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1822 146 Years 1968

A Short History

of

The First Congregational
United Church Of Christ
North Ridgeville, Ohio



By Glen F. Warner

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This short history was the result of a request from the Ladies Evening Society of the North Ridgeville First Congregational United Church of Christ that I write such a history and narrate it at the society's meeting in September, 1968.

Following the presentation, the Rev. Harold Wiley Freer, Minister of the Church, suggested that I put the history into booklet form.

In gathering the material, I received help from many sources. Mrs. Sterling Mills, a long-time member, gave me many leads to some of the town's early settlers. Her ancestors were among the first to come to North Ridgeville from the East to start a new life.

Others whose help is much appreciated are Frank S. Whitcomb, Mrs. Robert Lyons, and Albert Vimpeny, whose ancestors also played important roles in shaping the future of the church.

I am also indebted to the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland where I spent many hours pouring over the original records of the church for which the society is the repository.

Much information was gleaned, too, from the Williams History of Lorain County which was published in 1879. I am also greatly indebted to the Ladies Benevolent Society of the church for their generosity in underwriting the cost of putting this history into a booklet.

North Ridgeville, Ohio
February 1, 1969

Glen F. Warner

A CHURCH HISTORY

146 YEARS

The First Congregational United Church of Christ of North Ridgeville, Ohio, was born out of the great migration from New England to the Western Reserve in the late 1700's and early 1800's when Connecticut farmers and others bought a share in the wilderness from the Connecticut Land Company.

The land company had purchased the unexplored and uncharted territory from the state of Connecticut which had shared in the division of the area by the infant United States republic.

The lands were part of the spoils of war coming out of the victory of the American colonies in their revolt against Great Britain. The area contained about 3,000,000 acres and was sold for thirty-three cents an acre.

Some of those who swapped their properties in Connecticut for the forest lands which were to be transformed into the village of Ridgeville became the founders of the church. Handling those deals in the fall of 1809 was Ephraim Root, of Hartford, Connecticut, who turned over to the prospective settlers something like one-fourth of the territory which is now a city.

Root, from whose name was derived Rootstown, the first name of the settlement, was a member of the association that formed the Connecticut Land Company.

Among those who traded their New England farms for a piece of this wilderness were Ichabod Terrell and his wife, Rhoda Williams Terrell, great-great grandparents of Mrs. Sterling Mills. Rhoda Terrell was a descendant of Roger Williams, who founded Rhode Island in 1636. Mrs. Terrell in her girlhood was a member of a colony of Connecticut settlers in the Wyoming Valley along Pennsylvania's Susquehanna River in July, 1778 when it was attacked by Indians and the British. She escaped in the massacre in which 300 were killed and found sanctuary in a Delaware settlement.

THE TRAIL BLAZERS

The first party to set out for the new lands left Connecticut in April, 1810. Left behind were the Ichabod Terrells who followed shortly after their son, Tillotson, arrived in Ridgeville with his family in July, 1810.

The 13 who blazed the trail that spring of 1810 included four Terrells, Joel,Oliver, Philander, and Elihu, and David Beebe, Jr., and his sons, David and Loman, and Ira B. Morgan. Traveling on foot, they arrived in their new lands on May 15. Many of these pioneers, if not all, are buried in the cemetery across the road from the church at the corner of Center Ridge Road and Stoney Ridge Road.

On their arrival these emigrants, although far from civilization, did not forget their New England heritage. The first Sunday after completing their journey, they held a religious service, which must have been one of thanksgiving for reaching their destination safely.

Joel Terrell led the service. There was a reading of the Scripture, a prayer and the singing of a hymn or two, for which David Beebe piped the tunes. Very few were members of a church, but from then on Sabbath services were held regularly in the homes. Much of the credit for this falls to Terrell, who is said to have done more than anyone else to establish worship and maintain it.

A CHURCH IS BORN

This home worship continued for 12 years, or until 1822, when a church---the present First Congregational United Church of Christ---was founded. There were six charter members on that December 20th---146 years ago. The people assembled in a log schoolhouse, the first in town. It was located at what is now Route 76 and Route 20 where the Shell gasoline station now stands.

The schoolhouse proved too small for the crowd, so the meeting was moved to the barn of Joseph Humphrey where the Rev. Alfred H. Betts of Brownhelm and the Rev. Lot Sullivan

officiated at the organizational service. Mr. Betts preached. The church was given the name of First Presbyterian. Mr. Betts and Mr. Sullivan were described in the early records as missionaries from Connecticut and members of the Presbytery of Portage. This apparently was a reference to Portage County of which Ravenna is now the county seat.

