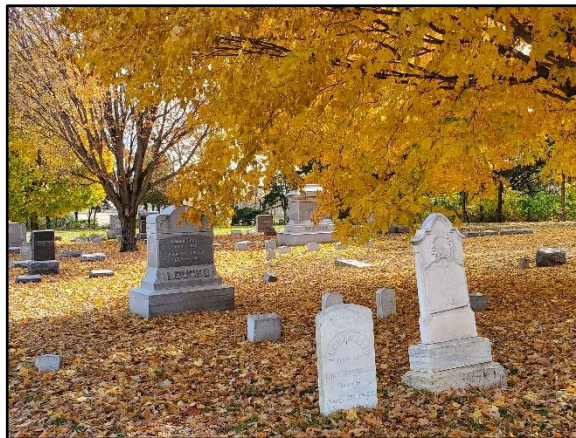
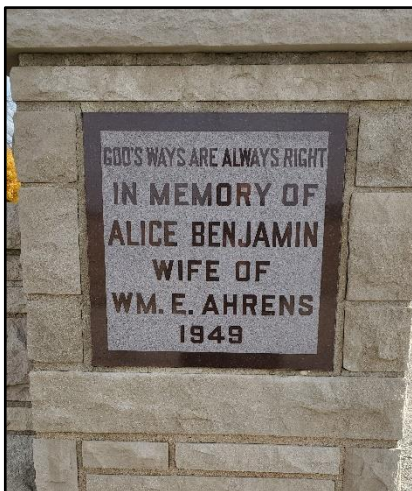


The Jericho Church Sugar Grove Township

by Calvin D. Elifson

Some church congregations do not last long in years, and Jericho church is one of them. However, its impact in Sugar Grove Township and beyond cannot be fully measured in years alone. Worthy of mention are its firmly held beliefs, including abolitionist convictions and activities in furthering the cause of freedom for African Americans.

In *Sin-Qua Sip, Sugar Grove, A History of Sugar Grove Township in Kane County, Illinois*, Patsy Mighell Paxton wrote about the churches. "Construction on the first church building was begun in May of 1855 on Mighell Road, one mile south of Jericho Road, adjacent to Jericho Cemetery. The Mount Prospect Free Mission Church was finished and dedicated the following winter." This church with its interesting history is reported here.



The Jericho Church was a *Congregational* Church. This identification helps to clarify the characteristics, beliefs, and formation of the Jericho Church. Congregationalism had its roots in the earliest history of the American Colonies. The Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620 were the forebearers of Congregationalists' beliefs and church government. They were "Separatists" who had severed their connection with the established Church of England, viewing the church as unscriptural and unchristian. The Puritans were also part of the Congregationalists' roots. They did not separate from the Church of England but tried to reform it from within.

Congregational Churches were of the Reformed faith. Their congregations were self-governing. They also maintained covenants with other congregations. Because of their local autonomy, many congregations could add or subtract many emphases (such as barring slave owners from membership).

An early Illinois Congregational gathering of Cook County and DuPage County Churches (July 13th, 1833) suggested these faith statements that were adopted by many of the Congregational Churches in that area, though not required. Even when used in a local church, they were meant as a "testimony" of faith and not a test that one must actually conform to as written.

- belief in the Triune God
- the inspiration of the scriptures of the old and new testaments
- the fall of the human race into sin
- the death of Christ as an atonement for sin
- justification by faith
- congregational authority to choose its own officers and admit members
- baptism and the Lord's supper are ordinances to be observed
- the resurrection of the dead when God will judge the world.

In 1826 in New York City, the Congregationalists and Presbyterians formed what was called The American Home Missionary Society. The purpose of this society was to be a missionary organization to evangelize and plant churches in the West, including Illinois. For example, in 1850-51 the society employed 1065 missionaries and of these 119 were working in Illinois.

The Jericho Church (also known as The Mount Prospect Free Mission Church) was formed or founded in the 1838/1839-time frame. The Congregationalists list both years as the year of formation. One of its founders was Reuben Bingham Johnson who became a Deacon in the church and who donated the land on which the church building was erected in 1855. He also provided the balance of funds needed to build the church after contributions from other members. Reuben Johnson was also a “station keeper” on the Underground Railroad. His farm was one of the stops along the UGRR at Jericho in Kane County.

