**OUR CHURCH HISTORY**

**Part 1: Beginnings 1721-1836**

The Europeans who first arrived in our area, and those who eventually settled here in the late eighteenth century, lacked the whole variety of public institutions and services that we now take for granted -- roads, stores, schools, social organizations, lodging, and water and power utilities. On the contrary, their immediate concerns were housing, starvation, freezing, drought, crop mortgages, and bare survival. It therefore took 70 years before the first formal religious institution appeared in the eventual Town of Worcester -- the Congregational Society of Christ (later First Presbyterian) -- in 1792. The First Baptist Church followed at the eastern foot of West Hill Road in 1799.

Elizabeth Champion formed the Methodist Society of East Worcester in 1823. Local leaders and circuit riders operating out of Westford served the East Worcester members, as well as any of those living in less-populated West Worcester, who then had to travel east if they wanted to attend Methodist services. This arrangement lasted until 1831, when the Emory Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the Town of Worcester purchased vacant land at the present location of the Second Baptist Church and constructed a church building there at least by 1836, when the West Worcester Methodist Episcopal Church was organized at a meeting over which its first pastor, Rev. Alexander E. Daniels, presided. Rev. Daniels' photograph is on the wall at the rear of the present church sanctuary. He, Martin Marvin and other circuit riders from Westford likely preached at both East and West Worcester.

December, 2022

**Part 2: The Methodist Meeting House 1831-1846**

A Methodist conference history says that the local "Country was wild; settlements were few and far between. Roads were few, people were poor, wicked and restless..." Nonetheless, on December 19, 1831, Schuyler Crippen, John Waterman and other trustees of the Emory Society purchased vacant land at 132

Main Street in the hamlet of West Worcester from George Clarke, Esq., of Hyde Hall, for $1 .The land was "not to be used for any other purpose than as ground for the construction of a church and as a church yard." The Otsego County history states that "the society was without a church edifice until 1840 [an incorrect date] when a neat and substantial edifice was erected." The building was to the west of the present site of the Second Baptist Church -- a 36x46 wooden structure with a pulpit on the south side. Rev. Alexander E. Daniels, a circuit rider from Westford, presided over the organizational meeting in 1836. Rev. Daniels was also the first pastor at Methodist churches in East Worcester, Decatur, and Jacksonboro (Schenevus). Other church bodies in the circuit included Elk Creek, Brooker Hollow, Richmondville, Westford, Low's Schoolhouse, Eliot Hill, Boardman's, Crumhorn, and Foster Schoolhouse. The circuit apportionments included $717 for two pastors, rent $40, wood $45 and "table expenses" $200.

The West Worcester Methodists apparently faced early difficulties, for in 1837 the Westford Quarterly Conference appointed a committee to "sell or rent the Methodist Meeting House in Worcester." On January 2, 1839, several "Western" Baptists, who had been meeting in the "Old Academy" building in Tusculum , contracted for the sale of "An undivided half of the lot, house and stores of the Emory M.E. Church of West Worcester" for $200. They were to build 16 horse stalls for use by both congregations. Each group was to use the meeting room on alternate weeks, and both were to use the burial ground. On February 15, 1840 the Emory trustees sold the other half of the lot, and the church and sheds, to the Baptists, for $300. On March 1, 1841, a council met at the "West Meeting House" and organized the West (now Second) Baptist Church of Worcester.

In July, 1841, Decatur Hollow, Eliot Hill and West Worcester were set off as a separate charge. Ministers from 1841 to 1854 were circuit riders from Decatur. Some old Decatur and Eliot Hill documents survive today in the historical archive of the present church. On December 1, 1846 the Emory trustees sold full title to the entire plot at 132 Main Street to the Baptists for an additional $300, reserving the right to use the graveyard for as long as the Baptists did.

January, 2023

**Part 3: Tusculum; "The Old Church" 1846-1870**

Before fully purchasing the site of the Methodist Meeting House at 132 Main Street in 1846, the West Worcester Baptists had been meeting in the "Old Academy" building in Tusculum (near 215 Tuscan Road), having no name or formal organization, and had apparently been growing in number. The needs of both the Methodists and Baptists were met by the eventual sale in segments between 1839 and 1846 of the Methodist Church properties to the Baptists, and by the apparent eventual relocation of the Methodists to the "Academy" in Tusculum. There is no known legal record of either the Baptists or Methodists receiving ownership of the Tusculum building, which may also have been called the Hall of Science. Perhaps it was a private building which the groups either rented or used intermittently with the consent of the owner.