The first members were Chester Beebe and his wife, Marcia, Hezekiah Case, Samuel Eldred, Seth R. Alcott, and Lucinda Cahoon. Most of these names are familiar in the area today.

On December 27, a week after the founding, four more members were received: Mrs. Hezekiah Case, Marcus Case, and his wife Laura, and Ora Case. On May 15, 1823, Ebenezer Porter and his wife Eunice were admitted to membership and on August 31 of that year Jeremiah Womren and Lydia Morgan were added to the list. The first baptism, that of Truman Case, son of Mr. and Mrs. Marcus Case, was recorded June 2, 1825.

A SOLEMN COVENANT

That their religion was a serious matter to our spiritual ancestors is evident from a study of the covenant which they adopted. It declared that "after solemn admonition and examination, they were pronounced to be a visible Church of the Lord Jesus Christ." By some standards the rules of discipline were harsh indeed. They probably would cause much grumbling today and perhaps did in that day, too.

"This church," Article Seven of the Covenant declared, "considers collecting of hay, or grain on the Sabbath, attending to any part of the business of making sugar, visiting friends except in case of sickness and the prosecution of journeys on that day without special necessity a violation of Christian duty."

What did they do on Sunday? There were no movies, TV's or automobiles, of course. Perhaps they did their visiting before and after the morning and evening services. There was no prohibition against reading a good book...perhaps, this was a favorite Sunday indulgence.

It is obvious that these founders did not intend the covenant to be taken lightly. It is recorded that a couple was cited to appear before the elders on a complaint that they had absented themselves from public worship. When the couple failed to appear, they were promptly excluded. They were read out of the church and in public. Such harsh treatment isn't often inflicted today.

Then there was the case of a woman who was ex-communicated for lying and for dishonesty. These were veritable trials and in public. The elders also left for posterity some harsh notations on membership lists. Beside one name was the word "backslider."

A NEW MEETING PLACE

When the schoolhouse where the first meetings were held burned in 1825 the congregation moved to a new one on the site of the Junior High School on Center Ridge Road. This was the year the church obtained its first resident pastor, The Rev. B.W. Lathrop, who was installed June 25, 1825. Along about this time, too, the church built its first log meeting house on the site of the present city hall.

The Rev. John Monteith replaced Mr. Lathrop in 1832 and remained until 1835. During the next six years the congregation depended upon supply pastors. Dark days fell upon the membership. It was never prosperous, and by 1840 became almost extinct and, to quote the record, "the cause of Christ was very low." The affairs of the church, it was said, "were conducted in a loose manner, at least part of the time, and its records were not very regularly kept and by 1841 its members were scattered and disheartened."

THE CHURCH IS RESCUED

Into this scene of despair came a rescuer in February, 1841, in the person of D.C. White, a New Jersey layman, who began preaching to the faltering congregation. At this

point, the church, according to its records, put aside its creed, or articles of faith and covenant.

Under Mr. White's leadership, the record says, "the church seemed somewhat resuscitated and agreed to renounce its creed or articles of faith and covenant and take the simple word of God, as reported in the Bible, as its only rule of faith and practice."

An attempt was made to heal some of the differences among the brethren and a return of those who had strayed. "Although some cases of discipline existed," says the record, "the past should be forgotten, and each member should receive his brother, and for the future, walk in love, one with another."

AN ORDINATION

On July 1, 1841, the church apparently having recovered somewhat from its troubles, invited Mr. White to become its pastor. He accepted and on September 1 was ordained and installed in the orchard of Levi Terrell, the log house being too small for the crowd.

The sermon was delivered by the Rev. Charles G. Finney, professor of theology at the Oberlin Collegiate Institute, which had been founded seven years before. Mr. Finney became one of the more noted presidents of what we now know as Oberlin College.

Mr. White's ordination is attested to on the monument over his grave across the road from the church. It reads: "D. C. White, ordained as minister of the Congregational Church of Ridgeville, 1841."

Apparently Mr. White's pastorate continued to have a good measure of success, for we read that in 1844 "a season of prayer and fasting was offered up for young converts." The church at this point had 55 members.

The pastor's pay came in part in food, firewood and even clothing. It is recorded that Mrs. Cerepta Terrell, wife of Wyllis Terrell, made a suit of clothes for The Rev. Mr. White.

