

A HISTORY OF COKE'S CHAPEL C. 1817-1870

One of the Town's earliest churches, Coke's Chapel, stood on the south side of Nott Road, on the hilltop west of the Route 21 intersection.

Methodism was first preached in township 9 in the Town of Canandaigua in the summer of 1796. Rev. Hamilton Jefferson, a circuit riding preacher from the Philadelphia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America located three newly settled farmers and enlisted them as members of a Methodist Class. Roswell Root, a Revolutionary War veteran, was designated as the leader of the class, which included his wife Hezekiah, her sister Lydia Phelps and Ambrose, her husband, and Sarah Moore. The three women were daughters of Joab Gillette, a prominent Methodist in the Town of Farmington. Brother Root convened the Class in his home weekly. Several new residents joined the Class over the next three years. In 1801 a log meeting house was constructed nearby in cooperation with School District 18.

In 1807 Bishop Asbury, head of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, visited the Class on July 7th. The Bishop spoke to 400 people from Root's barn on Nott Road, east of Route 21. Interest in Methodism grew. In 1810 the Methodist Church reorganized. The new Genesee Annual Conference was created to provide general supervision of Church activities in most of upstate New York, part of northern Pennsylvania, and upper Canada. This action further spurred interest in the Church.

Root's Class continued to expanded. Members considered it essential that a new meeting house be built. Ambrose Phelps offered a site on his farm. Other Class members offered skills and materials. The Class went to work and in early 1811 had a Methodist meeting house. Itinerant Methodist preachers in the county occasionally occupied the pulpit there. Probably none was more memorable than James Gilmore, whose forceful preaching intimidated some members.

In 1816 the Genesee Conference assigned William Barlow to the Ontario Circuit, which included Canandaigua Methodists. His attention was focused on drawing the three Canandaigua village classes into a Society and constructing a house of worship on what is now Chapel Street. While pursuing this, he also met with Root's Class, which expressed interest in the activities of their fellow Methodists in the village. Still growing, Root's class began to consider building their own chapel. One of the sentiments expressed was to create a tribute to Bishop Thomas Coke.

Thomas Coke was one of several contributors to the establishment of the Methodist Episcopal Church of England in the 1710's. He soon became the Missionary Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, traveling throughout the British Empire, establishing Methodist Societies. In 1784 he and others met in Baltimore MD to create the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. Continuing his missionary work, he died while visiting India in 1814. At that time he was probably the best known Methodist on earth. Recognition seemed warranted. Under the guidance of Rev. Barlow, the class met on April 14, 1817 and agreed to organize themselves as a Religious Society to be known as "The Trustees of Coke's Church."

These trustees moved forward to delineate the sites of the meeting house and proposed church. About one acre of land on Nott Road, with a scenic view, was purchased July 7, 1817. Perhaps no one noticed the date was just ten years to the day since Bishop Asbury had preached to the Class from Root's barn. Thoughts were more likely focused on the many tasks required to get this 2,000 square foot chapel enclosed by winter, considering the recent cold weather. Though the Canandaigua Village Methodists had begun their chapel on the north road to Chapin months before, it was still under construction. William Barlow was replaced by the Genesee Annual Conference in 1817 by Benjamin Paddock at the Canandaigua Station. His efforts during that year are related in his biography.

Rev. Paddock spent much time raising money for the village chapel. However, as Paddock had taken rooms with Father Spencer, a Trustee of Coke's Church, he was likely informed about their construction plans. At one point Rev. Paddock aided a Mrs. Thayer, a teacher in District 9, in developing youth programs for the children of the Coke's Chapel congregation. No information has been found as to progress in constructing Coke's Church. Rev. Paddock was reassigned in June and replaced by Rev. Barlow. The Village chapel was completed and dedicated in July 1818. Construction of Coke's Church on Nott Road would likely have been completed about the same time. While no image of the chapel has been found, verbal descriptions suggest a rectangular structure with a minimal steeple and other architectural features typical of early Methodist chapels. Today, perhaps the best illustration of these features can be found at "Little Church", in the Town of Seneca several miles east of the Coke's site.



Little Church, 4948 Little Church Road, Stanley, NY

In 1818 the chapel provided an appropriate space for even more Methodists. The congregation, which had grown together for over two decades, had found or made the space needed for worship. In 1823, Methodist authorities asked the Trustees of Coke's Church reorganize to reflect the official Church name, Methodist Episcopal.

Concerns were expressed about the lack of a burying ground for members of the Society. Roswell Root assured all that they were welcome in his family plot on the north side of Nott Road, east of Route 21. It was near where Bishop Asbury had preached in 1807. Discussion followed and in 1828 Root deeded his family plot, now called the Root-Remington Cemetery, to the public, naming Society members as Trustees to oversee the burying ground. This assured public access as long as the Trustees maintained the gate and the land.

