



A Short History of
St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church of Wurtemberg
Rhinebeck, New York

1760 - 1960

The Men of Wurtemberg
and
Their House of God

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by
Elizabeth McR. Frost

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Long before the Revolution, before the Boston Tea Party and Paul Revere's Ride—even before the Fall of Quebec, which decided that the English were to control America—the people of Wurtemberg were already here.

Their story—the story of the Palatine immigrants is well known. They came from a part of Germany called the Palatinate, and the Duchy of Wurtemberg. The choicest part of the German Empire was their home, rich in farmlands, vineyards, orchards, market-towns, and villages. They engaged in farming and business, and were people of thrift and independence.

Just before 1700, Louis Fourteenth of France invaded this country of theirs, conquered and destroyed it, and finally exiled all its people.

England at this time was rapidly colonizing America, and these homeless men and women turned to the new world as their only hope. Some of them managed to reach England, and their leader, the famous and beloved Pastor, Reverend Joshua Kochertal, petitioned the London Board of Trade for them. Through Queen Anne, his request was granted—that he and his people, the German Lutheran Exiles, might be brought to America.

A contract was made, under the terms of which the exiles were to receive clothing, tools and other supplies, a little land for each settler, and a little money. They were to gather pitch, tar, and other pine-tree products, for the use of the English Navy,

and they were placed in charge of Robert Hunter, Royal Governor of the Province of New York.

Pastor Kocherthal made his first trip to America in 1709, and his second one in 1710. The first time, he brought a few families from Neuburg, and settled them at Newburg-on-the-Hudson. The second time, a big group of exiles came with him, and he brought them farther up the Hudson, to East Camp, and to West Camp—now Germantown and Saugerties.

The misfortunes which the settlers had experienced in Germany still pursued them—storms, sickness and death at sea, and untold suffering in America. Due to some political trouble in England, the contract they had made was entirely disregarded. Nothing whatever was done for their comfort, and the trees from which they were to earn their money were not of the type to produce any pine-products at all. And they were still bound by their bargain. Governor Hunter did try to help them, but at last his money and credit were exhausted, and he had to release them from their obligation, and set them free to make their own way.

The plight of the Germans came to the attention of Colonel Beckman, son of the patentee of Rhinebeck, through the powerful Livingston family, whose interests lay in the area north of Rhinebeck. Through the common effort of these two families, related by marriage, negotiations were opened and the first group of Palatines were given small farms here at Rhinebeck. It was wilderness, of course, but, as they cleared their land, they found it to be rich, and abundant, and satisfying. They began to make a living, and to be happy again. Others followed them here—a third great immigration—and, for the sake of the old home in Germany, they called the new homeland “Wurtemberg.”

These were our ancestors—the builders of our church.

This was the “church situation” at the time: At the south end of the Beekman Patent was the farm of Stephen Fraleigh, on the King’s Highway, which is Route 9. On this farm, at the foot of Primrose Hill, stood a small wooden building, with a cemetery

across the road. This has been called the Staatsburg church. It was a mission-station, tended by different preachers, the famous John G. Hartwick among them. The first real church was at Pinck's Corner, or Wey's Crossing. This was a union church, belonging both to Lutherans and Reformed Protestants, and was built in 1716. Both these churches have long since disappeared, and also the cemetery of the one at Staatsburg.

Colonel Beekman, who felt and showed a deep interest in these early people at Wurtemberg, built two roads by which they might reach the churches. He already had built roads to the river for them, so that they could get their produce to market—and now, the church roads. First the Vlei, or Swamp Road, running all along the old swamp, and turning off, to reach the King's Highway and the Staatsburg church. Then the lovely old "Pilgrim's Progress" Road, starting at Wey's Crossing, continuing past Doctor Miller's, turning twice, and so up over the Wurtemberg hills.