This apparently was the place in time when the congregation took the name "Congregational Church" for on September 4, 1842, Ebenezer Porter and his wife, for the consideration of $60, conveyed to Charles Whittlesey, Seth Perry and Ebenezer Porter as trustees of the First Congregational Church and Society a tract of land on Center Ridge Road. It is evident that a church was built on this parcel. In the minutes of June, 1846, appeared this item: "Commenced repairing meeting house the first of June, 1846." And on November 28, 1847, "meeting house dedicated." It was in 1846 that the church bell was purchased. The bell is still in use, calling the congregation to worship each Sunday.

The church name was further confirmed in 1880 when Charles Herrick and wife conveyed the parsonage property on Center Ridge Road to three men as trustees of the "First Congregational Society of Ridgeville." The church, incidentally, was incorporated under the laws of Ohio on January 12, 1915.

H.G. Stacey, a member for many years, made an investigation of titles in the 1920's and found that a conveyance made in 1842 apparently covered only the westerly half of the land upon which the church edifice was located.

When this situation was discovered, Mr. and Mrs. Alvah B. Knapp, who at that time owned and lived in the home on the east, very graciously executed a quit claim deed to cover the defect. The church had occupied and used the entire parcel from very early times.

SOCIAL ACTION IN 1845

Political and social problems found their way into the church even as they do today. In 1845 the congregation, to quote the record, "adopted temperance resolutions", and in 1851 approved "strong resolutions against slavery and intemperance." The church not only talked against slavery but its members tried to do something about it.

It is recorded that Turland T. Winckles, one of the builders of the new church and grandfather of Mrs. Ruth Winckles Haehl, concealed slaves in loads of hay on trips

to Oberlin as part of the celebrated underground railroad through which southern slaves were helped to reach Canada and freedom.

From 1851, when the Rev. I.L. Tomlinson was the pastor, until 1872 when the Rev. R. McCarthy arrived on the scene, the church had no regular pastor but depended upon missionaries from the East and upon seminarians and ministers from Oberlin.

DECISION FOR NEW CHURCH

Decision to build a new church came in 1872 when Mr. McCarthy took over the pastorate. On June 2, 1873, the congregation received a report from its building committee that it had considered "the building of a new house of worship."

On the committee were Turland T. Winckles, Wyllis Terrell, J. Shandon Terrell and Edward Ames. Armin Terrell was secretary and Bradford Race was treasurer. The congregation voted to go ahead with the building on the site of the frame church which was moved to the other side of Center Ridge Road immediately west of Stoney Ridge. A section of this building is still used as a dwelling.

The congregation voted to divide the building cost into shares of $10 each. It is not clear from the record as to just how many of these gifts each contributor was to make, but when the church was completed a debt of only $600 remained. And when the work began there also was a debt -- $1,516. This was quickly liquidated by two members. Most of the labor was donated.

Albert Vimpeny, a member since 1907 -- 61 years -- has records which show that his wife's grandfather, Joshua Lickerish, was one of those who worked on the new structure. He hauled most of the stone for the foundation. Later -- in 1879 -- he was superintendent of the Sunday School which had 150 pupils. Church membership totalled 47. Evidently the practice of dropping the youngsters at Sunday School was prevalent in those days too.

Another member who helped in the building was James Sayers, grandfather of Mrs. Robert Lyons. Mr. Sayers was a carpenter, building mover and blacksmith. His diary tells of many days when he "was at work on the church in Ridgeville." One entry mentions that he helped shingle the roof.

WORK BEGINS

Work began on June 27, 1873. The building was not completed until January, 1876, but the first service was held in it on Christmas Day, 1875. Dedication came on January 22, 1876, with the Rev. Dr. Wolcott preaching the dedicatory sermon. The debt of $600 was wiped out in 20 minutes by pledges and the church was dedicated debt-free. Bradford Race, the Building Committee treasurer, set the cost of the new building at $10,244.14.

The new church was lighted by kerosene lamps. The heating system was crude according to present-day standards. Mrs. Mills recalls a pot-bellied stove in the Narthex and Frank Whitcomb, a 52-year member, remembers a huge coal furnace in the basement with a single register in the center of the aisle of the Sanctuary. He recalls looking down through the register at the red hot furnace below.

In later years this worried him and, with Neil Reitsman, placed a heavy grating over the register to prevent anyone from falling onto the furnace. Wood also was used for heating. In 1886 a financial record shows that $8 was paid to Turland Winckles for wood. Also spent was $5.23 for oil and wicks for the lighting.

In 1880 a parsonage was built for about $1,600. This evidently was the second parsonage, as the minutes of a meeting on April 22 of that year read: "The church instructed the trustees to sell the parsonage and authorized the building committee to go forward with arrangements for a new one."

