

## An Incomplete History of Pittsburgh Presbytery: Created in Schism, Reborn in Unity

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The Presbytery of Pittsburgh was organized and reorganized in 1837, 1869, 1906, and 1969. Created in schism and reborn in unity, the formation of Pittsburgh Presbytery represents an ongoing process of God's covenanted people growing together and coming apart, all while striving to find the best ways of serving God and building His Kingdom.

The history of the Presbytery of Pittsburgh is an integral part of the bigger story of Presbyterianism in western Pennsylvania. The judicatory which became Pittsburgh Presbytery grew out of generations of church-building.

The earliest Presbyterian congregations west of the mountains expressed the desire of newcomers for gospel ministry, communion with God, and faithful community with each other. Hopeful settlers built congregations. Presbyteries grew out of congregations, and synods grew out of presbyteries.

The British victory in the French and Indian War in the early 1760s encouraged people of European origin to move west across the Appalachians into territory previously possessed and controlled by Native Americans. The failure in 1763 of a confederation of native peoples under the leadership of the Ottawa leader Pontiac to expel the British and American presence led to an accelerating in-rush of settlers.

Actions of settlers, plans of land speculators, and exigencies of imperial politics together forced the legalization of European expansion. The Fort Stanwix Treaty of 1768 allowed western settlement beyond restrictions previously imposed by the British government. This allowed for the "New Purchase of 1769," permitting acquisition of land beyond the Appalachians. Tens of thousands of people of European origin pushed into this western frontier.

Many of the families trekking west were Presbyterians, often newly arrived from the north of Ireland, and also the children of earlier migrants from Ireland, Scotland and New England.

Families and individuals with colonial-era origins in Ireland began to shift west of the Alleghenies as early as the 1760s. Rev. David McClure recorded in his diary during a 1772 missionary trip, that on August 30, near the Youghiogheny River, he "preached, two sermons to a serious & attentive audience. Some of the settlers here had not heard a sermon for 14 years. There was no settled minister or church organized in all the country westward of the Appalachian Mountains. The people are generally presbyterians."

Families like those who gave McClure serious attention organized the region's first congregations in the same decade the nation experienced its birth pains. The expansion of the backcountry population and consequent growth of Presbyterian congregations led the Synod

of New York and Philadelphia in May 1781 to approve the creation of the first presbytery west of the Allegheny Mountains—the Presbytery of Redstone.\*

Previously, the entire Upper Ohio Valley had been under the jurisdiction of the Presbytery of Donegal, based in Lancaster County.

The end of the War for Independence encouraged families (often Irish Presbyterians) already located in central and eastern Pennsylvania to cross the mountains and create new homes in the valleys of west-flowing creeks in the Ohio basin. The formal cessation of the Revolutionary War allowed migration to western Pennsylvania directly from Ireland.

In Washington County, settlers organized nineteen Presbyterian congregations between 1774 and 1798, thirteen of them prior to 1790. In Allegheny County, ten Presbyterian congregations were organized between 1771 and 1794. Most of these congregations before the county formally came into existence in 1788. Seven congregations were organized by 1790.

Presbyterians in the Pittsburgh region had already several congregations prior to the formal beginning of their denomination and the General Assembly in 1788.

The region's accelerating rate of population growth over the following decade necessitated a new presbytery, Ohio, created out of Redstone Presbytery in 1793. The Ohio Presbytery's five ministers in that year had responsibility for more than twenty congregations west of the Monongahela River in Pennsylvania and in parts of what are now the West Virginia Panhandle and eastern Ohio. The Synod of Pittsburgh came into existence in 1802 with three presbyteries: Erie, Ohio, and Redstone.

The explosive growth in regional Presbyterianism resulted from rising new generations in Presbyterian enclaves, a series of local revivals near the turn of the nineteenth century, and continuing migration from Ireland.

