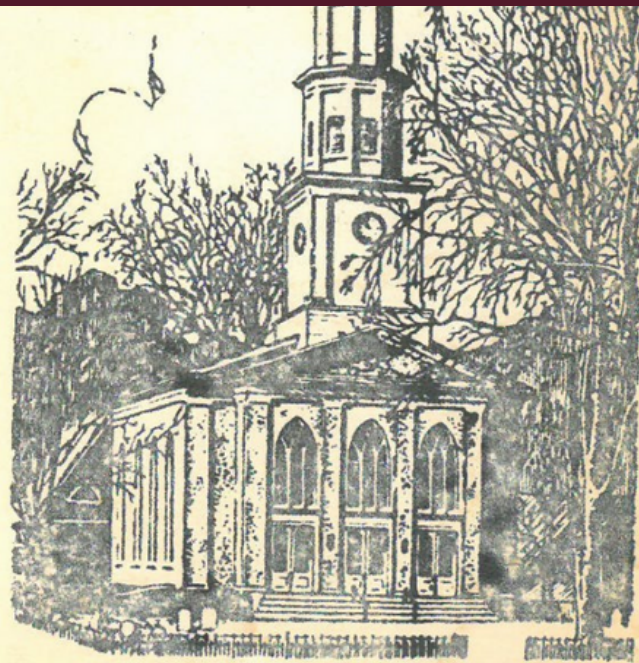
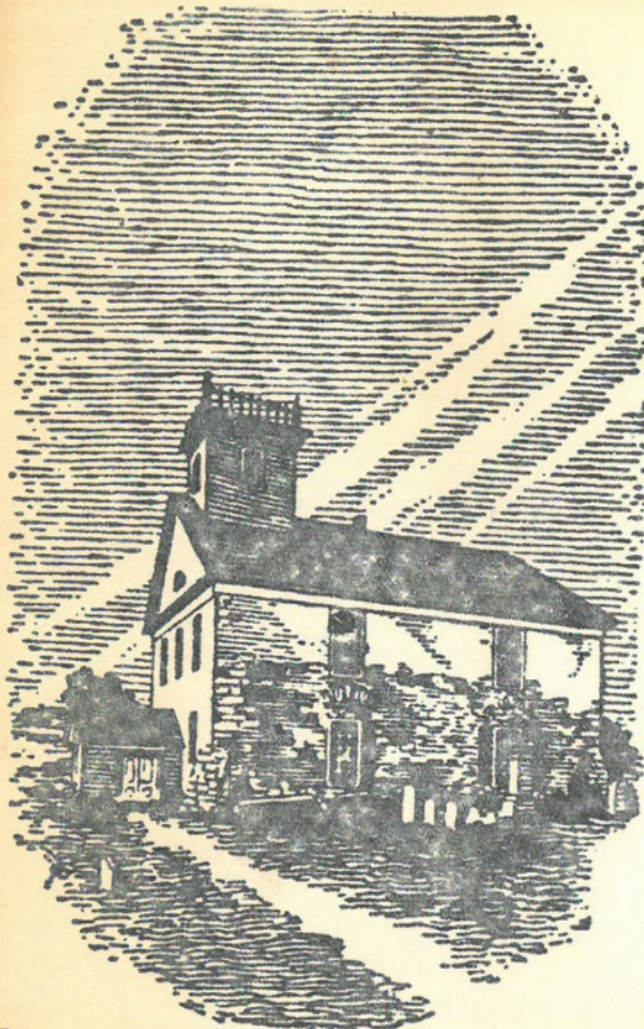


