

## Chapter 1

### THE FOUNDING FATHERS

By 1840 slavery in the United States was rapidly becoming an issue about which no one could be neutral. The establishment of “The Liberator” by William Lloyd Garrison in 1831 for the purpose of leading people to think seriously about the slavery question was bearing fruit throughout the North. The brutality with which fugitive slave laws were enforced, and the stories told of the South, particularly of conditions in slave markets, added to the feeling. Everywhere those who were moved by the demand for the abolition of slavery began to press for action, and to do whatever they could wherever they were.

There was a station of the “Underground Railroad~” in Elmira. The work of this organization was stimulated by the fact that a runaway slave named John Jones came to Elmira in 1844 on his way to Canada. He was kindly treated and came to believe that no one in Elmira would report him. He stayed and became a kind of foundation stone in the Elmira station of the “Railroad.” A fascinating account of Jones’ career and a good deal of information about Elmira’s part in this route of escape is given in Clay Holmes’ book “The Elmira Prison Camn.”

As a part of all this foment over slavery certain members of the First Presbyterian Church in Elmira wished to have the church on record as an antislavery church. They presented a petition which, if honored, would have had the desired result. The petition was tabled. To an ardent abolitionist this was no better than an open statement in favor of slavery. A contemporary record says that the minister of the First Church preached “certain sermons upon slavery which resulted in alienation of feeling.”

Those whose sense of justice and humanity were offended by these things began to think of breaking away and founding a new church — secondary accounts say “an anti-slavery” church, but the official records are less specific. They are models of parliamentary calm and decorum.

Under date of December 15, 1845, we read —The meeting, being organised by the appointment of Silas

Billings, Chairman. and T.B. Covel, Sec’y — was opened with prayers. After which Brs. Cleeves, Gould, Billings, Andrus and Selover expressed their views freely in relation to our present position as members of the Presbyterian Church and likewise on the subject of importance of taking measures for the organization of a new church. After a full discussion of the subject the following Resolution and Amendment was presented and carded.

“Resolved. That in view of the present state of things in this church, and the increasing population of the community in which we live — the interests of religion and the cause of Christ

require that measures be adopted preparatory to the organization of a new church in this place; *the following Amendment* was added. That a committee of four persons be appointed to consult with the pastor and session of the church with which we stand connected in regard to the subject contemplated in the forgoing Resolution — the Resolution and Amendment was unanimously adopted.

The following brethren were appointed as a committee:

S. G. Andrus, Ira Gould, Silas Billings, John Selover and Joshua Cleeves, after which the meeting adjourned to meet on Monday evening next at the home of S. G. Andrus to hear the report of the committee.

Closed with prayer.

T. B. Covell, Sec'y.

Silas Billings, Chairman.

The account of the second meeting held on December 22 reads as follows

Meeting convened at the house of S. G. Andrus and opened with prayer. S. Billings, Ch'n. and T. B. Covell, Secy.

“The committee appointed to consult with the pastor and session of the Presby. Church reported that they had met the session and had a free and full conversation with them on the subject of organising a New Church, and that the pastor and Session unanimously concurred with the committee in the opinion that in view of the difference of opinion on certain subjects which were known to exist between some of the brethren of the Presby. Ch. and in view of our increasing population that it is desirable that a new Church should be formed. And the Session as a pledge of their concurrence and cooperation in the enterprise — gave to the committee the following letters:— Meeting of Session Dec. 19, 1845

“Certain brethren having appeared before the Session for the purpose of conversing on the subject of organising a New Church the Session gave it as their opinion that it was expedient to organise a New Church, provided there was a reasonable prospect of sustaining it and they promise their countenance and cooperation to those who may wish to embark in the enterprise. The Session add that if any grievances are felt by any members of the church, they would be happy to do anything in their power to relieve them, whether a new organisation is formed or not.

S.

