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The West Danby
Baptist Church
(1810-1963)

By GERALD P. HOLMES



1963

DeWITT HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OF TOMPKINS COUNTY, INC.
ITHACA, NEW YORK

P R E F A C E

Originally I intended doing this history as a term paper for a course in Church History required by the Northeastern Bible Institute, Essex Falls, New Jersey, in which I am a student. Then I was asked by the curator of the DeWitt Historical Society to provide a copy for the society; and another request came from the Cornell Public (City) Library.

When I started on the project, I did not know how I could ever find enough data to write a paper about the West Danby Baptist Church which I had selected for my topic. But from old church records, from Mrs. Frances Todd who has a history of the Todd farm, and from material supplied by the historical society I was able to collect considerable information pertaining to the initial era.

In the study of early church records it was interesting to learn how strict was the discipline. If a brother was found not walking according to the way the church thought he should, the hand of fellowship was withdrawn and he was dismissed from the church.

I begin my paper with a reference to history of the Town of Danby for both church and town were started by the same men; therefore, they have been interlocked throughout this history

GERALD P. HOLMES

January 22, 1963

IN EXPLANATION

When this young Bible student came to the DeWitt Historical Society for aid in tracing the early history of West Danby Baptist Church which he loyally terms "my home church," he was asked to provide a copy of his term report for the society's archives. Completing his research and writing during a recess, he promptly filed the promised paper with the society.

Although the original copy is a special-purpose document, it lent itself to adaptation for a general-interest historical pamphlet. With a minimum of changes the results of this worthy effort is here offered as another in the lengthening series of such publications issued by the DeWitt Historical Society.

Not only does it present some significant history of this church, the pamphlet also serves as an illustration of what historically-minded young persons may do for their community or for some component of it. The value of such contributions may not loom large in the contemporary era, but a hundred years hence much of the data they record may well be unavailable.

With the printing of 200 copies of this record, preservation of its vital data is enhanced by its numbers. Today's set of official books is but a single source that may be destroyed by one stroke of misfortune; but with numerous copies of this unpretentious pamphlet lodged in libraries throughout the state, the historical record of this one small church is preserved—and conserved for those who may wish to use it in later years.

WILLIAM HEIDT, JR.

DeWitt Historical Society

SETTLEMENT OF WEST DANBY

Before we discuss the founding of West Danby, let us present a brief sketch of the fathers of two men who founded the community. Joseph Barker settled in Spencer in 1774, having come from the Wyoming Valley in Pennsylvania by an Indian trail along the Susquehanna. He cleared a spot in the Spencer wilderness and with the first trees felled he erected a log house, meanwhile subsisting with his family upon cracked corn and deer meat. He had a son named Moses Barker.

Phineas Spaulding was born in Woodstock, Vt., in 1759. He removed to Spencer about 1798 and to West Danby in 1807. His first wife was Rebecca Jaquith; his second, Miss Susanna Hodgekiss of Massachusetts, who became the mother of Amy Spaulding Barker. He had fought under Washington at Monmouth and suffered with him and his heroic army at Valley Forge during that winter of indescribable hardships from hunger and cold, when the blood from shoeless men, including himself, reddened snow and ice.

Spaulding was a Baptist clergyman and one of the fifteen pioneers who settled Spencer. He swung an ax to help fell trees for building the first Baptist Church in that locality, and aided in rolling the logs up into walls of the church. In this church he preached the first sermon at its dedication.

His wife died in 1832 at their home on the farm about three miles south of West Danby to which they moved from Spencer a quarter-century before. After the death of his wife, the Rev. Mr. Spaulding lived with

his children in West Danby, dying at the home of Moses Barker in 1839, aged 79. He is buried in the old cemetery at Spencer.

Since it was first settled, West Danby has been a rich farming area; a century ago Danby led the towns of the county in production of hay and grain and ranked high among other agricultural products. In its early days it was widely known for its farms and farmers.

Today's Todd farm is one of the county's most historic; it has been in the family more than a hundred years and is now being operated by Milton Todd.

West Danby is a hamlet situated on the Cayuga Inlet and was a station of the Geneva and Sayre branch of the Lehigh Valley Railroad. Its start, so far as the historical record is concerned, began in 1807 when Moses Barker became the first settler in the area. Some years later Jared Patchen built the first dwelling near where Barker settled, bought a farm in 1828 and raised a family.