The History of Fort Herkimer Church

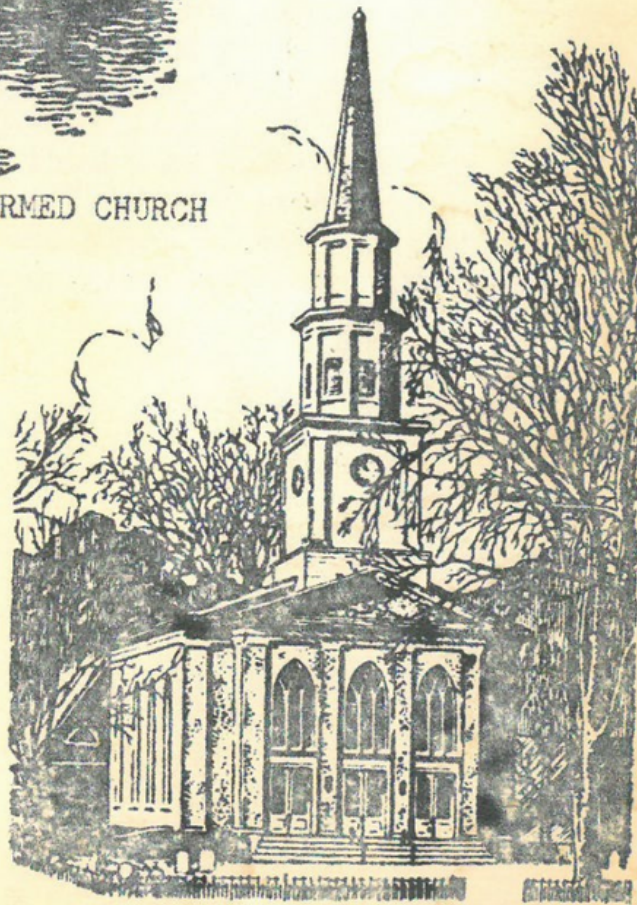
THE



THE REFORMED CHURCH OF HERKIMER
Established 1723



THE FORT HERKIMER REFORMED CHURCH



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FOREWORD

We are all debtors to the past and its people. Here in the Mohawk Valley this is especially evident because the past goes back to and beyond the beginning of our nation. It is worthy for us to acquaint ourselves with the events of bygone years and the stalwart men and women who shared those formative experiences. From their dedication to God, church, home and government we can learn much.

In these few pages a very brief sketch of people and events is presented with the hope that a better understanding and appreciation of them may result. Perhaps it may stimulate some to seek more information about the period when these two churches were established. It is to be fervently hoped that in succeeding years the knowledge of these early days will be cherished.

Our special thanks go to Mrs. Andrew Patrick and Mrs. Raymond Klock for preparing this little booklet. The ancestors of both of these ladies were among the original settlers in the Valley.

Rev. Forest L. Decker

The Reformed Church
Herkimer, N.Y.

November 21, 1966

It was a day of rejoicing and thanksgiving in the little settlement on the Mohaques. We do not know the season nor with certainty the year. But it was the Sabbath and the sturdy inhabitants were gathered in their newly completed house of worship to give thanks to God. Never was "ein' feste Burg" sung more meaningfully for already our forebears had found that God was indeed a "bulwark never failing."

We must go back some years before to understand what manner of men and women these were who first settled in this locality. Most had come from Germany where they had lived under a Palatine or provincial ruler to whom the king had given authority to act for him in his own province. The man was called Count Palatine and his province a Palatinate. Most fertile and prosperous of these was the Palatinate, of the lower Rhine whose chief city was Heidelberg. Since this land was on the border of the country, it was a place for refugees and a battlefield between the Protestant forces and those of the Church of Rome. Seeing their crops ruined and their homes destroyed by the opposing armies during the 30 years war they dreamed of liberty and freedom to worship. Thousands of them emigrated to London where, in their poverty, they proved a burden on the economy. As a solution it was suggested that they be moved to the New York area which the English had taken from the Dutch. Here they could be put to work developing a tar industry for the British Navy and would stand as a buffer between the English settlements and the French and Indian forces to the north and west. This was done beginning in 1708 and the Palatines found themselves settled along the Hudson river. They were poorly clothed, fed, and housed and they were little better than slaves compelled to labor at a task giving them neither satisfaction nor profit. Frequent complaints were sent to Governor Hunter until in the fall of 1711 having exhausted his "substance and credit" for their support he warned them to "take measures to subsist themselves" during the coming winter. Many immediately moved to Schoharie where but for the help given by the Indians, they would have perished. Since the land on which they settled had been sold previously

to others once more they had to move. In 1721 Governor Burnet gave them permission to purchase land along the upper Mohawk river from the Indians. This purchase was made July 7, 1722 the tract conveyed being lowlands along both sides of the river for about 24 English miles. The next year the land was surveyed and the formal grant from the Crown called the "Burnetsfield Patent" followed. It was dated April 30, 1725 but the settlements had begun at least two years before. This patent granted up to 100 acres. The grantees held the land subject to a quit rent of two shillings and sixpence per 100 acres and were bound to cultivate within three years at least 3 acres of every 50 given them.