Thus, the "Academy" building in Tusculum, apparently occupied by the West Worcester Methodists by at least 1846, may have been the home of the church body for 25 years or more, and is often called the "Old Church." It appears on 1856 and 1868 maps as the "M.E. Church." There are, however, vague indications that the "preaching was first in the schoolhouse" and later in the former Academy, which the conference history dismisses as "uninviting and out-of-the-way." The sequence is not clear.

The weakness of the Tusculum body is attested by Conference acts in 1855 which again joined the East Worcester and Worcester church bodies into one charge. The strongest part was at East Worcester, which is where the pastors were based for the next 16 years. Possibly in response\to this dependent status, a Methodist Society class is said to have been organized in the Red Schoolhouse in Tusculum in 1857, followed by the appointment of a committee in 1859 to solicit members and to propose a new Church. Disagreement surfaced over the location of this "New Church," with some members preferring to stay in Tusculum and others to move to the Worcester hamlet, which was the host of the new railroad depot and the object of boom-town expansion during and after the Civil War. A compromise finally emerged that the church building "should not be built any further than the Decatur Creek," at a site which turned out to be the present one at 111 Main Street.

There are no known drawings or photographs of the "Old Church." There are two different accounts of its eventual fate. One is that it was later sold to Morrell Starkweather and moved to "Railroad Avenue;" the other is that it was sold to Alonzo Herrick, taken down and moved to Worcester, where it was remodeled into a double house standing "opposite the milk station on Depot Street."

February, 2023

**Part 4: Worcester; "The New Church" 1870-1894**

Sylvester Groat ad Eli Vaughn began work on building the "New Church" at 111 Main Street in Worcester in 1870 and concluded it the following year. Harrison Hoyt, a local storekeeper, made lemonade in a big wooden churn for the carpenters The original building, still in existence as part of the main sanctuary, was a 35x56-foot rectangle with the main entrance in the front center and a bell tower atop the roof. Several photographs of the building's interior exist, but an 1890 lithograph at the Worcester Historical Society and known exterior photographs are small and indistinct. In the lithograph, the church design appears remarkably similar to that of the present Methodist Church in Westford. The $3,600 cost was met by public donation, with $700 from the Queal brothers. John Trickey gave the tower and bell, and the organ was given "through the influence of the pastor, Rev. Hiram V. Talbot," by the Estes Organ Company.

Construction apparently preceded the actual acquisition of the land (3/4 acre), which the trustees of the "Second Methodist Episcopal Church of Worcester, New York" purchased from Hamilton Russ and his wife Levantia on November 27, 1871 for $405, "being the same premises on which there is now a church edifice." Bishop Jesse T. Peck was the first of four preachers at the formal dedication on the previous November 9. Benny Day was the first Sunday School Superintendent.

In 1883, East Worcester and Worcester, which had been administered as one charge since 1855, separated and became individual charges, each with its own minister. "It was thought best to have a permanent pastor and Rev. [J.D.] Belknap was assigned" as the first one for Worcester-only. Services were on Sunday morning and evening, and also on Thursday evening. A house was rented on "Park Ave." (then called Brook Street, and now Park Street) for a parsonage. On March 24, 1884 property for a parsonage (a house opposite the church"; 1/4 acre) was purchased from Giles C. Goodenough and his wife Alida for $1,300.

On January 10, 1884 the "First Methodist Church of the Village of Worcester, New York" was incorporated.

March, 2023

**Part 5: Renovation and Enlargement 1895**

With increased membership, the "New Church" building was remodeled and enlarged for $4,100 in 1895. Two thousand dollars had been raised in advance, and 1,500 was raised on the day of dedication. George B. Crippen headed the Building Committee. L.H. Blend of Oneonta was the architect and W.H. Murphy of Cobleskill was the builder. Sunday school rooms were added, the sanctuary was enlarged, and new floors and stained-glass windows were installed. Rev. Asa J. VanCleft was the presiding elder at the dedication on October 10, and two former pastors spoke in the afternoon on "Christian Fruit Bearing" and "Our Fraternity," respectively. Bishop Edward G. Andrews of New York City held forth in the evening.

A new parsonage was begun in 1901 at 112 Main Street on property previously purchased in 1884. It was completed in 1903 at a total cost of $2,100. A 1902 bequest of $1,000 from Miss Ann Smith provided $1,000 of the funds.

