

Faith Growing Through the Years

- 1714 Emigration of Scots-Irish to the Susquehanna Valley begins.
- 1721 The Donegal Church is organized and pastoral supplies are requested.
- 1740 Two hundred acres of land are deeded by the sons of William Penn. A new church is built of stone, replacing the earlier log meeting house.
- 1777 During services, an express rider brings news that General Howe is preparing to invade Pennsylvania and engages Col. Lowrey, who was attending services, to organize his men to defend the front. The congregation gathers around the white oak tree standing at the front of the church and with hands joined vows allegiance to the cause of Independence. Since then, this tree was always known as the "Witness Tree".
- 1786 The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania grants the Charter for the Church.
- 1810 The study house is erected by adding a brick structure to an early one-room log house.
- 1851 The church is remodeled – stone walls are plastered, windows are squared, and new entrances are made at the gable end of the building.
- 1899 Battle monument erected in memory of those who served in colonial and revolutionary wars by D.A.R. Witness Tree Chapter.
- 1911 The Donegal Society is officially established.
- 1925 The memorial entrance wall and gateway are completed and dedicated.
- 1960 The Christian Education Building is dedicated.
- 1971 The 250th anniversary of the church is celebrated with a year of events
- 1981 The Memorial Garden in the Southeast corner of the cemetery is set up and dedicated for the purpose of accepting ashes of those church members and members of the Donegal Society choosing cremation instead of the conventional burial tradition.
- 1985 Donegal Presbyterian Church is placed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- 1988 Second floor added to Christian education building.
- 1995 The Tracker pipe organ is installed.
- 1996 The church is air-conditioned.

2002 Congregation expands to fill 2nd service...

In 1930, the pastor, the Rev. Dr. C.B. Segelken wrote: "The glory of Donegal is not as a shrine, but as a live, growing church where the gospel of Jesus Christ is being preached, where the Word of God is being taught to the rising generation of the community, where the same truths and the same convictions, which made the people of Donegal what they were, and exert the influence which they did, are still alive and being held to influence the children of this generation, and of succeeding generations, to the glory of God and the well-being of American institutions."

"Donegal lives in a memory which we venerate, she lives in lives of her descendants scattered far and wide over this fair land of ours. She also lives in the life of her present members who are still carrying on in the name of the Triune God and in behalf of this beautiful land which her people helped to found, and for whose free institutions they labored so faithfully and suffered so much. Donegal has always stood and labored for the advancement of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ in the world. She stands and labors for this end at the present time. May she remain steadfast and immoveable in the ages to come."

The Donegal Society

In 1909, the Rev. Frank Bosset and others initiated a reunion of "past and present attendants of the Donegal Church." It was such a success that an annual reunion was authorized. At the third reunion in 1911, The Donegal Society was formed with Martha Baden Clark as president.

The Donegal Society is dedicated to promoting the collection and preservation of the history of the Scots-Irish who founded the Donegal Presbyterian Church; to maintain, beautify, and preserve the grounds, trees, spring, cemetery, and buildings; and to be a focal point for all descendants and others interested in the objectives of the Society; to preserve the living history and heritage through membership and reunions.

The annual reunion on the third Thursday of June is an all-day affair that has attracted some of the nation's outstanding individuals as speakers.

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History

Donegal Presbyterian Church



***Established in 1721,
Donegal Presbyterian
Church is one of the oldest
continuously operating
churches in the area.***

History of Donegal Presbyterian Church, Founded 1721

Founding of Donegal Presbyterian Church

Donegal Presbyterian church dates its founding to August 1, 1721. At that time, Andrew Galbraith presented a petition to the New Castle Presbytery requesting supply ministers for the many Scots-Irish Presbyterians who had begun settling here in 1716. The site for the church undoubtedly was chosen because of the unusually strong spring surrounded by a virgin oak grove. Approximately 200 acres of land was deeded to the congregation by the sons of William Penn in 1740.

This northwest corner of Lancaster County was at that time called West Conestoga Township and was part of Chester County. By 1722, the name was changed to Donegal Township for the place in Ireland from where many of the Scots-Irish had emigrated. The area was also known as Chiques-Salunga, the Indian name for the region of the Big and Little Chiques creeks, which flow into the nearby Susquehanna River.