The history of the Jericho Church will be divided into three sections:

The Early Years: 1839 to 1849

The Middles Years: 1850 to 1859

The Later Years: 1860 to 1871

The literature available varies in quantity for each era of the church’s existence. Some individual pastor’s correspondence with the American Home Missionary Society has been preserved and includes up to 8 letters, while correspondence from other individuals includes far fewer letters. For some pastors there is no correspondence at all. The spelling and punctuation of the letters of correspondence has not been corrected. Some of the sources for the information provided below vary in their reliability, but in general the source material appears quite trustworthy.

The Early Years: 1839-1849

According to Congregational Church records, Jericho Church (also known as “Big Rock Creek Church”) was “gathered” or formed in 1838 as a Presbyterian Church. In 1839 it became a Congregational Church, and that is the year listed in the Congregational records as the year they were organized. Reuben Bingham Johnson was one of the founders of the Jericho Church. He was a native of Ashville, Chautauqua County, New York. In 1836 he and his wife Sophronia made their way westward and arrived in Kane County on March 6th.

In an undated letter, Reuben, along with Thomas Pierce and Ira Fitch as a committee of three, wrote to American Home Missionary Society (AHMS) headquarters in New York City to its secretary, Rev. Milton Badger. “Dear Sir. We the undersigners or Committee of the Congregational Church Big Rock Creek, Kane Co. Ill., appointed for the purpose of making application to the A.H. M. S. for aid for the present year want to state that we have obtained the Ministerial Services

of the Rev. L. C. Gilbert one half time alternately for one year commencing on the 29th day of September, 1839.

The Church consists of 21 members and the average *number* of attendants on Public Worship is about 40. The church is in cooperation with the Congregational Church in Bristol in the support of Rev. L.C. Gilbert the present year for \$400. We being in limited circumstances and enduring all the inconveniences of a new country are enduced to ask aid from your Society to the amount of Fifty Dollars.”

Ira Fitch

Thomas Pierce

Reuben Johnson

(Committee)

A recurrent theme in the correspondence (as evidenced above) is the concern by both pastor (May 1840) and congregation (October 1840) that the agreed to salary of \$400 per year be supplied for the pastor. One request was that the home office provide another \$25 of aid. A request by the Bristol Congregational Church committee to the AHMS was that they support Rev. Gilbert in his ministry at Oswego. This would increase his salary since he served another church.

In Rev. Luman C. Gilbert’s letter to AHMS dated August 31, 1840, he reported that on the 4th of July “we held a Sabbath school celebration at Rock Creek.” He also stated that “The congregations at Rock Creek are now larger than they were last winter and would probably be still larger if we had a convenient place of worship.” He also noted “Temperance Societies exist in both places (Big Rock Creek and Bristol) and Abolition Societies have formed during the year past.”

Rev. Gilbert reported in a November 1840 letter some “hindrances” to religious interest: “The country here is new and but few among us have comfortable dwellings, and the attention of the people is so entirely absorbed in providing for their temporal wants, that it is very difficult to induce them to make the effort and give that attention to the subject of religion.” However, a few months later in February 1841 he stated that “weekly prayer meetings have commenced at Rock Creek.”

In April of 1841 Rev. Gilbert reported that daily religious meetings with “principal denominations” (Baptist and Methodist) had taken place. He stated that the meetings were well attended and “considerable numbers gave pleasing evidence of passing from death to life.” He continued, “Among the converts are two men aged about 50.”

Later in 1841 a letter from the Sterling, Illinois Congregational Church committee to the AHMS acknowledged “We propose to secure the labors of the Rev. Gilbert in conjunction with the church in Popular Grove.” And so ended the ministry of Jericho’s first pastor.

The Rev. Henry Bergen, a recent graduate of Princeton Seminary in New Jersey, became Jericho Church’s second pastor, seemingly by accident. He had begun his boat trip with Milwaukee, Wisconsin, as his destination, but when the boat arrived in Milwaukee that changed. He wrote “some obstruction in the mouth of the river” in Milwaukee prevented him from landing there. The captain of the boat sailed on to Chicago. Rev. Bergen’s superior considered it “Providential” that he was not able to land in Milwaukee. The record indicates that Rev. Bergen landed in Chicago on November 5, 1841, and preached every Sunday after that in Jericho Church and Bristol.

