

The Early Church

It was one-hundred years ago this month that the Methodist Church on Main Street was erected. That structure of 1872, more than a building, is a symbol of its congregation... past, present, and future. It is a symbol of their struggles, their pioneering, their devotion, and their dreams. In a very real sense, the church is the congregation, and without them it has no identity and no history. Therefore, in order to understand how this edifice was built, how men and women came together to create it, it is necessary to go back into the history of this congregation, which goes back very nearly as far as the history of the village itself.

A dense forest, ancient beyond reckoning and undisturbed by man, lay over what is now Chautauqua County in the year 1800. In other areas of the eastern United States a new civilization was already fairly advanced, but here was an area entirely uninhabited by white man. Trails traversed the forest by which Indians passed to and from their hunting grounds, but few Indians resided there. It could very well have been the reference point for Longfellow's poem, "Hiawatha," which begins, "This is the forest primeval..."

It was at about this time that the Holland Land Company completed its purchase of lands in western New York by the treaty of the Big Tree with the Indians and began to survey the territory to prepare it for sale

Methodists were like most of the other Protestant sects of the time. So we have a mental picture of the people in the Meeting House that first Sabbath morning, all seated quietly on simple benches, men on one side, women on the other, dressed in sober colors and with their heads bowed, but with gratitude and pride in their hearts for the new place of worship.

The Methodist Episcopal Church was officially established with a board of trustees in Westfield on April 21, 1832. This fact, along with a list of the trustees for the Church, was recorded in the office of the County Clerk. There is evidence to indicate that even after the building of the new Meeting House, there were small groups of Methodists who met elsewhere under the supervision of the Methodist Church of Westfield. One such group met at the Burch School on Prospect Road. At least two prominent early members of the Westfield Church, Cyrus House and Andrew Kelsey, apparently were converted at the school during the period 1844-1845.

From Meeting House to Church

The first Meeting House served the congregation for 20 years. At the end of this time, the congregation was, by all indications, experiencing a low point in its life cycle. When Rev. J.H. Whallon was sent by Erie Conference to minister to the

Cyrus House was a member of the Official Board, a Steward and usher. He was known as a great supporter of Temperance. He was apparently a very strong influence in the church at the time the new building was erected.

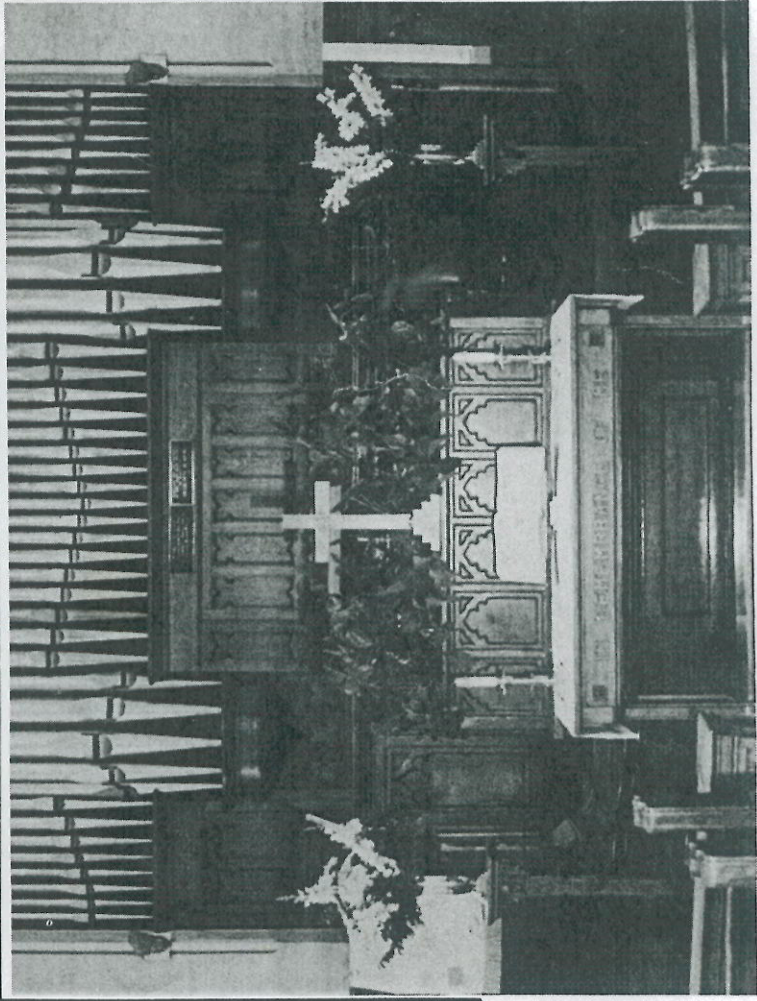
Philander Bemis, residing at the corner of Oak and Terrace Streets, was another strong leader of the church at this time. He was a trustee and Superintendent of Sunday Schools.

