

1820 RELIGIOUS REVIVAL IN MALTA, NY

Delivered by Paul Perreault, Malta Town Historian, September 22, 2015 to the Malta History Group

As we all know, the first European settlers of the New England colonies were seekers after religious freedom. They risked their lives, futures and fortunes for their beliefs. Most were followers of John Calvin, either Presbyterian or Congregationalists, who preached a strict, non-emotional understanding of God's will. Services were mostly long lectures from the pulpit, with no singing and little participation from the congregations. For the first few generations, this religious fervor guided and drove not only their religious decisions but what we would today call secular and/or government decisions.

These early generations were followed by people who came for a variety of reasons, mostly to gain a better life here on earth. Although very religious from our modern standards, these "new comers" paled in comparison with the earlier group. As they moved inland from the coast, their time, efforts and thoughts appeared more focused on carving out farms from the forest. They were also underserved by the clergy who, after training at Harvard and Yale, rarely wished to live among the unwashed masses on the frontier.

Starting in the 1730s, a movement called the Great Awakening, an evangelical and revitalization movement, swept through the Colonies, leaving a permanent impact on American Protestantism. It resulted from powerful preaching that gave listeners a sense of deep personal revelation of their need of salvation by Jesus Christ. The Great Awakening made Christianity intensely personal to the average person by fostering a deep sense of spiritual conviction and redemption, and by encouraging introspection and a commitment to a new standard of personal morality.

While the Great Awakening was very effective in reviving religion, the emotion burned out quickly after the first generation and there was much "back sliding", so in the 1820s conditions were ripe for what became the Second Great Awakening. They were particularly ripe in little Malta, N.Y.

A "moral wild" and a "waste place" were among the terms used by churchmen of the time to describe Malta in the early 19th. Century. (If you think

that is bad, wait till you hear what they said of Stillwater). Religious life at the time was described as “a very small Methodist church in one corner of the town, and two or three of God’s children in another corner, there was neither piety nor prayer, no means of grace nor desire of salvation.”

Redemption, however, came to Malta in 1820 in the person of Rev. Asabel Nettleton, a well-known revivalist from Connecticut. Few have heard of Nettleton today but he was the Billy Graham of the 1820s, his name familiar in every New England household. It has been estimated that more than 30,000 converts responded to his call.

In the summer of 1819, Nettleton’s ministry shifted from Conn. To the Saratoga area. Although he went there for a period of rest and to restore his failing health, local ministers pressed him into service once they learned of his presence. A “Mr. Hunter” from Malta was credited with persuading him of the need to start in Malta. There was both a Samuel and a Robert Hunter (father and son) active in civic life in Malta at that time, having held office as Commissioner of Schools and Constable. Samuel was elected to the State Assembly and, I suspect, had the prestige to extend the invitation to Rev Nettleton. Both men were probably descendants of John Hunter, one of the earliest settlers in the town.

In the summer of 1819, responding to this call, Nettleton, preached to 1,400 people in Malta. To put that in perspective, the population of the town in the 1820 Census was 1,518. Although it is reasonable to assume that most of the crowd were from Malta, not all were. People were known to have been attracted from Stillwater, Galway, Ballston and Saratoga. It was estimated that he was responsible for over 600 converts during the 7 months he spent in Saratoga County before moving on to Union College in Schenectady where he led another successful revival with the assistance of Dr. Eliphelet Nott, the famous president of the college.

In fact Malta was the center of a revival which spread throughout the County. Ministers came to Malta to see what was going on. What they saw so impressed them that they carried the revival spirit back with them to their own towns and villages. So the revival flourished in Saratoga, Stillwater, Ballston, and Galway, Charlton, Schenectady Amsterdam and many other smaller places.

And it was not a moment too soon for those sinners in Stillwater. Described as “boatmen, tipplers, tavern haunters, gamblers, infidels and atheists”. What was going on in Stillwater???? In 1817, the State had begun digging both the Erie Canal and the Champlain Canals which passed through the Town of Stillwater, thus attracting rough, mostly Irish and Catholic immigrants to an area that had known few, if any, prior.

The revival was so significant that the Albany Presbytery appointed a special committee to investigate the matter. It stated in part:

“From the very commencement of his (Rev. Nettleton) labors, the work of the Lord’s spirit became more powerful and rapidly progressive. It was but a little while until weeping and anxious distress were found in almost every house; the inhabitants of sin; the families of discord; the haunts of intemperance; the strongholds of error; the retreat of pharisaic pride; the entrenchments of self-righteousness, were all equally penetrated by the power of the Holy Ghost. “

“It commenced there in Malta, and with such display of the power of God’s spirit in crushing the opposition of the natural heart to everything holy, as are very seldom seen. The Deist, and Universalist, the drunkard, the Gambler and the Swearer, were alike made the subjects of this heart breaking work. Four months ago, Christ had no church there. It was a place of great spiritual dearth—and like the top of Gilboa had never been wet by rain or dew. But the Lord has now converted that wilderness into a fruitful field. “

Religion in Malta—The Presbyterian Society of East Ballston incorporated March 1, 1793 on East Line Road. Eventually it became a Congregational Church and literally moved the building near the corner of present day East Line and Round Lake Road. The Society eventually moved to Maltaville and built a church there around 1820. This group swayed back and both from Presbyteries to Congregational and eventually became a United Church where the local Methodists were also allowed to use the building for services. A very practical frontier solution which also saw no reason that the people’s school houses could not also be used for religious services. In 1843, the Maltaville Presbyterians organized a satellite church on Dunning Street but by 1845,

doctrinal differences split the groups and the Dunning Street folks organized their own church, in the lovely building we know today.

In 1809, the Methodists Episcopal Church was organized and built the structure now standing at the corner of Rt. 67 and Eastline Road. It served as a church until 1870 when it was converted to School House # 8. Currently unused.

In December, 1814, a Methodist Society was formed in Malta Ridge. While we know they had a church building (because there are records of a custodian being paid), we do not know where it was. However, in 1816 Thomas & Polly Collamer gave the land where we now are to the society for the purpose of building a church. In the 1830s the group split in two (perhaps over the Abolitionist Movement which was dividing many churches at the time). A Methodist Protestant church was organized. And they build a church down the road and lasted until the 1870s. In 1833, this congregation built on the Collamer land, a building which served them until 1929 when it was replaced by the building in which we now meet.

The Methodist movement in Round Lake, which we are all familiar with was a late comer. In 1867, the Troy Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church purchased 40 acres from two prominent Round Lake farmers for the purpose of conducting Summer Camp Meetings modeled on those held in Martha Vineyard, Ma.