

A brief history of St. John's Episcopal Church in Ogdensburg, New York.

The area at the confluence of the St. Lawrence and Oswegatchie Rivers saw its first European settlers when French Abbé Francois Picquet established a mission to the Iroquois Indians at Fort de la Présentation in 1749. During the Seven Years War, the fort was occupied by French troops. In 1760, the French ceded their territories to the British who moved into the fort and renamed it Fort Oswegatchie. It wasn't until the Jay Treaty in 1796, twenty years following the American Revolution that clear national ownership of the area was established, and the first American settlers arrived to settle the lands belonging to speculator Samuel Ogden. The fledgling community was named Ogdensburgh in his honor.

Nathan Ford, Ogden's land agent strongly desired to establish a Presbyterian church in the new community while Ogden, an Episcopalian, had prayer books sent to the settlement and directed Ford to set aside land for an Episcopal church. However, no single denomination of settlers could afford to support their own clergyman and as a compromise, subscriptions were gathered and the non-denominational First Church and Congregation of Christ in the Town of Oswegatchie was established in 1805.

In 1820, David Parish, who had purchased Ogden's unsold lands in 1809, gave lots in the village to both the Presbyterians and Episcopalians so that they could establish their own churches. With this gift and the leadership of the local missionary, Rev. Amos Baldwin, the Corporation of Rector, Wardens and Vestrymen of St. John's Church in Ogdensburgh was founded on May 23, 1820. Lawson Carter was called as Rector that October and shortly after work began to build a stone church on the lot at the corner of Caroline and Knox Streets. The first service was held in the church on October 13, 1822. An adjacent Rectory was built in 1825.

As the community and congregation grew, the church building was expanded in 1843 and again in 1857. By 1869 the building was again considered too small and now in need of major repair. With a gift of money from David Judson, it was decided to tear down the first church and build a new one. At the same time, the Diocese of New York that had previously encompassed the eastern half of the State, was divided into several smaller ones and St. John's became part of the new Diocese of Albany. Given the size of the diocese and the challenges of travel, the first bishop, William Doane, immediately advocated for a further division and envisioned a northern diocese centered in Ogdensburg. The new church was designed in American Early Decorated Gothic style by architect Emlen T. Littell. It was clearly constructed with the appropriate grandeur to serve as a diocesan cathedral. Demolition and construction began after Easter services in 1870; the cornerstone was laid on July 25, 1870, and the new church consecrated one year later.

A chapel, also designed by Littell, was added at the rear of the church in 1874. In 1914, a two-story Parish House was built, joining all three buildings in one continuous structure, matching in style and materials. The size of the new buildings had necessitated the demolition of the Rectory in 1871. Various homes in the neighborhood served as a Rectory including the Merriman House that was situated at the corner of Knox and Franklin Streets behind the Parish House. In 1929, the Merriman House was demolished and a new Rectory, that matched the other church buildings, was constructed.

In 1943, a devastating fire gutted the Parish House just 2 weeks after the new Rector, George Palmer arrived. Palmer quickly moved the parish to action and the restored and refurbished hall was reopened

just one year later. At the same time, the mansion on the south side of the church was demolished and the James/Madill family deeded their garden land to the church. As a result, St. John's is an architecturally harmonious blend of buildings – Church, Chapel, Parish House and Rectory built with grey-blue Ogdensburg limestone and roofed in decorative Vermont slate -- with beautiful grounds occupying one-half of a city block.

During his tenure, Canon Palmer also oversaw the refurbishing of the church and chapel interiors including the addition of many stained-glass windows. The project culminated with the installation of a new Hill, Norman and Beard organ in 1960.

In the past 60 years, no significant changes have been made to the buildings, but they have been carefully and lovingly maintained so that the beauty and integrity of the church remains.