) and stressed that humans have free will and can choose for God.

In the Second Great Awakening, the three largest denominations were the Methodists, the Baptists, and the Presbyterians. Methodism became especially popular among the common folk because of its simplified doctrines, spiritual preaching and emphasis on personal religious experiences. Methodist membership also grew greatly because it had an efficient organization. So many people were brought back into or more fully a part of organized religion that upstate New York—stretching largely from Utica west to Buffalo—became known as the "burned-over district." Like a forest fire that burns all the trees in its path, there was the belief that there were no people left in this upstate area to convert to Christianity.

This Burned-Over District or North Star Country spawned many important reforming movements. This was simply because of the basic belief that if man/woman has "free will," he can do "good;" if she/he can do good, then he/she can work to get rid of evils in society. Because of the intense belief that evil needed to be weeded out wherever it existed, there came such reforms as abolitionism, women's rights, dress reform, education reform, peace advocates, asylum builders, the Millerites, etc.

Given all this background information about the Second Great Awakening and the Burned-Over District, it is easier to understand how Seneca County would come to play such a major role in the reforms associated with these terms. In Seneca County, we have the origins of one of the major organized Christian denominations (i.e., the Mormon Church). In Seneca County, we have the birth of the woman's rights movement in the United States. In Seneca County, we have dress reform in terms of use of the bloomer by women. In Seneca County, shortly after the Civil War, we have asylum reform in terms of the Willard State Hospital for the chronically insane poor--a facility that will become the largest state mental hospital in the United States. In Seneca County, we will have many developments in terms of abolitionism and divisions over the issue of slavery.

The Slavery Issue

Prior to the Civil War, the slavery issue caused much tension within the various churches of Seneca County, as well as throughout much of the nation. Except for a few faiths, such as the Quakers (Society of Friends), most church denominations outside the South had attempted for many years to avoid taking a strong stand for or against slavery. As more parishioners embraced anti-slavery sentiments, there was a growing desire to have their church take a strong stand against slavery.

In August 1843, Abbey Kelley could not get any Seneca Falls church to allow her to use its facilities to speak out against slavery. This is not surprising, given that in her speaking engagements elsewhere, Kelley had become known for her radical viewpoint that as long as American churches allowed slave-owners to be members of their churches, these churches were pro-slavery. Not able to use any church, Ansel and Eliza Bascom had Kelley speak in their apple



orchard, a site that had been used for numerous summer gatherings including July 4th celebrations. In her speech, Kelley orated on the idea that “northern churches were as guilty, in fact, as southern slaveholders, since northerners had the majority population and could make things right. That includes your Presbyterian Church....”

Kelley’s reference to the Presbyterian Church in Seneca Falls probably was prompted by the incident between Rhoda Bement and the Rev. Horace Bogue. Rhoda Bement had heard Abby Kelley speak in Seneca Falls in August 1842. Acting on her enhanced anti-slavery beliefs, Bement helped organize anti-slavery fairs. To publicize an upcoming anti-slavery fair, Bement had used the normal practice of placing on the pulpit a notice for Rev. Bogue to read at the Sunday service. When he didn’t read it, she began to criticize him for not being strongly anti-slavery in his beliefs and actions. Coupled with previous “tensions” between the two, Bement was the subject of a two-months’ long trial in which she was expelled as a member of that congregation. Because of this incident, the Bements moved to Buffalo, and several parishioners of the Seneca Falls Presbyterian Church removed as members.⁴³

Those disenchanted anti-slavery Presbyterians soon found a new church to call their own. They allied with anti-slavery Methodists who were upset that their Methodist Church conference once again had failed to take a strong stand against slavery. In March 1843, these various anti-slavery Christians joined together to create the Wesleyan Methodist Church. Its beliefs were virtually the same as that of the main Methodist church, except that the Wesleyans were strongly anti-slavery.

The Seneca Falls Wesleyan Methodist Church was organized on March 27, 1843, by strongly anti-slavery parishioners of various churches, including especially Methodists and Presbyterians, who wanted to worship in an anti-slavery church. This was true of 47 communities in Upstate New York, where “come-outer” Wesleyan Methodist churches were established. A key driving force in the establishment of this new Wesleyan church in Seneca Falls was Joseph Metcalf. The Wesleyan Methodist Church in Seneca Falls was a bi-racial church. Two freedom seekers (i.e., fugitive slaves)—Thomas James and Joshua Wright—served as trustees of this church. The Chapel was the site of several anti-slavery gatherings, including the famous event of November 1844 when the freedom seeker Peter Bannister spoke to a standing-room only crowd in the chapel, telling of his mistreatment as a slave. On many occasions, the pastor’s parsonage, if not the chapel itself, was used as a station on the Underground Railroad. The Wesleyan Chapel became an important meeting site for many anti-slavery speakers and groups, including political parties. This helps to explain why it was the site of the first woman’s rights convention, July 19-20, 1848.⁴⁴

On April 7, 1848, a majority of the Presbyterian Church of Canoga voted to become a Congregational church because the Presbyterian Church organization had not taken an anti-slavery stand. The activists in this effort were abolitionists of the radical sort and said “they could not conscientiously belong to a sect that countenanced slavery, as did the Presbyterian church.” The Rev. C.W. Cherry, who was pastor of the Canoga church at this time, was tried for heresy by the Geneva Presbytery. Local residents who opposed this action by the Canoga church dubbed the Canoga church the “Nigger Church.” On April 10, 1853, the society voted to again be Presbyterian⁴⁵

In 1853 a bi-racial church commonly known as the Disciples of Christ was organized in Waterloo. Thomas and Maria Jackson were anchors of this congregation. Thomas was probably a freedom seeker (i.e., fugitive slave). This church met at the Court House in Waterloo and then later upstairs over the M’Clintocks’ drug store.⁴⁶

