

History of Presbyterian church predates George Washington

BERNARDS TWP. — The Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church, which celebrates its 275th anniversary with a parade and community-wide celebration on Sunday, June 14, has a rich history predating even the birth of America's first President George Washington.

With its well-known ancient oak tree — estimated to be 375 years old in the church yard, the church is one of the most recognizable buildings in the Somerset Hills. It is also the mother church of several other congregations in the area, including Presbyterian churches in Liberty Corner, Sirling and Bernardsville.

For the big anniversary event, 14 community churches and congregations will join the celebration, as well as Bernards Township, the Historic Society of Somerset Hills, and numerous civic and community organizations.

The parade is scheduled to begin at 2 p.m. June 14 (June 21 rain date) from the campus of Ridge High School to the center of Basking Ridge. From there the celebration will continue on the grounds of the Oak Street School.

History Recalled

The church was formed in 1717, 15 years before George Washington was born. It stands next to an ancient oak tree which cast its first shadow 34 years before Columbus was born.

For many years, the history of Bernards Township (founded in 1769) and the Presbyterian Church were intertwined and the same. An early pastor, William C. Brownlee (1818-25) noted a church membership of 1,760 members as well as 117 slaves, probably the entire population of Basking Ridge at the time. Four of Basking Ridge's main streets are named after Presbyterian pastors: John Cross (1732-41), Robert Finley (1793-1871), William C. Brownlee (1818-25) and John C. Rankin (1813-95).

The fortunes of the church have reflected secular and religious trends. It has experienced periods of strong growth (1800-25, 1900-13, 1945-50), slow growth (1910-15), decline (1825-50), and stability (1850-1900, 1965-90). Membership has fluctuated when religious revivals have swept the country, when new churches emerged offering devotional diversity, as the community changed from farming to suburban, and as membership responded to the mobility modern business demands of its employees. Currently, the church enjoys a strong, vital congregation, yet, one which reflects the tensions of modern society.

The church traces its roots to 200 families that left Scotland in 1685 to escape religious persecution and settled in Somerset County, some in Basking Ridge. Itinerant pastors on Journeynack served the early settlers. And, in 1717, according to the best records, the settlers built a little log meeting house (at the site of the pre-



Local Landmark
The Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church, pictured with its ancient oak tree, will be the site of a huge 275th anniversary celebration on Sunday, June 14.

sent church) as their first place of worship.

The first use of the name "Basking Ridge" (then "Baskinside") is found in the records of the little church in 1713. Early settlers used this term when they saw animals come up from the swamps and "bask on the ridge."

The Great Awakening

John Cross was the church's first minister. A forceful man, he shook an otherwise somnolent congregation into joining a religious revival called "The Great Awakening" then spreading throughout the country. He supported settlers who resisted paying newly chartered (by the King of England) "proprietors" a second time for their land.

Charles McKnight (1742-44) and Joseph Lamb (1744-49) had brief tenures in the pulpit. During the latter's tenure, in 1749, the members built a new frame church 55 feet by 35 feet, in the site of the "Ancient Log Church."

Samuel Kennedy (1751-87) was the rightful heir to the Earl of Cavendish, Scotland. He was truly a Renaissance man — a pastor, a practicing medical doctor, and an educator. He established a preparatory school "where persons may be fitted to enter any class in college." Many of his students came to Princeton, then the "College of New Jersey." During his pastorate the congregation instituted missions giving to the Indians, but went for more than four years without paying Kennedy's salary. Kennedy bore the doleful duty of ministering to his congregation during the dark days of the Revolutionary War. Thirty-five

parishioners who died in the war, lie in the churchyard.

Under Robert Finley (1793-1871), the church experienced revival and expanded 20 feet. Finley continued Kennedy's classical school. As superintendent, it was necessary to build a new structure on West Oak Street, now known as "the Old Academy Building," which later became the Bernards Township Hall and now houses the Somerset Hills Historic Society. Finley was instrumental in founding the American Colonization Society, whose aim was to resettle freed African slaves in Africa (Liberia), a goal later shared by Lincoln, Clay, Webster and Douglas. Finley gave up the pulpit to become president of the University of Georgia. The trip to his new home was interrupted from time to time by a few months' leave.

William C. Brownlee (1818-25), a Scot, was the fourth son of the Laird of Tertoon. He continued as headmaster of the academy. He was of a conservative bent, showing little tolerance for other religious beliefs and harsh to parishioners who didn't follow the practices of the church. On another side, he was a writer and wrote a commonplace book.

Period Of Decline

The ministry of John Coo Van Dervoort (1823-34), John Anderson (1834-56), and Oscar Harris (1838-51) were each relatively short, and marked a period of decline. The community itself declined, also, two new churches, St. Bernards' Episcopal (1837) and St. Mark's Episcopal (1850) offered other devotional opportunities.

Bennett provided a steady hand in running church affairs and accommodating steady growth.

In the post-war period, J. Merion (Dutch) Kadyk ministered to a rapidly growing congregation, commencing the publication of a church newsletter (the "Oak Leaves") which continues to this day. The church was expanded by the addition of Cabot Hall.

Bedroom Community

William Folmish (1931-75) served as a Battery Commander and staff officer in the Aleutians and Europe during World War II. Under his guidance, growth continued. Two Sunday services were instituted. An associate-assistant pastor was added to the staff. Basking Ridge had become a bedroom community for large corporations. Parishioners came and went in great numbers, as breadwinners transferred jobs.

A new organ was built. The music program grew to unprecedented proportions to include three singing choirs and three bell choirs. The church sanctuary was completely rebuilt (1951) and the new Education Building and Memorial Chapel (1954-55) were built.

