

Celebrating Vestal's 190th Anniversary

1823-2013

No. 15—Origins of Worship in 19th Century Vestal

Today's brides plan their weddings at least a year in advance to ensure the accommodations they've chosen for their special wedding day. Newspaper notices confirm that the vast majority of weddings take place on a weekend when family and friends can share this important day...a very different story from the 19th century.

In the early 1800s, the wedding day was determined by the irregular schedule of the circuit rider arriving in town. The circuit for one Methodist minister of 1845 included these stops; Vestal, Apalachin, Little Meadows, South Owego, Brackneyville (Quaker Lake), Choconut, Forest Lake, Vestal Center, Catlin schoolhouse, Hard Scrabble (Tracy Creek), South Chenango and Eel Hill. Rev. Levi Pitts and Davis Dimock were circuit riders whose circuit included Vestal and nearby towns. Vestal born John C. Murphey, a blacksmith, entered the ministry and served at numerous churches in upstate New York, including the First Reformed Methodist Church of Tracy Creek. He was married to Ida Knight of Vestal whose grandfather, Joel Knight helped Amos Whittaker to build the first church at Tracy Creek.

Historical maps show how widespread farms were with little social interaction throughout the week. Sunday services brought neighbors together to worship and socialize. Activities such as potluck suppers and picnics provided fellowship, while work "bees" provided many hands for accomplishing large jobs. Until buildings of worship were constructed, services were held in homes, or at the local schoolhouse. Marriages would be performed at a friend or relatives home, at a hotel, outdoors, or at the home of the bride's father. An example of a brief early account in the Union Weekly News of November 25, 1868 reads; "William A. Hagadorn of Union was married 19th inst. to Marie E. Leighton of Vestal, at the home of the bride's parents, Vestal, by Rev. H. Bensen." On occasion, multiple marriages would be performed at one location on the same day. This November 19th marriage took place on a Thursday.

Rev. Levi Pitts' records not only document the baptisms, marriages, and burial services he performed, they include the amount he was paid for his services. When Rev. Pitts joined in marriage John Troup of Binghamton and Fanny Stratton of Vestal on Monday, March 19, 1888, he was paid \$5.00 by the groom, double the typical amount listed. Important genealogical information can be found in the ledgers kept by early circuit riders. The ledger of Rev. John C. Murphey records for the death of Mr.

William Gurney; "Services at the Methodist-Episcopal Church, Vestal Centre, NY. Buried in Binghamton, NY" (no date given). Funerals were typically held at home. Vestal Centre's undertaker, Charles Russell of Sugar Creek Road (now Powderhouse Road), drove the deceased to their final resting place in his handsome horse drawn hearse.



Prior to 1820, a handful of families residing in what would become Tracy Creek gathered for Sunday meetings in the homes of members under the leadership of Elder Buckley of Apalachin. By 1820 approximately twenty residents led by Rev. Winthrop Collins organized "**The First Reformed Methodist Church in the Town of Vestal**" which was incorporated in 1838. Their first church,



built in 1832 at a cost of \$1000, was constructed from lumber cut in the surrounding forests and milled nearby. The original building was moved and renovations by members followed which resulted in a completely new

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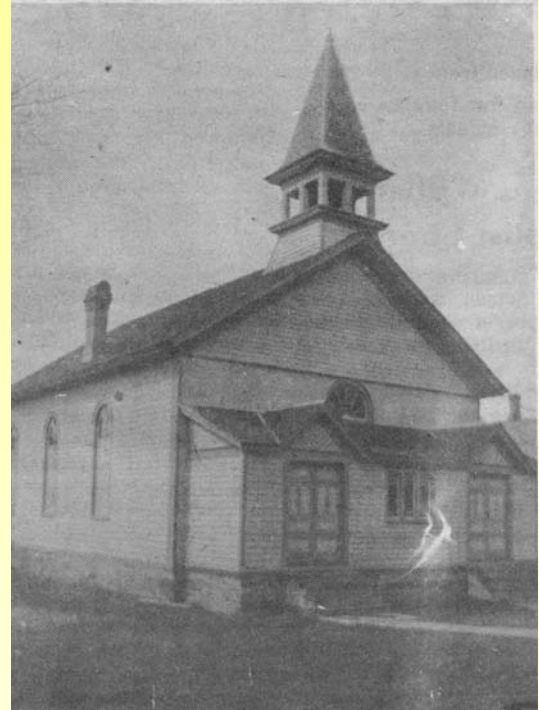
No. 15—Origins of Worship in 19th Century Vestal (continued)

brick structure that was dedicated in October 1968. The church is now the Tracy Creek Memorial Church.