The Quakers of the Junius Monthly Meeting (like a congregation) were activists in anti-slavery efforts. Many Quakers were involved in Underground Railroad efforts in this county. This is very logical, given their Quaker beliefs in the equality of everyone—male and female, black and white—as well as their close working ties with Quakers in neighboring communities and counties.⁴⁷ These Quaker working ties provided an easy network by which “freedom seekers” (fugitive or runaway slaves as they were referred to at the time) could journey from one anti-slavery Quaker family house (“safe house”) to another anti-slavery Quaker family safe house on their long trek from their southern plantation to freedom either here in upstate New York or on to Canada (what is commonly referred to as the Underground Railroad). The actions of the Thomas and Mary M’Clintock family in Waterloo illustrate what other things Quaker families could do to promote the anti-slavery effort. The M’Clintocks openly advertised that their store sold no products made by slave labor. They also led several efforts to secure signatures on anti-slavery petitions to be sent to Congress. They opened their home to anti-slavery speakers (like William Lloyd Garrison, Abbey Kelley, and Frederick Douglass).⁴⁸

Many members of Seneca County churches were part of the Underground Railroad and other kinds of anti-slavery efforts such as anti-slavery fairs, meetings of anti-slavery societies, and even anti-slavery political parties (such as the Free Soil Party and the Liberty Party).⁴⁹ It is significant to note that in both Waterloo and Seneca Falls, anti-slavery businessmen helped to establish woolen mills to produce an alternative cloth to cotton that was produced by slave labor.⁵⁰

Summary

On the eve of the Civil War, many flourishing churches existed in Seneca County. This is not at all surprising given the nature of Seneca County residents at the time. Their ancestors had brought their religious faith with them when they came to settle in Seneca County. Going to church services on Sunday had become an important part of the social as well as religious life of these people’s lives. Their general economic prosperity had made it possible for many congregations to erect beautiful large brick or wooden houses of worship.

Reflecting the basic aspects of the Second Great Awakening and the Burned-Over District, Seneca County was playing a major role in the nation’s history in the years leading up to the Civil War. Reforming spirit within organized religion was taking place, as evidenced with the beginning of the Mormon Church and the split taking place within the Quaker Church. Seneca County churches had been struggling with the issue of slavery. Factions have left their churches because of the differences of opinion on this issue that was tearing the entire nation apart. It is not surprising that Seneca County was playing a key part in the nation’s history.

¹ www.everyculture.com/North-America/Iroquois-Religion-and-Expressive-Culture.html

² *History of Seneca Co., New York with Illustrations Descriptive of Its Scenery, Palatial Buildings, Public Buildings, Fine Blocks, and Important Manufactories*, Philadelphia: Everts, Ensign & Everts, 1876

³ John E. Becker, *A History of the Village of Waterloo, New York and Thesaurus of Related Facts*, Waterloo: Waterloo Library and Historical Society, 1949, p. 15.

⁴ *Manual of the Churches of Seneca County with Sketches of Their Pastors, 1895-96*, Seneca Falls, NY: Courier Printing Company, 1896, Introduction.

⁵ taken from “Something About the Churches” section of the Seneca County History included in the 1896 publication *Artwork of Seneca County*

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- ⁶ *History of Seneca Co.* p 29.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Manual of the Churches* pp 85-87
- ⁹ p 57
- ¹⁰ pp 5-6.
- ¹¹ *History of Seneca Co.* p 29.
- ¹² *Manual of the Churches*, p 57.
- ¹³ p 31.
- ¹⁴ p 50.
- ¹⁵ *Manual of the Churches*, various pages
- ¹⁶ pp 123-24.
- ¹⁷ pp 103-04.
- ¹⁸ pp 98-99.
- ¹⁹ pp 101-02.
- ²⁰ Diedrich Willers, *Centennial Historical Sketch of the Town of Fayette, Seneca County, New-York, 1800-1900*, Ovid, NY: W.E. Morrison & Co., 1982 reprint of 1900 publication by the W.F. Humphrey Press of Geneva, NY, Willers, p 125.
- ²¹ Lewis Halsey, *History of the Seneca Baptist Association: With Sketches of Churches and Pastors*, Ithaca, NY: Journal Association Book and Job Printing House, 1879, p 18
- ²² *Manual of the Churches*, pp 155-56.
- ²³ taken from "Something About the Churches"
- ²⁴ taken from "Something About the Churches"
- ²⁵ *Manual of the Churches*, pp 127-28.
- ²⁶ taken from "Something About the Churches"
- ²⁷ taken from "Something About the Churches"
- ²⁸ *Manual of the Churches*, p 138.
- ²⁹ Diedrich Willers, p 49.
- ³⁰ p 49.
- ³¹ Judith Wellman, *Discovering the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism and African American Life in Seneca County, New York, 1820-1880*, p 275.
- ³² Wellman, pp 274-77.
- ³³ *History of Seneca Co.*, p 29.
- ³⁴ *Manual of the Churches*, p 202.
- ³⁵ p 86.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ p 6.
- ³⁸ p 128.
- ³⁹ p 202.
- ⁴⁰ p 100.
- ⁴¹ p 44.
- ⁴² *Manual of the Churches*, various pages.
- ⁴³ Judith Wellman, pp 19-20.
- ⁴⁴ pp 232-38.
- ⁴⁵ *Manual of the Churches*, p 114.
- ⁴⁶ Judith Wellman, p 301-03.
- ⁴⁷ pp. 274-276
- ⁴⁸ pp 317-25
- ⁴⁹ pp 11-36
- ⁵⁰ pp 215 and 332