Ira, one of his sons, lived in the community and in 1850 erected a building, established and conducted Patchen's General Store for thirty years. In the 1880's it was burned. The old Patchen farm is owned by Lawrence Kortright.

Other enterprises operated in the hamlet included a small sawmill owned by John Banfield; a novelty shop which had "everything imaginable." With F. A. Fairbrother as postmaster, the office was next door to the Patchen store. Another merchant was A. J. Tupper. Some years after the general store was burned, Banfield erected a store building on the original site that is now used as the post office and West Danby Grange Hall.

Also in the West Danby community during most of its mid-history were two churches, a Methodist Episcopal and a Baptist.

FOUNDING OF THE BAPTIST CHURCH

Moses Barker, son of Joseph Barker, and his wife Amy Spaulding Barker removed from Spencer to West Danby in 1808, guided by marked trees along the forest trail for the last three miles. Two years later he organized the West Danby Baptist Church, official leadership of which in 1821 was moved to Ithaca where the society became today's First Baptist Church. Barker gave the land for that first church in West Danby to the Baptist Society, until preaching ceased; but today's Baptist Church in the community also stands upon this site.

Moses Barker was born in Spencer in 1787 and died in West Danby August 7, 1867. Amy Spaulding Barker was born in Woodstock, Vermont, in 1792; they were married at Spencer March 10, 1812. She died in West Danby December 9, 1888. She had lived to witness the civilization wrought by railroads, new farming implements, growth of neighboring villages and the rise of the commercial world of her descendants.

In assembling West Danby Baptist Church history, I encountered a discrepancy as to its beginning. In the History of Tioga, Chemung, Tompkins, and Schuyler Counties it is recorded that in 1821, twenty-seven members organized for the purpose were dismissed from the First Baptist Church in Spencer, came to West Danby and formed the Baptist Church here. The account then relates this group went to Ithaca and started the First Baptist Church there, but keeping the West Danby Church as the mother church. Adding to the development, this statement continues, that in 1823 the First Baptist Church in Spencer divided and formed the First and Second Baptist Churches, the latter moving to West Danby the same year. In 1840 this society built the present church edifice, and in the winter of 1841 Elder Gross, pastor, dedicated it.

However, in the old records of the Todd farm, part of which I mentioned when speaking of Moses Barker, and the church books containing the minutes of the church, we have the beginning of the West Danby Baptist Society established as of 1810. Therefore, I shall say the church was formed in 1810 by Moses Barker, founder of the settlement. There is, however, a problem concerning when the church was built; but let us leave that as 1840, although I think a log structure preceded it on the same site.

Between the founding of the Baptist Church in 1810 and the records of 1858, I do not know any of its authenticated history. Therefore, we will begin on October 31, 1858.

ITS HISTORY SINCE 1858

It was on this date that the church society met for the purpose of calling an ordination council for Moses Arkills, then pastor of the church. Moderator of the meeting was David Beach. The church had invited these churches to send delegates: Spencer, Candor, Caroline, and Newfield. Those persons from West Danby who were to sit in the council were T. G. Stevens, J. Briggs, David Beach, G. A. Todd and Moses Barker. The council was to meet November 26, 1858.

On that day they came together and Moses Arkills was ordained. Pastors present were the Revs. G. W. Huntley, William Spaulding, F. G. Dusenburg, and M. Emery. Moses Arkills remained the pastor until February 26, 1859, when the church voted to call Elder Emery to come as pastor, and to give the Rev. Mr. Arkills a letter of recommendation as a Gospel Minister.

The Rev. Mr. Emery was pastor for only a few months, during which time there were several disputes. Whenever a dispute arose among members of the church a committee was set up to go before the individ-

uals concerned and either settle the matter outside the church or have them come before the body. After the church made its decision the committee was dismissed. However, the Rev. Mr. Emery remained as pastor until November, 1859.

On November 26, 1859, the church called E. L. Benedict to come and be its pastor. The Rev. Mr. Benedict and Mrs. Benedict came from Maine, New York, and in May of the next year he, J. B. Todd, David Beach, and G. A. Todd were sent as representatives to the Broome and Tioga Association in which the church held its membership.

