THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN PITTSBURGH

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If the object of this sketch were to pamper Presbyterian pride rather than to trace historical continuity of development, it might be said that the beginnings of Pittsburgh Presbyterianism date from the first sermon preached by a Presbyterian chaplain at the newly named Fort Pitt. The burning of Fort Duquesne by the retreating French on November 28, 1758, altered for years the entire religious outlook of Pittsburgh and shifted the major responsibility from the Catholics to the Protestants. As Father Andrew A. Lambing points out, the French garrison at Fort Duquesne regularly received ministrations from Catholic clergymen, who kept accurate records of baptisms and deaths. These records form the earliest religious source material for the Pittsburgh section. But to the Protestant English, the French and Indian War had something of the aspect of a religious struggle. General Forbes was not loath to take advantage of this inevitable combination of religious zeal and patriotism. While he was levying forces for the contemplated expedition against Fort Duquesne he encouraged the Reverend Dr. William Smith, provost

1 Read at the joint meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association and the annual history conference sponsored by the history department and the extension division of the University of Pittsburgh on April 19, 1935. The Reverend Mr. McKinney is the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Ambridge, Pennsylvania, and is a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh. Ed.

of the College of Philadelphia, to publish broadcast an address in which this pugnacious clergyman declared: “Never was the Protestant Cause in a more desperate situation... Rise then, my countrymen! as you value the blessings you enjoy, and dread the evils that hang over you, rise and shew yourselves worthy of the name of Britons!”

It was natural that a representative of the belligerent Presbyterians should be the chaplain of Colonel William Clapham’s regiment of Pennsylvania troops in the Forbes expedition. To that clergyman, the Reverend Charles Beatty, was given the honor of preaching the first Presbyterian sermon at the newly named post of Pittsburgh in 1758. It was a service of thanksgiving for the kind providence that had made possible the destruction of Fort Duquesne without bloodshed and loss of precious Protestant lives. Two years later the Synod of New York and Philadelphia appointed the Reverend Hector Alison and the Reverend Alexander McDowell to serve as chaplains in the renewed struggles centering around Fort Pitt. It would be agreeable to think that the labors of these two chaplains stimulated in the hearts of Pittsburgh laymen a desire for continued religious fellowship. The only authentic bit of evidence on this point, however, is a suggestive comment made in the journal of James Kenny, a Quaker merchant. He arrived in Pittsburgh on May 16, 1761, and throughout his three-year visit he kept a little diary enlivened by interesting data on the religious, social, and economic life of the village. He relates that during the fall and winter of his first year’s stay in Pittsburgh, “Many of ye Inhabitants here... hired a School Master... (he being a Prisbiterant)” to lead them in public worship on the first day of each week. This is the first recorded evidence of regular worship under Presbyterian leadership in Pittsburgh. The pulpit resources of this unnamed teacher were probably quite meager; for Kenny states that he read from “ye Littany & Common Prayer,” an Episcopalian, not a Presbyterian, book of worship. The result was encouraging, however, since Kenny declares that “on ye occasion ye Children also are brought

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to Church as they Call it,” and describes the congregation as men “of different Principels” who “behave very Grave.”

In 1766 another Presbyterian preacher, the Reverend James Maclagan, served in the capacity of chaplain to the English garrison at Fort Pitt and probably preached with some regularity to the settlers clinging close to the protection of the fort. Matthew Clarkson, a Philadelphia fur trader who visited Fort Pitt in August, 1766, records his reactions to a sermon delivered by this renowned Scottish preacher. He was not very favorably impressed, as he writes that he “heard Mr. M’Cleggan preach to the soldiers in Erse—but little edified.” In further explanation he adds that Maclagan “preaches alternately one Sunday in that language, and the next in English.” Presbyterians might take particular pride in the frequent use of Presbyterian chaplains and conclude that Presbyterianism was predestined to be the dominant religion of Pittsburgh, were it not for the uniformity with which early travelers comment upon the almost total lack of evidences of regeneration in the lives of both soldiers and citizenry.