Also noted as supportive members at this time were Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Rickenbrode, who lived at 15 Cottage Street, Andrew Kelsey, who had a farm on Main

Road, Mrs. Erastus Leffingwell, who lived with her husband on the Leffingwell Homestead on West Main Road.

The new church was erected at a cost of around \$30,000. It appears in an old photograph of the early 1900's with one handsome steeple crowning its brick facade. The dedication of the building was held November 2, 1872. It was a time of great rejoicing, even though a large financial obligation had been incurred.

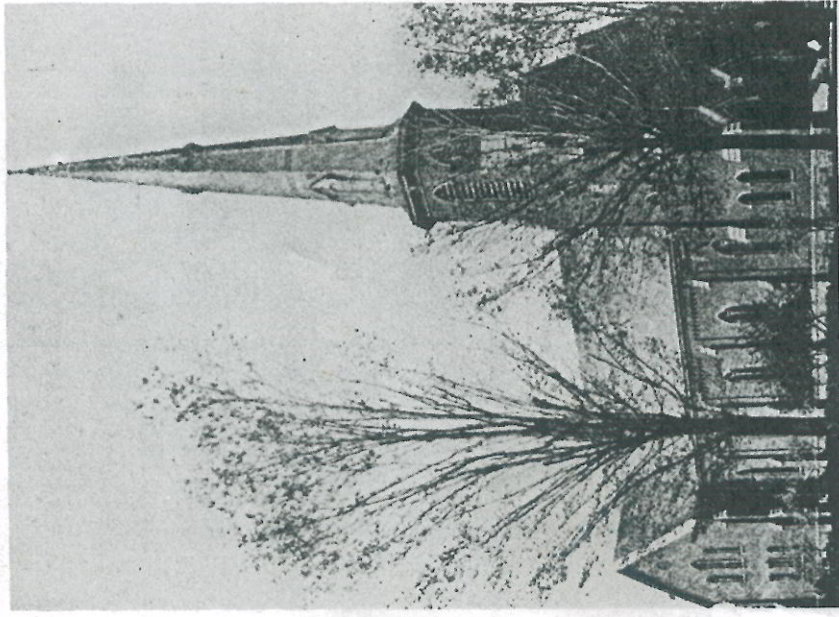
To Rev. Robert W. Scott, who arrived in Westfield and served from 1877-1878 fell much of the burden of raising money to satisfy this debt. The Rev. James E.



One Hundred Years on Main Street

A History of the First United Methodist Church of Westfield

by Patricia Higginbotham and Ralph W. Strickland



The present First United Methodist Church at 101 East Main Street was completed in 1872 and dedicated in November of that year. The building was originally constructed with a steeple.

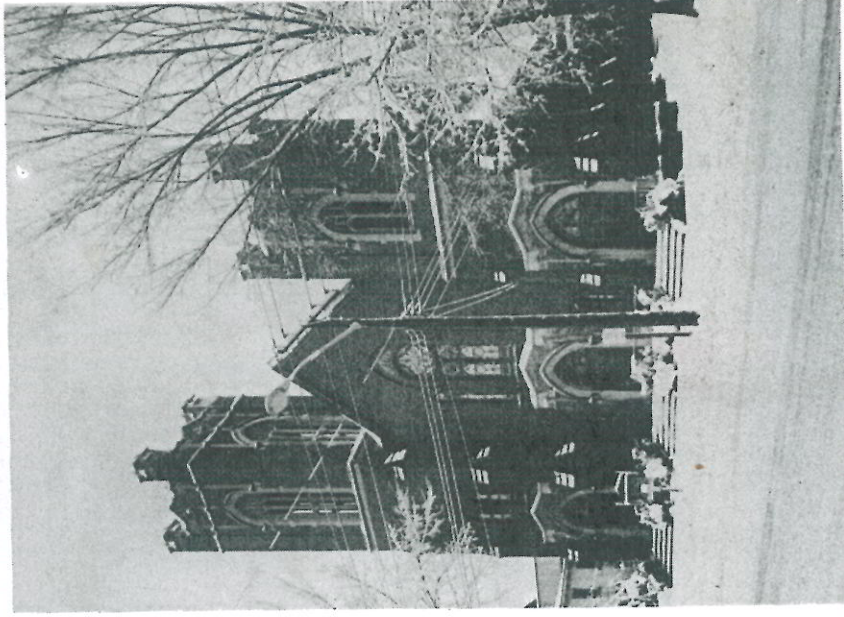
Chapin, who had begun work on the new sanctuary fourteen years earlier, had the satisfaction of returning in 1884 to preach in the church he had only dreamed of. He retired in Westfield in a house on the corner of Union and Second Streets. When he died in 1893, he left \$3000 to the church which was used toward the purchase of a new parsonage. Both of these men are remembered by the church. The south windows over the balcony are in memory of them.