A year later (November 1842) Rev. Bergen reported in his letter to AHMS that he had in recent weeks spent less time on his pastoral duties. Instead, he had invested time preparing a place to live for the coming winter months. “I attempted to repair a small building erected some years ago for a corn house.” Next to the corn house was a small log cabin that the Rev. Bergen and his wife also used to set up housekeeping. That winter had been “uncommonly severe,” and the Rev. Bergen reported that he came through that winter without any illness.

In the same letter he wrote: “Our Sabbath school which is held between the services on the Sabbath has been increasing in interest for some months. I have seldom seen a school more interesting in a country place like this. It is continued throughout the year, averaging about 30.”

In his report of February 1843, he noted that he was spending 2/3 of his time in Rock Creek and 1/3 at Oswego. "Both congregations are increasing in numbers and interest." He observed that the Rock Creek congregation was scattered over a wide area and meetings were held in different neighborhoods on weekday evenings. He reported one advantage of that: he was able to preach the gospel in



homes to people who would not think of coming on the Sabbath.

Mighell Road across from Jericho Cemetery. (2023) It is easy to picture households scattered over a wide area.

In his May 1843 report Rev. Bergen mentioned the lack of a Sabbath school library. In August of the same year, he rejoiced that someone had donated some funds for a library. "The youth and children are much taken up with reading." It was one of the first libraries in Sugar Grove Township.

By October of 1843 the Rev. Bergen had left the Big Rock Creek Church and the work in Oswego for a Presbyterian Church in Rushville, Illinois. He left September 5, 1843, and returned to "Big Rock Creek and vicinity" by December 1, 1845. He continued his ministry at the Congregational Church, Big Rock Creek, well into 1848. No record of his correspondence for those years has been found. He died in Galesburg, Illinois on August 12, 1874, and was buried in Jericho Cemetery in Sugar Grove, Kane County.



The Middle Years: 1850-1859

At the Albany, New York Congregational Church convention in 1852, the churches “in the East” resolved to give to “the churches of the West” \$50,000 “to aid them in the erection of sanctuaries.” This fund was to aid “230 missionary churches in erecting houses of worship.” Illinois was allotted \$8050 which was distributed among 37 applicants for these grants-in-aid amounts ranging from \$150 to \$250. In 1855, 36 churches were reported to have received the aid.

Congregational Church historian Rev. Richard Taylor wrote: “The American Missionary Association (AMA) was formed in the 1840’s as an anti-slavery missionary society. It gave aid to churches in the west that took a strong stand against slavery...The Jericho Church received such support 3 times: in 1852-1855 under Pastor Hiram G. Warner and Pastor Russel Whiting, in 1856 to 1858 under Pastor C. C. Breed, and in 1861-1862 under Pastor George B. Hibbard.”

And so it was that in May, 1855, the Congregational Church in Jericho began to build its church sanctuary. “A subscription to the amount of about \$500 was obtained from the farmers in the immediate neighborhood.” The Congregational Society in the East donated between \$250 to \$300. The balance was furnished by Deacon Reuben B. Johnson who also donated the land for the church. The building was dedicated as Mount Prospect Free Mission Church. “The burying ground for the southern portion of the township lies just adjoining.”

According to the American Congregational Year Book of 1856 (with 1855 statistics), the Jericho Church had 21 members. In the 1856 Year Book, the same number of members was reported. In the years 1857 and 1858 Jericho had 26 members, which is the highest number of members reported in the church’s history. In 1859 the church had 21 members.

