

## THE HISTORY OF THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF WHIPPANY

*By Barbara Thompson Howell*



Until 1718, there was no church in Whippany. Most villagers gathered for services in barns or in homes large enough to accommodate them. A schoolmaster changed that. In 1718, [Schoolmaster John Richards](#) deeded three and one half acres of land adjoining the [Whippanong](#) River to erect “[a Suitable Meeting House for the Public Worship of God](#),” a burying yard, school house and a training field. He died three months after making this generous donation to the village. The church Richards’ deed made possible, which was the first church in the area, was built within the burying yard. [Presbyterian](#) in name, parishioners came from areas we now know as Chatham, Hanover, Madison, Morristown, Parsippany, and Whippany.

Anxious for a place to worship, the church was a simple wooden structure, hastily constructed. Its first pastor was Reverend Nathaniel Hubbell who served for twelve years, until 1730. During the pastorate of the Reverend John Nutman, the second pastor, it was determined that the church was unfit and a new church was needed. Since the parishioners could not agree on a location for the new church, the issue was resolved by the Scriptural process of “[casting the lot](#).” The outcome was a decision to build the new church in the same Whippany location. The parishioners from Morristown refused to abide by the decision and withdrew from the Whippany church to form the [First Presbyterian Church in Morristown](#).

In 1746, the [Reverend Mr. Jacob Green](#) became pastor of the Whippany church. One location after another decided to form its own church. The original building continued to fall into disrepair. It was finally abandoned in 1755. Two new churches were built: one in Hanover and the other in Parsippany, both using materials from the original church.

After trying to minister to both the Hanover and the Parsippany church, Reverend Green, by order of Presbytery, devoted all his time to the Hanover church. Most Whippany residents who had attended the Whippany church worshiped in Hanover and decided to do so until there was a group large enough to form another church in Whippany. They would worship in the Hanover church for 78 years! Finally, in 1833, the time seemed right to form another church in Whippany. The Reverend J. A. Ferguson, pastor of the [Hanover Presbyterian Church](#), in his A Historical Sketch of the Presbyterian Church of Hanover, delivered on July 2, 1876, described the situation this way: “the Whippany people withdrew from the Hanover congregation. Forty or more members were dismissed...” The group who left the Hanover church had neither pastor nor church. Until a church building could be acquired, these Whippany people met in the Academy—a school located on Route 10 about 1/2 mile from where the mother church had been.

Their first order of business was to identify themselves. On April 2nd, 1833, they met to discuss the expediency of organizing a religious society and employing a Presbyterian clergyman as preacher. That course of action was agreed on and a committee was appointed to select the preacher. The first candidate was the Reverend Mr. William Cochrane. Only half the members of the committee voted in his favor. It was decided to continue the search. The second candidate was the Reverend Mr. William W. Newell of South Boston “who gave such general satisfaction that he was invited to become a pastor...of this then churchless, religious society. He agreed to fill the post for 14 months.

In June 1833, the [Presbytery of Newark](#) met in Whippany for the purpose of forming the new First Presbyterian Church of Whippany. The original 40 members were those who had worshiped in the Hanover church. Nodiah P. Thomas, Elijah Hopping and James Tuttle were named Elders. Jared Kitchell was named Deacon. The first Trustees were Nodiah Thomas, James Tuttle, W. H. Blything, Albert T. Hopping and David Howell.

Now that the Whippany people had a pastor, at least for the immediate future, and a definite structure, they could turn their attention to acquiring a church building. The site for the prospective church was chosen on July 4, 1833. It was a tract of land adjoining the Academy, purchased for ten dollars from Timothy Tuttle and his wife Susan W. Tuttle.

On September 3, 1833, a building fund was begun. Some gave money, others pledged work or materials. Builders began preparing materials for a new church building, which was to be built under the direction of Mr. Elijah Hopping, called “boss”. Nine months later, on June 19, 1834, almost a month before the church was actually completed, the Whippany people gathered in the new sanctuary to dedicate themselves and their church to the worship and service of Almighty God. The builders finished their work on July 16, 1834. The first Communion service was held on the first Sunday of July, 1834. On this occasion, twenty new members were added to church membership.

