

# The Kendaia Baptist Church-- First Church in Seneca County

Article by Seneca County Historian Walter Gable  
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Although it no longer exists as a congregation, the Kendaia Baptist Church (formally known as the First Baptist Church and Society of Romulus at least until 1898) was the first church organized in Seneca County. The year was 1795. For most of its years, services were held in the church building located between the two sections of the Kendaia Cemetery on the former Seneca Army Depot. (Shown above is a c. 1939 picture of the Church.)

The records of the Chemung Association of Baptist churches show that in 1792 there were “brethren giving at Romulus or Apple Orchard, and the reception of two members by baptism, James Finch and Mary Steven.” The Kendaia church was constituted (formally organized) in June 1795 with 7 members. Although most church records were lost in a fire many years ago, we do know the names of the first enrollees of this church: Absalom Bainbridge, Peter Bainbridge, John Green, John Finton, Mrs. Sally Sayre, Mrs. Denton, Samuel Blain and wife, and Elijah Abbott. Absalom Bainbridge was the first pastor of this congregation, and the first one received into membership by baptism after the church was constituted. John Green and John Finton were the first deacons.<sup>1</sup>

For its initial years, the congregation met without a church building. That fact began to change under the leadership of the Rev. John Caton who commenced his pastorate in 1808. The church at that time had 62 members. John Caton had been a soldier in the Revolutionary War. When the Marquis de Lafayette came to Waterloo, NY as part of his 1825 tour of the United States, the Marquis recognized John Caton in the Waterloo crowd, called him by name and embraced him.<sup>2</sup>

This church in 1808 was part of the Philadelphia Baptist Association. On New Year's Day, 1808, William Watts Folwell donated a lot on which to build a meeting house and a cemetery. In October 1808 the roof had been completed, but services were held in the winter months in a nearby school house. Money was scarce in those times. People donated items, including whiskey, food grains, and livestock. An old account book records that a J. Green donated one yoke of steers, valued at \$30; one axe was donated by Silas Beers, valued at \$3; and beef and grain by John Finton, valued at \$11.97. These donated items were used as barter to pay for the construction items and labor. Gallons of whiskey were purchased for use by the workers. (The use of whiskey was commonly used by workers at that time.)<sup>3</sup> It wasn't until 1824 that the church building was completed so that it could be used the year round.<sup>4</sup>

The building was a plain wooden structure, 50 feet by 40 feet. No nails were used in its construction.<sup>5</sup> It was all put together with square wooden pegs!<sup>6</sup> The peak of the gable roof was 60 feet above the ground. Originally, the sanctuary/auditorium was on the first/ground floor. The seated congregation faced the front door of the church. There was a gallery (balcony) on 3 sides. The pulpit was the old-fashioned high type.<sup>7</sup> For many years, the parishioners used foot stoves to help them keep warm in the cold winter Sundays. Then a huge drum stove was installed. It was located just in front of the minister, with the stove pipe passing the length of the auditorium, then joined by another pipe from another stove located at the back of the building and then passing up through a radiator in the gallery and out of the roof without the use of a regulation brick chimney.<sup>8</sup>

It soon became apparent that there was a problem with the main entrance of this meeting house (that is the term the congregation used to refer to its church building) facing the south. South winds would blow open the entrance doors and sometimes livestock wandered in and had to be driven from the pews. So, in 1820 the meeting house was moved a short distance and was turned around so that the main entrance faced the north. A portico, with 4 Doric columns of 20 feet in height, was added. The building itself was raised slightly at the same time.<sup>9</sup>

Many noteworthy changes were made in the next century or so. Major renovations were made, starting in the 1850s. The auditorium/sanctuary was moved to the upper floor, with the galleries on the 3 sides removed. The ground floor then became a meeting room/banquet hall. A parsonage was constructed near the meeting house.<sup>10</sup> In 1860, there were 212 members of this church—the largest membership in the church's history.<sup>11</sup> In 1864, the ownership and administration of the cemetery was turned over to the First Baptist Church and Society Cemetery of Romulus Association.<sup>12</sup> (see 1914 picture below)

In November 1916, a gas lighting system was installed in the meeting house.<sup>13</sup> In 1921 a new kitchen 14 by 26 feet was added at the back of the church.<sup>14</sup> The meeting house and the parsonage were wired for electricity in 1931. At that time the church membership was 145.<sup>15</sup> (see c. 1939 photo at right)



As part of the “defense build-up” of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration before the



