

COME, COME TO THE LITTLE STONE CHURCH ON THE RIDGE

As the settlers moved from the Atlantic Coast inland, they develop patterns for establishing themselves that were repeated each time families or groups of families found a place to call home. Trees had to be cut to clear land for planting crops, cabins built, schools and churches established, with one building sometimes serving both purposes. The settlers did not seem to be so concerned about the separation of church and state as we are now. Stores and newspaper offices had to be built and if there was a stream nearby, a mill was built with a water-powered wheel to turn the stones that ground grain into flour. The same water wheel could power a gang-saw that would turn logs into planks. Most other building supplies were found nearby, such as stone that could be quarried, clay to make bricks, and sand and gravel to make mortar and cement.

The settlers' path to uncharted lands was usually a stream of water and a crude boat. If no stream was available, they followed an Indian trail on foot with pack animals. When the Erie Canal was finished in 1826 this gave the settlers a veritable thoroughfare for all kinds of boats. The towpath was a fairly smooth boulevard for foot traffic and pack animals.

Thus it was that Titus Hall and his nephew, Sylvester Flagler, started their long walk from Washington County, NY, to Niagara County. They came to see the fertile fields of Niagara County, which were in stark contrast to the stony fields of Washington County. In May of 1826 their journey commenced. Our records only show that they walked, with no mention of where they slept or what they ate. Walking was the common mode of transportation during that era. The teams of horses and the buggies and wagons were needed at home, so if they wanted to travel, they walked. It would have been nice if they could have filled a sack with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and cans of pop. I do not think they had peanut butter and certainly they did not have canned pop. They probably did carry salt pork and bread, and some water. By 1826, both sides of the eastern and central sections of the canal were populated with inns, taverns, and farms that could supply food, water and a place to lie down. They liked what they saw and headed back to Washington County to make plans to move. No mention was made of how they got back. Did they walk? Did they catch a ride on a packet boat? We will never know.

In the spring of 1827, Titus sold his farm and everything that he could not pack into his recently purchased boat. He left room for his wife, Sarah and their five sons, hitched the team of horses to the boat and headed for Niagara County. The record shows that they ended their journey at Orangeport, traded their boat for a wagon and headed up the escarpment to Chestnut Ridge, settling at McNalls Corners. In 1829 they moved closer to Lockport near the T intersection of Keck Road and Chestnut Ridge. Like all settlers they cleared land, planted crops, and built a log cabin. Like most settlers Titus had a vocation other than farming, for he was a blacksmith.

Sylvester Flagler moved a few years later and purchased land on the southwest corner of Keck and Chestnut Ridge. They lived in a log cabin in the woods until 1839 when they

built the stone house on the Ridge, which is now home to the Hamilton family. Sylvester, with the aid of his wife, Abby, raised thirteen children. With the addition of another boy, Sarah and Titus were happy with six sons.

In the 1800's Chestnut Ridge Road was known as the Batavia or Lewiston Road, connecting these two villages. Perhaps they changed the name because there were so many chestnut trees along the way. Deeds to all property had to be recorded at the Holland Land Company in Batavia. Sylvester put his deed in a little leather satchel, along with some food, and walked to Batavia, recorded his deed and walked home. There is no record of how Titus recorded his deed. Perhaps he also walked or sent his oldest son, Thomas. Sylvester's great, great granddaughter, Rachel, still has the little satchel.

The Halls, Flaglers and their neighbors soon settled into the routine of farm life. They planted their crops, sent their children to the District #3 school, which is still standing at the intersection of Chestnut Ridge Road and Rochester Road. On Sundays drove into Lockport to attend the Methodist Church. One of the subjects that united and divided people, during this time, was slavery. There seemed to be three groups---Abolitionists, Pro Slavers, and Fence Straddlers, who did not want to get involved. Titus and his friends were Abolitionists. By 1833 their zealous opposition to slavery clashed with the Fence Straddlers of the Church to such a degree that Titus and friends left the Church and united with the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, which shared their views on slavery.

On January 27, 1834, at a meeting held at the District #3 School, the First Methodist Society was formed. Sunday services were held in the school house. By 1834 the congregation decided it needed a church building and a plan was developed. Titus donated a plot of land on the southwest corner of his farm for the church. The trustees appointed Titus as the supervisor of construction and he and his boys went to work. All the materials to build the church were available locally which included gravel and sand for the concrete and mortar from the John Wilson sandpit on the Wilson or Sandpit Road, stones for the walls from the Shuler Quarries at the corner of Cold Springs Road and Chestnut Ridge Road, and planks and timbers for the floor and roof from Lyman Spaulding's gang sawmill in the Canal Basin.

Titus kept a record of expenses in his journal. Some of the entries in his journal are as follows: 500 feet of planks, \$2.50; twelve staging poles, \$0.75; 18 pounds of nails, \$1.40. He paid for all of these items, added \$0.25 for each load he hauled and billed the trustees for the various amount. He boarded Samuel Rowling, probably a stone mason, for seven nights and fed him two meals and billed the trustees \$2.40. He furnished his team of horses, a two-handled dump scraper, and two of his sons who dug the basement, all for \$2.00 per day. His first entry for supplies for the church was August 14, 1834 and the last entry was July, 1835. Another entry was "Meeting House dedicated June 13, 1835. Elder Philmore preached from Isaiah 6:1-9." The dedication took place even though there were a few things to be done. The building was enlarged in 1866 and the early members referred to their church as The Chapel.

The little stone Chapel has occupied that plot of ground for 167 years, and, even though it is small in size, the congregation has always been a dedicated, active group of people. My great grandfather, John Hall, was brought up in the Chapel and even after moving to Transit Road, he attended services and was active in a leadership role. When my great grandfather died, my youngest aunt, Lucy Hall Pollock, drove my great grandmother to Sunday services from her home in South Transit. The little songbook, filled with words only, and the song leader have been replaced by a notebook computer perched on the altar. Press a button and the words appear on a screen hung from the ceiling. Press another button and CD player starts and away we go. Even though the Bible has been revised many times, the message is still the same.

In 1951 and 1952, when the First Baptist Church erected their new church building, my father, John A. Hall, was chairman of the building committee. He worked with contractors to see that they followed the plans, and also supervised the volunteer church members who painted, laid floor tile, and performed many other tasks.

So far, the little stone Chapel has avoided being turned into an antique emporium. Let's keep it that way.

John K. Hall (2002)
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