No doubt, in 1933, when the Methodist Church was celebrating the 25th anniversary of a \$35,000 renovation of their church, the members would have been aghast had they been told that in 1968 work would begin on a new fellowship hall and complete renovation of the educational area which would cost \$206,000. It is probable that \$206,000 would have seemed to them an incomprehensible sum, just as the construction of a magnificent brick church for \$30,000 is incomprehensible to us in 1972.

More Modern Times

By 1900 the congregation had undergone many changes. By this time, of course, most of the very early supporters of the church were gone. In fact, the Methodist Episcopal Church of Westfield was in the midst of what might be called the Welch period of its history. Investigation of old records reveals that Dr. C.E. Welch was not only a trustee, but the Superintendent of Sunday Schools and a steward. Mrs. C.E. Welch was President of the Ladies Aid Society, William Taylor Welch was organist, and E.T. Welch was President of the Epworth League. We also know that Dr. Welch was an extremely heavy financial supporter of the church, at times meeting its financial needs almost single-handedly. We know, too, that he was such an avid Methodist that membership in the Methodist Church was a prerequisite for

Rev. George Haley was pastor at the time of this project, the culmination of the heritage and the vitality of the congregation of the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Westfield, and now the First United Methodist Church of Westfield. The plan called for a \$56,000 fellowship hall with complete kitchen and installation of the organ from the home of C.E. Welch, which was previously installed in the chapel in 1941. It called for \$74,000 in alterations to the educational area, and the acquisition of the property north of the church for construction and parking at an expense of \$28,000. These figures are given mainly to point out how very much times had changed since this grand old church



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and settlement. By 1802 the land near Westfield was ready for sale, and people began to move into the area from eastern New York. The first actual settlement began at Cross Roads, now Westfield, founded by James McMahan, a man of Scotch-Irish descent. Many of the new settlers were of this same Scotch-Irish descent, and as a consequence were Presbyterians. Therefore, the earliest sermons preached at area meetings were Calvinist in doctrine.

By 1808, however, other Church organizations had put down roots in the area. In addition to the Presbyterians, there were Baptists, Congregationalists, and by the establishment of the Holland Purchase Circuit of the Philadelphia Conference, Methodists. The first clergyman assigned to the new circuit was Rev. George Lane. He established in 1821 the first organization of the Methodist Church in Westfield, a class consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Brainard Spencer, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Clark, Mr. and Mrs. Reuben Peck, and others not recorded. Up until this time the circuit rider preached where and when he found Methodists gathered, on an irregular basis and more often than not, under no roof other than the leafy green of the forest clearings.

The coming of Dr. Lawton Richmond to the Cross Roads was a very important event in the history of Westfield Methodism. This man, a practicing, licensed physician, was also the first permanent preacher to Westfield Methodists. Dr. Richmond built a home on the west side of town. In 1830, when the Methodist Congregation elected to build a Meeting House, Dr. Richmond moved his home to the rear of the lot to allow the Meeting House to be built on the front of the property. This lot was located on the west side of the creek, as nearly as can be determined, on West Main Street and east of Chestnut. Later Dr. Richmond moved to a new house, and his original home became the Methodist parsonage.