United States formally entered World War Two, there were plans to build a munitions supply facility somewhere in the northeastern U.S. Over 60 possible sites were considered. On March 31, 1941, a survey of the Kendaia area—parts of the towns of Romulus and Varick--, one of the possible sites, was made by some “strangers.” On June 11, 1941, the War Department announced approval of the Kendaia site for its proposed Seneca Ordnance Depot.<sup>16</sup> When the War Department decided to establish the Seneca Ordnance Depot, the future of the Kendaia Baptist Church meeting house was immediately perceived by parishioners as coming to an end. The government initiated a condemnation proceeding for the entire 5.25 acres of the church property. The church, in good faith, sold its property to the government at an agreed upon price. Then it was discovered that the cemetery association was not incorporated. Another complicating factor was that it wasn't clear how much of the property was owned by the church and how much was owned by the cemetery association. A condemnation procedure, therefore, was initiated to determine the property lines for the church and the cemetery. The condemnation procedures were handled by a commission of condemnation that consisted of Victor G. Mount, the mayor of Seneca Falls; and Daniel Mc Guane and Daniel H. McGrain of Waterloo.<sup>17</sup> The congregation was paid \$17,000 for the church building, \$5,000 for the parsonage, and \$162.50, by condemnation, for the cemetery and church lands.<sup>18</sup>

No special planning was made for the last regular church service at the meeting house on Sunday, September 7, 1941, at 10:30 a.m. Mark Baldrige, the chair of the board of trustees, said that “inasmuch as most of the members of the church are farmers and are busy at



present harvesting their crops, they could not spare the time to get up on rather short notice any special service for the occasion.”<sup>19</sup> The last service was conducted by pastor The Rev. B. A. Wagner, who also ended his pastoral ministry with that last service. At the service a solo was sung by Phyllis Corry (later Mrs. William Hudson). The bulletin for the church service contained a poem by Paul Baldrige in which he honored the over 100 farm families who were dispossessed from their farm



properties to make way for the creation of the Seneca Ordnance Depot, with many of those families being parishioners of the Kendaia Baptist Church. The poem is as follows:

PATRIOTS OF '41

By Paul Baldrige

A tribute to my neighbors in Romulus and Varick  
who left their homes in 1941 in the name of preparedness,  
defense and democracy.

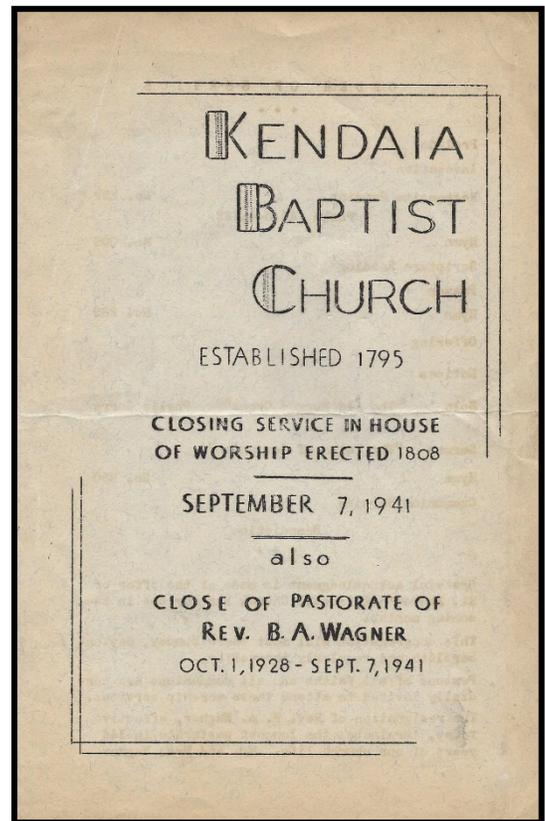
I give you heroes women, men,  
Of sturdy stock and strong,  
Who faced the world with courage high  
Through years both hard and long.  
I give you little folk and young,  
I give you hope and youth  
To shape their world and build anew  
With vision clear and truth.

I give you neighbors scattered far  
From homes beloved and lands  
Where field and furrow, fence and fold  
Were wrought by kindred hands;  
I give you patriots who hold  
The common good so high  
They left their acres and their hopes  
And trees against the sky.

I give you men of forty-one  
An uncomplaining kind,  
A proud unyielding race of folk  
With purpose set, and mind;  
A pioneering, forward breed  
Inured to loss or gain,  
Too proud to turn from charted course,  
From snow or sun or rain.