On August 25, 1860, the church set up a Ministerial Committee and adopted the following resolutions pertaining to this committee:

1. That we appoint a Ministerial Committee of three men 1st, 2nd, 3rd, so that the time of their service expires according to their grade or number, the first in one year. the second in two years. And their duty shall be to engage the Pastor and see that his salary be collected at the proper time for his benefit.

2. The Ministerial Committee be authorized to engage the services of our present Pastor to serve us for an indefinite time; that if either Pastor or church desire a change that three months' notice be given, and that this shall be their duty in any future engagements with other ministers as pastors with us.

- 3 That the Ministerial Committee be authorized to make an agreement with the one who may be selected as Pastor for a specified sum per year as agreed upon by the committee and authorized by the church, for which the church becomes responsible.

The following were placed upon this committee: David Beach for one year, Sidney House for two years, and Charles H. Stephens for three years. On September 1, 1861, the church sent the Rev. E. L. Benedict as a delegate to the District Missionary Committee held in

Newark Valley, New York. He remained as pastor until October 26, 1861.

On October 29, 1864, the church met and voted that the Rev. A. B. Woodworth come as pastor. At this time a pulpit committee was set up with these members: G. A. Todd, Charles N. Stephens, David Beach, and John H. Crance. In January of 1865, the Rev. A. R. Woodworth asked to be released from his engagements with the church on the grounds that he had been called to the mission field. The church voted to release him from his responsibilities and in May set up a committee to inspect the church roll and to dismiss delinquent members.

In April 1866 the church called the Rev. W. L. Goodspeed as pastor. He stayed for only a short time and departed without submitting a resignation. On December 29 the church met to consider a communication from him in which he asked for his letter from the church. The church sent one but stated its objections to what he had done.

In April 1867 the church called the Rev. John Gray to come and take the pastorate. He remained pastor until May 1869, when he left West Danby. He served the church for the longest period of any pastor for quite a few years.

In June of that year the church called the Rev. E. Perry to the pastorate. In April 1870 he was voted the regular pastor after serving as a supply from the preceding June. During the next January the church discussed the possibility of erecting more fence around the cemetery and appointed a committee to obtain the necessary funds. In March of 1872 the Rev. Mr. Perry gave a farewell address and left the pastorate of West Danby.

For the ensuing five years the congregation was without a pastor, but in May 1867 voted to call C. W. Jones to come and take the pastorate, and a council

was formed to arrange his ordination. After he left, the church appointed different brethren to be moderators until October 26, 1878, when the Rev. Mr. Dusenbery was called, but he remained until only the next June. In July the Rev. H. Baldwin accepted a call to the pastorate to remain until April 1884. It was on June 5, 1881, that the West Danby Baptist Church received its first missionary offering.

In May 1884 H. W. C. Millington came to West Danby as pastor, and on July 14 was ordained into the Christian ministry to remain until November of the next year. In August 1884 the society voted to take out the old wood-burning stoves and install coal stoves.

From the date of Mr. Millington's departure until May 1888 there is no record of a pastor; then the Rev. F. A. Matheson came to remain only until the next November. Different members acted as moderators until October 1889 when the Rev. T. F. Broderick became pastor and served until his resignation in March 1892.

When in November 1892 the Rev. D. Osborne came from Grand Rapids, Mich., to candidate, " 'twas moved and seconded that Rev. D. Osborne remain with us as our pastor, but the light vote of the church rejected him." During the following February a Mr. Vose became pastor to remain until 1897. Not much is recorded of events during this period, but in the following October the church sent a letter expressing a desire to accept the State Missionary offer of Bro. J. B. Abbott as pastor. In February of 1898 the society instituted the envelope system to increase finances. Bro. Abbott remained until July 13, 1899, after which the society was served by supply. The Rev. E. D. Hammond occupied the pulpit on September 24, and the Rev. R. T. Gates preached October 1. Miss Cornelia Bronnel led the services October 15, 22 and November 5, but cancelled further engagements to accept a position as missionary teacher in Shanghai, China.

F. R. Eaton supplied for December 10, 17 and was the regular supply beginning with January 1900. During this time the Bible School and Junior work was well sustained; the Wednesday evening prayer service was continued and the Senior Christian Endeavor Sunday evening meetings were held the greater part of the time. Brother Eaton remained until February 1900, from which time until 1903 there was no regular pastor.

