

The Presbyterian Church, Sewickley

A Synopsis of the five Histories

1888, 50 years or Semi-centennial: *Memorial*, The Fiftieth Anniversary Exercises of the Presbyterian Church, Sewickley, PA, February 17, 1888

- An historical address by Rev. James Allison, D.D., from 1802 to 1864
- Historical addresses by Mr. John F. Robinson and Mr. George H. Christy, from 1864 to 1888
- Addresses re the Sabbath School by Mr. Thomas Patterson and Mr. Frank C. Osburn
- An essay entitled "The Olden Time in Sewickley" by Mr. John Way, presented in 1879
- "Sermon by the Pastor", Rev. William O. Campbell

"A large company assembled to celebrate the Fiftieth Anniversary of this Church, made up chiefly of members of the Sewickley congregation, to whom were added many invited guests from the Leetsdale Presbyterian Church and from the various churches of Sewickley. All seemed to be in hearty sympathy with the occasion. After the anniversary exercises, the congregation repaired to the lecture room, where a collation was served by the ladies of the Church." *Memorial* p.8

"At the request of the pastor and elders of the Presbyterian Church of Sewickley, Presbytery of Allegheny, I have undertaken to write its history from its beginning, in 1802, to the close of my pastorate, February, 1864, with biographical sketches of its elders who served previous to my resignation. To perform properly the task allotted to me, it will be necessary to notice the early history of the Valley of Sewickley. The facts presented will be taken mainly from a sermon preached by me July 16, 1876, entitled "Presbyterianism in Sewickley Valley," which was afterwards published." *Ibid.* p.11 (address by Rev. James Allison D.D.)

"What, then, is necessary that we should fulfill our vocation? What is necessary that this Church should, in the future, be a power for good in the midst of this community? It is not necessary that it should have an eloquent ministry; it is not necessary that it should be strong in point of intellect, or wealth, or numbers. If we are satisfied to build up a Church, which shall have the power that resides in these things, we shall not be powerful in the sense that Christ desires us to be. I believe that the temptation to self-complacency for our sacrifices, our devotedness, our self-denial, to glory in ministers, in means, in numbers, and contributions is very powerful. Let us look to the Lord to deliver us from this snare. Let us try to look at such success as this implies, altogether external. True power depends on other conditions. Christ did not call many wise; he did not seek the wealthy as such; he did not count the number of his disciples. That is a morbid disposition which manifests itself in "counting heads." What Christ seeks in a Church, is spiritual power. We want intellect indeed, but intellect that shall be wholly sanctified by the Spirit of God; we want wealth, but wealth that shall be in the hands of those who shall be willing to devote it to the extension of the Redeemer's kingdom; we want numbers but numbers of such as shall be saved. We want, for the purpose of bearing testimony to a callous world, a people who shall live in daily union with Christ, who shall be filled with his Spirit, who shall be strong in faith, who shall be of good courage in the battle with sin, who shall be steadfast in the ways of righteousness, who shall be willing to accept the lowliest work in the service of Christ, whose hearts shall be full of love to their Lord and Master. The review of the past in which we have been engaged, should encourage us. There has been growth, but have we grown in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour as we should have grown? Shall we not wait upon the Lord, and thus renew our strength; shall we not with faith and prayer wait for the promise of the Father – shall we not say: Restore unto us the joy of thy salvation, and uphold us with thy free Spirit? Then will we teach transgressors thy way; and sinners shall be converted unto thee." *Ibid.* p153-154 (Sermon by Rev. Campbell, one week after the semi-centennial celebration)

1913, 75 years: *A History of the Presbyterian Church of Sewickley*

> Consisting of addresses delivered February 16-19, 1913 on the Occasion of the Seventh-fifth Anniversary of the Permanent Organization of the Church, together with a Compendium of Events, Photographs, and Notes, prepared by A Committee of the Congregation

- A Compendium of the History of the Church
- Earliest Presbyterianism in the Valley, an address by the Rev. Matthew B. Riddle D.D. LL.D.
- The Pastorate of Mr. Nevin, an address by Mr. Theodore W. Nevin
- The Pastorate of Mr. Allison, an address by Mr. Alexander C. Robinson
- The Pastorate of Dr. Bittinger, an address by Miss Lucy F. Bittinger
- The Pastorate of Dr. Campbell, an address by Rev. William O. Campbell D.D.

- Sewickley: A Historical Sketch, an address by Mr. Franklin T. Nevin
- The Trustees, an address by Mr. T. H. B. McKnight
- The Church Buildings, an address by Mr. William W. Titus
- The Elders, an address by Mr. Bayard H. Christy
- The Sunday School, an address by Mr. John A. McCague
- The Work of Women, an address by Mrs. Joseph M. Browne

“Sewickly Church was organized by order of Presbytery of Ohio on February 17th 1838: By Rev. Messrs. J.W. Nevin & Joseph Reed. When, Messrs. James McLaughlin & John B. Champ were elected to the office of Eldership, when the former was dully installed having been ordained already. The names composing Sewickly Church at its formation, as follows received on certificate. . .” A list of twenty names follows, and the record continues: “The day following February 18th, being Sabbath, Mr. John B. Champ, Elder elect was regularly ordained and installed.”

