

Celebrating 200 Years

Historian Notes

by Patricia Evans, Church Historian

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Early History of the United Church of Christ First Congregational Church of Norwich, NY

Chenango County Development from 1683-1800

The Province of New York was divided into 12 counties on November 1, 1683. The area we know as Chenango County today was called Albany County in 1683, Tryon in 1772, Montgomery in 1784, Herkimer and Tioga in 1791. Chenango County was developed from Herkimer and Tioga counties in March 5, 1798. The northern part was later split off to Madison County in 1806. In March of 1807 Chenango County was organized with 21 towns. Norwich was established as the county seat on March 6, 1807.

The first settlement in the town of Norwich was by Avery Power in 1788. He initially was a squatter and later paid three shillings per acre. The site of this is about a mile south of Norwich on both sides of the river. His daughter Lucy was the first child born in Norwich, and he had the first dwelling house and tavern.

There was such a steady influx of settlers that in 1790 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, and the Congregational General Association of Connecticut sent missionaries to our area. From this missionary work the Congregational Church of Colesville (originally in Chenango County), was organized in 1793 with 7 members, and The First Congregational Church of Sherburne in 1794 with 17 members. Then the Congregational Church of Lisle (also in

Chenango County at the time) with 16 members in 1798. The Congregational Church of Jericho (later renamed Bainbridge) was also organized at the same time. This was the site of the first ordination in Chenango County of a Congregational minister, Reverend Mr. Joel Chapin, a 1791 graduate of Dartmouth College.

Truman Enos

Mr. Enos has been described as a remarkable man, a man of common sense. In the "History of the First One Hundred Years of the First Congregational Church, Norwich New York 1814-1914" by C.R. Johnson, he is described as "not a great leader-a masterful man," "not that he was always right and made no mistakes-he made many mistakes" "we cannot say that he "fulfilled the law of Christ;" but he had many virtues which "covered a multitude of sins."

Truman was born October 24, 1779, (that would make him 235 years old this October!). He was born to Abijah and Hannah Enos in Windsor, Hartford County, Connecticut. The family lived there until 1782 when they moved to Kingsboro, Fulton Co. NY. This is where Truman grew up and at age 23, married Lenda Thrall the lovely daughter of Isaac and Rhoda Thrall. It is thought that Lenda is a nick name and Philinda was her real name, a name also give to their daughter. In 1804 after 2 years of marriage the promised land of the "Shenang Country" was calling him forth. They settled in Oxford and their daughter Philinda was born October 28, 1804. The family moved the next year to Norwich and started a tannery business. This tannery was on Canasawacta Street just north of the present "Stone Mill" on the corner of West Main Street and Canasawacta. Their residence was across the street from the tannery on West Main Street.

Mr. Enos was soon joined by a partner, Charles Randall¹. This partnership lasted only a few years when Mr. Randall sold his interest in the company to Joseph S. Fenton at the start of the War of 1812. He then enlisted with Colonel Thompson Mead as a Lieutenant.

On a faithful day of Sunday in 1811, Truman was deer hunting on West Hill. He had been unsuccessful in providing for his family and as he left the forest cover entering a clearing with a view of the west and the setting sun "there came into my mind the Bible lessons taught me by my mother" back in Connecticut; and he seemed to himself "the wickedest man on earth."

He hurriedly returned to his home and was unable for days to lose this feeling. He bought a Bible and read it cover to cover. He attempted to pray but was unsuccessful. He decided he needed to talk with another Christian but in the area of several hundred people he could only think of one, a Mrs. Elizabeth Snow. They prayed and prayed for a season but to no avail. He would find peace for but a few days. He was upset to find his fellow neighbors hunting, fishing, working and visiting on Sunday the Sabbath Day. The profanity never seemed to stop. He took it upon himself to start a crusade to stop this sinning. Slowly the community improved morally and socially. Then some professors of religion came to town. They held services where they were welcome— school houses, and barns about the village.

During this period Truman was finally able to convert his partner Joseph Fenton. In the fall of 1812 Rev. Jonathan Hascall, a Baptist minister of Oneida County visited Truman at his home. Mr. Enos was able to convince Rev. Hascall to preach the following Sunday at a local tavern's ballroom. The service was fairly well attended. After the completion of the services Mr. Hascall was hired for one year with a salary of \$300 to be paid in money and produce. Mr. Enos rode throughout the countryside and "tackled everybody Christian and infidel alike" raising the subscription money. In December 1812, Truman with Joseph Slater and Job Stafford moved Rev. Hascall and family from Oneida County to a "house north of the creek bridge on the Plymouth road."

Truman Enos is reported to have spoken in very terse

sentences. He had little “book larnin,” He spelled one of his wife’s names three different ways. Truman, as many then, had a lot of common sense. He has been described as having “unlimited energy” and “bulldog pertinacity.” But he was not egotistical or arrogant.

Mr. C.R. Johnson felt Mr. Enos was so concerned about the church formation that he was willing to do anything to build it; it was that important to him.

Truman Enos and his wife Lenda (Philinda) Thrall had a daughter Philinda who married Dr. Harvey Harris a prominent physician of Norwich. Dr. Harris was the fourth child born in Norwich. There were three other children born to Truman and his wife, a daughter and two sons. The youngest son drowned in back of Mr. Enos’s tannery at age three in 1815, just two months after the death of the child’s mother (Lenda) of fever lasting seventeen days. Truman remarried in October of 1815, one Betsey Campbell. Betsey died July 1817 of consumption (tuberculosis). In October of 1817 he again remarried to Abigail (“Abby”) Parmlee of Durham CT; she died forty-five years later at the age of sixty nine.