From 1721 when the application for pastors was made, until 1727, the church was supplied with itinerant ministers. In 1727, the Rev. James Anderson who had been serving the Wall Street Church in New York City was installed as the first full-time pastor, serving until his death in 1740. The church has had a continuous organization and unbroken line of regular worship services over these more than 270 years. Services are held each Sunday morning at 9:00 a.m. followed by fellowship time and Sunday School. In 2002, a second morning service at 11:15 was begun.

Donegal Presbytery Formed

In 1732, with the ever-increasing number of Scotch Irish Presbyterians settling in the colonies, and many more Presbyterian churches being established, it became necessary to have another Presbytery to serve the central part of Pennsylvania. The presbytery is the governing body of the churches composed of an equal number of ministers and ruling elders. It is recorded that on October 11, 1732, the Donegal Presbytery was organized and held its first meeting at Donegal Presbyterian Church. Donegal Presbytery had wide jurisdiction and was responsible for the founding of many colonial churches in Pennsylvania and also Maryland and Virginia.

Revolutionary War Period

The Donegal Presbyterians pledged themselves in whole-hearted devotion to the cause of independence with almost every able-bodied man serving in the military, seventeen holding the rank of colonel. Names of those serving can be seen on the monument on the church grounds that was erected by the Witness Tree Chapter of the D.A.R. About forty are buried in the adjacent cemetery. Many also served as representatives to colonial assemblies prior to and following the founding of our country. While there are very few surviving records of the earliest period of the church, there is a complete list of members totaling nearly 500 that was compiled in 1776 by the Rev. Colin McFarquhar. After the war, many of the Scots-Irish left the area, moving west or south where larger landholdings were available.

Donegal's Witness Tree

When Lord Howe began to invade Pennsylvania in September 1777, and Washington's army was obliged to fall back to Chadds Ford on the Brandywine, a messenger brought a summons for the aid of the local militia who were at that Sunday morning time assembled for worship at Donegal. The service was interrupted and the Donegal congregation gathered around the oak tree standing at the front of the church, and with hands joined, they vowed allegiance to the cause of the patriots. Their minister, who had always prayed for the King of England, united with them. Since then, this tree was always known as the "Witness Tree," a symbol of liberty and patriotism.

This huge white oak tree, which had stood at the entrance of the church for 260 years, succumbed to drought and old age and had to be taken down in 1991. A ring count confirmed its age. The solid oak wood was made into fine furniture and many smaller mementos by the Donegal Society.



The Church Building

The earliest church building was a small log structure which supposedly was located within the present cemetery walls.



While the exact date is not known, the present stone building is believed to date to no later than 1740, perhaps as early as 1730. Some remodeling was done in 1772 and major changes made in 1851. There was no provision for heating until about 1780 when stoves were obtained from Cornwall Furnace.

Before 1851, the rough stone exterior of the building was not plastered, the windows were smaller and arched, and there was only one entrance, toward the cemetery, with a broad aisle toward the pulpit at the opposite side of the interior. The walnut pulpit high on the north wall with a sounding board overhead was a 1772 addition, at which time also entrances were made at each end of the church.

The 1851 remodeling replaced the brick aisles and earthen floor with a wooden floor, moved the pulpit to the west end, and lowered the high square box pews and turned them toward the pulpit. A vestibule, or narthex, was partitioned off at the east end and the only two entrances located there.

In 1960, a Christian Education building with an architectural style identical to the church building was added.

Kerr Study House

The small brick structure near the church was built in 1810-11 during the pastorate of the Rev. William Kerr. Originally a place for meetings of the session, it was expanded in 1845 to house the church caretaker. In 1976, the building was again restored for use by the pastor and the church secretary.



The two-story brick building beyond the parking area was purchased as a residence for the pastor, later becoming a rental property. In 2001 the house was dedicated by the congregation to charitable use as "Hope House" to be used for transitional housing for those in need. It's operation is administered by Homes of Hope Transitional Housing of Donegal. Our congregation participates in the building's upkeep and offers help whenever possible. The house is typically occupied rent-free for only a couple of months while the residents stabilize their lives.

Donegal Cemetery

While the graveyard was probably begun as soon as the church was founded, the earliest gravestone is 1732, that of Thomas Jamison. There is evidence however of a great number of unmarked graves. The wall around the cemetery dates to 1790. A list of the burials can be found on the church web site, in the 1995 Donegal Church history by Richard K. MacMaster, and in the church office.