EARLY CHRISTIAN ENDEAVOR

The Christian Endeavor Society, forerunner of our Pilgrim Fellowship, was organized in 1888. Few records are available until 1916. In records of that year I found names

of committee members which are familiar to us today. Among them was that of Doris Terrell, who became Mrs. Sterling Mills. She had joined the church the year before. Active also in the society were Ruth Winckles, Louise Fitts, Ivah Hadaway and C. Gilder. The society flourished for more than 37 years.

About 1890 the church experienced a period of prosperity and well being. New members were taken in, collections were generous, Sunday School and Sunday worship services were well attended. The membership rose to 106. The building was repaired and new carpet laid.

On December 20, 1897, a two-day community celebration marked the church's 75th anniversary. A check for $370 to clear the church of debt was received from H.L. Terrell, of New York, a former member.

FIRST ORGAN

In 1900 the church installed a $1,300 organ, the gift of Judge Stephenson Burke, a native son, who gave $1,000, and of the Ladies Benevolent Society and the Christian Endeavor Society which gave $300.

In 1911 a basement was added and dedicated as the Undercroft. This was a great asset as a Sunday School room, as a place for social events, and as a place to serve meals to the public.

In December, 1912, another extensive program was held in celebration of the church's 90th birthday.

In 1914 Mrs. James Paddock gave the church the beautiful window in the southeast corner of the Sanctuary as a memorial to her husband and to her son, Harvey M. Paddock.

In 1920 electricity was installed and the organ electrified. In 1922, on the church's 100th birthday, the building was renovated and redecorated, and the organ enlarged. The $2,500 expense was met by gifts of members and the Ladies Benevolent Society. About this time the horse sheds in the rear of the church were torn down to make way for more automobiles.

Mr. Whitcomb recalls that in the 1880's he often rode to church by horse and buggy with his grandfather, William Fuller, a township trustee and operator of a cheese factory here.

His grandparents lived on a farm on Center Ridge Road on the site of the present Bess and Andy's. Both his grandparents and his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Sumner Whitcomb, were active in the church. Mrs. Whitcomb was among those who drafted an early constitution for the congregation.

A CENTURY OLD

The Rev. E.C. Young, pastor for 18 years, presided at the 100th birthday celebration in 1922. Speakers included Archer Shaw, a native son who was for many years an associate editor of the Cleveland Plain Dealer.

Dr. Dan Bradley of Pilgrim Congregational Church, Cleveland, spoke at the 110th birthday celebration in 1932. Dr. Bradley, who, while a student at Oberlin Theological Seminary, was pastor of the North Olmsted Congregational Church, became widely known as one of the early champions of civil rights and other social causes.

Active in the church during this period were John Elbert Ely and Etta Sayers Ely, parents of Mrs. Robert Lyons. Mr. Ely, among his many other services for the church, was for several years treasurer of the Church School. Following his death Mrs. Ely initiated a campaign for a fund to purchase an altar table in his memory. This table still serves in the Sanctuary.

WINCKLES ROOM ADDED

In 1931 Mr. and Mrs. Carey T. Winckles answered the church's need for more space by financing a social room and kitchen. The social room was named for the Winckles family and dedicated in 1959 to the memory of Mr. and Mrs. Winckles.

In 1934 Grace Winckles established an endowment fund in memory of her husband Carey. The church derives an annual income from this fund.

In 1943 Erston Butterfield began to preach in this church while studying for the ministry at Oberlin. When he completed his studies in November, 1946, he was ordained here and was installed as pastor. At the 125th anniversary observance in November, 1947, The Rev. Mr. Butterfield presided. Mrs. Winckles lighted a large cake and Mr. Whitcomb, chairman of the Board of Trustees, gave highlights of the church history.

Mr. Butterfield left North Ridgeville in 1948 for a Dayton pastorate. He later served as superintendent of the Southern Conference of the Congregational Church in Atlanta, Ga. He went on to become assistant superintendent of the Ohio Conference and then executive secretary of the Cleveland Congregational Union. He has been for several years superintendent of the Ohio Conference of the United Church of Christ.

He returned to his first charge in December, 1967, to preach the sermon at the installation of our present pastor, The Rev. Harold Wiley Freer.

On April 25, 1948 Ralph H. Chapman was installed as pastor. Another era of expansion began. On March 13, 1954 a new pipe organ was dedicated. It was installed after a fund-raising campaign in which $8,500 was pledged. On October 3, 1954 Mr. Chapman was ordained.