While a majority of Presbyterians became communicants of congregations affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in the USA, a sizeable minority did not. These Presbyterians affiliated with the Associate Presbyterian Church ("Seceders"), the Associate Reformed Church ("Union Seceders"), or the Reformed Presbyterian Church ("Covenanters"). The Associate Reformed Church had been organized in 1782 as a hopeful merger of (various tendencies of) Seceders and Covenanters. However, some Seceders insisted on retaining (and then rebuilding) the Associate Church. The Reformed Presbytery (later Synod) was rebuilt in 1799 with the arrival of new clergy from Ireland.

The smaller denominations, disproportionately favored by recent Irish immigrants, faithfully adhered to the Westminster Confession and the standards and worship practices of the churches in Ireland and Scotland. Western Pennsylvania was their heartland. Here, they contended with each other and with the General Assembly congregations and presbyteries for souls, hearts, and minds. (Several congregations now in Pittsburgh Presbytery can trace their origins back to the Associate Presbyterian and Associate Reformed Churches.)

The first half of the nineteenth century was a time of both great growth and division.

The Synod of Pittsburgh created a number of presbyteries. This process included, in 1819, the creation of Washington Presbytery out of Ohio Presbytery, and in 1820, Allegheny Presbytery out of Erie Presbytery. Both of the new presbyteries consisted of what had been the southern territories of the parent presbyteries. Ohio Presbytery continued to direct the work of ministers and congregations in northern Washington and southern Allegheny Counties. Pittsburgh Presbyterians, originally in Redstone Presbytery, found themselves shifted by synodical decision back and forth between the Redstone and Ohio presbyteries.

The Associate Reformed Synod split in the early 1820s, as congregations in western Pennsylvania and in states to the west protested what they considered to be the denomination's compromising latitudinarianism. The dissident congregations and their presbyteries organized the Associate Reformed Synod of the West. The Reformed Presbyterian Church split in 1833 over the appropriate relations between church and state.

And in 1837 the Presbyterian Church in the USA divided into two separate denominations, Old School and New School, as church members warred over polity and doctrine.

Most congregations in western Pennsylvania adhered to the Old School. The relatively few New School congregations in the region came together as the first-ever Presbytery of Pittsburgh.

Both the Old School and New School denominations split again as the United States itself underwent division and experienced the bloody chaos of war. (The New School Church divided in 1857; the Old School maintained its unity until after the start of war in 1861.)

Not all Presbyterian churches fractured: the Associate Presbyterian and the Associate Reformed churches in 1858 achieved long-desired unity, voting simultaneously at Pittsburgh convocations to come together as the United Presbyterian Church in North America.

Pittsburgh became the scene of another dramatic expression of unity in November 1869, as the northern New School and Old School denominations merged to become the Presbyterian Church in the USA. The consolidation plan provided the new church with a new Presbytery of Pittsburgh which combined the former New School Pittsburgh Presbytery with Allegheny County congregations of the former Old School Ohio Presbytery.

The separate Allegheny City and Pittsburgh Presbyteries were consolidated in 1906.

Pittsburgh Presbytery was born again in 1959. The merger (in Pittsburgh) of the Presbyterian Church in the USA and the United Presbyterian Church of North America in 1958 created a new presbytery in a new denomination. As of January 15, 1959, the newly organized Pittsburgh Presbytery of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA combined all the congregations of the former PCUSA and UPCNA in Allegheny County. These included congregations of the older Pittsburgh Presbytery, the United Presbyterians' Monongahela Presbytery, and some

congregations from the Presbyteries of Redstone and Blairsville (PCUSA) and Westmoreland (UPNCA).

Pittsburgh Presbytery was a building block in the edifice of new and expanded denomination created in 1983, when the southern and northern Presbyterian churches finally united to create today's Presbyterian Church (USA).

Following a missionary God as a missionary people, Presbyterians in Allegheny County have sought to realize a covenant community formed by the triune God in rough-and-ready frontier days, amid the excitement of revival, controversy and schism, and in heady moments of rebirth and renewal. The story is ongoing.

\*Sections in boldface refer to key dates significant to the formation and re-formation of Pittsburgh Presbytery.