The distances, even with the new roads, made attendance difficult, and those who could not reach the churches held services as Neighborhood Meetings, in the different homes. Meanwhile, the men of Wurtemberg were growing prosperous, and independent; by 1758 they had begun to feel that they could maintain a church of their own. Permission to build and conduct a church had to be given by Colonel Beekman; a license had to be issued by the government; and a special charter had to be granted for receiving subscriptions.

The result was a succession of documents and some of these are still in existence. In particular, there is still at the church, hand-written in early German, and in early German Script, a document, dated 1758, incredibly difficult of translation, but stating clearly that Leonard Weger and Michael Weger, his son, gave, for a church and cemetery (*Ein Gottes haus und ein Gottes acker*) an acre of land—the only condition being that, should the church discontinue services with no possibility of reopening, the land

would revert to the Wegers. There must have been a twin document from the Pultz family, for they gave another acre. They lived on one side of the present church property, and the Wegers on the other. (Later, the restriction was removed and more land was given, for the erection of a schoolhouse.)

The Wurtemberg people had chosen to build their church here, on the little rise of land, which gives it its commanding position, and its view of the mountains and the beautiful valley to the south. Here, then, they gathered—the men of Wurtemberg—to raise their *Gottes haus*, for the worship of God, and to be a center of life for their families. They came in wagons they themselves had built, bringing tools they had made, and here, to the ringing of her own axes, to the sound of her own saws and hammers, in 1760 St. Paul's of Wurtemberg arose.

Fifteen years later, Colonel Beekman conveyed to the trustees, "for the use and benefit of the church," nineteen and three-fourths acres of land, lying adjacent to the land of Leonard Weger and the Jacomintie Swamp. In 1807, Gertrude Livingston, Colonel Beekman's granddaughter, and her husband, Morgan Lewis (later Governor of New York State), gave consent to the sale of this nineteen and three-fourth acres. The proceeds were used in payment of expenses incurred in the erection, in 1802, of a new church building. At this time the Staatsburg church was taken down, and some of the lumber was used in the new church. In 1832 it was repaired and improved; still later, in 1860 and 1861, the basement was put under the church, the north gallery was removed, a recess for the pulpit was built, a hall was added, and the old bell was hung in the new tower. A survey and map by Alexander Thompson show that the church as it stands today is on the site, or within a few feet of the site, where the men of Wurtemberg built their *Gottes haus* in 1760. The parsonage was built in 1870 and the sexton's house in 1867.

The first known historical sketch of the church was prepared by the Reverend Doctor Neff, under the authority of Synod, and

read by him at a meeting of the Conference, which was held at Wurtemberg church in 1872. This sketch was printed in the *Lutheran Observer*, and then placed in the hands of the appointed historian of Synod. In it, Doctor Neff tells the story of the coming of the Palatines and the building of the church, and explains the changes in the structure which were afterward made.

The Wurtemberg Cemetery Association was formed on October second, 1852, and incorporated three years later. One acre of land was bought, south of the church, and several additions have been made since.

The Shed Association was incorporated in 1860. Land was purchased, west of the church, and fifty horse stalls were built. Most of the families drove to the church, and even this accommodation was usually insufficient.

For many years the church was, as its builders had intended, a center of community life. A Singing School was held for twenty weeks each winter, and besides the pleasure of the music, instruction was given in singing by note. An organization called The Wurtemberg Lyceum held meetings also. There were programs consisting of declamations, essays, debates, and complete dramas. The coming of moving pictures, radio, and television in a sense crowded these activities out, and stopped the constant gathering of the church members.

However, there were the usual church organizations.

The Woman's Home and Foreign Missionary Society was formed in 1879. It has always been very active and is still active today. Regular meetings are held, there is a great deal of study, and there are constant contributions to all missionary work.

In 1890, the Ladies' Aid Society of the church came into being. A good deal of money for the church expenses has been earned by this group. In 1957, these two societies were united under the name, The United Lutheran Church Women, each organization having its own officers. Recently, a complete union has been effected, with one set of officers.