For many years the south side of the river seemed to progress more rapidly and we shall consider them first. As soon after the arrival of the colonists as they had erected log cabins to protect their families they gave thought to a place for worship and a little log church soon stood on the site of the present Fort Herkimer Church. On September 24, 1730 Nicholas Wollaber, one of the patentees, gave a deed for a portion of lot no. 30 being an acre and 9 rods. The deed mentions the presence of a school house already on the ground. This building had probably been used for the first religious services.

In 1740 Johan Jost Herkimer, father of Nicholas, had a stone mansion built in the settlement of Fort Herkimer. This was later known as the Fort. Soon after was begun the work of erection the present stone church. In 1751 the Governor was petitioned for a license to solicit funds to complete the church. The request was granted and work begun. The building formed a part of the stockaded defensive built under the direction of Sir William Johnson. Operations were interrupted by the French and Indian invasion of 1757 but the work was completed in 1767. This was the first church in the valley built for European worship. It was one story or 17 feet high and 48 X 58 feet on the ground, built of stone and supported by heavy angular abutments at each corner. Since the road was between the church and the south bank of the river, the door was in the center of the north side, arched over the top with the initials JHE s.q. 1767 cut in the keystone.

These are supposed to stand for Jost Herchheimer, builder. Directly opposite the entrance was the high pulpit.

In 1812 the height of the church was increased 8 feet, another row of windows added and a new entrance made on the west end. The old entrance was closed with stone and a gallery was erected on three sides. The pulpit was moved to the east end and a winding stair was provided giving an entrance from the rear.

During the Revolution the church with the Herkimer mansion was within the stockade. Here the settlers took refuge. At one time Col. Willets forces were stationed at the fort. On June 28, 1775 a council was held here with the Indians when the Oneidas and Luscaroras ceded to the state the territory lying between the Unadilla and Chenango rivers. Here also was raised the first liberty pole in the state.

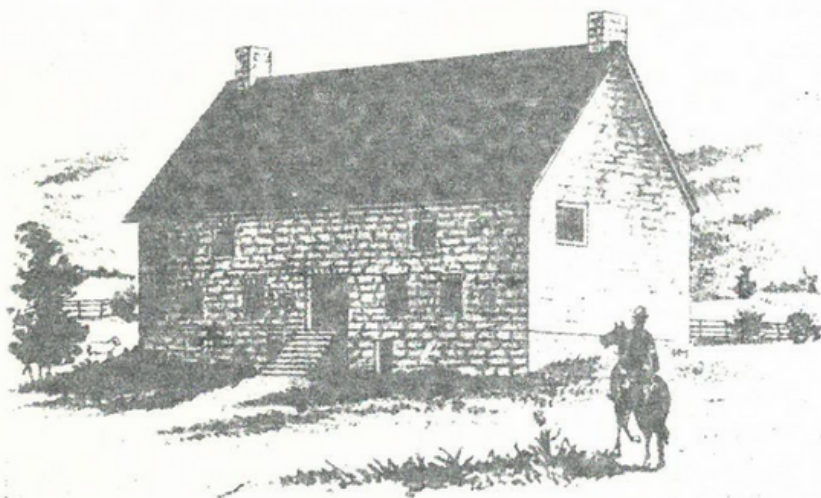
In 1796 the corporate seal of the church was adopted which gave the name of Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of German Flats. August 4, 1798 is the date on which the 1st definite official collegiate union between the Herkimer and German Flats Churches. Action was initiated by the latter one mentioned to aid the one in Herkimer.

In 1753 Hans Dedrich Stelly and others had deeded to Peter Remsen three lots on the flats for the support of the minister, who was to receive the Glebe rents. These lands could not be sold as they were in trust and were desposed of by granting perpetual leases at an annual rent of $12\frac{1}{2}$ cents per acre. In 1851 an act of the Legislature was passed authorizing the consistory to sell a portion of the lands. Quit claim deeds were authorized in 1892 and recently this means of raising funds for the church was concluded.

No record of membership in the church was kept until the Synod of 1812 ordered annual reports to be made.

