

KNOWLESVILLE CHURCHES



Presbyterian - The Knowlesville Presbyterian Church was formed as Congregational on August 17, 1817 with 11 members, who had probably belonged to Congregational Churches in their former homes in New England. As it was difficult to secure pastors here in the wilderness, and the Niagara Presbytery had been organized to help struggling young churches, this group joined the Presbytery on June 10, 1820 and they legally organized as the First Presbyterian Society of Ridgeway on July 22, 1821. As the first religious society in the town they received a donation of 100 acres of land from the Holland Land Company.

Members came from a wide area and the church held services in school houses alternately at Oak Orchard and the newer hamlet of Knowlesville. By 1832, when the church felt strong enough to build a house of worship, Knowlesville on the canal had become the more prosperous village and it was decided to build there. William Knowles, A.H. West and Dennis Kingsly were appointed as the building committee and a substantial brick edifice was constructed on the north side of a road just south of the canal running east from the main road in 1832. This road became known as Presbyterian Street in honor of the first church edifice.

In 1893 this prosperous church sold the "Gospel Land" they had acquired from the Holland Land Co. and used the money to build a new church. The fine old brick edifice was torn down and a brick building in the Romanesque Revival Style was erected on the same site. Here, members continued their active church program and often provided excellent cultural entertainments for the community. Pastors for many years also conducted services at Oak Orchard in the I.O.G.T. lodge hall later known as the Chapel. In 1906, with the help of a gift from philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie, a pipe organ was installed.

In 1917, the membership was 143 but by mid-century however, as older members passed away, membership began to decline. By 1964 only 15 members remained to carry on the work and provide the money to support the church. Likewise, it became impossible to hire a full time pastor. The parsonage was rented and services carried on for a time by student ministers. In 1966 the property was turned over to Genesee Valley Presbytery and in 1969 this beautiful example of architecture was torn down.

Baptist - A number of Baptists living in the Knowlesville vicinity began meeting together for services soon after 1820, whenever they could secure a minister. In the spring of 1829 the First Baptist Church of Medina was organized and in November called a resident pastor. After regular Sunday services were established, the Knowlesville Baptists joined the Medina Church. During the months of navigation on the canal it was customary for this group to make the Sunday trip to Medina and return in a large scow towed by a team of horses.

However Knowlesville Baptists soon decided to form a church of their own even though a Presbyterian Church was already established in the small village. In March 1831, 45 members of the Medina Church who lived in or near Knowlesville requested letters of dismission. The Knowlesville Baptist Church was organized in 1832. Their church was built on the east side of Main Street in 1833. The church was remodeled in 1873, an extra room built on and a baptistry constructed. Prior to that time baptismal services were held at suitable places along Oak Orchard Creek.

In 1876 revival services were held which resulted in many new converts coming into the church. Quite a number of these people lived near Oak Orchard-on-the-Ridge. This group wished to have religious services in their own community and built a brick meeting house on the south side

as a separate society but united with the Knowlesville Church. The building was known as the Baptist Chapel and for many years a Sunday School and midweek prayer meetings were held there and the Knowlesville Baptist pastors held preaching services there at least every two weeks.

In 1897 the Knowlesville Baptist Church was very active with a membership of 155 and Sunday School enrollment of 102. A Women's Missionary Society was also very active. It is therefore quite surprising that by 1910 the Baptist Church had disbanded. The Chapel at Oak Orchard was deeded in 1904 to a man who made it over into an apple drier. The edifice in Knowlesville was turned over to the local Grange in 1910. In 1909 the Medina Church reported that their parsonage had been destroyed by fire. At the same time they reported a gift of \$1,000 from the Knowlesville Baptist Church to help rebuild. This money may have come from the sale of the Knowlesville parsonage. After the Grange disbanded many years ago, the old Baptist Church became the Recreation Hall for the Fire Department. In time it was eventually removed and replaced with a modern Fire House.

The photo accompanying this article shows at left, the Baptist Church in the early part of this century and to the right, the Presbyterian Manse at the time.

United Methodist Church - Most Orleans County Methodist Churches started as small classes formed by the Methodist Episcopal circuit riding preachers in the various pioneer settlements. When the hamlet of Knowlesville began to grow and prosper because of the canal traffic, no doubt area Methodists who came to the village wanted a church there. So the Methodist Episcopal Church of Knowlesville was legally organized on May 8, 1833.

A site was purchased on the west side of Main Street, a short distance south of the canal and their house of worship was completed in 1835. In 1863 the church burned and was replaced by the present brick church that same year. Repairs to the building were made from time to time and in 1921 a major remodeling project was begun. An excavation was made under the church and a basement constructed, where the dining room and kitchen were placed. The old dining room and kitchen on the main floor were torn out to enlarge the sanctuary which was then redecorated. During 1954 the steeple was rebuilt and in 1965 an addition at the back of the original building was completed which included a vestibule for the basement and rest rooms.

A Ladies Aid Society was formed in the latter part of the 19th century and was reorganized as the Women's Society of Christian Service.

The Knowlesville Methodist Church has usually been a part of a pastoral charge with Eagle Harbor. The pastors for many years lived in a parsonage purchased at an early date on Presbyterian Street which was later sold when the church was placed under the care of the pastor of Millville Methodist. In 1963 when Knowlesville and Eagle Harbor Churches were again in the same charge a house on the East side of Main Street was purchased for the pastor.

In 1939 when several branches of the Methodist Church merged, the word "Episcopal" was dropped. In 1968 after a merger with other Methodist related bodies, the General Conference adopted the name United Methodist and this became the United Methodist Church of Knowlesville.

The present pastor is Rev. Ron Schompert with weekly services at 11:00 A.M. On August 18 and 19 Knowlesville will celebrate its 175th birthday. The Christian work of all three churches of this community has no doubt had a far reaching influence upon its citizens over the past 175 years.