

# Bethinking of Old Orleans

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## Orleans Church History Part I

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The 1850 census for Orleans County gives us the following statistics on churches at that time. They are as follows: 10 Baptist, 2 Freewill Baptist, 3 Christian, 1 Congregational, 2 Episcopal, 1 Friends, 11 Methodist Episcopal, 1 Wesleyan, 9 Presbyterian, 1 Roman Catholic and 3 Universalist with the total being 44. By the end of the 19th Century we know that 91 churches had been formed in the county. Let's look at the developmental years up to 1850 so we may better understand our religious origins in this area.

To me, these statistics suggest a great deal about the kind of people who lived here then when our total population in the county was 28,501. The immediate thing which jumps out at me about these figures is the fact that there was only one Roman Catholic Church in 1850. That certainly tells a lot about our ethnic population at that time. We were indeed, a white Anglo Saxon Protestant movement. We have to remember that the great Irish famine did not occur until the 1840's, so it was not until the late '40's that we began to get an influx of immigrants who were Catholic. Likewise, the Polish and Italian immigrants also with a Catholic background did not arrive in our area until the latter part of the 19th Century and early part of this century. It's interesting to note here that the Catholic Diocese of Buffalo was not established until 1847. Landmarks of Orleans County mentions

that there were only two Catholic families in 1829 in Albion. The first Mass in the first Catholic Church in the county located in Medina, did not occur until 1849 although there were a few Catholics as early as 1825 in the Medina area. The 1850 figures do not include any Lutheran Churches which simply tells us that German people who were German Lutheran were not living here in any great numbers prior to 1850. Therefore, most religious societies which developed early in this county were the mainline Protestant denominations running the gamut from liturgical to liberal. It is also interesting that the 1850 census figures do not show a large number of Evangelical or Fundamental type churches here which of course, has been a later development in the Christian theology.

Let's now go back to the early beginnings of Orleans County to find our religious roots locally. The men and women who left comfortable homes in the established settlements of New England and eastern New York to carve new homesteads out of the wilderness that was Western New York at the beginning of the 19th Century, were very courageous individuals. In 1803 the Holland Land Company started selling land to settlers in what is now Orleans County when it was practically an unbroken forest. There were no roads west of the Genesee so that the few who came here to contract for land did it by boat on the lake.

The most pressing task for each family was to cut trees for a clearing and use the logs to build a rude cabin. Then more trees were cut in order to clear some land for raising crops. But these early settlers were God fearing people and they did not leave their religion back in their former communities. As soon as a few families were near enough together, they met in one another's log cabins for public worship. Although they had belonged to churches of various denominations before coming to Western New York, they all met together for prayer and Bible reading without denominational distinction.

The first preacher to hold a religious service in the county was a Methodist missionary from Canada. Rev. Mr. Steele who about 1809, came to Carlton and preached wherever he could get a congregation together. These early settlers were hungry to hear the word of God proclaimed and went many miles to the meetings. Our pioneer forefathers were also strong believers in education and as soon as enough families had settled in an area, they worked together to build a log schoolhouse. Once the school was erected, it also frequently functioned as a place for religious services. The very first school taught in the County was during the winter of 1810-11 by Peleg Helms in the Town of Carlton. By 1814 the N.Y.S. Legislature had appropriated \$5,000 to improve the Ridge Road which had been an Indian trail through the forest. From then on settlement was more rapid in this area. As more people came here, they began to cluster into groups of like religious doctrines.

Among the early preachers who settled in the county was a Baptist named Elder Simeon Dutcher who came to Carlton in 1817 and began conducting religious services. In fact, a Baptist congregation was organized in Gaines as early as 1816 which the Rev. Dutcher later ministered to. The very first church edifice in Orleans County was erected in Gaines in 1824, but not entirely for religious purposes, rather, more for political reasons as at that time Gaines hoped to be the county seat and felt if it had a church it would stand a better chance. At any rate, it was shared equally by Baptist and Congregationalists until the Congregationalists erected their own church building in 1834. This first church pictured here in 1912 stands today in Gaines as part of the Town Hall and highway garage. An early Free Will Baptist Church was established at East Gaines in 1822 by Rev. Francis Turner, a Free Will Baptist minister who came into Gaines in 1815.