ST. THOMAS' PROTESTANT EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF WASHINGTON COUNTY

The First Church in Western Pennsylvania

By Charles W. Dahlinger

It is not generally known that the Episcopalians organized the pioneer church west of the Alleghany Mountains where the English language was used, and erected the first house of worship in that entire territory. Only the little church at the Moravian Indian Mission on the Beaver River, and the churches at the Moravian Indian Missions in the Tuscarawas Valley in the present State of Ohio antedated it. The German Reformed Church in German township, Fayette County, was built in 1770, the year of the construction of St. Thomas' Church.

At an early day in what is now West Pike Township, Washington County, but which was then part of Youghiogheny County, Virginia, there was a settlement of Church of England people, the leading man among them being Jonathan West. Some years before the Revolution they organized a parish and built a log church on Mr. West's farm seven miles from Brownsville and twenty-six miles from Pittsburgh, on the path which is today the Brownsville and Pittsburgh road. It was called St. Thomas' Church. Rev. J. P. Norman, M. D., who was rector of the church from 1872 to 1875, in connection with ministering to St. Paul's Church in Monongahela City, and St. John's Church in West Brownsville, in an address delivered on November 15, 1915, before the Historical Society of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh, said that the date cut on a log in the front of the church was 1770, which would indicate that this was the...
year of its erection. Alfred Creigh, in his *History of Washington County*, on what authority is not known, gives the date as 1777. The building was situated on the summit of a long steep hill, was almost square, being thirty feet long by twenty-six or twenty-seven feet in width, and was two stories in height with a gallery inside for the slaves, which went around three sides of the building. The stairs leading to the gallery were inside of the church. Some years after the church was erected, Thomas West, who then owned the farm on which it stood, for the nominal consideration of five shillings, conveyed the church and the acre of land by which it was surrounded, to Thomas Dowler, William Crawford, Henry Gregg, John Gregg, Frederick Cooper, Jacob Springer, James Ellis, Edward Morton, Robert Kerr, William Riggs, Jacob Crabs and John Housh, vestrymen and trustees of the church. The Rev. Robert Ayres was the first rector of whom there is any knowledge. The church and the rector are both of peculiar interest, because in front of this building and by this rector, in 1794, during the darkest days of the Whisky Insurrection, a decided stand was taken in favor of law and order. Creigh (2) tells the story: While the insurgents were marching toward Parkison's Ferry, now Monongahela City, they stopped at the church, in which Mr. Ayres was then preaching, and for his sentiments, he advocating the loyalty of the citizens toward the government, the insurgents took him from the pulpit, determined to shoot him, but finally set him free, when he returned to the church and finished his sermon.

In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, St. Thomas' Church was the most important Episcopal Church in Western Pennsylvania, far outranking Trinity Church, the first Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh. It was here that in 1819 the few Episcopal clergymen in Western Pennsylvania met and set in motion a movement for the organization of a diocese for the Western country to comprise the western counties of Pennsylvania and Virginia, and the state of Ohio, which resulted eight years later in the formation of the Diocese of Ohio.

The Episcopalians were liberal in the use of their building, and at intervals for many years, other denominations were permitted to worship there. Thus services were held in the church by Old-school Presbyterians, by Cumberland Presbyterians, by Free-will Baptists and by others. In 1870 when Creigh wrote, the church had been weather-boarded on the outside, had plastered walls and was ceiled overhead. A unique feature was a stone in the gallery, seventeen inches by twenty in size, on which was inscribed: "Surely the Lord
All that remained of St. Thomas' Church in 1915. Members of the Historical Society of the Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh are in the foreground.
is here. How dreadful is this place. This is no other but the house of God and gate of heaven. A. D. 1791."

In the later years of the church’s existence Episcopal services were held there only intermittently. When Mr. Norman was rector he conducted services monthly, which were well attended. Locally the church was also known as the “Old West Church,” after the West family, who generation after generation worshipped there. They kept the church in repair, and when they died or moved away it fell into disuse, and thirty-five or forty years ago was abandoned. Today only the frame work of badly rotted logs remains, and the surrounding land, and the graves of the pioneers are shaded by a growth of sumacs and young trees. The ground is enclosed by the remains of a stone wall, in many places fallen into decay, and is covered with coarse grass; and myrtle, symbol of love and death, creeps over the graves.