

THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF PERINTON

One hundred and eighty-five years ago, in 1824, nine people met in the home of Jesse Perrin just south of the village of Fairport. This meeting was the genesis of today's Congregational Church on East Church Street in Fairport, the first church to be organized in Perinton. Huldah Wight, Lemuel Wight, Nancy Perrin Blackmon, Leah Packard, Lucy Eaton, Lettice Norton, Lucy Bristol, Captain Simeon Bristol, and William Stebbins met with the Rev. John Taylor of Penfield and the Rev. Asa Carpenter of Macedon on December 18, and the church was formally initiated with the signing of a Covenant and nine Articles of Faith. At the time, having no designated building, the group met in area homes and schools. Although the first pastor was a Mr. Morgan, records show that services were conducted by a variety of individuals. Little activity was recorded from 1824 to 1828, when there was some question as to whether the group would merge with Presbyterians from Bushnell's Basin. As envisaged by its New England Congregational ancestors, however, the group decided to remain independent.

The early years in Fairport showed only small growth and minimal activity. There were occasional celebrations of the Lord's Supper. Ezra Whittlesey was selected as deacon. Two resolutions were passed stating that "female members of this church may, if they wish, have a vote in all matters that come before the church" and "every person uniting with this church shall be required to give their pledge to this church that they will abstain entirely from the use of ardent spirits except as medicine." The first baptism, that of George Bristol, took place in 1826. In the 1830's, under the leadership of the Rev. Mr. Brooks, and inspired by increased religious fervor as a result of the Second Great Awakening, the congregation was able to erect its first house of worship. Apparently the revival also inspired stricter discipline because, in 1835, Diantha Blackmon was excluded from the church fellowship for "Sabbath breaking," and a committee of two was created to remonstrate with Brother Daniel Willson for having worked his harvest the previous July on the Sabbath. He was the subject of special prayers for two weeks, but there was no subsequent record of whether or not either of these two mended their ways.

The first building on the present site was completed in 1833. The church continued to expand and in 1844, the first building was moved just west of the First Baptist Church and a new building was constructed on the site. As Fairport continued to thrive due to the railroad and the canal, so did the church. In 1868, the main portion of the present building was built by a Rochester firm at a cost of under \$18,000, and the 1844 building was moved to West Avenue where it was remodeled into Shaw's Hall. An early Sunday School building was moved to 9 Filkins Street in the early 1900's to make room for an addition. In 1922, a primary department was completed thanks to the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Snow, Dr. and Mrs. Wesley Clapp, and others. Further additions followed to house the expanding congregation and active Sunday School, the most recent one in 1971. More recently, the congregation restored and renovated both the interior and the exterior of the building and added a memorial garden.

The church has had many pastors, most of whom only served one or two years. The longest serving pastors include the Rev. Jeremiah Butler, the Rev. Lee Fletcher, and the Rev.



*Post card photo circa 1910 of the
First Congregational Church*

James Doellefeld. They all served for more than ten years. The current pastor, the Rev. John Cedarleaf, has been in Fairport since 1984.

The First Congregational Church has been active in the community since its inception. The church has provided a number of opportunities for service and social activity as well as for spiritual renewal. As late as the 1920's, church was an all-day affair. Morning services would be held at 10:30 a.m., followed by Sunday school at noon and a second service and sometimes a second Sunday school following that. Many brought their dinners to eat between the services. They also may have brought fire pans or foot warmers in the colder weather. The first funeral (for Gilbert Benedict) was held in 1869, but the early practice of tolling the bell when a member died was soon discontinued to avoid disturbing the peaceful rest of neighbors.

The first Sunday school met as early as 1820 in local school houses, and a regular church school was started in 1835. By the 1920's, there were nearly 300 names on the registry. One man recalls of his class that "we had the highest average collections nearly every Sunday for two years, and there were five pairs of brothers in the class." Sunday school, however, wasn't just for children. One hundred fifty men were part of a mid-nineteenth century Bible Class which studied the whole Bible verse by verse. There was also an elderly men's class referred to as "The Saints of Rest." In the 1880's a "Christian Endeavor Society" was formed to broaden the social and religious life of young people.

The very first church choir was started shortly after 1833. Apparently, during the sermon, the leader of those early choirs would hunt for an appropriate anthem to fit the theme of the sermon and the choir would then sing it (without any rehearsal), "scarcely ever beginning or finishing all at the same time." Until 1850, at which time a melodeon, a small reed organ, was purchased, a tuning fork and an occasional bass were the only instruments used. The first pipe organ was installed in 1874 and needed a "blow boy" to pump the bellows from the dark organ chamber. In the 1950's when a new organ was installed, there were three choirs for adults, youth, and younger children, all of whom performed after rehearsing.

From the early days the church has been involved in outreach programs. The Women's Foreign Missionary Society, formed in 1874, supported foreign missions, and the Home Mission Society, formed in 1882, supported domestic missions with money and materials. The Ladies' Aid Society, formed in 1909, raised money through food sales and cafeteria suppers, which they used to fund new furnishings or building repairs, as well as worthy causes like various war efforts and the local Welfare Association. For over forty-five years, the Women's Fellowship Committee organized and ran an annual antique show and sale, which became known as one of the finest in the area and was a major fund raiser for the Church. The church has sponsored a Boy Scout troop for many years as well as an active youth group whose activities have included participation in programs like Habitat for Humanity and "Reach Camps" which rehab homes in places like West Virginia, Ohio, and New York. Over the years, this congregation has supported such community endeavors as the Fairport Apartments, the Perinton Clergy-Lay Council, Advent House, Meals on Wheels, and the Bertha Agor Memorial Nursery School, and it has also extended its outreach to include involvement with the Joy Community Church of Rochester, Bethany House in Rochester, and Water for Sudan, Inc. This latter project raised \$10,000 during the 2009 Lenten season for a well in the Darfur region of Sudan.

This venerable congregation, which, in 1961, became part of the national United Church of Christ, when the Congregational Church merged with the Evangelical and Reformed Churches, continues to be an important and integral part of the Fairport-Perinton community as it joyfully celebrates its 185th year.

