

***The First Church in Ogdensburg<sup>1</sup>***

As settlement began in Ogdensburg, land owner Samuel Ogden pressed his land agent, Nathan Ford to provide the infrastructure to support an Episcopal church and minister. Ford was known to be a staunch Presbyterian but in recognition of the size of the community, he reasonably responded by suggesting that subscriptions raised first be used to form a single, non-denominational church. Specific denominations would establish their own churches later as the settlement grew.

In 1805, with trustees drawn from the most prominent early settlers across denominations, the religious society, First Church and Congregation of Christ in the Town of Oswegatchie was formed. Nathan Ford led the effort to find a minister to come to Ogdensburg and, logically, he worked through the closest Presbytery in Oneida, New York to identify a candidate.

Communication was challenging as it took some time for letters to travel between Ogdensburg and Oneida and the head of the Presbytery had to also connect with potential ministers. While their original choice, John Younglove, did come for a few weeks on a trial basis and clearly impressed the local churchgoers, he left the village without being formally called and did not return to Ogdensburg. The next minister, Cotton Miller, came and brought his family with the intent of staying but the War of 1812 forced them to leave for safety reasons. The economic impact of the war left the new church unable to insure sufficient subscriptions to bring Miller back. By the time everyone was "back in business", Miller had moved on to another church. Potential ministers, one after another, could not come for a variety of reasons and as there were more churches seeking to employ a Presbyterian minister than the number available, the competition left the new church settling for a variety of occasional supplies.

As the situation dragged on, Episcopalians sought to weigh their options for organization. The first Episcopal missionary, Daniel Nash, visited the community in 1816. According to di Harsanyi in his history, the uncertainty of finding a minister through the Presbytery resulted in a series of hastily called meetings in 1816 that were considered an underhanded attempt by the Episcopalians to control the subscriptions in support of finding a minister of that persuasion knowing that the desire to have a permanent minister for the settlement might outweigh denominational concerns. If they couldn't get a Presbyterian minister, perhaps an Episcopalian would suffice even though, as Ford claimed, Presbyterians in Ogdensburg outnumbered Episcopalians eight to one and he found their "mode of worship" unacceptable.

In the meantime, Samuel Ogden's nephew, David Ogden had supported the establishment of an Episcopal church in Hamilton (Waddington). St. Paul's was finished in 1818 and Amos Baldwin was called as rector. Unfortunately, the expense of a minister was too much for the small church and they sought the support of Episcopalians in Ogdensburg. Without immediate prospects for finding a Presbyterian minister, the First Church committed to using their subscription funds to pay half of Baldwin's salary for one year in return for the provision of services on alternate weeks. Ford, however, continued to press on to find a permanent Presbyterian minister before the end of the year as the

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<sup>1</sup> The information on the First Church and Congregation of Christ in the Town of Oswegatchie is primarily drawn from De Harsanyi, Andrew. One Hundred and Fifty Years of the Presbyterian Church in Ogdensburg. Boonville, NY: Willard Press, 1955.

employ of Baldwin was considered a devious plan of the Episcopalians “to raise a...church on the ruins of the Presbyterian order.”

The formal end of the non-denominational First Church came in 1820 when St. John’s Episcopal Church was incorporated on May 23<sup>rd</sup> and the Presbyterian Church followed on June 1<sup>st</sup>. David and George Parish promised each of the churches a lot on which they could build a physical church as well as a lot to serve as a shared burial ground.

The Episcopalians began to build a stone church on their lot at the corner of Caroline and Knox Streets in 1821 with the first services held in 1822. The Presbyterians had erected a temporary structure – “The Gospel Barn” – on the corner of Ford and Caroline Streets in 1819. By 1824 they had raised the funds to build a stone church on the Ford Street lot given by Parish. St. John’s Episcopal Church was considered to be one of the finest buildings in the community. The contract with the builder of the Presbyterian Church specified that the workmanship “be every way equal to the inside of St. John’s Church”.