

***Century Service: 1800-1850***  
***“Stress Fractures”***  
***I Corinthians 1: 10-25***  
***April 26, 2009***

The year is 1800. Our country is a mere twenty-four years old; this church, sixty-six. The national capital has just moved from Philadelphia to a swampy piece of real estate on the Potomac River. A hotly contested presidential election is narrowly won by Thomas Jefferson, making rival Aaron Burr vice-president. Meanwhile, a naval officer named William Bainbridge is doing battle with pirates on the Barbary Coast. In a slightly ironic twist, a destroyer named after Bainbridge will battle so-called pirates off the shores of Somalia 209 years later.

During the next fifty years, the land mass of this fledgling nation triples. In 1803, President Jefferson brokers the Louisiana Purchase for a mere \$15 million. With Jefferson’s support, two men named Lewis and Clark seek a water route to the Pacific Ocean. In the process these explorers stir imagination and interest in the new lands of the American west. Under James Madison, west Florida is purchased from Spain, thereby creating an outlet for retirees and college students on spring break.

A war against Britain causes this new nation to taste terror when the new capital in Washington is burned, and to find its own inner strength to endure. Mary Pickersgill focuses a fresh fervor of patriotism as her handmade star-spangled banner flies above Fort McHenry. Francis Scott Key pens a poem which is wedded to the challenging tune “Anacreon in Heaven.” Not until 1931 does this song become our national anthem, but through the years the vision seen by Key rallies the country.

When Napoleon meets his Waterloo in 1815, this particular war winds down while another kind of battle begins to stress the nation. When Alabama is admitted as a state in 1819, it is permitted to be a slave holding state. As other states in the newly opened western territories begin to form, the issue of slavery is a determining factor in their creation. The Missouri Compromise deepens the fault-lines of the times. When the Erie Canal is finished in 1825, trade, pioneers, and problems skirt the Allegheny mountains which, until now, provided a formidable barrier between the former colonies and the alluring plains and prairies, mountains and rivers - and, eventually - gold.

While railroads press west, the Underground Railroad connects slaves in their own flight north toward freedom. Shortly after Texas becomes a state - and “a whole other country” - Martin Van Buren follows Andrew Jackson as president. No sooner does he take office than a financial panic takes the country. Four hard years later, James K. Polk becomes president just as Samuel F.B. Morse invents “instant messaging,” allowing this news to be sent swiftly in 1848: Zachary Taylor is commander-in-chief.

During this same period of about fifty years, as the country experiences the stresses of increasing social complexity, serious international challenges, and monumental

expansion, on the local level, First Presbyterian Church experiences its own changes, challenges, and opportunities. In 1800, the church has two well-known leaders in Dr. Charles Nisbet, who is also the president of young Dickinson College, and Dr. Robert Davidson, college vice-president and professor. Shortly after the turn of the century, in 1804, Dr. Nisbet, “learned and witty,” according to one report, dies prematurely, dealing a blow to both the college, recently suffering the destruction of its main building by fire, and this congregation. Now leadership rests more directly on Davidson about whom it is said, his “gentle catholic spirit so claimed the elements of strife that the two congregations of Carlisle, long bitterly hostile, became harmoniously united under him.” (p. 113/ Norcross)

Perhaps all is not as harmonious as this observation claims. Remember that the congregation is composed of two factions: the Old Side faction which held firmly to order and many standards inherited from Scotland, and the New Side which believed there was room for change, including more ardor in worship. During the last three years of Davidson’s pastorate, he is assisted in preaching by the Rev. Henry Wilson, Dickinson College graduate and student of Dr. Nisbet. After Davidson’s death in 1812, some members of the congregation want Wilson’s relationship with the church to be more permanent (p. 148 f./Wing). Others in the congregation do not. When a call for Mr. Wilson is presented to the presbytery, papers are presented against the action. Such a row ensues, both at the presbytery and synod level, over this matter, that Mr. Wilson is not permitted to “preach or exercise his ministerial function” in this church. Mr. Wilson becomes pastor at Silvers Spring and then at Shippensburg where he is “more than commonly successful” as a pastor and preacher.

Then in July, 1815, Mr. George Duffield, at the age of 21, is on a journey and decides to stop at his grandfather’s former church for a visit. Duffield can not help but notice the “embittered new feuds,” no doubt fueled in part by old animosities and new impulses in the country for spiritual awakening. Duffield makes an impression on the people who, in December, agree to lay aside their dissensions, unite, and call Duffield as their new pastor. Before he accepts the call, attempts are made behind the scenes to enlist Duffield on one side or the other, and to prejudice him against persons in the church and the presbytery.