In the year in which the women began to organize, 1879, the young men of the church also formed an association, which met monthly, Sunday afternoon, at the church. Upon marriage, a member became an associate member. This Young Men's Association came to an end about 1900, because there were no more bachelors!

However, in 1915, The Men's Brotherhood was formed, holding a business and social meeting once a month. There was always a program, a speaker, or pictures; and once in a while, when something especially delightful was planned, the ladies were invited to attend. This organization was extremely beneficial in many ways and, in particular, it sponsored the restaurant booth at the county fair.

In this last, it was joined by the Luther League, which was organized in 1913. This is now one of the most active societies of the church. Devotional and social meetings are held, money is being raised, and a great deal is being done for the church by these young people. The beautiful red altar-linens are their latest gift.

The Sunday School has become one of the most inspired and inspiring phases of the church activity. The faithful work of the staff and the teachers, the happiness of the children in their Sunday School, and the constant increase in their numbers, give hope and promise for the future of the church.

In 1859, now over one hundred years ago, the first Wurtemberg Turkey Supper was held, and only one year has been missed since. This has been called "Wurtemberg Homecoming," for the same people come year after year, to greet old friends, and to enjoy the famous dinner.

The roster of the founders of the church and their descendants has been enriched and blessed by the sincere and dedicated men and women who have joined its number.

The early records show that services were held immediately upon the building of the church. The first baptism was in the

first year. The first Pastors received calls specifying that they were to preach in German, with an occasional English sermon if this was required. For a time, the church shared a Pastor with some neighboring church. Everything was planned together, and everything was paid for together. There are long lists of contributions for Pastors' salaries, and for supplies and necessaries. One man gave four bushels of wheat, another gave two bushels; someone else gave money or a day of work, instead of wheat. The individual Sunday morning contributions varied from twenty-one cents to sixty-seven cents. But every name is there.

There have been many changes. The members of the congregation no longer come to the services with horses and wagons, tying their horses under the old sheds. The church is no longer heated by stoves and lighted by candles and lamps. The members are of every profession, and not tillers of the soil alone; and since the children of the settlers learned to speak English, the sermons are not given in German.

But in two hundred years, one thing has not changed at all. The love of God, with the unfaltering devotion of these His people to St. Paul's of Wurtemberg, is the same love as that which gave her being in 1760. And it is this love, and the continuing, united striving of her men and women for her welfare and progress, which have brought her to this happy hour.

So, still guided by God, may we go forward together, like our ancestors, the builders of our church.

The following men have served St. Paul's as Pastors:

- Rev. John Frederick Ries, 1760- (?)
- Rev. George Heinrich Pfeifer, 1781-1794
- Rev. John Frederick Ernest, 1794-1797
- Rev. Frederick Quitman, 1797-1825
- Rev. William J. Eyer, 1825-1837
- Rev. A. T. Geissenhainer, 1838-1840
- Rev. Charles A. Smith, (prob.) 1842-1850
- Rev. Wm. M. School, 1850-1855
- Rev. George Neff, 1855-1876
- Rev. J. G. Griffith, 1876-1881
- Rev. John Kling, 1881-1887
- Rev. George W. Fortney, 1888-1895
- Rev. Chauncey Diefenedorf, 1895-1898
- Rev. Roscoe C. Wright, 1898-1907
- Rev. John Kling, (recalled), 1907-1913
- Rev. William G. Boomhower, 1913-1916
- Rev. Oscar B. Noren, 1916-1919
- Rev. E. L. Davison, 1919-1924
- Rev. Elder J. Himes, 1924-1946
- Rev. Karl Romoser, 1947-1949
- Rev. Herbert E. Finch, 1949-1954
- Rev. John L. E. de Papp, 1955-1958
- Rev. Paul M. Young (Interim Pastor)
- Rev. Rolf W. Eschke, 1959-