

The old Clarendon Universalist Church

BY C.W. LATTIN

Universalists were the first religious group to erect a church building in the Town of Clarendon. They were organized in 1832 in Holley and incorporated as the First Universalist Society of Clarendon and South Murray.

In 1836, Eldredge Farwell, founder of Clarendon, gave land in the hamlet of Clarendon to the society and plans were made for a church. Contractor Philip Preston and stone masons, Levi Davis and Seth Knowles, were employed to erect the church building in 1837.

Stone from local quarries was used to build this substantial landmark. It had a large seating capacity with galleries on three sides. The pulpit was located on the north end with a choir loft opposite on the south end.

In 1870, extensive alterations were made when the galleries were removed and the pulpit placed on the south end. The old box pews were removed with new cushioned pews taking their place.

In 1877, a high wooden spire was removed leaving the lower portion of the tower.

In 1896, a wing was added to the east side of the church for a dining room and kitchen. This was referred to as the annex where many social events were held. Wide doors opened between the dining room and the church sanctuary.

Church sheds for horses were located along the south boundary

of the lot.

In 1887 an attractive parsonage was built directly west of the church.

By 1932 the congregation became so small that a pastor could no longer be supported and regular services ceased.

In 1947, however, plans were made for an Old Home Day. This sparked renewed interest and concern. The church interior was repainted and an attractive mural restored behind the pulpit. The organ was electrified and new kitchen equipment purchased.

The Rev. Donald Lawson from the Pullman Memorial Universalist Church in Albion was hired part time to also serve the Clarendon Church. A church program was then carried on here until 1959 when attendance dropped off and the church closed for good.

The property was then held by the New York State Convention of Universalists.

Members of the Earle Smith family, who lived west of the church, did not want to see their beautiful old church neglected or used commercially. Therefore, they prevailed upon the N.Y. State Convention of Universalists, formed a private corporation known as the Clarendon Universalist Church Preservation Society, and were deeded the property in 1967.

Once the Smith family gained control the old parsonage was removed and grounds landscaped.



At this point there were no foreseen problems. However, after several years passed the Clarendon assessor recognized that this is a taxable property and assesses it. The corporation is then shocked and enraged.

The assessment was not to be removed so as a result, the corporation tried to give the church to a non-profit group. The Town of Clarendon was offered the property but refused. The Orleans County Historical Association was offered the church for a museum but ultimately refused it.

Members of the Smith family became frustrated that they couldn't even give their cherished church away. Feeling the assessment was higher than what they thought reasonable, the property was sold at a public auction on Aug. 21, 1980. This not only included the building but all its historic contents.

What a sad, sad commentary!

The church has since been utilized as a used book store and an antique shop/residence.

It is truly one of Clarendon's most historical buildings and architecturally one of Clarendon's most significant landmarks. Currently the old church needs a lot of TLC.

Ironically, everything the Smith family tried to avoid in the beginning has seemingly occurred.