Perhaps the earliest organized effort that the Presbyterian church undertook for the evangelization of the frontier inhabitants in the vicinity of Pittsburgh was the visit of the Reverend Charles Beatty and the Reverend George Duffield during the year 1766. Three years earlier the Synod of New York and Philadelphia had appointed Beatty and John Brainerd to “preach to the distressed frontier inhabitants, and to report their distresses, and to let us know where new congregations are a forming, and what is necessary to be done to promote the spread of the gospel among them.” But the bloody deluge of Pontiac’s Conspiracy prevented the undertaking. The commission was renewed in 1766 and Beatty, accompanied by Duffield, set forth on a tour of exploration that was to result in the formation by the Presbyterian Synod of a program of mission-

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ary activities throughout western Pennsylvania. The two men reached Fort Pitt on Friday, September 5, and were courteously received by the commanding officer, Captain William Murray, who introduced them to Maclagan, chaplain to the Forty-second Regiment, part of which was stationed at the fort. On Sunday morning, as recorded in his diary, Beatty “preached in the forenoon, to the garrison in the fort, while Mr. Duffield, at the same time, preached to the people, who live in some kind of a town without the fort, to whom I also preached in the afternoon.” Matthew Clarkson, the Philadelphia merchant to whom reference has already been made, reports that on Tuesday evening he heard Duffield preach “in the town a very judicious and alarming discourse.” These two preachers left Pittsburgh the following day and continued their journey some 130 miles to the Indians on the Muskingum River. The historic importance of their tour does not lie in the religious quickening of Pittsburgh so much as in the response of the synod to their report. The minutes read: “Messrs. Beatty and Duffield . . . found on the frontiers numbers of people earnestly desirous of forming themselves into congregations, and declaring their willingness to exert their utmost in order to have the gospel among them, but in circumstances exceedingly distressing and necessitous from the late calamities of the war in these parts.”

The report developed within the synod and its constituent presbyteries a new sense of responsibility for the spiritual welfare of western Pennsylvania. As a result there is not a single year from 1767 until the organization of the Redstone Presbytery in 1781 that some missionary was not sent from either the synod or the Presbytery of Donegal to labor west of the Allegheny Mountains for limited periods of evangelistic services. The indefiniteness of the instructions given and the meager reports quoted in the minutes of the synod make it impossible to determine the exact communities in which these men preached or the num-

7 Presbyterian Church, Records, 325, 362, 375; Beatty, Journal, 29, 30; Clarkson, in Schoolcraft, Indian Tribes, 273; Dahlinger, Fort Pitt, 27. Much of the information on missionary activities before 1776 in this and the following paragraphs is based on Thomas C. Pears, Jr., “The Foundations of Our Modern Zion—the Pre-Redstone Period,” in the Presbyterian Historical Society, Journal, 16: 146–159 (December, 1934).
ber of missionaries who visited Pittsburgh. Until other research materials are uncovered the six years from 1766 to 1772 must remain veiled in obscurity, but it may be believed that some of the missionaries commissioned by the Presbyterian church occasionally visited Fort Pitt and that a few faithful souls attempted to keep burning the lamp of faith while they prayed for greater religious privileges. With the year 1772 uncertainty gives way to definite historical information. It was in that year that the first organized Presbyterian church in Pittsburgh began a long period of discouraging struggle for a precarious existence. The chief light upon this period is thrown by the illuminating journal of the Reverend David McClure. This journal is a fairly well-known attractively printed book, but up to within very recent months it has been strangely overlooked by local church historians.

David McClure, in company with his friend, the Reverend Levi Frisbie, reached Pittsburgh on August 19, 1772. These two New England preachers had been ordained a few months before and had received from the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge a commission to visit the Indians on the Muskingum. The ill health of Frisbie detained him in Pittsburgh, and McClure set out to visit the Indians alone. Circumstances did not appear favorable for the contemplated missionary work among the Indians, however, and he temporarily abandoned the enterprise and returned to Pittsburgh. During McClure's absence, Frisbie preached regularly both in Pittsburgh and at Long Run near Irwin, where McClure reports that a small house for public worship had already been built. This is the first mention of a Presbyterian church in the vicinity of Pittsburgh. With the return of McClure these two Presbyterian preachers decided to minister to the religious needs of the Presbyterians on the western frontier for an indefinite period. Frisbie's work was in Pittsburgh and Long Run, whereas McClure preached each week to the scattered settlements up the Youghiogheny River. Later the ill health of McClure caused him to exchange responsibilities with Frisbie, since he felt that it was much easier to preach at Pittsburgh and Long Run. In order that there should be no question of their proper ecclesiastical standing these men applied for membership in
the Presbytery of Donegal, and, after a careful examination and their acceptance of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Catechism, and the Presbyterian form of church government, they were accorded good and regular standing.\footnote{David McClure, \textit{Diary \ldots 1748–1820}, 26, 45, 49, 83–86, 100, 101, 108, 113 (New York, 1899); Presbytery of Donegal, \textit{“Minutes,”} April, 1773 (Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia).}