Eight years after the Town of Vestal was established, **“The First Methodist Episcopal Church and Society in the Town of Vestal”** was chartered on July 1, 1831. Former historian Laurence Leamer wrote in his history of United Methodist Church that it is likely an informal group of Methodists existed prior to this date. There are no records to document who was in that first “class” or who had been named as leader. John Griffin(g) was the pastor in 1831. Trustees included these familiar names: John Dunbar, Samuel Murdock, Lewis Seymour, Daniel Foster, and Edmund H. Robinson. The first house of worship was a log cabin called “The Chappell”; it would be replaced before 1845 by a large red brick church along Main Street with four tall windows along the north and south elevations. This building would be replaced in 1971 by the current brick structure of the Vestal United Methodist Church.

The **Vestal Centre Baptist Church** was organized by Rev. James Clark December 16th 1834 with Rev. Charles G. Swan as the first pastor. A handful of its founding members had been members of the Choconut Baptist Church in Choconut, PA as early as 1814.



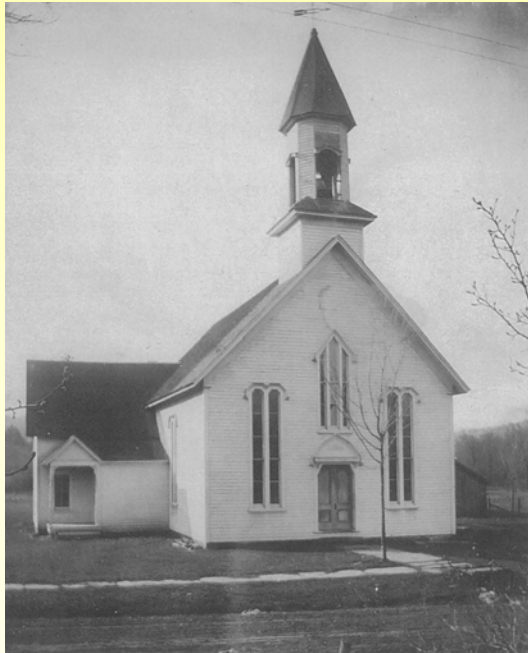
The large clapboard church, which was built in 1853 at a cost of \$2000, stands next to its 1971 brick replacement. For a time, the 2-room Vestal Center schoolhouse next to the original building was used as a Community Hall until being purchased by the church and renamed Stanton Hall. Under Rev. Gordon Lewis, the name was changed to the First Baptist Church of Vestal.



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No. 15—Origins of Worship in 19th Century Vestal (continued)

The **Reformed Methodist Church**, subsequently known as the Church of Christ and Christian Union in Tracy Creek was organized December 30, 1860 by Rev. Daniel D. Brown. Its first house of worship was completed in 1870, replaced two years later in 1872. Rev. W. W. Warner led the forty-eight member congregation, John Baker was steward, and Edwin Underwood was the clerk. The building was eventually used as a Community Hall before being demolished.



Known first as the **Vestal Centre Methodist Episcopal Church**, then the Vestal Center Methodist Church, and now the Vestal Center United Methodist Church, it was formed in the early 1870's by a group who held meetings in a building known as "The Tabernacle" on the present site of the 1875 church. During November 1874, a plot of land on Center Hill Road, now West Hill Road, was purchased from Coe and Katherine Wells for \$75. The deed stipulated that a church edifice was to be built within two years on the small 132 ft x 240 ft. plot. The first four trustees elected were: James C. Brown, Marvin M. Maricle, Henry S. Parker, and George W. Landon. While the basic structure remains as built, a steeple and belfry were added in 1897, later tin panels were used to lower the ceiling, and stained glass windows were installed in 1944. A small prayer room on the east elevation was removed in 1956 when a two-story education building was added. The church was designated a local historic landmark in 2012.



The **Reformed Methodist Church of Bunn Hill** started out by conducting Bible classes in the Bunn Hill schoolhouse. On May 15, 1897 the building at the corner of Coughlin, now Jensen, and Bunn Hill Roads was dedicated by Rev. John C. Murphey, the first pastor. The simple \$800 structure which sat in a pine grove was known for a time as the "Little White Church in the Pines". In 1944 it was officially renamed in The Bunn Hill Community Church. A new foundation with full basement was constructed in 1950. Other small interior remodeling continued until 1969 when a large addition was added to the rear of the building. The church, which became the Bunn Hill Baptist Church in 1980, is today the Tri City Baptist Church.

Although there are historical references to John B. White, a Methodist preacher who resided in Ross Corners as early as 1835, it is not known whether a church was built in the hamlet. The **Vestal Methodist Episcopal Church Mission** branch began in 1888 with a handful African American families who would eventually migrate to other established churches throughout Vestal.

While early Vestal residents of other religions had to travel to nearby towns to practice their faith, Vestal is now home to a broad spectrum of religious organizations.

Sources and additional information about this subject can be found at the Historian's office.