The Later Years: 1860-1871

In his January 22, 1861, report to the AMA (American Missionary Association) Rev. Sullivan S. Cone reported these statistics on the Jericho Church:

Members 20

Attendance 65

Members added 2

Sabbath School 50

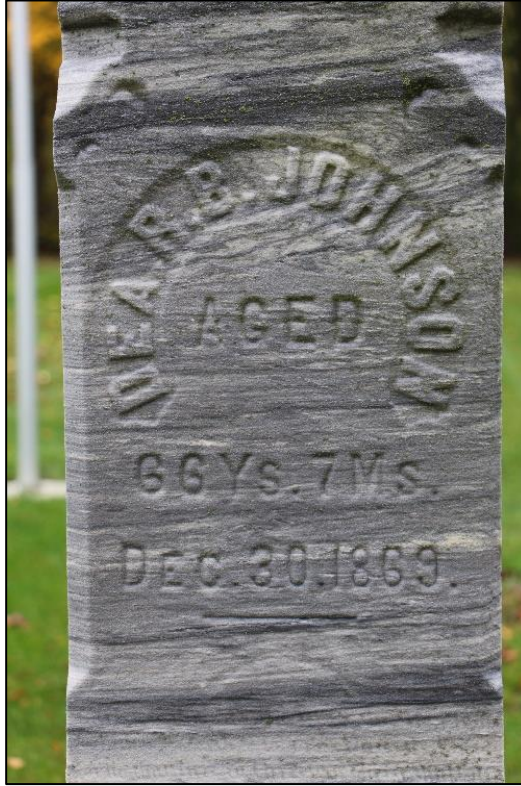
By April of that year Rev. Cone reported to AMA "Our cherished hopes (a general mark of grace among the people) has not been realized...in view of it we are melancholy and sad." As a result of that Rev. Cone wrote concerning "the closing of our labors here." The following two years (1862-1863) Jericho Church had no pastor, and membership dipped to 17 in 1863 with average of 31 in Sabbath School.

In 1864 the Rev. James Brewer pastored the Congregational Churches in Jericho and in Bristol. The Office of the American Home Missionary Society, New York City sent him a questionnaire in February of that year. In the "Remarks" section, he described the activities and conditions of his two churches: "This people have done less for foreign religious enterprises on account of the heavy draft constantly made for soldiers, contraband etc. For these we have contributed in connection with other denominations, Baptists, Methodists, Universalists..."

Rev. Lucian Farnham pastored ½ time at Jericho in 1865 with 17 members and in 1866 with 13 members and an average of 25 in Sabbath School. For 2 years (1867-1868) Jericho had no pastor while membership stood at 17. In 1869 Charles Hibbard pastored the flock with 12 members. In the Congregational Quarterly for 1871 (with 1870 statistics) the Jericho Church submitted "No report."

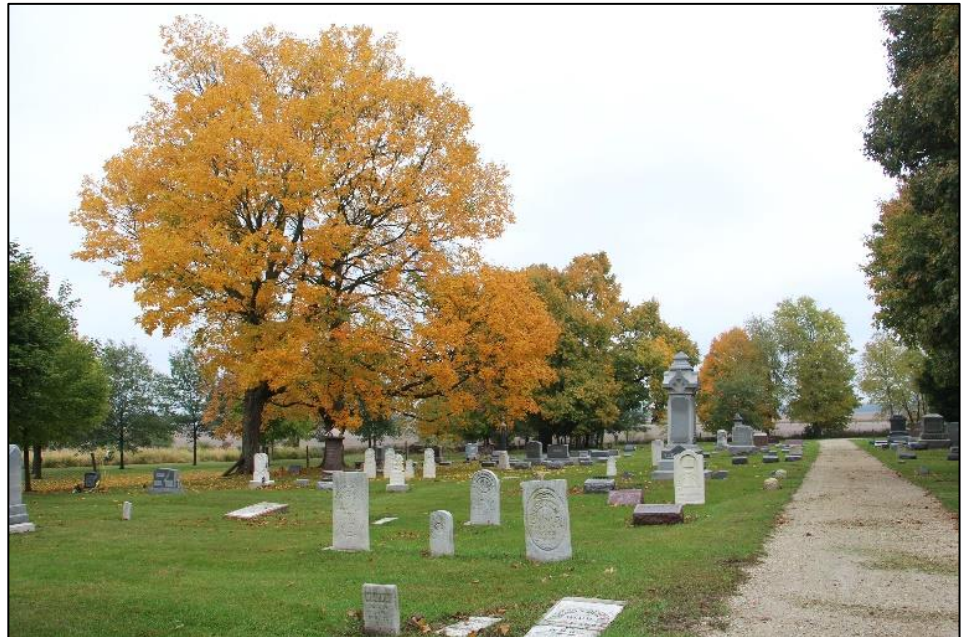
Jericho Church was a member of The Fox River Union which consisted of Congregational Churches in the area. A dissertation by F.B. Spyker included a history of the FRU. That history reported that in May of 1868 Jericho Church was admitted to membership along with 4 other churches. "Of these five churches the church at Jericho passed out of existence in 1871." This report also indicated that Jericho had no pastor in 1867 but Horace Whitmarsh was a Delegate at an October 1867 meeting.