I give you men of sky and sod,  
Of furrows straight and long,  
Of bulging barns and fatted kine,  
Of thankfulness and song;  
I give you folk of sacrifice  
In name of freedom done  
Whose trek afar an epic makes  
In nineteen forty-one.<sup>20</sup>

After the final church service was held in their meeting house on September 7, 1941, the congregation started conducting its services the next Sunday at the St. Andrew's Episcopal



(This is the cover of church bulletin for the last service held at the Kendaia Baptist Church.)

Church building in Kendaia. That church building had been empty for about 2 years until purchased by the Baptist congregation. The Baptists planned to build a new church building in Kendaia as soon as it was possible. Those plans were disrupted in 1942 when much property in the Kendaia area was taken over by the federal government to become Sampson Naval Station. Many of the dispossessed property owners—those in 1941 for the Seneca Ordnance Depot and those in 1942 for the Sampson Naval Station--moved out of the area, and a new meeting house was never built.<sup>21</sup> Regular services were held in the former Episcopal Church building until 1945.<sup>22</sup> Then there were only occasional gatherings. The First Baptist Church of Romulus was formally disbanded in 1954.<sup>23</sup>

After the last service was held in the meeting house, it had been assumed that the War Department had planned to raze the Kendaia Baptist Church building. With construction work at the Seneca Ordnance Depot moving faster and faster in the summer of 1941(as prospects for U.S. entry into World War Two increased), the church building was instead used variously in 1941 and 1942 as police headquarters, and as a “break house” where workers could have shelter, tables, and a stove while eating their lunches.<sup>24</sup> This was when there was need for such buildings but priority, of course, was for completion of the munitions storage igloos. After 1942, when construction of virtually all of the new buildings needed for the Depot was completed, the former meeting house was used somewhat for storage.

The meeting house was not razed, largely thanks to Col. Arthur D. Elliott, the commanding officer at the Seneca Ordnance Depot at the time. He had some restoration work done to the meeting house so that it could be used for funerals and other gatherings.<sup>25</sup> One major renovation was a new hardwood floor for the meeting hall on the ground floor.<sup>26</sup> In June 1951, the meeting house was leased as a revival camp and servicemen’s center for recruits receiving training at the Sampson Naval Station.

By 1952, the church building was no longer being used and had deteriorated considerably. So the government decided to arrange for disposal of the building. Members of the Cemetery Association wrote to local congressman John Taber to express their opposition to this government decision. In their letter they said that this was because the “Old Church, a symbol of Christianity, was the sole remaining physical evidence of the organization of the first Church between Seneca and Cayuga lakes, in 1795.” The situation was resolved when the government sold the building for \$1 to a person who pledged to re-erect it on a new site (specifics about this in the next paragraph). The church pews were sold to a Rochester synagogue, and some of the stained glass windows were returned to the families, in whose memory they had once been given.<sup>27</sup>

Now for specifics about the plans by the successful bidder for the church building, who acquired it in 1954. Mr. G.L. Freeman was a Watkins Glen publisher of books on antiques and



Americans. A resident of the property of John Ireland, a pioneer land owner northwest of Watkin Glen, Mr. Freeman wanted this church building as part of his creation of Old Irelandville Village (also known as Yorker Yankee Village) village of buildings moved to the site. The component



parts of the Baptist meeting house were numbered and taken apart and re-assembled at the Old Irelandville Village site. Only some of the original pioneer-hewn beams had to be replaced.<sup>28</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> century village never materialized, however. There are reports that Mr. Freeman was injured in the re-assembling of the church building and never resumed work on the Village. His widow was not interested in continuing the project. The former Kendaia Baptist Church meeting house stood idle at that site. (The pictures at the bottom of the previous page show the Kendaia Church building shortly after it was re-assembled at Old Irelandville.) Without routine maintenance, the building's condition deteriorated. (The picture at left above shows the deterioration of the church building as it stood basically neglected at Old Irelandville.) The roof collapsed in 2017 (see picture at right above) and the building was demolished soon after.