April, 2023

**Part 6: Church Trial 1898**

On February 11, 1898, charges were preferred in the case of the *Worcester Methodist Episcopal Church v. Manley J. Preston.* Mr. Preston, a Sunday School teacher and a lifelong church member, and the pastor, Rev. Hugh A. Williams, had experienced a series of disagreements during the year 1897. Preston was charged with disobedience to the pastor and to the Discipline of the church in refusing to abstain from acting as the teacher of the class after a disputed Sunday School Board vote (either 6-5 or 5-6 with ineligible voters) to relieve him of his duties. A local church trial found him guilty, having the effect of expelling him from the congregation, whereupon he appealed to the Quarterly Conference.

Meeting in Milford during the first week of March, Presiding Elder Austin Griffin and other officials acquitted Preston by a vote of 5-2 and reinstated him. He arrived back in Worcester by train to a happy reception and celebration and resumed his role in the church. Rev. Williams had left town in April, 1897, succeeded in the normal course of clergy rotation by Rev. Frank N. Smith, who had been required by virtue of his office to press the charges, which he did reluctantly and against his personal preference.

May, 2023

**Part 7: Charlie Smith 1907**

In 1907, Charles W. Smith assumed the pastorate of the Methodist Church in Worcester. A boisterous and charming man who "was the life of any party," his extroverted nature led to carrying on with younger female parishioners, to an inevitable divorce, and to a more compatible line of work as a traveling salesman in the Southern Tier and elsewhere.

Charley left his wife Lizzie, a piano teacher and church choir director, and their young daughter, to live in a house at 236 Main Street in Worcester, where Lizzie subsisted by taking in laundry and doing seamstress work. The daughter, Helen S. Bevington, became a poet and award-winning writer who taught English at Duke University. Her most noted work, *Charley Smith's Girl*  (1965), recounts this family history and details her discompassionate relationships with both of her parents, neither of whom comes off well. "... [One] was strong and brave and indomitable, and the other withdrew in utter despair,"she writes

Because the book deals with such sensitive subjects as infidelity and divorce, and because it mentions the names of many individuals and families that local residents may recognize even today, 13 decades after the events, some prominent patrons of the Worcester Free Library implied that they would withdraw their support if the book remained on the shelves. So Inez Palmer, the Librarian, took it home with her, thus figuratively "banning" it, later to return it when the focus lessened.

Despite its tone of turbulence and resentment, one reviewer cites a "brightness" to *Charley Smith's Girl*, which was the runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize.

June, 2023

**Part 8: Three Point Charge 1946-1993**

In the Methodist Church, individual congregations, or multiple congregations served by the same principal pastor, are called "charges." Each congregation within a charge is called a "point." The charges are held together by a central administrative body covering a specified geographic region, which is called the "Annual Conference," headed by a bishop who has supervisory, but not doctrinal, responsibilities. Among other functions, the Conference oversees the periodic rotation of clergy members assigned, or "called," to the various charges. The Roman Catholic and Episcopal Churches have similar systems, but with names such as "diocese" and "parish." Presbyterian churches are run by "elders" elected by their congregations for fixed terms. In general, Baptist churches are independent bodies.

For many years, the Worcester charge was part of the Wyoming Conference, which was founded in 1852 and covered much of eastern Pennsylvania and a strip of the New York Southern Tier from its headquarters in Scranton. Many of the pastors serving in the Conference were natives of Pennsylvania. Because Worcester was situated at the frigid, snowy, isolated and far distant northeastern edge of the Conference, some of the pastors privately expressed their (only half-joking) feelings of being "sent to Siberia" because of their being in supposed disfavor with the central authorities in Scranton.

A noteworthy pastor in the mid-twentieth century was Wheaton P. Webb (1937-1942), who also became a community activist in ways additional to his formal ministry. He was an illustrator and authored several books, including Uncle Swithin' s Invention, The Dramatic Silences of His Last Week, and The Twelve Labors of Wimpole Stout. He wrote the Town of Worcester sesquicentennial program in 1947. His widow published his autobiography Wind on the Stairs in 1990, which featured a full chapter on his service and experiences in Worcester, including chronicles of folk stories from the surrounding hills.

From 1946 to 1993, Worcester was a "three-point charge," in which the pastor served all the three local churches in Worcester, East Worcester and Decatur. Several of the 14 pastors who accepted this laborious and travel-intensive calling remain in present memories:

1946-51 Frederick W. Church; he is said to have consolidated many of the charge's documents into one Worcester location, including perhaps those from Decatur and Eliot Hill. Some East Worcester members, perhaps unaware of that innocuous effort, accused him of "dumping" that church's records.