NEW EDUCATIONAL BUILDING

In 1956 plans were made for a new educational building and an enlarged kitchen. Land for the expansion in the rear of the church was given by Mr. and Mrs. George Lasch. By July more than $40,000 was pledged. Ground was broken July 29. The building was dedicated on Sunday, February 24, 1957.

Speakers included the Rev. Everett A. Babcock, at that time the superintendent of the Ohio Conference. The building loan was retired in July, 1959. The clearing of the debt so quickly was made possible by a generous gift from Mr. and Mrs. Whitcomb. On January 20, 1964 the congregation voted to name the building Whitcomb Fellowship Hall in recognition of their many benefactions to the church.

The Rev. Mr. Chapman resigned in November 1960 to accept a call to the First Congregational Church of Bellevue, Ohio. In March 1961 the congregation voted to build a new parsonage to replace the one built in 1880. The old parsonage, which was sold, is located next to the Orr farm on Center Ridge Road west of the church.

The new parsonage was built on a 1½-acre site directly behind the church property. Construction began after a successful fund pledge campaign. The Whitcombs again made a substantial gift toward financing the home.

The Rev. Gene Wilson was called as pastor and installed in November, 1961. Under the leadership of Mr. Wilson the church undertook in 1964 a study of its spiritual and physical needs.

EXPANSION PROPERTY BOUGHT

When Mr. Wilson left in September, 1964, to accept a call to a Huntington, Indiana, church, the self-study was continued under the leadership of the Rev. Robert Peters who was called in February, 1965. During his pastorate the church was renovated and redecorated. The congregation purchased the Lasch property east of the church for use as a church school annex and for future expansion.

The George Lasches had purchased the property from the Alvah Knapps, who, as I have already related, deeded to the church land it had occupied for many years.

The Knapps had bought the house from two sisters of the Rev. Mr. Young, pastor of the church at the time. They had established an inn in the house which they operated for a number of years as the "Three Chimneys."

Mr. Peters resigned in April 1967 to accept a position with Case Western Reserve University. In September The Rev. Harold Wiley Freer was called.

BUILDING NEEDS STUDIED

On January 25, 1968 at Mr. Freer's urging, the congregation continued its long range planning with special attention to the needs of the church school.

Many organizations have played major roles in the progress of the church through the years, including the Ladies Benevolent Society, the Christian Endeavor Society, the Pilgrim Fellowship, the Men's Club and others.

The organization that has persevered the longest is the LBS. It was founded February 1, 1849 in the home of Mrs. Joel Terrell to promote, as its early minutes state, "the extension of science, morality and the welfare of humanity and especially to be liberal to the poor."

A study of its records will show how well the organization has kept this resolve.

The original name was the Ridgeville Sewing Society, a community group not officially connected with the church but working with it. Terrell women were prominent in its organization and work. Among the Terrells listed in the society's minutes were Mrs. Malvina Terrell Smith, Mrs. Aurilla Terrell Burrows, Mrs. Delila Terrell Saulsberry and Mrs. Ursula Terrell McIlvaine.

They performed many services for church and community. It is recorded that they made shirts and knitted sox, presumably for the ill-clad of the town and of the mission field. Their first fair was held December 23, 1858, at the home of one of the Terrells.

It is also recorded that the society promoted a dance and bought a melodian for the church. When the parsonage needed repairs, the society provided the money.

In August, 1875, the ladies gave the building committee $842.19 to furnish the new church. The fund represented eight years of labor. In 1902 the name was changed to the Ladies Benevolent Society, but the purpose remained the same. Through the years it has continued to work for the church. A recent contribution was the refinishing of the church pews at a cost of more than $1,000.

The results of many years of struggle and hardship, the church truly has a rich and glorious heritage handed down to us by the pioneers who settled here more than 146 years ago and by those who followed.

During its life time the church has joined with two other denominations to further the cause of a united faith. First, it merged with the Christian Church. Then it was the Evangelical and Reformed Church, out of which merger the United Church of Christ was born.

A GREAT OBLIGATION

We have much to live up to. I can do no more in closing than quote Mrs. Edward Ames, author of a church history in the early 1900's:

"In looking back," she wrote, "I cannot but feel that we are under great obligation to the pioneers and others for what they suffered and hope that we fully appreciate the privileges we now enjoy, and with God's help may we be ready and willing to carry on this great work.

"I feel that this people can truly say with emphasis and with the deepest gratitude: Thus far God has been with us and led us, and may His blessing rest upon us in time to come."

As we reach the close of nearly a century and a half of inspiring history, let us continue to build on a glorious past.

THE END