On October 18, 1903, Clayton I. Swayze became a member of the society and began serving as pastor. After ordination by the West Danby Baptist Church, he resigned July 1, 1904. A native of Lake Ridge, the Rev. Mr. Swayze had studied at Colgate but transferred to Cornell where he graduated in 1904. Long since retired, he made his home in Ithaca until recently when he remarried. Currently he lives in Geneva.

During the years following until 1907, the church was served by supply speakers, but in April of that year Miss Nellie E. Bosely came to take the services of the church and in July initiated evening services at Van Etten. It was on May 10, 1908, that Miss Bosely became a member and was licensed to do the work of a pastor in this church.

December 17, 1909, was a red-letter day in the church's history for Miss Bosely and Delos VanBuskirk were married by the Rev. G. M. Whitmore who had come to speak at the evening services. It was the first marriage in the church in sixty years. In June of the next year, Mrs. VanBuskirk's resignation as pastor was accepted.

The Rev. W. H. Barrett served as pastor from July 3 to October 9, 1910; then on October 16 the Rev. Sidney Fisher came as a supply for an indefinite time but on January 8, 1911, became a member of the church. The Rev. Mr. Fisher met and courted a local girl, Miss Edith Lewis, whom he married October 15, 1913. They

took up residence on what is now the Swartwood Farm, that being her home.

During the summer of 1913 the church was painted outside, a cement porch and steps were constructed, the interior painted and papered. Altar curtains donated by Mrs. Major were put up. The church reopened August 10 of that year. With the help of the convention, the Rev. Mr. Fisher was made resident pastor in April 1915, the first such since 1899.

In February 1920 Baraca and Philathea classes gave the communion tray and glasses, and the Lewis twins, one of whom was Mrs. Fisher, gave the silver bread tray.

At a business meeting of the church October 11, 1920, resolutions were adopted relative to Christian education as prepared by the Northern Baptist Convention, of which the West Danby Church was a member. The reasons for the action and the conclusions thereof were stated as follows:

“Whereas, some of the money paid to the Northern Baptist Convention, namely 32 per cent of it, is used for Christian Education;

“Whereas, some of the schools to which the money is paid are teaching doctrines not according to our beliefs and so detrimental to the cause of Christ, Therefore, Be It

“Resolved, That of all money collected to be sent to the Board of Promotion 32 per cent be retained by the treasurer; and Be It Further

“Resolved, That a committee shall be appointed consisting of the treasurer, church clerk, chairman of the board of trustees, and the pastor, whose duty it shall be to select the school or schools to which the said 32 per cent shall be sent.”

As the history of the West Danby Baptist Church lengthened, there were incidents and events indicative of the enduring vitality of the society which had as its

arena a small rural community. Among these events was the installation in 1923 by Treman, King & Co. of the first coal furnace in the building. It replaced the coal stove which thirty-nine years before had been substituted for the original wood-burner.

Then the next year the society voted to tear down and rebuild the sheds which still stabled and protected the horses and carriages while their owners were in attendance upon services. The impact of motor vehicles had not yet been felt and its future development was not anticipated, or the rebuilding of the sheds might not have taken place at so late a date.

Another historic event of the era materialized in April 1925 when the church began having union services with the Methodist Church, which services alternated monthly between the two with the Rev. Mr. Fisher occupying the pastorates of both societies.

One of the tragic events in the long history of the West Danby Baptist Church came in the autumn of 1927 when the exterior of the building was being painted at a cost of \$160.09. As W. C. Jackson was finishing the cupola, he fell to the ground and was crippled for the remainder of his life.

Again the church was reopened for services in July 1928, and next year new chairs were bought for the choir. At the time an article in *The Ithaca Journal* took note of developments when it reported:

“West Danby—A revival has been experienced and the whole community is profoundly moved. Twenty-two were baptized in the First Baptist Church, Ithaca, on November 8. Others are waiting. This church is the mother church of the Ithaca First Baptist.”

According to the incumbent church clerk, membership had doubled. Six years later the church joined the Chemung River Association.