The first Meeting House was built largely by its own members. According to John Herron, who was a member in boyhood and knew the early members, the beams were hand hewn in the woods and hauled to the site by teams of oxen. Some of the members dug the foundation while others laid the stones. Some did carpentry. Some shaved the hand-made pine shingles for the roof. Since the Methodists were in a sense underdogs in the community, many non-members were happy to help the rivals of the Presbyterians, whom they considered aristocratic and prosperous. One interesting fact about this laboriously-constructed Meeting House was that it had two doors, one for the use of women and one for men. The sexes were also segregated inside the church. The feeling was in those days that the women were a distraction for the men and should therefore be kept separate.

At this period of Methodist history, the emphasis was on great simplicity in both dress and behavior. Women could not attend church with flouncy dresses, and, indeed, even a bow on a bonnet would be held highly suspect. In this respect the

Westfield Church in 1849, he found the membership, 130 in number, "in a scanty state, and in a state of things quite in despair. This state of things was produced by a variety of causes, some extending back for years." Rev. Whallon was informed that in his appointment to this happy flock he would secure the erection of a new church building. To the Rev. Whallon this appeared, "like the requirement of bricks without straw."

However, the brave reverend set about his work, trusting in the Lord, and in due time, the new church was erected. It was completed in 1850.

The building is described as 66 feet by 32 feet with a brick foundation, an ornamental front, and a 75-foot tower and dome. It was located on the corner of Clinton and Maple Streets. This site was a matter of considerable controversy at the time and the conflict presented such difficulties that some of the members did not follow the congregation into its new home. It is not recorded what became of these malcontents. It must therefore be assumed that they found their way into other congregations.

The 1850 edifice was apparently sufficiently elaborate as to be called "Church" rather than "Meeting House." There is mention of such interior appointments as carpeting, and the preceding description definitely indicates an ornamental exterior. The Methodists were beginning, for better or for worse, to move away from their early simplicity.

The Present Church Structure

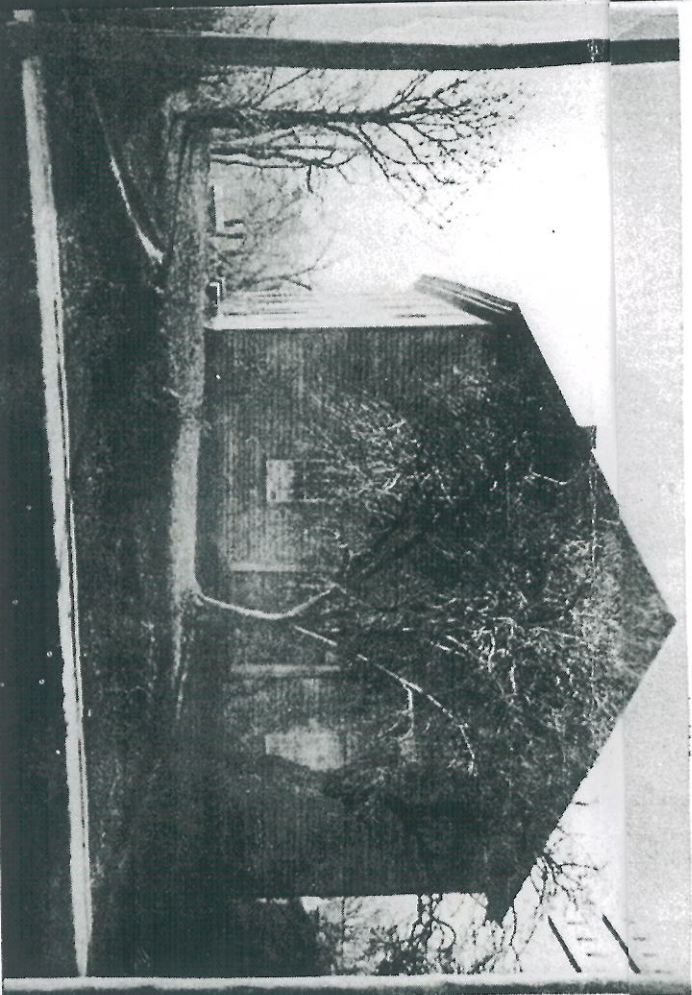
By 1870 many changes had taken place. The 1850 building was considered too small for the growing congregation. The church, by this time had developed some tradition, a little history, and a great deal of organizational know-how.

Rev. James E. Chapin, who had been a minister in the area for a great many years, was assigned to Westfield in 1870. He did preparatory work toward a new edifice for Westfield Methodists.

