

# Octorara United Presbyterian Church\*

By T. C. EVANS

**T**HE men and women who came to America from Scotland and the North of Ireland in the early part of the eighteenth century—especially those who settled in southeastern Pennsylvania—did so with the firm purpose of founding a home where they could worship God according to the dictates of their conscience and be free from the objectionable features of the Established Church of Scotland.

They were stern and relentless; and while they themselves were dissenters, they would not tolerate dissent in others. These hardy Pennsylvania pioneers, who formed the organization that afterward grew into the Octorara United Presbyterian church, were much more interested in meeting together for worship and establishing schools for their children than in preserving for future generations records of their activities. For this reason, it is tradition rather than authentic history that tells us of a place of worship somewhere west of Bartville, Lancaster county, Pa.; and, at a later date, of services held in a house situated near the present "Mars' Hill Reservoir." Who ministered to these people prior to 1753, I have been unable to learn. In that year (1753) two missionaries—Alexander Gellatly and Andrew Arnot—were sent over by the Associate Synod of Scotland. They labored among the Covenanters in southeastern Pennsylvania, some of whom subsequently formed the congregations of Octorara, Oxford and Muddy Run.

The congregations of Octorara and Oxford were organized the same day; and tradition says that Mr. Gellatly was installed October 23rd, 1754, pastor over both congregations.

No records are known to exist from November, 1753, to June, 1762; and from June, 1784, to May, 1799.

In 1738, John, Thomas and Richard Penn, sons of William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania, deeded to Henry Work, Alexander Craighead, Robert Mathews and Hugh Barkley, members of Middle Octorara Presbyterian church, one hundred acres of land in

what is now Bart township, Lancaster county, Pa., for the sum of fifteen pounds, eleven shillings and six pence—about seventy-five cents per acre. The purpose of this purchase was to secure land on which to erect a church and school house. In 1754, six acres were transferred to the Associate congregation, which built a large stone church the same year. This was used as a house of worship for 95 years, until 1849, when the present structure was erected. Rev. Alexander Gellatly was pastor at that time. During the building of the church, the congregation probably met on alternate Sabbaths in the Middle Octorara church, at least it is so stated by Rev. Richard Webster, in his story of the times. Mr. Gellatly served Octorara congregation until his death, in 1761, in his 42nd year.

Dr. William Easton, in his memorial sermon delivered in Octorara United Presbyterian church on June 9th, 1872,—the 45th anniversary of his pastorate there—says that the congregation was without a pastor from 1761 until 1770 or 1772, when Rev. John Smith was installed pastor. During those years of pastoral vacancy there were sent over from Scotland, as ministers, Mathew Henderson, John Mason, Robert Annan, William Marshall, Thomas Clark, Samuel Kinlock, and John Smith, who subsequently became pastor of this church. Several of these ministers, no doubt, preached to this congregation occasionally. In 1774, the Reformed Presbyterian Presbytery of America was formed by Rev. John Cuthbertson, William Lind and Alexander Dobbins.

A union of the Associate and Reformed Presbyteries was effected in 1782, the new denomination being known as the Associate Reformed Church. Octorara united with this movement. Rev. John Smith (see above) resigned his charge at Octorara in 1794, and the church was vacant until 1796. In that year Rev. Ebenezer Dickey became pastor of the Oxford congregation, giving it three-fourths of his time, and Octorara one-fourth. Mr. Dickey continued to serve both Oxford and Octorara congregations until 1822, when he became affiliated with the Presbyterian church. Octorara declined to follow him.

Oxford and Octorara were received back in the Associate Presbytery on October 23rd, 1823, from which they had separated in 1782; and in 1858 the Associate and Reformed churches again united and formed the United Presbyterian church, by which name it is known to this day. From 1822 to 1827, the Octorara church was without a pastor. In 1827, Rev. William Easton was called to be its pastor; and on June 7th of that year he was installed over Oxford, Octorara and Muddy Run. In 1854 Mr. Easton resigned the pastoral care of the Oxford congregation; and in 1869 he retired from the Muddy Run charge, giving his entire time to

Octorara until October 22nd, 1878, when he resigned. He passed to his reward less than a year afterward, on June 12th, 1879. His pastorate had extended over a period of 51 years.

Rev. David Anderson served the Octorara church, as supply, from April, 1880, until May 10th, 1881, when he was installed pastor, and continued as such until July 1st, 1890. It was during his pastorate that the parsonage and stable were built and the church enlarged. The addition was used for some years as an academy and township high school.

For almost three years the congregation was served by supplies. On May 15th, 1893, Rev. James M. Knipe became stated supply. He was installed pastor August 12th, 1895, and released March 22nd, 1897. The church was without regular preaching until June 21st, 1898, when Rev. Ervrit S. Boice was ordained and installed pastor. He was released in June, 1902, to accept a call to the Olivet Presbyterian church, Moores, Pa. On December 11th, 1902, Rev. F. W. McKee became pastor, serving four years, until 1906. Rev. E. M. Giffin was installed pastor in 1907, and resigned in 1911. September 23rd, 1913, Rev. W. J. Pinkerton became pastor. He was dismissed to another Presbytery in 1915.

The church was opened for worship at rare intervals until 1917, when the congregation disbanded, thus bringing to an end an organization that had continued for more than a century and a half.

It was the first of its denomination to have a permanent place of worship in southeastern Pennsylvania, and the last to hold regular services.

Outside of Philadelphia, where there are still several United Presbyterian churches, it was the only church in the Philadelphia Presbytery, so far as I am able to ascertain, to elect a woman as trustee.

Miss Grace A. Collins, elected a trustee in 1908, continued to serve in that capacity until the congregation disbanded in 1917. It was the last church to use tokens as admission to the communion table, and the last to use instrumental music as part of public worship. As it looks to-day its walls will never again echo to the sweet strains of the Psalms of David, the metrical versions of which were always used in its public and private worship,—that peculiarity marking the greatest difference between the Octorara United Presbyterian church and its neighbors.

\* Octorara United Presbyterian church is on the north side of the road marked Route 312, on the maps of Pennsylvania. It is four miles east of Quarryville, and one mile west of Green Tree, Lancaster county, Pa. The west branch of Octorara creek is about one mile from the church.

The Middle Octorara Presbyterian church is on the south side of the road (Route 312), and adjoins the grounds of Octorara United Presbyterian church.

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