A congregational meeting was held March 24, 1838 at which “a call was made, and a Committee delegated to present the same to the Ohio Presbytery, for the pastoral services of the Rev. Daniel E. Nevin, one third of the time.” *A History of the Presbyterian Church of Sewickley Pennsylvania*, p.10 (taken from the first leaf of the Session book of 1838)

“For the interests of Christian unity, it seems rather an invidious distinction to attempt to separate the work of women from that of men in an organization where all have labored together in harmony to advance the one great cause of Christ and His Kingdom. Nevertheless, the women of this church have had an individual place and a work of their own and they have “builded the walls over against their own houses” as faithfully as have the elders and trustees with whom they have cooperated.

“These are some of the things the women of the church have been doing during the past seventy-five years. For what they are yet to do in rounding out the century, the sympathetic cooperation of every woman in the congregation is necessary. There is an opening for everyone, no matter what her gifts may be; and, whether her talent be a single one or be multiplied to ten, there is need of it in the Master’s service. *A History of the Presbyterian Church of Sewickley Pennsylvania*, pp.157 & 171 (an essay entitled “The Work of Women” by Mrs. Joseph (Eliza) M. Browne)

1938, 100 years or Centennial: Centennial Anniversary

- A compilation of events occurring at the Centennial Celebration, April 24-25, 1838 prepared by Eliza Atwell Browne
- Historical Statement by Rev. Henry R. Browne, Pastor of Shields Church
- An essay by Bayard H. Christy entitled “Change and Continuance”
- An Essay by Rev. Rodney Thaine Taylor, Pastor of the First United Presbyterian Church, Sewickley entitled “The Three Churches”
- A play by Isabel Booth entitled “One Hundred Years Ago” performed at the Edgeworth Club

“My words today can be only a recapitulation of some things known more or less familiarly to you all and certainly well-known to some of you. We are met here by the courtesy of Miss Quay, not to repeat but to commemorate what was done here 100 years ago. We represent all who, present or absent , living or dead, have been called into the fellowship and service of the Sewickley Presbyterian Church during these years. We would praise God for them with such a simple ceremonial as we imagine they must have used who constituted that first little group of February 19th, 1838.

The Sewickley Church shows a certain modesty in dating its organization so late as 1838, because the records of Presbytery, Synod, the local Session Book, and rural tradition reveal that for more than 30 years before that date, that is from early in the century, there was more or less sustained effort on the part of a little group to maintain an occasional and at times a more or less regular supply of service in the neighborhood, then commonly known as the Sewickley Bottoms.” *Centennial Anniversary*, p.18 (Historical Statement by Rev. Henry R. Browne, D.D. Pastor of Shields Presbyterian Church)

“We began as a church of the Old School – that is to say, of theological conservation; but we never have been a church of doctrinal controversy. Our ministers here have done their work on a plane above all such strife; and today as always the doors stand open to liberal and to conservative alike. But within, their disputings have no place. The circumstances have been such that the church has not become institutionalized. From earliest years it has maintained its Sunday School and its Missionary Society. But its larger work in the community has been done in accommodation to and not in competition with the activities of the Union Aid Society and of the Young Men’s Christian Association. If it concerns anyone to gain some measure of the extent to which this church permeates with

its influence the life of the community, let him consider these organizations and inquire who effected them; let him list for himself the officers of all the altruistic organizations and note how many are Presbyterian. . . .

“I have been young and am young no longer. This always has been my church. I have known all of its ministers – childishly, in part, of course. Of its twice four and twenty elders I have clear recollection of all but a very few. Even so, how are comparisons and estimates possible? He who move with a current can have little knowledge of the rate of flow. This is a house of prayer, the gateway to the eternal. To this place the paths of many have returned again and again; in baptism, in confession, and in death. Here is the place of contrition. Here anger is laid aside. Here resolution is formed. Here anxious hearts have found peace; heavy hearts, hope, and glad hearts have given thanks. I remember A and B and C; souls whom the church has saved and shielded and comforted. Let him who can, set value on these things.” *Centennial Anniversary*, pp36-37(address entitled “Change and Continuance” by Bayard H. Christy)

1963, 125 years: 1838-1963*The Presbyterian Church of Sewickley, Pennsylvania*, by Mary Cooper Robb

- A complete history of the church structured as follows:
 - People
 - Ministers
 - Elders
 - Deacons
 - Trustees
 - Women
 - Congregation
 - Program
 - Plant
 - Staff
 - Benevolence
 - Education
 - Activities
 - Services
 - Music

“At the annual meeting of the Congregation of the Sewickley Presbyterian Church in February, 1962, the Clerk of Session announced with considerable pride that the “sound Barrier had been broken” and that for the first time the membership numbered more than one thousand – 1,020 to be exact. One year later, on the 125th anniversary of the church, it seems safe to assume that the comfortable figure will be still in force. But how many of the thousand-plus realize that they represent the fruition of an undertaking begun , after several frustrating attempts by a mere twenty souls in February, 1838? These were men and women who, in spite of all obstacles, were determined to provide for the spiritual needs of their tiny community and, wonderfully enough, for the spiritual needs of the wider world beyond their valley home.” *1838-1963*, Preface

