



NORTH GREENBUSH NOTES

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It may be hard to believe, but there were two Dutch Reformed Churches in Wynantskill from the 1800's into the twentieth century. These two buildings stood only about a block from one another on Church Street. One is gone now, but what was referred to as the Bellinger Church had a colorful history in its day.

The current First Reformed Church of Wynantskill traces its lineage back to at least 1793. By the early 1820's a schism had occurred within the church and several members broke away to form their own church which they called "The True Dutch Reformed Church of Wynantskill and Poestenkill". We can't say for sure what the controversy was about. It may have concerned interpretation of certain Dutch Reformed Canon Law or it may have been how church Elders dealt with "heretics" and "immoral persons".

We don't know the membership numbers for each Church, but in the early days there was a lively competition for members. The First Reformed Church was incorporated in 1824 and the rival True Reformed Church followed suit the next year. A newspaper report describes the True Reformed Church members as "a stubborn and dogmatic group of hell-and- damnation believers". After meeting many years in homes and halls, the congregation erected its own building in 1854, just up the street from The First Dutch Reformed Church.

This new building became known as the Bellinger Church after its flamboyant minister Rev. Henry Bellinger. Born in 1789 in Schoharie County, Bellinger traveled a circuit from Sharon to Bethlehem to Glenmont to Wynantskill and to Johnstown. He was known to be a welcome sight to the congregations he served, particularly in the winter, when his descendants recall he wore "a brown cowhide fur coat when traveling to Wynantskill". A collection of his sermons is available at the State Archives and gives a taste of his fire and brimstone manner of speaking. He died in 1877.

Bellinger was the last ordained minister to preach in the Church. I suspect that his departure led to an ever increasing loss of membership since services were led by lay readers. The last services were around 1926 when the Church closed its doors. Being vacant, the Church building fell into disrepair over the years. A notation in the 1948 town meeting minutes indicates that church was neglected and constituted a fire hazard. The building was dismantled in March, 1975 by an East Chatham resident who intended to re-assemble it as a dwelling.

Long time Wynantskill residents talk about Frank Wolfe, the last church caretaker who possessed a big brass key which he occasionally used to unlock the church and show visitors the hand-stenciled border design; the pews and benches; the large gas chandelier and two wood-burning stoves. All this is gone now. Does anyone know what happened to the brass key?

I'm interviewing long time residents about their reminiscences. If you know someone or you would like to be interviewed, please call me at 283-6384.