During 1936 Mrs. Sidney Fisher died. In 1957 Mr. Fisher married Mrs. Nellie VanBuskirk who had come

into the community a half-century before to take charge of services in the church, and on October 2 of the year the Rev. Mr. Fisher died after the longest pastorate in the church's history, 27 years. Mrs. Fisher now has her home in Sarasota, Florida.

There is a legend that a brother told the Rev. Mr. Fisher after service one morning that he did not get anything out of the messages because they went in one ear and out the other. Mr. Fisher is credited with the retort, "And what's there to hinder?"

It was in November 1937 that the church called the Rev. Linn Williamson to the pastorate which he served until his resignation December 3, 1937.

The question of uniting with the Newfield Baptist Church was on the agenda in January 1940 but the decision was not to unite. However, the two churches shortly afterward began sharing the pastor. Also given contemporary consideration was the proposal to build a new parsonage to be called the Sidney Fisher Memorial Parsonage in honor of the late Rev. M. Fisher's twenty-seven years of unselfish labor in the church.

In February following these discussions the society asked the Rev. Louis Shelly to become pastor, an invitation he accepted, and served until February 1940. In May Carlton Hunt reported to the church that the parsonage had been paid for in full by Mrs. Myra Mead Seeley.

It was on March 1, 1942, that the Rev. Lloyd Morris accepted a call to the church. After the annual meeting of that year the church body decided to hold regular monthly meetings; prior to this time meetings had been held yearly or when needed. In November Charles Young came for evangelistic meetings.

In January of the next year two men were engaged to close the balcony and install a new ceiling in the sanctuary, and in July the society adopted a church constitution. In March 1944 the church became a mem-

ber of the General Association of Regular Baptists Churches. Then on July 16, the Rev. Mr. Morris resigned his pastorate and went to Bethel Baptist Church in Jamestown, New York.

A call extended to the Rev. Vern E. Spencer was accepted September 2, 1945, and he came from the Baptist Church of Breesport, New York. When the question of disuniting with the Newfield Baptist Church came up, Mr. Spencer asked that the affiliation be continued for a year at least. In 1950 the church began using a public address system to play records so that it it would be heard in the community. In November services began to be held in Grange Hall while repairs were made to the church edifice, and in January 1952 fire escapes were erected.

The Rev. Mr. Spencer resigned May 11, 1952, his pastorate of both the Newfield and the West Danby churches so as to bring about a separation of the two congregations. Verna Belle Spencer had her letter brought from the Newfield Baptist Church during September of that year.

Following this action and after some discussion the West Danby Church joined the North Spencer Baptist for a time, but the latter congregation called a pastor shortly before the Rev. M. Spencer resigned January 3, 1954, to accept a call in Port Morris, New Jersey. In April the Rev. Merton FitzGerald was called, following his pastorate of the First Baptist Church of Covert.

Union with the Methodist Church in West Danby had been under discussion before the call was extended Mr. FitzGerald, but the churches never united. Before the FitzGerald arrived the parsonage was remodeled and three rooms added. In May 1958 new steps in front of the church were voted as was painting of the interior. On August 17, 1958, this resolution was adopted: "Be it resolved that the West Danby Baptist Church be put on record as opposing the legalizing of bingo in the

Town of Danby, and that a copy be sent the Town Board.”

During 1959 the floors of the main auditorium were refinished, and pews from the old Methodist Church of Danby were purchased.

Remodeling the parsonage was discussed on July 16, 1961, and the work performed during August. Another event of significance for this year was the sending of a telegram on March 1 to the Rev. Vern Spencer at Windsor Locks, Conn., for the dedication of his church there.

At the annual business meeting in April of 1962, the Rev. Mr. FitzGerald informed the members that he had supplied in the pulpit at Unadilla, New York, and that he might go as a candidate. His resignation was given in June and on September 1, he and his family left West Danby to take up the pastorate at the Unadilla First Baptist Church.

Robert Mitchell, a graduate of the Baptist Bible Seminary at Johnson City, was extended an invitation to come as pastor. He accepted the invitation but owing to other duties he was not able to come immediately. He did come up each Sunday during the month of October, however. On November 1, 1962, he moved with his family into the parsonage to devote full time to the church.

* * *

As you drive through West Danby you may look off from the main road and see the church sitting on the hill on a little side road. This church and those who attend it mean so much to me because this is my Home Church!