In 1897 a new bell was placed in the church tower. The membership had decreased to such an extent that

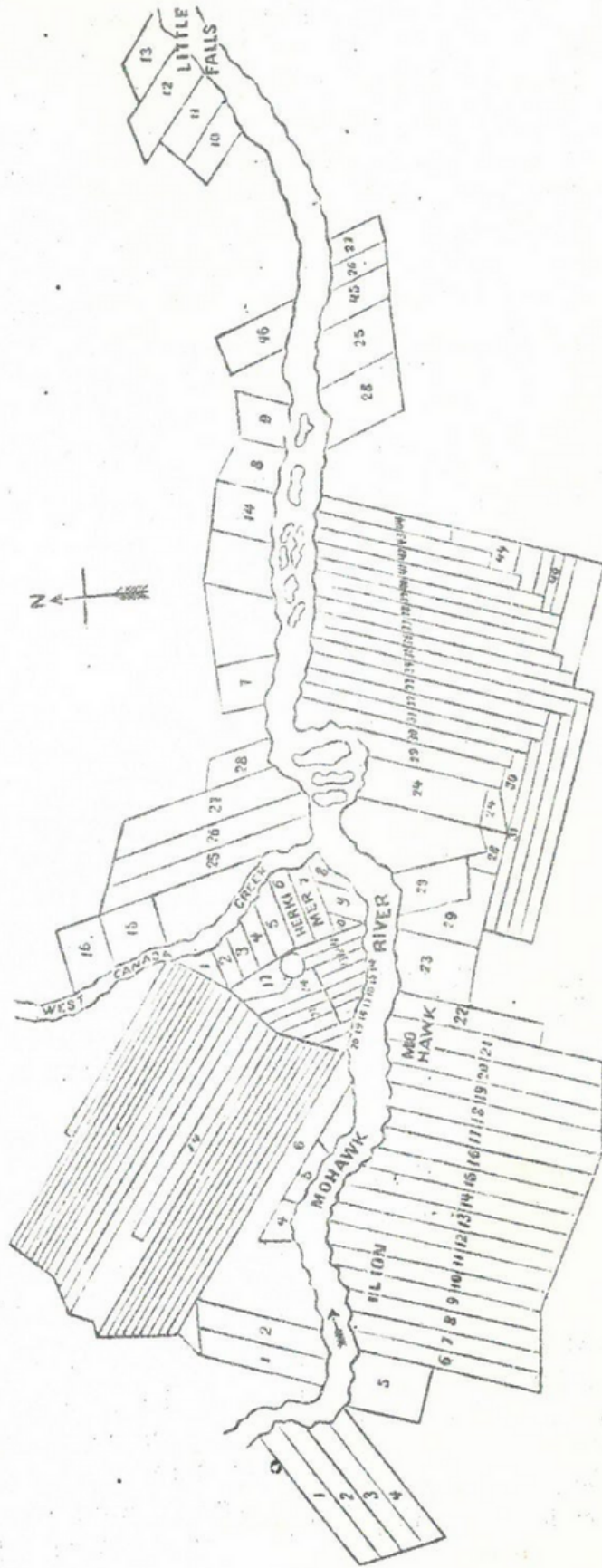
the gallery was sealed over, a new floor was laid, the seats were lowered six inches and a platform was erected under the high pulpit. In 1905 a new slate roof was put on. July 13, 1912 the property of the church was deeded to the Classis of Montgomery its governing body. In that year the DAR did a magnificent job of restoring and redecorating the church, where a service was held on July 23, 1912. In 1947-48 the church was restored to the arrangements as in 1812. Vesper Services have been held during the month of July and a Union Thanksgiving Services is held each year. In 1965 a inter-faith Thanksgiving Service was held at which for the first time all three faiths, Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant participated.



FORT HERKIMER.

The home of Johan Jost Herkimer, which was built in 1740. This was later known as the Fort.

THE LAND PATENTS OR GRANTS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE MOHAWK RIVER FOR THE PIONEERS OF THIS AREA.



There are larger maps with the names included. One of these is on view in the Reformed Church at Herkimer.