## Charter Members of the First Presbyterian Church of Whippany

Abraham Fairchild	Esther Tappin (widow)
Phebe, his wife	Keturah Flatt (widow)
Jared Kitchell	Lucinda McFarlan
Sarah, his wife	Maria McFarlan
Elijah Hopping	Hetty Squier
Mary, his wife	Nodiah P Thomas
John Fairchild	Mary Tuttle(widow)
Lucy, his wife	Jereimiah Tuttle
James Tuttle	Rhoda, wife of Wm. Cook
Elizabeth, his wife	Susan W., wife of Timothy Tuttle

Cornelius Vorhees	Jemiah, wife of W.O. Ford
Phebe, his wife	Mary, wife of Wm. Green
Linus Condit	Nancy, wife of E.R. Fairchild
Sarah, his wife	Electa, wife of Robert King
Robert R. Kitchell	Margarett, wife of Solomon Fairchild
Susan Kitchell	Eliza D., wife of J.N. Voorhees
Ann T. Kitchell	Charlotte. Wife of George Squier
Susan A. Kitchell	Margaret M. Tuttle
Mary, wife of Zenas Kitchell	Daniel Beach
Mary O. Parker (widow)	Mary Owen

The work of organizing themselves in a meaningful way and building a church so that there was an acceptable place to worship God were enormous tasks for a relatively small group of women and men. They completed them in just 13 months. Yet, there were countless challenges ahead of the Whippany people and no certainty that they would be up to them. Still, they had made a

good start and had no reason to doubt themselves. During Pastor Newell's brief stay, the congregation more than tripled, from 40 to 129.

Church records make plain that members of the congregation expected a great deal of each other. Regular attendance at worship was a given. Moreover, all who joined were expected to agree "that we will not drink ardent spirit nor offer it to our friends or others, or buy or sell it, except for medicinal or mechanical purposes." (This agreement not to drink was carried into the 20th century.) Members did not hesitate to report to church elders any behavior they considered inappropriate. At any time, an elder might visit to inquire if a member of the household had, as reported, been drinking or involved in fraudulent dealings or using profane language or backsliding or engaged in some other "sinful" act.

It was not as if elders had nothing better to do with their time. The Presbyterian Church required them to "[inquire into the Christian conduct of members of the church](#)...to admonish, to rebuke, to suspend, or to exclude from the sacraments those who deserve censure." Only 3 in number, Whippany elders were busy men of God who were appointed for life to oversee the welfare of the congregation. Until 1930, the Presbyterian church mandated that only men could serve as elders and deacons. The Whippany congregation did not elect its first female elder until 1951.

On July 31, 1837, the Whippany church withdrew from the Newark Presbytery and joined the Congregational Association of New York. The reasons for doing so are recorded in detail in church records. After stating those reasons, the records close with the following: "Resolved that in withdrawing from the Presbytery of Newark, we are activated only by pure motives, do it with kind and Christian feelings toward that body...." Seven years later, in 1844, the Whippany people returned to the Presbyterian Church, and by choice joined with the Rockaway Presbytery. Explaining the reason for this reversal, Pastor Andrew Sherman in his sermon celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Whippany church explained: "the grievance compelling their withdrawal from the Newark Presbytery was removed."

Youth have always had an instrumental part in the life of the Whippany church. In 1894 the [Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor](#) raised enough money to construct an alcove behind the pulpit. The next year, the young people presented a pump organ to the church, which was installed in the alcove. Until the early 1960's the church organ, although changing in form and grandeur, continued to occupy the space that youth of the young people had provided. At Christmas in 1869, the Mite Society and The Soldiers Aid Society presented the church with its first pulpit Bible. It was not replaced for almost 100 years, until 1960.

Women's groups were also very attentive to church needs. As early as 1838, church records referred to women as "the nerve and sinew of the church." Women were often appointed to

collect funds for church needs, including the reduction of debt. In 1910, the women of the church provided electricity for the sanctuary. In 1927, women of the church paid for the removal of horse sheds that stood at the back of the church building. When the congregation finally decided to add a woman to the ranks of elder, the formidable Agnes Briggs Watson was chosen. At the time of her election, Mrs. Watson had been a member of the congregation for 22 years. As late as the 1960s, while increasing in number, women elders still did not serve communion. That did not mean they had no role in the sacrament. Women elders hand washed and dried the glass communion cups. It was doubtless a woman elder who alerted the session to the availability of the disposable cups we use today.

There was one thing no member of the congregation -- male or female, young or old— could do anything about: the weather. Winter months found the sanctuary so cold that church services were sometimes cancelled. In 1899, however a hot air furnace was installed under the alcove to replace the old potbellied stove. Almost 100 years later, in 1981, two new gas fired boilers for central heating were installed.

During summer months, heat inside the sanctuary often proved unbearable. The church was usually closed for the month of August. In 1939, however, the session decided to hold Sunday services in August from 8:00 A. M. until 8:45 A.M. Two years later, Sunday services began at 8:00 A.M. until 8:45 A.M. in both July and August. Social functions were held on the second floor of the fire house or on the church lawn. Finally in 1992, the sanctuary was air conditioned—a gift of an anonymous donor. The parish hall was air conditioned in 2006. The education wing is kept cool by using window air conditioning units.