L. Gillette, Clerke.

‘Whereupon it was Resolved, that we will ask for letters of dismission from the Presbyterian Church for the purpose of being formed into a new church to be known as the Independent Congregational Church of Elmira. Closed with prayer.

T. B. Covell, Sec'y.

S. Billings, Chairman.

There is nothing in the records to give a glimpse of the thinking that led to the establishment of an “Independent Congregational Church” rather than just another Presbyterian Church as happened when another group broke away from the First Church some years later, but the choice was suitable. Being people of strong convictions on a still controversial subject, the founding fathers wanted no authority higher than the local church. It is also true that at the time Independent Congregational Churches all over the North were known as anti-slavery churches. The word seems to have been in common usage in Congregational circles.

On January 2, 1846, forty-one like-minded people asked for letters of dismissal from the First Presbyterian Church for the purpose of being organized into the new church. Although only forty letters were granted, it seems from a study of the records that the proceedings were conducted in good spirit, and that the new church had the blessing of the mother church.

The organization meeting of the new church was held January 3, 1846 in Temperance Hall, a drafty, wooden building at 258 Baldwin Street. Many years later a charter member of the church said of this place, “We would hardly think it fit for hens today.” Nine people from other churches joined with those having letters from the First Presbyterian Church. The one who had been refused a letter was also taken in because, as the record says, his letter had been refused “without any reasons assigned.”

At this meeting a constitution, confession of faith and by-laws were accepted. According to present day standards these documents seem unnecessarily long so we shall not quote them in full. The most important articles from the constitution were:

That each congregation of Christians meeting in one place and united by Covenant is a complete Church having no superior but the Lord Jesus, subject to no authority but his, and from him deriving the right to choose its own pastor and discipline its own members.

We maintain that the choice of pastor~ and deacons should be made by the whole church.

That the admission of persons to church fellowship and communion should be the act of the whole body.

These articles established the independent, congregational and democratic character of the church.

The confession of faith affirmed belief in the divine inspiration of the Bible, the Trinity, the doctrine that “our first parents” were made upright but voluntarily transgressed; that Jesus assumed the nature of man to make an atonement for the sins of the world; and that salvation came through repentance and faith. The confession also affirmed a belief in the divine establishment of the church, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the resurrection of the dead with life eternal for the righteous and eternal punishment for the wicked.

The confession further set forth the belief that faith was shown by works as follows:

Among the leading duties of the Christian are to be named the maintaining a sober industrious life, manifesting a meek and charitable conversation, the frequent and devout study of the scriptures, the sanctification of the Lord's Day and worship upon it, the habitual practice of secret and family prayer, and whatever pertains to domestic order and the religious education of children and youth.

Interesting articles from the by-laws were

That the using, holding, or trading in men as slaves is a sin in the sight of God, a great wrong to its subjects and a great moral and political evil inconsistent with the Christian profession. And that this church will admit no person into its pulpit or communion who is known to be guilty of the same.

Believing that intoxicating liquors are not only unnecessary but hurtful as a drink, and in view of the great evils which result from the same to the bodies and souls of men and more especially in view of the mischiefs which have arisen from this cause to the Church of Christ, they being a most frightful source of scandal and discipline therefore this church declare and agree as follows: That it is the solemn conviction of this church that the practice of using and trafficking in intoxicating liquors as a drink is morally wrong and that it is the duty of all such as profess to be Christ's disciples to abstain from and discourage such use and traffic. That we will not use intoxicating liquors ourselves nor furnish them for others except conscientiously as a medicine in case of bodily ailment nor will we traffic in them as an article of drink. And that it shall be a standing rule of this church that no person shall be received into it either by profession or letter who shall refuse assent to this article.

Nor will our members be allowed to attend theatres, balls, or dancing parties without subjecting themselves to the censure of the church.

These by-laws were revoked January 24, 1862.