1952-57 Richard V. Graham

1958-59 Ernest C. George

1960-62 William Quick

1963-65 Larry W. Saxe

1966-67 Thomas White

1968 Richard Baker

1969-71 Joseph P. Timlin

1972-74 Ronald W. Browning

1975-77 Jeffery A. Glassey

1978-82 Algernon B. Jayne

1983-90 William G. McCall, Jr.

1990 Norman Tiffany (acting)

1990-93 John L. Phillippe; the Decatur church became inactive in 1993 and was torn down in 1998.

July, 2023

**Part 9: Contemporary Pastorates 19990 to Present**

**JOHN L. PHILLIPPE**

Worcester 1990-96

East Worcester 1990-96

Decatur 1990-93

**JOYCE K. ALLEN**

Worcester 1996-2001

East Worcester 1996-2000

**JANE M. PYKUS**

Worcester 2001-09

"Yoked" with First Presbyterian Church 2008-09

**EILENE SUSAN WENNER**

Worcester 2009-15

"Yoked" with First Presbyterian Church 2009-14

Westford 2012-15

**DANIEL J. MARTIN**

Worcester 2015-22

Westford 2015-16

East Worcester 2016-22

**HOWARD "RUSS" UNDERWOOD**

Richmondville 2019-present

Worcester 2022-present

August, 2023

**Part 10: Some Significant Dates 1926 to Present**

1926 -- The Church purchased a two-manual pipe organ from Clarence E. Morey of Utica for $3,000. The sale was financed by pledges. Installation was in 1927.

1939 -- Formation of the Women's Society for Christian Service

1950s -- Jim Konstanty, famed World Series pitcher for the Philadelphia Phillies, and his family, were members of the congregation.

1951 -- Horse sheds and carriage step stones were removed for additional parking.

1954 -- Lewis and Ella Wade donated .151 acre of land north of the Church. In 1956 William Weber and Kenneth Robinson constructed an "Educational Building" on this site for $10,225. It was later renamed the Charlotte Smith Sunday School Room, and has been more informally known as the Fellowship Hall, the Social Hall, and "the back room." With an open area, stage, and movable partitions, the building is adaptable for classes, meetings, dinners, performances, and community events.

1955 -- The Church received the gift of chimes in memory of Lewis M. Wade.

1961 -- Ella Wade donated .20 acre for a parking lot.

 1965 -- Union services with the Baptist and Presbyterian Churches were formalized.

1968 -- Nationally, the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church merged as the United Methodist Church.

1971 -- Centennial observances of the "New Church" building

1977 -- The Church received a substantial bequest from the Robert Darling estate; also from the Waterman Fund (1988), the VanWagenen Fund (2000), and the estates of Kenneth Hatton (2003), Stanley Gorham (2003), Paul Hunt (2004), and Andrew Skinner (2006).

1980 -- Formation of the Community Chorale

1991 -- The Church published a Directory; also in 2000, 2004 and 2018.

1993 -- New renovations included siding, handicap access ramps, a new kitchen and bathrooms, and window changes. The budget was $170,000.

2001 -- The Church purchased the adjacent former U.S. Post Office Building at 115 Main Street from Ursula B. Kohn for $53,398.33 and named it the Mission and Ministry Building.. The "M&M" has a supplemental parking capacity and hosts many community and church meetings and events.

2006 -- A year-long series of monthly events through January, 2007, celebrated "170 Years of Ministry in Our Community, 1836-2006."

2007 -- A 15-year project began to repair and restore the stained-glass windows on the eastern and southern sanctuary walls, supported in part by the Robinson-Broadhurst Foundation.

2008 -- The Church was "yoked" to the First Presbyterian Church. Local Methodist pastors were certified to serve there.

2010 -- Observance of the 175th anniversary of the formation of the Church; the *Outline of* *the History of the United Methodist Church of Worcester, New York* was distributed.

2010 -- The Wyoming Conference dissolved. The Worcester charge became part of the Oneonta District of the new Upper New York Conference, headquartered in Liverpool and in general consisting of that part of New York State north of the Catskill Mountains.

2015 and 2022 -- Substantial renovations took place to the parsonage.

2021 -- Consideration of the Church's status resulting from anticipated changes in the *Discipline*, has begun and is continuing.

September, 2023