

Oh! Those Pittsburgh churches

by Rev. Richard W. Davies

Wherever military units settled in colonial America, the church followed the troops. Thus it was that in the French Fort Duquesne, the first know worship was a Roman Catholic service held in 1754 in the chapel called "The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Beautiful River." First burials from the fort were made in a nearby Indian mound, where Trinity Cathedral is located today. the funeral processions went from the fort on a path called "L'Allee de la Vierge Marie," later named Virgin Alley and now called Oliver Avenue.

On November 27, 1758, a service of Thanksgiving for the departure of French troops from Fort Duquesne was held by a Presbyterian pastor, the Rev. Charles Beatty, chaplain with the Scottish and British troops led by Gen. John Forbes. Beatty used the Anglican Book of Common Prayer.

It is our belief that Col. Henry Bouquet at Fort Pitt ordered a garrison to be build on the Chartiers Creek in 1765, where Old St. Lukes is situated today. It is our assumption that a chaplain came to minister to British troops stationed here-the "seed" of Old St. Luke's.

Once a treaty was signed with the Iroquois nation, a wave of westward emigration of settlers and squatters began in 1768. No duly ordained clergyman settled west of the Allegheny Mountains before the start of the Revolutionary War. It was said that local settlers had lived so long without the authority of the church that the regions had a reputation of being godless. When Gen. Anthony Wayne came to Pittsburgh in 1794 to establish the first American Army Pittsburgh was "drinking, debauchery and vice," and "church on Sunday and whiskey on Monday," so he moved his training base to Logstown, today's Ambridge.

The first Pittsburgh church was built by German residents in 1782, today's Smithfield United Church. In 1787, the Penn family gave land in Pittsburgh so that Episcopal and Presbyterian churches could eventually be built.

In the Chartiers Valley, Maj. William Leda and Gen. John Neville settled into their homes after the Revolutionary War, and as was typical of the period, they must have offered their homes for lay led worship, and hospitality to itinerant clergymen such as Joseph Doddridge and Robert Ayres. These home based meetings relied on printed sermons sent from denominational headquarters. Lea and Neville were moved in 1790 to construct a frame church building, the first Episcopal facility in the area.

Out of this frontier climate, the recruitment of local men for ministry emerged. Woman's role in ministry was very limited. Methodists and Baptists favored spirit and a natural preaching ability more than a formal theological education. Sadly, in denominations without entrance requirements a few men became "ministers," even "charlatans in sheep's clothing." Presbyterians, Episcopalians and other denominations emphasized theological education, and for this reason the Rev. John McMillan formed the Jefferson Academy in Canonsburg, later becoming Washington and Jefferson College. The first resident vicar at Old St. Lukes was Francis Reno, a Methodist, who studied with the Presbyterian John McMillan, and was ordained in the Episcopal Church in 1791.

The clergy seldom received a living wage, following Thomas Jefferson's leadership in 1783 to end the state support of established churches. Many clergy maintained a farm, taught school, or practiced medicine.

The privilege of having worship led by a clergyman in a church building or held under a tent was a treat, so the services and sermons were long, and church going became a social gathering to exchange family news and views about the emerging nation. Communion services, held infrequently, were respected as solemn occasions. In 1797 The Great Revival began in Kentucky and came into western Pennsylvania in 1802, when some preachers called for the "falling work" of worshippers, who were often called "holy rollers."

Trinity Episcopal Church started construction of a brick church building at Liberty and Sixth Avenues in 1805. The First Presbyterian Church also began a brick church building on their Penn tract of land on Sixth Avenue.

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