On January 31, a business meeting was held and the following officers elected: Deacons — Thomas B. Covell, Stephen W. Hanford; Trustees Thomas L. Day and John M. Robinson for one year, Silas Billings and S. C. Andrus for two years, Philander Rexford and John Selover for three years. A "church committee" was also elected whose members were Dr. Lyman Smith, Jervis Langdon and John M. Robinson. S. G. Andrus and John Selover had been officers of the First Presbyterian Church.

The Rev. F. W. Graves was chosen pastor of the new church at an annual salary of \$600 and was in committee of the Chemung Presbytery. Here again the good will of the mother church is suggested; but wonder whether the members were yet as fully "congregational" as they were later to become.

A little later the mother church did discipline the daughter as the following record shows:

Feb. 5, 1846

The subject of some difficulty between this church and the Session of the Presbyterian Church growing out of the reception by this church of a member from that without a letter of dismission was presented and after full consideration of the whole matter the following Resolution was unanimously adopted. *Resolved* that this church, ever desiring to be orderly in the reception of members to our fellowship and communion and for the purpose of removing doubts which may have existed in the minds of any as well as for the declaration of what has always been the unanimous opinion of this church. To wit that regular letters of dismission will be required of persons wishing to unite with us from other churches in all cases where it may be practicable to obtain them and that we will not receive members from the Presbyterian Church in this place without such letters.

John Selover, Clerke

F. W. Graves, pastor Attests.

The Certificate of Incorporation of Trustees of the First Independent Congregational Church of Elmira was dated February 4, 1846 and recorded February 23, 1846 in the Chemung County Clerk's Office.

During the next few months some twenty people were added to the membership, but by November 1846 the little church found itself in difficulties.

At a meeting on November 10 an appointment was made that involved a curious combination of duties. "Be it resolved" the record reads, "that this church will pay H. Whittlesey \$40 per year for services as sexton. Also that said Whittlesey be allowed \$8 or the amount of his subscription for collecting the minister's salary the present year.

Later on in the same meeting it was found that the church owed the Rev. Mr. Graves \$35 back salary and was \$52 in arrears on other expenses. The following resolution was then passed:

In view of our feebleness both as to numbers and pecuniary resources it was Resolved, That in the opinion of this church it will not be in our power to raise a salary of \$600 for the Rev. F. W. Graves the coming year. Resolved, that a committee to consist of Doc. N. Smith. J. Langdon, J. M. Robinson and L.

G. Andrus be appointed to call on our pastor and inform him of this vote. And also that it is not the wish of this church that he should continue his pastoral relation with us after the expiration of the present year. Closed with prayer.

John Selover, Clerk

Up to this time there had been a steady growth in membership that seems in good proportion to the original numbers. Most of these additions were by letter from other churches, and we can but wonder how many of them came

because of the slavery issue. Throughout the church records of this period there appear again and again the names of men who are known to have been active in the part Elmira played in the Underground Railroad — Jervis Langdon, John M. Robinson, John Selover, S. G. Andrus. There can be no doubt that slavery was still a vital concern of the membership.

We have seen that within less than a year after its founding the little church found itself without a pastor and too poor to hire another one immediately. Nothing daunted, they passed the following resolution — “Resolved, that during the period that we may be without a stated supply of preaching, we do pledge ourselves to each other that we will sustain by our presence all the meetings of this church.”

For a year the church was without a pastor and then under date of the “First Sabbath in December, 1847”, we read — “Brother Jervis Langdon stated that during a recent absence from the place he had made inquiries relative to a minister of the Gospel who might be obtained as pastor of this church. From the best information he could obtain, he was in favor of immediately extending an invitation to the Rev. A. M. Ball to become our pastor. On motion the church voted to make out a call, which was accordingly done.”

Thus there comes into the record a clear glimpse of that leadership on the part of Jervis Langdon that was to be so important to the church, a leadership that would be carried on by his children and his grandchildren.