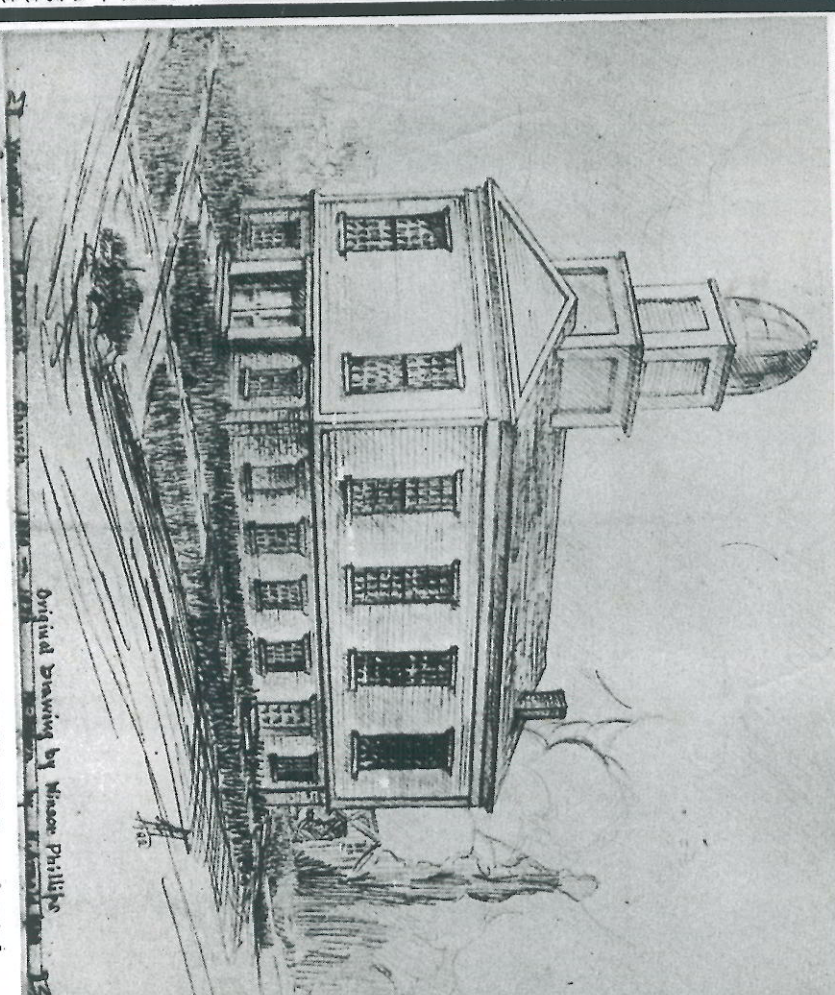
In 1871, J.C. Scofield was appointed to the Westfield Ministry. It was at this point that work on a new church actually began. The building committee consisted of Dr. J.C. Gifford, W.T. Hynes, Oris Persons, and J.H. Towle. Dr. Richmond again provided a site for the church by moving his second home back from Main Street to make frontage available for the church. And again Dr. Richmond's home was utilized as a parsonage.

A 1940 compilation of memorial gifts provides biographies of a few of the members who were active in the church at the time of the building of the 1872 structure. It is noted that William Hynes, in addition to being a member of the building committee, supported the building effort so heavily with his personal resources that his obligations became an embarrassment to him.

We have record of Emily Taylor, who helped with the work that the women did on the new church. . . carpeting, etc. She was a teacher in the Church School at the time.



The first "Meeting House" of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Westfield was located on West Main Street, east of Chestnut Street. Built in 1830 by church members and their friends, it served the congregation for 20 years. The building had two doors, one for the use of men, the other for women.



Construction of the Methodist's first Westfield church was completed in 1850. It was located at the corner of Clinton and Maple Streets. The building - 66 by 32 feet with a brick foundation, an ornamental front and a 75-foot tower and dome - was widely regarded at the time as the finest church structure in Chautauqua County.

The church building was remodelled in 1908 and two gothic towers replaced the steeple. The educational area of the Church was completely renovated in 1968 and a large, new fellowship hall was added.

employment at The Welch Grape Juice Company, and that Dr. Welch himself personally insisted on attendance.

