

PASTOR RENO + PIONEER

What a privilege to be a pioneer! What a challenge to be a leader amidst tumult and change! This was the calling of the Rev. Francis Reno, the first settled Episcopal clergyman west of the Alleghenies. In the 1790's not only was he newly ordained but he served a congregation made up of Federalist supporters in the midst of the Whiskey Rebellion.

Francis Reno was born in Virginia on February 7, 1758 to John and Susanna Thorn Reno. His ancestors were French Protestant Huguenots. He had 7 brothers and 4 sisters. Francis married Lydia Saviers (1764-1842) on June 15, 1784. They also gave birth to 7 sons and 4 daughters.

Francis served in the Revolutionary War until being discharged in 1782. He then studied with Dr. John McMillan in the Jefferson College, Canonsburg (predecessor to Washington & Jefferson College). It is said that Gen. John Neville sponsored Francis' theological education. At the same time, Francis served in the "Chartiers Chapel in Woodville," today's Old St. Luke's Church. They shared the friendship of the land owner, the William Lea family. Reno was ordained a deacon on April 26, 1791 and a priest on October 28, 1792, by Bishop William White in Christ Church, Philadelphia (where William and Dorothy Lea were married in 1774). He thus became the first settled Episcopal clergyman, sharing pastoral duties with itinerant clergy traveling their horseback circuits.

St. Luke's Church in the 1790's served Federalist supporters, most of whom were plantation owners in the Chartiers Valley. Pastor Reno was the spiritual director to these families as resentment and hostilities broke out over the federal excise tax on distilled spirits. It is interesting to ponder why this area was selected by these prosperous settlers. Was it the 1765 British garrison which had been in the middle of the Lea plantation, giving protection against Indian raids? Could the wealthy "Neville Connection" families around St. Luke's have been a magnet?

He served St. Luke's until 1797, when he went to Rochester, Pennsylvania, to begin Trinity Church. He served nine congregations in the Ohio Valley for some 46 years, including St. Luke's, Georgetown, and St. Stephen's, Sewickley, until "rheumatic afflictions" caused his retirement.

J. M. Reno, a descendent, in a 1915 letter we have in our archives, said that Francis "was not to be trifled with" in matters of obligations. In his ministerial contracts, he expected to serve, and he expected his subscribers to pay him. Several times he had to press his demand for the annual salary, which included money and such items as

measures of corn, pork, wheat. His salary for the year 1832 was \$320.

Francis died on August 12, 1836, and he was buried in Beaver County. The *Western Argus* newspaper obituary described him as

"a venerable patriot and devoted laborer in the vineyard of his great Redeemer. He emigrated with a respectable connection of relatives from Virginia, to the neighborhood of Pittsburgh on the waters of Chartiers (Creek), at a time when it was necessary to carry arms for defence against the ruthless savage, the dangers and toil of which he bore his part. He devoted himself fastidiously to his pastoral labours which were arduous, and his efforts indefatigable in building up churches in various places of the country around where he lived. He sank into the arms of death without a sigh or a groan."

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