That Pittsburgh was at this time in dire need of some form of religious ministry is evident. Two months before the coming of McClure and Frisbie, the Reverend David Jones, a Baptist minister from Delaware, had preached several times in Pittsburgh, where he had arrived on June 2. In his journal he remarks sadly: “The army was without a chaplain, nor was the town supplied with any minister. Part of the inhabitants ... are lamentably dissolute in their morals.” These observations are confirmed by McClure, who, in listing the officers at Fort Pitt, fails to mention the name of any chaplain and whose Christian sensibilities were shocked by moral conditions. A few sentences from his journal are illustrative: “The inhabitants of this place are very dissipated. They seem to feel themselves beyond the arm of government, & freed from the restraining influence of religion. It is the resort of Indian traders, & many here have escaped from Justice & from Creditors, in the old settlements.” In “this frontier of depravity” McClure and his companion began their labors, which extended over a period of nearly nine months. But the situation was not altogether disheartening. Captain Charles Edmonstone, commander of Fort Pitt, received them politely and confided: “I am a Christian, & therefore please to command me in anything, in which I may serve you.” These men found “a few fearers of God & friends of religion” who encouraged them to make Pittsburgh the center of their missionary labors. There is no direct evidence that a church was formally organized at this time, but the deduction seems inevitable from the fact that each Sunday one or the other of these two men, usually Frisbie, preached in Pittsburgh. The other was free to roam over a wide territory east of the Monongahela River. When he was leaving the Ohio country in June, 1773, McClure thus summarized the results of his labors: “We had the satisfaction, if I may so express it, of planting the seeds of some future churches, by forming
several settlements into something like ecclesiastical order, during 7 or 8 months of our preaching among them. May the good Lord, raise up & send forth faithful labourers into this part of his vineyard."

In McClure's diary is the first mention of some of the men whose names figure prominently in the subsequent activity of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh. One of these was Jonathan Plumer, whose descendants are still distinguished religious workers. Of Plumer, McClure wrote: "We found, however, a happy few who live in the fear of God, & maintain their integrity, particularly a Mr. Jonathan Plumer & his family. . . . In his family, which is numerous & laborious, the life of religion is duly maintained. The dissipated respect him for his goodness & benevolence; but by way of reproach, give him the name of Solomon. He was the first man who found us on our arrival, & treated us with every possible mark of attention & kindness, in his power." McClure also mentions John Gibson, one of the ten trustees whose names appear on the original charter of the First Presbyterian Church issued in 1787, who endeared himself to the community by much kindness and helpful service. A third prominent figure was Aeneas Mackay, at whose home McClure lodged during his entire stay in Pittsburgh. McClure describes him as "a friendly social and high spirited Scotchman . . . the friend of order and religion, or the form of it," and states that his was "one of the most orderly and respectable families in the place." Mackay entered the service of his country during the Revolutionary struggle, but died in 1777 after a march with his regiment from Kittanning to Philadelphia. Unless it is concluded that regular preaching over a period of months continued without any form of church organization and that these distinguished Christians delayed several years before developing the form of a church, it is justifiable to date the organization of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh from the fall of 1772, when Frisbie began his joint pastorate at Pittsburgh and Long Run.

Further evidence that the labors of McClure and Frisbie resulted in a regularly organized church appears in the numerous appeals for preaching that Pittsburgh made to the Presbyteries of Donegal and New Castle