It was in this climate that the Methodists undertook in 1908 a major renovation of their church building. The trustees at the time were C.E. Welch, G.S. Dickson, A.H. Harris, E.D. Harrington, W.B. Linsay, F.B. Lamb, D.J. Jilison, and H. Hardenburg. These men acted as the building committee. H.E. Wratton was the general contractor. The minister at the time was Rev. E.C. Delaplaine.

The Sunday School area was arranged on the "Akron Plan" . . . two stories of classrooms opening around a central room. A speaker on the podium in the center could speak to any or all classes at once. This was, in 1908, the most up-to-date arrangement for the Sunday School, and many churches of that vintage have this arrangement or some later modification of it.

Prior to 1908 there was a small pipe organ with hand operated bellows in the sanctuary. C.E. Welch personally dedicated, at a cost of \$5000, a new pipe organ. A plaque placed on the organ by the trustees reads, "To the Glory of God and the sounding of His Praise, this organ is dedicated by Charles Edgar Welch, 1908."

Memorial windows added at the time of the 1908 renovation, and many of the people in whose memory they were placed were members who had helped to build the original building. At the same time, new pulpit furniture was provided by Mr. and Mrs. L.W. Chapman.

The steeple had become unsafe, and would have cost too much to restore. The architect recommended that it be eliminated, and this advice was followed. The steeple was replaced by the two gothic towers which embellish the front of the sanctuary today.

The total expense of the building renovations was \$29,371. The total cost of the refurbishment, including furnishings and organ was \$35,000.

The rededication services were held from April 20 to April 27, 1908. At that time there was special organ music, and the choir also made special presentations. Dr. Riker of Mt. Union College gave the opening sermon. The week of services was closed with an address by Dr. C.M. Boswell of Philadelphia, Pa.

In 1926 there was more renovation of the structure. The old "Akron Plan" Sunday School was converted to two full stories by adding a floor to the lower story, on top of which could be laid a floor for the second story. This, of course, resulted in much more area for the Sunday School.

At about this time the organ was rebuilt and electrified, and chimes were donated by Bessie McDonald. The Steinway grand piano in the choir loft was a gift of Myrtle Warren Welch.

The present pulpit replaced the 1908 reading stand in 1931. It was designed by Alfred Farr and built by the Farr Lumber Company. Most of the cabinet work was done by Ford Baxter, an employee of the company. The funds were provided by popular subscription.

In 1933 a celebration marked the 25th

had been built in 1872. The observation that the property on which the new structure was to be built cost nearly as much as the church building did in 1872, and that the cost of renovating the educational space was more than double the original cost of construction of the building in the first place, cannot be escaped.

It is perhaps unfortunate that, through the years of the church, only the periods of hyperactivity are recorded. One finds in all the materials very little reference to the quiet times in church history. It is apparent in the history of the Methodist Church on Main Street that this congregation has had its ups and its downs, its fallow as well as fruitful periods. One wonders how many fine Methodist ministers led this congregation through difficult periods such as that described by J.H. Whallon in 1850. It is obvious that in the period since the beginnings of this church, many members have come and gone, some appearing in the records sparingly, some not at all. We have no knowledge of the bulk of the history of the church simply because no one took the trouble to write down the daily affairs and modest activities that build a congregation.

Rev. J.H. Herron, pastor of the Westfield Church in 1877, endeavored to bring together records of the early history of the Westfield Church, but even then recognized that the record was incomplete. Doubtless, as Rev. Herron stated, the building periods of the church were periods of spiritual power. This is why buildings are celebrated, more than for their physical presence among us, they are a physical reminder of times past, people take enough interest in them to keep a history. If the church had continued to meet in scattered schoolhouses and a few private homes we would probably have even less history recorded than we do.

The lessons from this history of the building on Main Street should be fairly clear. The record shows that modern times are not the only times of conflict and friction in the church. It shows that the very earliest Methodists in Westfield were quite capable of discouragement and lethargy, and that even then, they responded to able leadership and a real need.

The record also shows that no one minister or layman can take the entire credit for any accomplishment of the church, but that strong leaders and good followers together could accomplish more than could be dreamed humanly possible. Westfield, as a community, can be grateful for the fine church buildings which have been erected in all sections of the village. These congregations are the same people who have through the years used their spiritual and financial power to make this town a place we can all be happy and proud to live in. In other words, good church buildings, in any community, are an indication of the kind of leadership that makes a good community. That is why it is fitting that we should celebrate the 100th anniversary of the building on Main Street.