Truman, then eighty-three, waited a reasonable time and being in reasonable good health, except for being nearly blind and living with his daughter Philinda and her husband Dr. Harvey Harris, decided to take another wife. His choice was a Clarissa Marsh, sixty-one years old and a longtime Norwich resident and church member since 1853. She said yes. But he was talked out of this union by family and friends. He remained at his daughter’s home for eight years, dying May 1, 1869, at the age of ninety one.

Formation of the Church

The Rev. Jonathan Haskell (Hascall) was hired in the fall of 1812 for \$300 with money raised by Truman Enos. He was a pastor for all, neither Baptist nor other religion – he was to serve all the people of the Norwich area. After Rev Haskell’s arrival missionaries from the Missionary Society of Connecticut

started to visit the village. Reports sent to the society by Rev. David Harrower note that on November 2, 1812, “in Norwich by information, religion is a very low state here.” He returned the next year to a great improvement. Then returned again in April 1814 with the Rev. Joel T. Benedict. They preached and talked with the people of the village.

Numerous people of Christian faith now populated the village and they were anxious for the formation of a church. A letter was sent to Rev. Benedict asking for his assistance in the organization of a church. He returned June 14. At the time of Rev. Benedict’s arrival another missionary of the Missionary Society of Connecticut, a Rev. George Colton was also in town preaching. Together these two talked with some of the leading proponents for the formation of a church. They decided to start the examination of candidates the next day. On June 16, 1814 the examination of candidates was conducted by Elder Elisha Ransom, a pastor of the Baptist Church in Plymouth, NY. There were six males and ten females presented for the examination. The exam was not completed that day and was postponed until the next Saturday. Then Saturday June 18th one male and five females were examined in addition to the others from June 16th. Five of these combined with the previous sixteen were approved for a total of 21 approved (seven males and fourteen females).

The examination of candidates was done to examine the faith of an individual. They would endure strenuous questioning about their pledge to a creed and covenant with the community and their knowledge of the bible. They also might have given public testimony of their faith. It was commonplace for candidates to be sponsored by a community member about their standing in the community.

“On the Sunday following, June 19, 1814, the twenty-one were organized as “The First Congregational Church of Norwich, N.Y.” by Rev. Joel Tyler Benedict. Articles of faith and covenant were adopted. “Elijah Chamberlain and Tracy Ensworth were chosen the first deacons, ‘for life of good

behavior,' as the custom was then.”

The new members where: Tracy & Elizabeth Ensworth; John & Ruth Ambler; Joseph & Esther Kelso; Elijah Chamberlain; Levi & Tryphena Ray; Joseph S. Fenton & his wife Sarah T. Brush; Truman Enos & his wife Lenda Trall; Prudence Dickinson (wife of Josiah Dickinson); Elizabeth Snow (wife of Abraham Snow); Bridget Wells (wife of Ephraim Wells); Hannah Snow (wife of John Randall); Adocia Smith (wife of Judge Elisha B. Smith); Phebe Brewer (wife of Mr. Brewer); Betsey Miller; and Polly Brisbee.

Most of the above named lived in the village of Norwich but several were from Great Brook, New Berlin and the Preston area. Truman Enos was the first member and he was the last of this group of twenty-one to die.

Rev. Benedict led the first service in the old wood Court House built 1809 (on the site of the present Court House). The service was attended by approximately 400 people. The service started with a sermon from Acts 4:27-28 given by Rev. John B. Hoyt (pastor of the Greene, Congregational Church 1820-1833 then pastor of the 2nd Congregational Church at Coventry 1833-1862).

Six of the twenty-one were baptized. Then the organization of the church was determined. Nineteen children were baptized. The afternoon contained preaching and administration of the Lord's Supper.

Rev. Jonathan Hascall, still ministering in the village, was very opposed to the formation of this church. He did all he could to stop its formation. The reason is not truly known but is assumed by C. R. Johnson writer of the “History of the First One Hundred Years of the First Congregational Church, Norwich, New York, 1814-1914” and “History and Manual of the First Congregational Church, Norwich, N.Y. 1879” that Rev. Hascall was opposed to it because the church was not organized as a Baptist Church. Mr. Johnson states

that Rev. Hascall could not be a Congregational pastor. He also notes that Truman Enos was “first, last, and always a Congregationalist and as such he would vehemently resent any attempt to insert any other forms into the church.” Truman Enos was a Connecticut native and was very supportive of church and government, both of which were Congregational. For Mr. Enos this was a matter of conscience.

In the 1800’s the United States had the largest sectarian diversity of any country. New England had basically one dominant religion, as did the south. But the migration west included many different ethnic and religious individuals thus creating a melting pot. A family could buy land on the way west only to discover none of their new neighbors were of the same religion or country of origin. Many brought with them a deep belief in their chosen denomination. The creed of your chosen church was almost as binding as the Scriptures. Thus clashes were frequent between the four major denominations: Congregationalist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist. At the time the government was attempting to create separation of church and state but the largest denomination in the community still had the upper hand in influence over legislation. The members of this church would go on to become the socially responsible, financially successful and respected members of the community.

The Reverend Jonathan Hascall’s solution to his opposition of the church becoming Congregational was to become one of the first fifteen people to form the Baptist Church in August 18, 1814.

(From the “History of the First one Hundred Years of the First Congregational Church, Norwich, NY 1814-1914” by C. R. Johnson)

Charles Randall came from Stonington CT in 1798. He served in the War of 1812 at the Battle of Queenstown Heights. He was captured there and paroled. Charles returned home with the highest commendation from his commanding officers. He

returned to a farm on the east side of the Chenango River. In 1819 he was made deacon in the Baptist church, a position he held for 50 years.