

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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Zechariah Paddock

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From today's viewpoint, it was perhaps the Methodist circuit rider who had more influence upon the establishment of early churches than any other figure. It was the district superintendents of the Methodist Church who found young preachers and assigned them to large areas where settlements were being made. These preachers covered this territory on horseback. In 1816 such a district was established by the Genesee Methodist Conference which extended from Clarkson to the Niagara River and from the lake to eight miles south of the Ridge. Most of these preachers were with little formal education but had great faith in God and zeal for the salvation of everyone. They usually organized classes and put some local person in charge. Most of the Methodist Churches in the county today started this way, and many can be accredited to Zacharia Paddock (pictured) who was appointed in 1818 when only 19 years of age, to be one of these circuit riders. He had about 300 miles of riding and could cover his circuit in about four weeks. The oldest Methodist edifice in the county today is the former Kenyonville United Methodist Church. The Wesleyan Methodist Movement got under way in our county as a protest in 1843 when the Methodist Episcopal Church preferred not to act on the Abolitionist Movement.

Another early missionary was the Rev. John Spencer from Chautauqua County who traversed the wilderness in W.N.Y. and helped form most of the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches which exist in this region. The Rev. Spencer died in 1826 nine years after the Niagara Presbytery was organized. Many early Congregational Churches changed to the Presbyterian form of government. The Barre Center Presbyterian Church for example, was formed as Congregational. Another zealous Presbyterian clergyman was Rev. Rawson who was able to acquire from the Holland Land Company the gift of "Gospel Land" for churches. Land not exceeding 100 acres was given to the first legally organized religious society in each township which made application for it. And indeed, the Barre Center Congregational Church as it

was then, received such a grant.

The 1850 census indicates that there was a denomination called Christian with three churches at the time in our county. It seems that around 1800 there sprang up throughout the country so-called Christian Churches. In the beginning it was not intended as any organized movement but rather seemed to grow out of the desire of certain devout people to be free from the organization and the doctrines of established denominations. The purpose was to simply study the Bible, worship God and follow the teachings of Christ as dictated by their own consciences. Like-minded people formed themselves into churches they simply named Christian. However, as time went on they all became linked together. One of the earliest religious societies in Orleans County was such a group who met in the home of Wm Burnham of Holley in Sept. 1815. Eventually in 1839 this group built a Christian Church at Manning which had regular services until 1921. The so-called Christian Church eventually merged into what is known today as Disciples of Christ.

Our 1850 statistics indicate two Episcopal Churches which is not a surprisingly low number. We must remember that the Episcopal Church was the Church of England and during the period of rebellion against Great Britain and the Revolutionary War, the church became somewhat unpopular. It was ruled by the Hierarchy in a very undemocratic form of government. Its leaders were indeed, highly educated, perhaps better than most, but its highly formalized ritual was not adapted to the needs of the first scattered pioneers. The first Episcopal organization took place in Medina in 1827 and it is carried on today at St. John's Church.

By strict comparison we find three Universalist Churches in the 1850 census. This denomination got a foothold particularly in the late 18th Century, especially in New England. They rejected the creeds, the doctrines of predestination, and believed in universal salvation. The historic Cobblestone Church at Childs built in 1834 is the first Universalist Church structured in the area. A marble tablet over the entrance notes it was "Erected by the First Universalist Society". The term 'society' was used as the term 'church' suggested too much dogma and an undemocratic form of church government. Early Baptists were also prone to use the term 'society' as well. We must remember here that at that time our ancestors were not that much removed from the Revolutionary Period. Some had fought for liberty and as reactionists, carried it over into church structure. The American Constitution and Bill of Rights were in the forefront of pioneer minds. Universalists were certainly nurtured by the liberty and path of freedom found in our new nation as were all Protestant denominations at the time. After all, the Episcopal Church had been the church of the State for which taxes had been procured whether you believed in Episcopal doctrine or not.

Our statistics also note a Friends or Quaker Church in 1850. This was located in Millville having been formed in 1818. In 1841 they erected a cobblestone Meeting House at Millville and being liberal-minded like Universalists did not discriminate against women holding positions of leadership as most churches of that time did. As near as I can tell, a Mrs. E.G. Underhill was probably the first woman preacher in the county and served that church for about ten years.

With the exception of the last two denominations mentioned, we can surely assume that most pioneers were exposed to a great deal of Hell, Fire and Brimstone from the pulpits of their day. All our pioneer forebears were salvationists. Indeed, the 1850 census unmistakably shows the big three of that time as Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian. How much richer our American Heritage is today than it was in 1850 with the addition on many other ethnic groups some with non-Christian backgrounds, not to mention various Christian denominations which have been formed since 1850.