As for the cemetery, by agreement with the Depot and the Cemetery Association, the operation of the cemetery could continue forever. On May 29, 2011, local historians in Seneca County gathered at the cemetery to dedicate a wreath (see picture below which shows Seneca County Historian Walter Gable, the late Gail Snyder who was Ovid town historian, and Naomi Brewer who was the founding president of the Ovid Historical Society) to thank the Department



of the Army for keeping its promise regarding the continuing existence of the cemetery. The Cemetery Association continues to maintain the cemetery. Burials still take place in the various family plots. The Association conducts a public open house on the Sunday of each Memorial Day weekend. Visits by family members and the public can be arranged year-round by contacting an officer of the Cemetery Association. Just a couple years ago, an informational kiosk, with maps showing the location of the various family plots, was erected as an Eagle Scout project by a descendant of Coryell family buried in the cemetery.

The Cemetery contains graves of U.S. veterans, from the Revolutionary War through much more recent conflicts. The older half of the cemetery occupies the northern half of the cemetery. In that northern portion is the grave of 4-year-old John McMath Bainbridge, the first recorded burial, who was laid to rest in April 1812. The open grassy area between the north and south portions of burial plots is where the church and parsonage previously stood.<sup>29</sup> (Shown below is a February

2016 picture of the cemetery grounds with the open area that was the site of the Kendaia Church.)

Other than the cemetery, little remains of the First Baptist Church of Romulus (aka the Kendaia Baptist Church), which was the first organized church in present Seneca County.



Shown below is a more recent aerial view of much of the former Seneca Army Depot, looking east with Cayuga Lake at the top. The “green area with trees” in the lower center of this view is the location of the cemetery and former Kendaia Baptist Church.



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- <sup>1</sup> “First Baptist Church of Romulus,” *Manual of Churches and Pastors in Seneca County, NY with Sketches of Their Pastors, 1895-96*, Seneca Falls, NY: Courier Printing Company, 1896, pp 65-69
- <sup>2</sup> *Manual of Churches and Pastors*
- <sup>3</sup> “Last Service Tomorrow in Historic Baptist Church at Romulus,” *Geneva Daily Times*, September 6, 1941
- <sup>4</sup> Rev. Wisner Kinne, “History of the Church,” 1895,  
<https://sites.rootsweb.com/~taughannock/kendaia/kendaiahistory/8history.html>
- <sup>5</sup> “Ancient Baptist Church Being Moved,” *General Daily Times*, August 31, 1954.
- <sup>6</sup> Mary Ann Nichols, “A History of Change, But Actually There Is None”
- <sup>7</sup> *Manual of Churches and Pastors*
- <sup>8</sup> “Last Service Tomorrow in Historic Baptist Church at Romulus”
- <sup>9</sup> “Ancient Baptist Church Being Moved”
- <sup>10</sup> *Manual of Churches and Pastors*
- <sup>11</sup> *Manual of Churches and Pastors*
- <sup>12</sup> Mary Ann Nichols
- <sup>13</sup> “Kendaia Church Older Than the One at Lodi,” *Geneva Daily Times*, February 13, 1917
- <sup>14</sup> “KENDAIA Baptist Church Notes,” *Geneva Daily Times*, December 21, 1921
- <sup>15</sup> “Annual Meeting at Kendaia Church,” *Geneva Daily Times*, January 15, 1932
- <sup>16</sup> “Through the Years—Depot Has Dates to Remember,” *Geneva Daily Times*, August 8, 1969
- <sup>17</sup> “Kendaia,” *Geneva Daily Times*, December 3, 1942
- <sup>18</sup> “On Depot Site—Church Property Acquired,” *Geneva Times*, August 8, 1966
- <sup>19</sup> “Last Service Tomorrow in Historic Baptist Church at Romulus”
- <sup>20</sup> Church bulletin for the last service on September 7, 1941 at the Kendaia Baptist Church
- <sup>21</sup> Mary Ann Nichols
- <sup>22</sup> “In Historic Kendaia Church—Revival Camp, Airmen’s Center Slated at Sampson’s Back Door,” *Geneva Daily Times*, June 28, 1951
- <sup>23</sup> Mary Ann Nichols
- <sup>24</sup> “Kendaia Cemetery Grounds at Depot Will Be Opened,” *Geneva Daily Times*, May 24, 1944
- <sup>25</sup> “Kendaia Cemetery Grounds at Depot Will Be Opened”
- <sup>26</sup> “Ancient Baptist Church Being Moved,” *General Daily Times*, August 31, 1954.
- <sup>27</sup> “On Depot Site—Church Property Acquired”
- <sup>28</sup> “Ancient Baptist Church Being Moved”
- <sup>29</sup> “On Depot Site—Church Property Acquired”