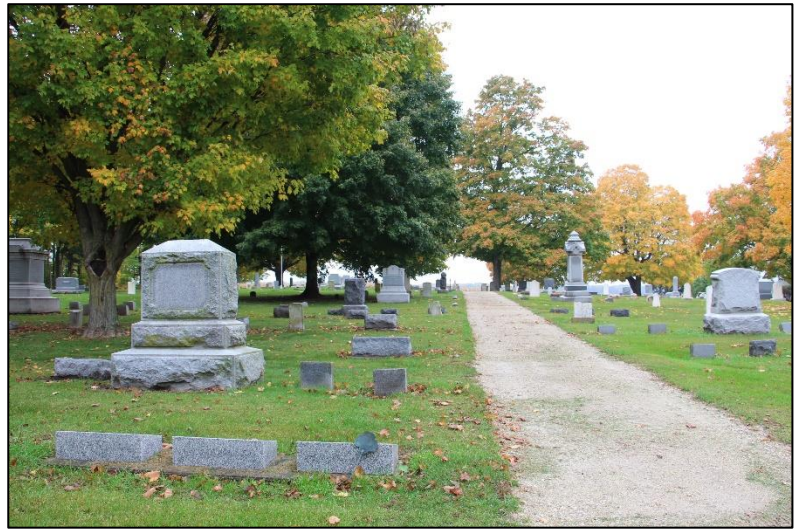
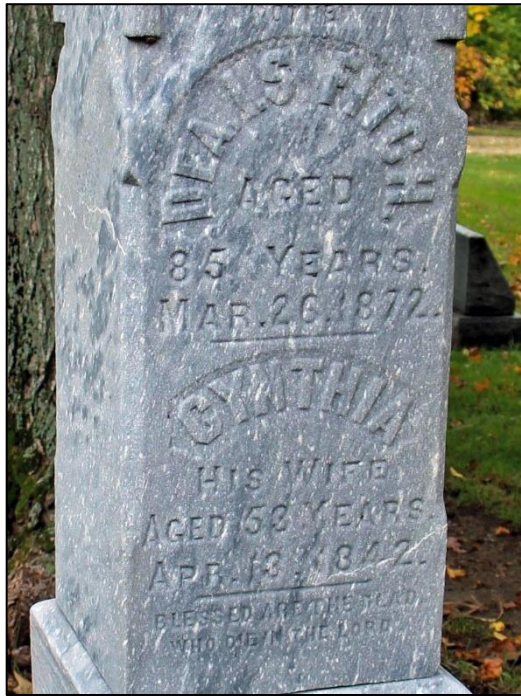
Sometime in 1930 the Aurora Beacon published articles about Sugar Grove. Based on those articles, a Mrs. David Smith wrote "The Story of Sugar Grove." In the section "Sugar Grove Firsts" she wrote: "The first church was built at Jericho in 1855 and 1856 and is now in a fair state of preservation." After Jericho Church passed out of existence in 1871, the building was used by the Methodists for a while. The building was also the site of funerals and community events. No picture could be found of the Jericho Church.



At least two early deacons are buried in Jericho Cemetery. On the left is Deacon Reuben B. Johnson.

North entrance facing east





Another deacon buried in this cemetery was Deacon Ira S. Fitch, who died in 1872 a short time after the Jericho Church dissolved. (left and above right) (Picture directly above is facing west).

Photos by Cal and Karen Elifson