One of the high points in the life of the church was probably a revival held in 1832. It is described in the Conference Report by Zina J. Buck, preacher in charge, as follows: "We commenced our labors here August 12, and soon after appointed a meeting in our Church at No. 9 [Coke's Church], three miles south of Canandaigua Village, to continue as long as circumstances should justify... Our altar was crowded with mourners day and night; who, with streaming eyes and broken hearts, cried aloud for mercy. The meeting continued with increasing interest for eight days, the last event being the most powerful of any. More than thirty were brought into the liberty of the gospel in less than five hours. During the meeting one hundred and twenty professed to be saved from their sins, and most of them have since been received on probation for membership in our Church."

The revival brought new people with new ideas into Coke's Society. Temperance was discussed. By 1835 several members of the Society decided to withdraw and create a new group. They were John Beech, Israel Parshall, Ezekiel Townsend, Calvin Conger, and William King. The new Society was named Cheshire Asbury Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Their preacher was the same one who served Coke's Chapel. Recognizing that the pastoral appointment would serve both Coke's Chapel and the Asbury Society, the appointment (charge) was named "Cokesbury". This designation prevailed through 1849. In 1837 the Cheshire Methodists reorganized themselves as The First Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Cheshire. There is no record of the Cheshire Methodists building a chapel, but they reportedly used the Cheshire Union Church.

The Genesee Conference was divided in 1848 and Ontario County churches became part of the new East Genesee Conference. Under this new conference, Cokesbury (Circuit) and Richmond were made the charge of Joseph Chapman and J. J. Brown in 1848. In 1849, Cokesbury and Canadice were a single charge, filled by Joseph Chapman alone. The establishment of the First Methodist Episcopal Church and Society of Bristol in 1845 and erection of a church structure at nearby Bristol Center in 1846, made feasible the linking of Coke's Chapel with a nearby congregation. This was accomplished in 1850, with Charles J. Bradbury serving the two groups both that year and again in 1851. The combined charge lasted another 11 years.

The State census of 1855 enumerated "Coax [sic] Chapel, M.E." as seating 260, having a value of \$2,000 with 75 attendees and 50 communicants. The East Genesee Annual Conference report of 1856 recorded Coke's Church as having 158 members and two local preachers for the Church. An 1859 map of Township No. 9 illustrates the location of Coke's Chapel on the southerly side of Nott Road, about a quarter mile west of Cheshire Road.

The national election of 1860 elected a Republican president and precipitated the civil war. The president called for volunteers to preserve the union. The positive response wreaked havoc in many rural area of the north, especially among male dominated institutions. The Methodist Episcopal Church lost many preachers and lay leaders. Men left Coke's Church.

These trustees, Daniel Becker and George Hickcox, struggled to maintain the Chapel and provide periodic worship services. Having no preachers supplied by the East Genesee Annual Conference, they sold the parsonage across Nott Road from the Church to Peter Brando in 1865. Thereafter, the trustees probably began seeking the approvals required to sell Coke's Chapel itself. In late 1870 the site of the Chapel was sold to the adjacent property owner, Willis Durand. The Chapel structure was later sold to a businessman who moved it into the Village.

Thus Methodism came to township No. 9 in 1796 and in 75 years it was disorganized. Coke's Chapel was but a memory. For John Baker, who had grown up in the Church, his nostalgic memories were expressed in a delightful poem written later in life and published in the Ontario County Journal on July 4, 1919.

BACK TO MY YOUTH AND OLD COKE'S CHAPEL

Back to my youth I went today:
And to old Cokes Chapel upon the hill.
Fond memory cleared my vision so.
I saw old faces long since still:
Yes, and heard old songs of long ago.
No choir was there, the audience sang:
Some voices cracked, few touched a note.
But the love of God was there, and faith and hope.

There ever-lasting Spring abides;
It touched some chord to memory dear,
The pearly gates seemed open wide,
And the crystal screen bore not a tear.
But I alone sat in that church;
No old time friends with mystic powers
Heard what I heard of loving praise
And never withering flowers.

Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood:
I heard again as once of yore.
As in my old place near the door,
I watched the cracks peep through the floor.
But no thought of them I gave today, I mean;
As boy I heard, as man I dream.
I heard those dear old voices sing.
Stand dressed in living green.

I left the church for the old homestead,
I found the buildings razed and gone.

I builded those old rooms anew,
I placed the old chairs that I knew,
And filled them with those dear loved forms.
A Bible lay upon the stand,
My father took with reverent hand,
And clearly read a chapter through.

Then mother's voice to me so sweet, so true:
Sang softly these words, "I give to you."

Thus far the Lord hath led me on,
Thus far His power prolongs my days:
And every evening shall make known
Some fresh memorial of His grace.
Much of my time has been to waste.
And I, perhaps am near my home.
But He forgives my follies past,
And gives me strength for days to come.

[John M. Baker, 1849 - 1922, Evergreen Cemetery, Bristol, NY]

Compiled by Gilbert Smith, with assistance