

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF PAXTON CHURCH

Our Paxton congregation meets in the oldest Presbyterian church building in continuous use in Pennsylvania, and the second oldest in the United States. Its early history is closely interwoven with the colonial history of central Pennsylvania. In fact, during the pre-Revolutionary period, Paxton was the leader of the Harrisburg area - even predating the founding of the city itself.

While tradition says that preaching started here as early as 1716, it is known that in 1726, Rev. James Anderson, of Donegal, Pennsylvania, was assigned to be our first regular preacher. He conducted services in a log structure which was located south of the current stone sanctuary. Today, its site is indicated by a stone marker which includes some of the original foundation stones. A replica of the log meeting house, built in 1950, stands on the hill north of the present sanctuary. It serves as a place for rustic services and youth activities.

The stone building of the present church sanctuary structure was built in 1740. The interior was renovated in 1931 to a Colonial Williamsburg appearance.

In 1732 the congregation was officially organized as a Presbyterian Church at the first meeting of the Presbytery of Donegal. The Rev. William Bertram was Paxton's first installed pastor. Rev. John Elder became pastor in 1738 and continued as pastor through the trying period of the French and Indian and the Revolutionary Wars. From July until October 1763, the Colonial Deputy Governor commissioned Rev. Elder to command one hundred men to protect the mountain gaps. This is where the term the "Fighting Parson" comes from. Conrad Richter's *Light in the Forest* was based on Paxton Church and the central Pennsylvania area during this time. Walt Disney's movie of the same name used Fess Parker as Rev. Elder. In addition to being a pastor and military leader, Rev. Elder was also a farmer, magistrate, civil leader, and regional leader and the key figure in the early development of this area.

Before the Civil War, Paxton members played a part in the Underground Railroad. During the war, its minister, Rev. Dinsmore Mitchell served as a chaplain to Camp Curtin which at the time, was the largest training camp in the world. Several young men who died of disease at the camp and could not be brought home, now rest in our churchyard.

Most of Paxton's colonial documents were destroyed in a fire in the 1890's, however, there have been four histories of Paxton Church written in the last 150 years:

-The first, *History of Paxton Church 1732-1877* by Downey, was published in 1877 and completely focuses on Paxton in colonial times in its forty-six pages. It is an interesting cultural document of facts and attitudes as being written the same year as Custer's Battle of Little Bighorn.

-The second book, *History of the Sesqui-Centennial of Paxton Church* by McAlarney was published in 1890 and in its 344 pages covers a treasure trove of information for an historical researcher. It includes addresses made during the Sesquicentennial program of Paxton Church; a listing of all the inscriptions available and readable in Paxton's Churchyard at that time; and colonial records listing births, deaths, baptisms, and marriages.

- The third book, *Historic Paxton, Her Days and Her Ways, 1722-1913* by Wallace, was published in 1913 and includes 141 pages of history. It also includes sixty-four pages of recipes donated by women of the church and twenty-five pages of home medicine, cleaning, and gardening tips.

- The final book, *A History of Paxton Church* by Rev. Morton Glise was published in 1976. His book includes fifty-two pages of history of the church and churchyard, twenty-six pages of marriage records, and 116 pages of sermons.

All books can be found on Amazon or eBay. And some can be found via Google search. However, we still have Rev. Glise's book available for purchase for Ten Dollars (\$10.00) which includes shipping. If you are interested, please send a letter including your name, address, and a check for ten dollars made out to "Paxton Presbyterian Church."

Additionally, we have found that William Henry Egle's 12 volume set: *Notes and Queries Historical and Genealogical Chiefly Relating to Interior Pennsylvania* to be an interesting place to look. It can be found via Google search.

A series of short YouTube Vignettes have been produced which take you to the spot as we discuss the buildings, history, and people of this historic church and churchyard. These vignettes can be found as part of Paxton's Facebook page as well as on YouTube under, "Historically Speaking" followed by a number.

Paxton Church today continues its original mission of being a beacon of the light of Jesus Christ in a troubled world. We welcome you to visit and tour our site and if you call ahead, we can offer a personal tour. If you have specific questions, you can contact the office **(717-561-0510 or [office@paxtonchurch.org](mailto:office@paxtonchurch.org))** who will put you in touch with a member of our Historical Committee.