Despite the generosity of its congregation and the fact that trustees sometimes dug into their own pocket, the Whippany Presbyterian Church often needed financial help. From time to time, the session found it necessary to apply for aid from the Board of Home Missions or National Missions. It was not unusual for pastors to be asked to wait for the compensation due them. For pastors the burden may have been eased by having the opportunity to live in the manse, which the church paid for. The first manse, at the corner of Troy Hills Road and Route 10 was purchased in 1883; the second was purchased in 1953 at 1 Karla Drive. The current manse, located at 23 Manchester Drive was purchased in 1971. The Pastor usually earned 800 dollars a year; was given use of the manse; and 4 weeks vacation.

From its beginning, the Whippany Presbyterian Church was a busy place. The sanctuary, the only space available, was put to good use. The session often met in the sanctuary. On Sunday mornings, church- school classes spread out in various parts of the sanctuary. Teachers sometime scrambled to remove all traces of church-school activity so that the sanctuary was in

order for the 11:00 service of worship. Once each year the sanctuary was used for the Week of Prayer evening services. Hanover High School held commencement exercises in the sanctuary. In 1922 the men's group was given permission to show movies in the sanctuary, provided that they appropriate for display in the church and not shown on the Sabbath. Spokesmen for various organizations presented their causes to the congregation. These included the Antislavery Society, the Whippany YMCA (founded by Pastor W. H. Belden), the Anti-Saloon League and various missionaries and missionary groups. One of the most memorable meetings was held in the sanctuary on September 18, 1918. On that day the Presbytery met in the Whippany church to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the original Whippany Church that once stood on the grounds of the Whippany Burying ground. As mentioned earlier, that church was the first church in the area we know as Morris County. Owing to the importance of the occasion, refreshments were served in Polhemus Hall, which stood at the corner of Troy Hills Road and Route 10.

The sanctuary served the congregation well for 117 years, with only modest alterations. There came a time, however when the sanctuary could not meet all the congregation's need for space. In January 1950, the congregation authorized the Board of Trustees to proceed with construction of a parish hall. The cost was estimated at 50 thousand dollars. Facilities to be added were a kitchen, meeting rooms, an area for social events, including a stage. The space was to be convertible to church-school use. The parish hall, which stands to the east of the sanctuary, was completed and dedicated in 1951. The building seemed to have more space than would ever be needed. There was even space enough to open the thriving Vacation Bible School to the community. During the next decade, church-school attendance exploded, requiring the congregation to rent space in the local school for church-school classes and leading to the construction of a church education building in 1961. It was completed and dedicated the same year. Still, despite the added space, recent years have sometimes found facilities so overcrowded that unscheduled session meetings had to be held, once again, in the sanctuary. On January 25, 1960 the congregation amended its by-laws to form a unicameral session, enlarging it to 21 members and making it responsible for both the spiritual and for the corporate affairs of the church. Today, 14 women and men do the work once done by three men who knew neither car, nor telephone, nor email.

In 1963 the sanctuary was renovated to its 1834 simplicity. Three years later fire, caused when a furnace overheated, destroyed the chancel and front of the newly renovated sanctuary. The damage was quickly repaired. In 1977 the sanctuary underwent a major reconstruction – literally from basement to balcony. It was almost as if the sanctuary were being built again. The original

builders had finished their work 143 years ago. Now much of what they had done in 1834 had to be done again. It was not that their work was poorly done. Rather, it was the passing of time that had taken its toll. Floors and walls had to be supported anew; old balcony hangers had to be removed to reduce stress on the ceiling and outside walls; various roof trusses and support plates had to be installed and much, much more.

Since 1885 when the young people gave the church its first organ—a [pump organ](#)—finding an organ that would fill church needs was somewhat problematical. In 1918, Mr. Arthur McEwan gave an electric pipe organ to replace the pump organ. Forty years later, Mrs. Arthur McEwan presented a new Moeller organ in memory of her late husband. At times, the organ seemed to have a mind of its own. For example, one organ would strike and hold a note when no one was touching it. The repairman was called on a regular basis and certainly before major church holidays, hoping the organ would play as expected. A very close relationship developed between the organist and its repairmen. In 2004, the church purchased a new Allen organ that promised to do all that was asked of it, We'll see.

In 2009, we celebrate and pay tribute to the Whippany people of 1834. Those Whippany people who left the Hanover church in 1833 had no church to go to and no pastor to lead them. They did have a clear plan in mind. They knew where they would meet until a church was available and they knew how to find a pastor. They were not thrown by the lack of resources. They were not too proud to ask for help. Their congregations knew periods of growth and periods of decline. The church they built, still stands. Something about the Whippany people attracted and attracts others to them. They were and are kind, caring, prayerful and faithful. Like the 1834 Whippany people, we too dedicate ourselves and our church to the worship and service of Almighty God. Had they had the opportunity, one wonders if they would have identified themselves as “Growing in Faith and Discipleship for Jesus Christ?” Perhaps those words link us more directly to the 1834 people than we originally thought. On the Sunday nearest June 24th we will start the next 175 years in the life of this church. In the year 2184, will the congregation honor and celebrate the work we begin? Time will tell!