“It seems safe to say that to the congregation of today no service would be complete, no matter how beautifully expressed or how richly ornamented, without music. Like everything else in its history, the Church’s “ministry of music” has had it own development and interest. The term, incidentally, can only with effort be applied to some of its early manifestations. . . . Problems arose with the installation of the first organ in 1863 in the new church. Session’s unease over possible difficulties is suggested in its minute on the subject: “In the employment of an organist as well as in the conduction of singing, the session *reserves* and *claims* the right to *control* the one and *direct* the other according to its best judgment and discretion.” *Ibid*. pp.96-97

“In discussing recent historical writing at one of his book reviews, Dr. Amerman made the point that one characteristic is the use of “adiaphora” – a theological term for matters which are of interest but not necessary to faith. Applied to history “adiaphora” are details of no great importance, which serve, however, to bring alive the period or the person under discussion.

“To many people it may seem that this history is merely a tissue of adiaphora, and so it is. So it must be. In the long flow of history, 125 years is a small matter, and in God’s time it is nothing. But the thousand who are this church today are the result of several lifetimes of the minute efforts of minute individuals gathering power from their unity of purpose. That power will increase so long as that purpose exists – to serve well and truly the greater glory of God.” *Ibid*. p.104 Conclusion

1988, 150 years: *Remember Rejoice Renew, The 1988 History of the Church*, by William Cooper

- A complete history of the church structured chronologically focusing on pastors, elders, staff and events in the church and events affecting the church
- A sermon by Rev. George B. Wirth “The Best is Yet to Be”

“Considering the parlous state to which the Presbyterian Church had been reduced in the mid 1830s, (and, amazingly, it was the only organized congregation of any religious denomination in Sewickley Bottoms), an inspired force was desperately needed, and, suddenly, it appeared in the persons of Mrs. Mary Gould Olver, John B. Champ and David Shields. The stirring events which they precipitated have been told and retold in prior accounts of our Church.” *Remember Rejoice Renew*, p.27

“As these trial preachings (by Daniel Eagle Nevin) progressed, Mrs. Olver, Mr. Champ and Mr. and Mrs. Shields probably concluded at an early stage that the young minister would be acceptable. They were English Presbyterians or Quakers and, as such, fairly broadminded and liberal in their approach to Presbyterian doctrine and practice. But Elder McLaughlin and his adherents from the Pioneer Church, as well as the congregation at Fairmount were cast in a different mold. They were Scottish and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who demanded literal adherence to the religious doctrine, practices and disciplines of the Church as they had been developed in Scotland and imported to this country by their forebears.” *Ibid.* p.29

“In the 1963 History, Mrs. Mary Cooper Robb classified the women of the congregation and their work as the Church’s “Fourth Estate.” They were expected to work, and work hard at manifold tasks, but they were not permitted to be either elders, deacons, or trustees of the Church; consequently, they could not represent our Church in such general bodies as the Presbytery, Synod and General Assembly. Except for their right to vote in congregational meetings, they were kept apart from the administration and direction of our Church and its religious affairs.

“Other Presbyterian bodies, however, had gradually seen the light. In 1915, the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church had been amended to authorize the election of deaconesses. In 1930, it was further amended to authorize women to be ordained as ruling elders, and as elders, they became eligible to serve as representatives in the Presbytery, Synod and General Assembly. In 1956, the General Assembly authorized women to be ordained as ministers in the Presbyterian Church.

“So the way was open, but while the subject was discussed on numerous occasions, a state of inertia prevailed within our Church. Both congregation and minister were being overly “Old School.” Following the retirement of Dr. Amerman, however, the dam suddenly burst. Mrs. Robb was elected to the Board of Deacons, and shortly thereafter Mrs. Harry (Elspeth) Hull was ordained an elder. From then on, the gates were wide open.” *Ibid.* p.163

“The Condition of the Church as It Enters 1988

Looking at the Church and its congregation today, it may be said that:

- the membership of the Church is the largest it has ever been, with more than 1,000 new members having joined the congregation within the past ten years;
- growing numbers of new members live outside the boundaries of the communities traditionally served by the Church, so that, in some measure, the Church is becoming regional in character; growing numbers of new members are persons who have formerly been affiliated with other religious denominations;
- more members than ever before are actively engaged in the work of the Church; indeed, more than 250 members are customarily engaged in decision-making and direction-setting activities during each year, and hundreds more are engaged in volunteer work in and for the Church;
- the reuniting of the Sewickley and Shields congregations has healed old differences and divisions and strengthened the Presbyterian denomination in this community;
- benevolent giving of this Church for local and foreign missions continues at record levels;
- and, most importantly, worship remains the central activity that unites, nourishes and motivates the congregation in all it undertakes.” *Ibid.* pp. 182-183