9 David Jones, A Journal of Two Visits Made to Some Nations of Indians, 20 (Sabin's Reprints, no. 2—New York, 1865); McClure, Diary, 43, 45, 53, 54, 124.
10 McClure, Diary, 53, 102.
after the departure of these two itinerant preachers. Before the coming of McClure and Frisbie there is no mention in the minutes of these presbyteries of any pleas for ministerial services from Pittsburgh. But with their departure the requests became numerous and so insistent that supply preachers were sent again and again in direct response to the supplications of a group of Presbyterians in Pittsburgh. For example, in April, 1773, the Presbytery of Donegal considered the request of Pittsburgh for a preacher and appointed a Mr. McFerrin to preach on the third Sunday in November. The following year Messrs. Vance and Black were sent in response to a similar plea to preach at Fort Pitt, and other places at their discretion. Again in 1775 Messrs. McKnight, Slemons, Farquhar, King, and Linn were instructed to visit various specified places, including Pittsburgh. On the second Sunday of September of that same year the Reverend John McMillan preached at Fort Pitt. In the light of these and similar facts it seems reasonable to visualize a small Presbyterian church struggling for existence in the face of numerous discouragements, not the least of which was the misgovernment of Dr. John Connolly and his antagonism to Scotch-Irish Presbyterians.\(^\text{11}\)

With the year 1776 ushering in the Revolutionary War and the enlistment in the government service of the fighting Presbyterians, religious activity again sinks below the vision of the church historian. The winning of the struggle for independence absorbed the energies of a courageous group who were destined to play an important part in the ultimate decision on the field of battle. From 1776 to 1784 there is no mention in any of the denominational records of any Presbyterian religious activity in Pittsburgh. The labors of Frisbie and McClure were temporarily obliterated, and it is impossible to trace any continuity of an organized church through these years of obscurity. The diaries of occasional travelers do not paint a very encouraging picture either of morals or of religion. Dr. Johann David Schöpf, who came to Pittsburgh on September 6, 1783, and remained seven days, was unable to discover any houses of public worship. He reports that "a German preacher lives there, who ministers to all of

\(^{11}\) Presbytery of Donegal, "Minutes," April, 1773; April, 1774; April, 1775; John McMillan, "Journal ... from October 26, 1774, to ... August 6, 1776," in Presbyterian Historical Society, Journal, 15:228 (March, 1933); McClure, Diary, 122.
the faith.” That venturesome preacher was the Reverend Wilhelm Weber, who is credited with having established the German Evangelical Church in 1782. Arthur Lee’s subsequent observation in his diary on December 17, 1784, that in the town of Pittsburgh there was “not a priest of any persuasion, nor church, nor chapel” is not generally regarded as strictly accurate, but it at least reflects a very dormant religious condition in harmony with his oft-quoted witticism that the people were “likely to be damned, without the benefit of clergy.”

Though Presbyterianism in Pittsburgh from 1776 to 1784 was almost quiescent, that same period witnessed a rapid development of new Presbyterian churches throughout southwestern Pennsylvania. The famous “Four Horsemen of Western Pennsylvania Presbyterianism,” James Power, John McMillan, Thaddeus Dodd, and Joseph Smith, had settled permanently in widely separated fields of labor between 1776 and 1779. Two years later, on September 19, 1781, at Pigeon Creek in Washington County they had established the Redstone Presbytery, which accepted the spiritual responsibility for the rapidly developing western frontier. Their numbers had been augmented in 1782 by the arrival of the Reverend James Dunlap at Dunlap’s Creek and Laurel Hill and still further strengthened in 1783 by the presence of the Reverend John Clark at Bethel and Lebanon and by the arrival of the Reverend James Finley as pastor of the Round Hill and Rehoboth churches. The labors of these seven pioneer Presbyterian preachers resulted in the development of a number of strong rural churches and in the elevation of the moral tone of the surrounding communities. But Pittsburgh with its population of traders and adventurers remained morally isolated. Dr. Joseph Smith says: “Had a traveler...confined his visits and his observations to towns and villages he might have inferred that he had got into a heathenish land... Had some one, on the other hand, carried him round the country churches... he would have thought that he had got into an earthly Canaan!” There is no record that these ministers made any effort to stimulate the religious life of Pittsburgh throughout the period from 1777 to 1784. Perhaps their energies were absorbed in their expanding rural

12 Johann D. Schöpf, *Travels in the Confederation*, 1:244 (Philadelphia, 1911).
fields or perhaps they purposely sought more responsive opportunities of evangelism. In fact one of the zealous Presbyterian laymen of that period, John Wilkins, resented this apparent indifference to the spiritual needs of Pittsburgh. When he settled in Pittsburgh in October, 1783, he found this discouraging situation: "All sorts of wickedness were carried on to excess, and there was no appearance of morality or regular order. . . . There appeared to be no signs of religion among the people, and it seemed to me that the Presbyterian ministers were afraid to come to the place lest they should be mocked or mistreated."14