Yet he agrees to the call, even though he is aware that his views on some points of theology, sacraments and church discipline are not in accord with previous pastors in the congregation or among other pastors in the presbytery. It would not be until September, 1816 that Duffield is finally ordained and installed. As the minutes books now housed in the archives of Dickinson College attest with page after page of handwritten notes, it does not take long before stresses increase and pressure grows within the congregation.

By October the Session adopts a list of resolutions by which the pastor and certain elders prudently desire to preserve the purity of the church. Since church records were not as precisely kept as now, all persons who desired to remain as members are to be interviewed personally by the pastor and/or elders. That there is much opposition to this

procedure should not be a surprise! According to Conway Wing's history, "in April of 1814, there had been reported 221 members, though it had been added this was probably 21 too many." Now the list of members numbers 152. Many former members join the new organization springing up in town known as Methodists, a "sect" making itself strongly felt across the country. Now those being admitted to communion must pledge to renounce, "attendance at balls, dancing, theatres, and such like demoralizing amusements."

Through the years the state of things is, as Wing puts it, by no means uniform. Cases of discipline often came up in the Session, and can be read in the minutes. In other seasons there is growth in the congregation, often mirroring the growth in the church in general throughout the country during this period of fervent religious awakening, the rise of camp meetings, the increase in the founding of colleges and seminaries, the development of new forms of worship. Many young men enter professional ministry through the congregation at the time, including one David McKinley who eventually becomes pastor of Second Presbyterian Church.

As happened throughout the country at the time, new forms of associations begin to develop and churches initiate organizations. At First Presbyterian, a Sunday school is organized basically to teach children the scriptures and basic doctrines. Midweek prayer services begin, as do Bible studies for women and for men. A missionary society reflects the new emphasis on mission work in the west and in far-flung parts of the globe. A Temperance Society finds root in the church and raises issues in the Carlisle community! With all these changes comes the need for more space, so a one story brick lecture room is attached to the stone meeting house which is itself remodeled. The pulpit is moved to the west end, the entrances are switched to the east end, and the galleries are moved while pews are installed.

Then the mounting stresses result in fracture. Old and New School factions in the church throughout the country have created a great deal of friction among members and in presbyteries. General Assembly meetings are filled with emotional speeches, contested debates over doctrine and procedures, disputes about mission and ordination requirements. Depending on which side has the larger number of commissioners, some presbyteries are removed from the church, others are restored or created.

The tension in this presbytery builds to a boil when George Duffield publishes a book called *On Regeneration*. In response, the presbytery forms a committee. A very complicated trial takes place accusing New School Duffield of truanicies in Biblical doctrine. His trial is one of three nationally known cases, one other being a trial for Lyman Beecher. In the end, the presbytery condemns what are termed erroneous views taught in his book, although Duffield denies these views were actually taught. There is no further censure on Duffield, even though the trial, held in this church building - newly remodeled - was packed every day. Shortly thereafter, Duffield accepts a call to Fifth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia.

Meanwhile, the church-owned farm - called a glebe - has been sold, although rights to the old cemetery are retained in perpetuity. The sale in 1827 brings \$3500. The heirs of Nisbet and Davidson finally receive monies to make up for payment in arrears to both.

The inherent differences in the makeup of the congregation which stretched back to Steele and the first Duffield finally create a fracture. Eighty-six persons petition Presbytery and are given permission to form Second Presbyterian Church. Some of the money from the sale of the farm pays for the start of this new congregation!

In the country, the pressures between New and Old School factions also create fractures resulting in what is called the Schism of 1837. First Church, having taken positions different from most churches in the region, remained in the presbytery. But friction develops between the Session and the presbytery, particularly with the call to the next pastor. Rev. William Sprole is associated with the German Reformed Church of Philadelphia. His call to First Presbyterian creates another clash with the presbytery. As a result, this church joins the newly formed new school presbytery of Harrisburgh and is removed from the presbytery of Carlisle. Sprole is never installed although he serves as stated supply until 1843. Pastor Sprole leaves Carlisle to serve First Presbyterian Church of Washington and then as chaplain at West Point.

Young Ellis Newlin is elected, ordained and installed the Presbytery of Harrisburgh, but his pastorate is a brief 3 years. When differences spring up between the pastor and the Session, Mr. Newlin concludes "that his usefulness was seriously impaired." He leaves for Lynchburg VA.

Membership at First, Carlisle is 348 with a Sunday school of 260, home mission support at \$347 an foreign mission support at \$144. As the church approaches its 114<sup>th</sup> year in the first year of Zachary Taylor's presidency, a new pastor from Huntsville, Alabama, is invited to visit Carlisle. Conway Wing brings with him a desire for union and a love for the church, and leadership which will be sorely needed for a time of the nation's greatest stress and deepest fracture yet: the American Civil War.

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