Meanwhile across the river another group of Palatines were having similar experiences. It's believed that the first church was erected in 1723, octagonal in shape and built of logs. This section was known as the "Stone Ridge." The church and in fact the entire settlement was destroyed by the French and Indians November 12, 1757. The pastor and some of his flock escaped to Fort Herkimer but many were killed and others taken prisoners to Canada. For over 60 years until after the Revolution in 1784 these settlements formed the outpost of the old New York frontier and suffered terribly during the Wars.

After his return, Johan Jost Petree, on August 20, 1770 reaffirmed that he had given an acre of land for the church. During the Revolution Fort Dayton was just to the east of the church property. From this place Gen. Herkimer led his troops to the Battle of Oriskany one of the turning points of the war for it prevented Col. Leger from joining Gen. Burgoyne at Albany and made the latter's defeat possible. Another church also of frame construction was erected between 1776 and 1798. This building, like its predecessor, was not to last long, but was burned along with the county clerk's office, in 1804 when a fire swept the whole area, destroying the jail and courthouse as well.

Plans for the present church, a brick structure, were immediately drawn up, and pews were sold on February 5, 1835. Previously, the Presbyterian and the Reformed Church congregations had used the church on alternate Sundays, but after the building burned the Presbyterian society became extinct.

The Church interior was largely rebuilt in 1874, when the old high-back pews and high pulpit were torn out and new stained glass windows installed. Rural members of the congregation were stoutly opposed to the change in the pews, and it was carried out during the week when they were absent on their farms, so that when they arrived for Sunday services the old pews had vanished. Rumor has it that the church lost not only the pews but many of their occupants. At the same time the walls and ceilings were decorated and the woodwork made of solid black walnut to the floor.

March 3, 1882 the Dutch Reformed Church filed papers of incorporation. The Herkimer Democrat of May 23, 1883 reported that the Reformed Church has a new tin roof. October 16, 1884 the Reformed Church people were reported to be laying a new flagstone walk on Church Street which no doubt replaced an old wooden one.

In 1881 contributions had been solicited to place an iron fence around the church and graveyard. Much of the land to the north had been sold to individuals for burial plots. Since the gentlemen who were reported to have "the matter in hand have not undertaken it for the benefit of the Reformed Church they feel at liberty to appeal to the public at large". The fence was to be similar in design to the one which at that time surrounded the Court House and was expected to cost \$400.

The present cut stone chapel building was erected in 1894, the idea at the time having been to build a new church eventually in the same stone. This project, however, was never carried out. In 1912 the church was redecorated by Tiffany and Co. of N.Y., indirect lighting was installed and the appearance was much as seen today. In October of that year, C.R. Snell and sons, Harry and George, presented a new organ in memory of wife and mother. A recital was held October 24, 1912 with Dewitt C. Garretson, Organist and Dr. Frank Covallo, baritone.

A town clock had been installed in the steeple in 1852. By 1916 the Evening Telegram reported that "the town clock on the Reformed Church is hiding its face behind its hands these days and keeps in the deepest seclusion." In May 1917 the Snell Memorial Clock, given by the sons in memory of their father, replaced the old one in the tower. Electric bulbs installed behind the transparent dials to illuminate them at night were connected with an automatic control. In other extensive renovations about 40 years ago, the building was raised and excavation carried out underneath to provide a basement auditorium, kitchen facilities, cloakrooms and other improvements for church activities. May 2, 1948 during the pastorate of the

Rev. Mr. Welwood the Harter Chapel and Youth Lounge were furnished and dedicated.

In 1956 it was necessary to replace the old hand hewn beams which supported the balcony with steel beams. The beams when removed showed that they had been used before and it is supposed that they escaped damage in the 1834 fire. At the same time the Chapel was redecorated. Spot lights were installed outside which makes our steeple an land mark which can be seen for many miles.

As the lighted spire directs one's eyes upward to the sky, may the influence of this Reformed Church of Herkimer ever turn men's thoughts to the God by whose providence and grace it has survived these many years.

* * * * *

"THE NATION THAT DOES NOT TAKE A JUST PRIDE IN THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF ITS ANCESTORS" says a great historian "WILL NEVER DO ANYTHING WORTHY OF THE ADMIRATION OF ITS DESCENDANTS." So it is with a church. The congregation of the Reformed Church of Herkimer is proud of its long and honorable career and it can be depended upon to see that future generations will have no cause to blush for the record of the present day.