In 1954, the church's support for the Italian Ministry paid off, as the first Presbyterian Church of Bernardsville was formed in its place, with the Rev. Donald Pepper, the church's pastor for missions, named as its first minister.

In 1961, James E. Morris (Waynesburg College, McCormick Seminary) became associate pastor, attending the pastoral and educational duties of the ministry. In 1967, the church added a modern, spacious Church House, the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harris Willis, providing office space, meeting rooms, a library, serving church and community alike.

During Folmish's tenure, membership grew from 970 (1951) to 1,833 (1968), the most ever. Yet, the community had changed as major highways and large industry moved into the area. The population became still more transient. In 1969 alone, in a growing church, some 100 members transferred to other churches. Yet, financial support grew.

Since 1975, J. Calvin K. Jackson has served as senior pastor. A dynamic speaker, writer, a gentleman and peace-maker, he exemplifies the highest values of the Presbyterian tradition. Son of a pastor, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and

Princeton Seminary, who attended the University of Edinburgh and traveled extensively in the Middle East, Jackson brought the talents and the sense of mission necessary to face the challenges of a changing society.

Innovative programs were introduced: a Fall Festival, a Sunday Forum, Kerygma classes, the "Maine" work camp for teen-agers, and "renewal weekends" increased membership involvement in the church's mission.

In 1975, the church was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. In 1980, the Sessions made the music available for the Women's Resource Center as a shelter for victims of domestic violence. In 1986, the church added a second associate pastor to administer the church's youth program. The Rev. Pam McNally (California State University at Sacramento and San Francisco Theological Seminary) has held this position since 1991.

The church has one of the leading musical programs in Northern New Jersey. J. Paul Dickey became music director in 1969, entered the Army in 1970, and returned in 1974. He and associate director Nancy Childs Knobloch administer six singing choirs and four bell choirs. In April, Dickey conducted the 50-voice Oratorio Choir (accompanied by a 35-piece orchestra) in Dabot's Seven Last Words of Christ and Mendelssohn's Christus.

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SHOP AT HOME SERVICE

Public invited to historic walks, folklore programs

The Great Swamp Folklore Project will present three public folklore programs in coming days. The public is invited to attend and participate in these programs.

At 2:15 p.m. Sunday, May 31 in the Madison Public Library, 39 Keep St., Basking Ridge resident Jack Wishing will share Great Swamp folk characters, folklore and demonstrate how prehistoric Native Americans might have killed mastodons near glacial Lake Passaic.

Wishing will describe several mysteries and folklore characters existing in the Madison area.

The public is asked to make reservations since space is limited. Call the library at (201) 377-4722 to make reservations.

On Saturday, June 13, near Liberty Corner, Wishing will lead a "living history" walk along a portion of the historic Continental Army Road, or stage coach road.

Volunteers, authentically dressed as Continental Army soldiers, will accompany the walkers, answer questions about the war and French General Rochambeau's march, and be available for photographs. Several important historical sites along the walk will be described.

The cost of this walk is \$10 for single walkers, couples or families. Ticket proceeds will be presented to several historic preservation organizations.

Reservations and pre-paid tickets are required. The number of walk participants is limited. For reservations, call (908) 758-5376.

At 1:30 p.m. on Sunday, June 14 the Morris County Park Commission's Great Swamp Outdoor Education Center will lead a living history folklore walk on Pyramid Mountain north of Beacon.

Walkers will meet the Robin Hood of New Jersey, two well known 1776 patriots who'll talk about the revolt and other interesting folk characters. Pyramid Mountain has excellent walking trails.

For more information about this walk and its starting point, call Sue Marchand, Great Swamp Outdoor Education Center in Chatham Township, (201) 635-6629.

Popular instrumentalist to appear at library

BERNARDSVILLE — Walt Michael, traditional instrumentalist and singer, will appear at the Bernardsville Public Library at 10:30 a.m. Saturday, June 13.

Tickets for 50 cents are now available at the library.

Michael's various musical incarnations have taken traditional string band music from the coal camps of Appalachia to the closing ceremonies of the 19th Olympic Games.

He has made recent appearances at Wolf Trap, The Kennedy Center, The Metropolitan Museum, and a BBC Radio concert from Cîteaux, Carle in Astor, Scotland. His music has been heard on ABC-TV (to 90 million worldwide audience watching the Olympic Closing Ceremonies), NBC's Tonight Show, PBS, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Broadway, the Nashville Network and NPR's Prairie Home Companion.

Michael will be featuring music from "Step Sisters," his most recent release on Flying Fish Records.

Bike helmet sale raise funds for safety videos

BERNARDS TWP. Through the sale of helmets for bicycle riders, the Liberty Corner School Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) was able to raise \$700 for the purchase of educational video tapes for the community.

According to the PTA, the bike helmets were sold through the school during the month of May, which was Bicycle Safety Month.

A total of 150 helmets were sold, which cost \$25 each, then donated \$25 to the PTA with the money to be used for the educational purposes.

The PTA will be donating the money to the police department. Township Crime Prevention Officer Patrolman Dennis Meit will use the money to acquire video tapes on safety that will be used throughout the school district.

As part of bike safety month, the PTA had scheduled a bike riding at the William Annin School park lot earlier in the month. The event was cancelled, however, due to inclement weather and dangerous ground conditions and will be rescheduled later in the year, probably during September, at a date to be announced.

Harness joins Penn's staff

Barbara Harness of Bernardsville has joined the legislative staff of Assemblyman John Penn, R-Somerset, in Somerset.

Harness was former office manager for state Senator John H. Ewing. During her many years with Senator Ewing she had extensive experience in constituent services and her knowledge will be an asset to my office and to my constituents," said Penn.

Harness is married to Charles R. Harness, an executive with Warner Lambert Corp. The couple has two sons.

She is a member of St. Bernard's Parish and a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

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