A part of the call to the Rev. Mr. Ball reads — We do cordially invite the Rev. A. M. Ball to become our pastor and spiritual teacher, and hereby pledge him our cooperation and support in the Lord and to supply the temporal necessities of himself and family, and promise him the sum of \$500 per year for the first year and more after that if his necessities shall demand it, and the Lord grant us the ability.

The Ball pastorate was one of progress. A lot known as the “Johnson Lot” on Baldwin Street was purchased with the intention of building a “suitable house of public worship.” A building committee was appointed and secured pledges of \$2,300 but, “owing to the sudden reverse in times,” the idea of a church was given up, and a lecture room only built on the “Johnson Lot.” This lecture room was modest enough, but it was an improvement on Temperance Hall. It was decided to rent “slips” in the hall as a means of defraying “contingent expenses.”

Slavery continued to be a concern of the church. Anti-slavery resolutions were passed, and a public anti-slavery lecture sponsored.

During this period Grandison A. Gridley was clerk of the church, thereby beginning another family’s service that has lasted to this day.

But the Ball pastorate was also fated to last but a year, the Rev. Mr. Ball resigning because of ill health.

A short pastorate on the part of the Rev. William Fairchild was followed by the pastorate of the Rev. William Bement, a graduate of Dartmouth College. In the call to the Rev. Mr. Bement \$800 was named as the salary “with the

proviso that the candidate be informed of our present inability to raise this sum, but that in accordance with a previous vote of the church, we will raise \$600 this year and hereafter as we may have ability until we shall be able to raise \$800.”

The Rev. Mr. Bement was a good choice and remained four years. During that time more than a hundred members were added to the rolls, and a church building erected adjoining Wisner Park on the northerly portion of the present site of The Park Church. This was a frame building facing Wisner Park and Main Street.

There is not a great deal in the records about this building, but several years after its demolition a member wrote — “A plain white desk in shape much like a big piano stool with a red cloth drapery was all the pulpit there was; long windows with diamond-shaped panes of red and yellow stained glass, very stiff—backed seats.”

The fifth generation of the Rev. William Bement’s family is now in The Park Church Sunday School.

Examples of what we may call the parental relationship of the church to its members in those days may be seen in the cases of a Mr. and Mrs. A, and a Dr. B. Mr. and Mrs. A. were living apart, and the church undertook to ~discover whether Mrs. A. had been justified in leaving the bed and board of her husband. A committee found that Mr. A. had “treated his wife with cruel and unchristian conduct” to a degree and extent that justified his suspension from the church for an indefinite period.

Later Mr. A. “fully acknowledged his faults, and manifested his sorrow and repentance for all the wrongs for which he had been suspended.” The record says that after a discussion “in which a good degree of candor and Christian spirit was manifested,” Mr. A. was restored to membership in the church. Whether he was also restored to his wife the record sayeth not.

Dr. B.’s trouble was with church doctrines. He had come to doubt the inspiration of the Scriptures, to regard vocal prayer as useless, and deny other tenets of the church. The church gave him an opportunity to present his views after which, “After serious deliberation and prayer for divine direction”, his membership in the church was “terminated.”

On May 12, 1854, the Rev. Mr. Bement asked to be relieved of his duties because of ill health. The church refused to accept his resignation, but granted him a six months leave of absence on half salary.

From the record,

Mr. John M. Robinson then stated that during a recent absence he had a conversation with the Rev. Thomas K. Beecher who had given him encouragement to occupy this pulpit during the absence of Mr. Bement. Thereupon the church voted to instruct Mr. Robinson to write Mr. Beecher, inviting him as a supply for the coming six months.

Here comes into the story for the first time mention of one who was to give his name to a truly remarkable period in the church’s history, and to become *a* beloved figure throughout the whole community.

Those who have studied the records of what may be called the pre-Beecher period of the church have come from the study with respect and affection for our founding fathers. They were men of conviction, courage and perseverance. They had to deal with human frailties, but they were determined that all things be done decently and in order, they were kindly affectioned to one another, and were greatly concerned with the Kingdom of God upon this earth.