But better days were dawning for Pittsburgh Presbyterianism. The close of the war resulted in an influx of aggressive leaders, who were soon to play notable parts in the development of the city's future greatness. The years 1783 and 1784 witnessed the presence of a group of army officers, who had either returned to Pittsburgh or who went there for the first time to establish their fortunes at the commercial gateway to the West. These years were notable also for new beginnings. Among the pioneers in rekindling Presbyterian activity was John Wilkins, who removed from Carlisle to Pittsburgh in October, 1783. In his autobiographical letter, previously quoted, he recalls that he "often hinted to the creditable part of the people that something ought to be done toward establishing a Presbyterian church in this place and encouraging it." Whether through his energetic initiative or that of other unnamed fellow communicants, a formal plea was presented to the Redstone Presbytery on April 13, 1784, for the services of a clergyman. The request was answered by the appointment of the Reverend Joseph Smith to preach "at Pittsburgh the 4th Sab. of August." No record remains of the results of this first sermon preached in Pittsburgh under the direction of the Redstone Presbytery. It may be surmised, though there is no supporting evidence, that Smith organized the little group of worshipers into a Presbyterian congregation. In October of that same year a second request for preaching was presented to the presbytery, and James Power

14 Presbytery of Redstone, Minutes . . . September 19, 1781, to December, 1831, 3, 47 (Cincinnati, 1878); Joseph Smith, Old Redstone; or, Historical Sketches of Western Presbyterianism, 218 (Philadelphia, 1854); Wilkins, in Centennial Volume of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh, Pa., 17 (Pittsburgh, 1884). Sketches of the lives of the seven pioneer preachers are in Smith, Old Redstone.
was appointed to preach on the fifth Sunday of October and Joseph Smith, "one day at discretion." Power failed to fulfill his appointment and made adequate explanation to the presbytery.¹⁵

During the following year Pittsburgh Presbyterians were blessed with the arrival of the man who subsequently became their first regularly installed pastor. The Reverend Samuel Barr, who had been licensed that spring by the Presbytery of New Castle, immediately visited Pittsburgh, where he found a group of worshipers who desired his services. Throughout that entire summer he preached satisfactorily to his meager congregation. On December 21, 1785, he presented to Redstone Presbytery a call for his services from the "united congregations of Pittsburgh and Pittstownship." He continued as pastor for a little over four years, but left in the fall of 1790. In April, 1787, an unpretentious log church was erected upon ground donated by the Penns; the property was deeded September 24, 1787; and on September 29 of that same year the church was incorporated by charter from the commonwealth of Pennsylvania.¹⁶

Space does not remain in which to summarize those four years of service during which the First Presbyterian Church was established on its present site. Suffice it to say that for Samuel Barr it was a period of turmoil, both within the congregation and with his brethren in the presbytery. Charges were hurled back and forth but, in his trial before the Synod of Virginia, Barr was completely exonerated of all charges of irregular practices. His accusers appeared in a most unfavorable light and were ordered by the synod to be publicly reprimanded from the pulpit and suspended from their church privileges until they showed evidence of repentance. It is only recently that the complete report of this trial before the committee of the synod has become available. This newer information corrects the false impressions formerly given in previous historical sketches of Pittsburgh Presbyterianism.¹⁷ To summarize these more recent find-

¹⁵ Centennial Volume, 175; Presbytery of Redstone, Minutes, 11, 12, 13, 15.
¹⁶ Presbytery of Redstone, Minutes, 20, 69; Pennsylvania, Statutes at Large, 1682–1809, vol. 12, p. 591; Synod of Virginia, Minutes,” 38 (Union Theological Seminary, Richmond), Dahlinger, Fort Pitt, 54. The Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, has photostatic reproductions of the minutes of the Synod of Virginia from October 22, 1788, to September 28, 1791, and transcripts for the same period are in the possession of the author.
¹⁷ The record of this trial is in Synod of Virginia, "Minutes," 20–42, 58.
ings would be a most pleasant and interesting task, but it is not the province of this article to go beyond the establishment of this First Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. The year 1787, when that church, with a regularly installed pastor, acquired a charter from the state and a commodious log building, may be said to conclude the period of the beginnings of Presbyterian evangelism in Pittsburgh.