

# Back in the Country... Bell Acres Stories

By Debby Rabold

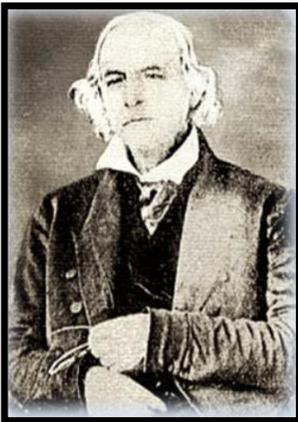
## Pioneer Churches in the Hills Behind Sewickley

**Widespread settlement** of the wilderness north of the Ohio River did not begin until the closing years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Until then, the vast woodlands of Western Pennsylvania had been occupied by Native peoples who were continually pushed westward by increasing numbers of settlers in search of land.

The first ministers to arrive were itinerants, men who travelled great distances to preach in homes, barns and oftentimes in the open air. Methodist ministers were known to make regular visits to the log home of one Jesse Fisher that stood close to where the Beaver Road crosses over Little Sewickley Creek.



An itinerant is pictured on the cover of an 1867 issue of *Harper's Weekly*.

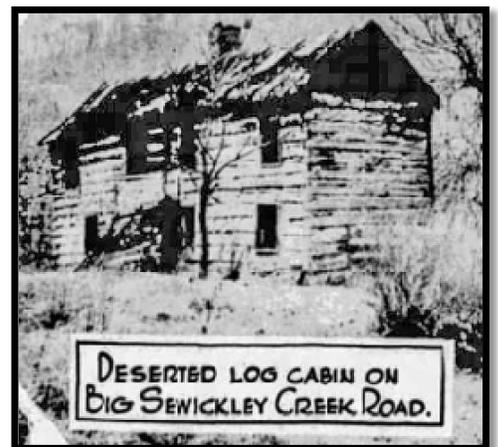


Writing in his journal, Presbyterian minister Robert Patterson (left) tells of hardships he experienced as an itinerant. *"Nov. 12, Saturday [1803]. Set out for Waterford...distant twenty-two miles, the road solitary, swampy, and in some places covered with deep snow...Two or three hours after night, came to a watercourse, seen by snow light, which was too broad and miry to cross. Prepared to pass the night as well as I could. All in a perspiration, my feet wet with walking and wading, for the place did not admit of riding, hungry and fatigued, I lay down on the slushy snow, somewhat afraid of wild beasts, but more of perishing with the chilling cold, though it did not freeze. About midnight the cold in my feet became excessive. Rose and walked for about an hour on a path which I made in the snow for the purpose. My feet were somewhat relieved from the cold. Lay down again and passed the night sometimes awake but mostly asleep."*

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Circa 1809, Reverend Thomas McClelland, an Irish Methodist licensed by Reverend John Wesley, arrived in the Sewickley Valley and organized the area's first Sunday School class. He then organized a second Sunday School that met further back in the hills, one that grew into the Blackburn Church in Sewickley Heights Borough.

Said to have preached the first Methodist service in Pittsburgh, in a foundry near the Point, Reverend McClelland later purchased a farm (1811) overlooking Big Sewickley Creek in future Bell Acres Borough. Neighbors gathered at his home for services until McClelland's death in 1820 (right). Those who attended his services later formed the nucleus of "Ingrams" or "Hopkins" Chapel, which was built in 1846 on a bluff above the creek in future Franklin Park Borough.



(24 March 1929 *Sun-Telegraph*)



**Perched on a wooded bluff** overlooking the Big Sewickley Creek within the Linbrook Woodland's Conservation Area is the former site of the Hopkins Methodist Chapel and Cemetery.

Built in 1846 on a half-acre of farmland donated by the Ingram family, the brick chapel was named in honor of Bishop Robert Hopkins, who also served as Sewickley Borough's first burgess.

Pictured standing on the far right of the above photo was Andrew Rosensteel, Hopkins' Sunday School supervisor who missed only two Sundays in nine years of dedicated service.

The small congregation of farm families shared ministers with Blackburn, Sewickley and Franklin [Ingomar] Methodist churches. Hopkins often received financial support from the larger Sewickley church until closing c1920. A 1935 Allegheny County survey recorded 125 known gravesites. Burials, however, continued as late as 1938.



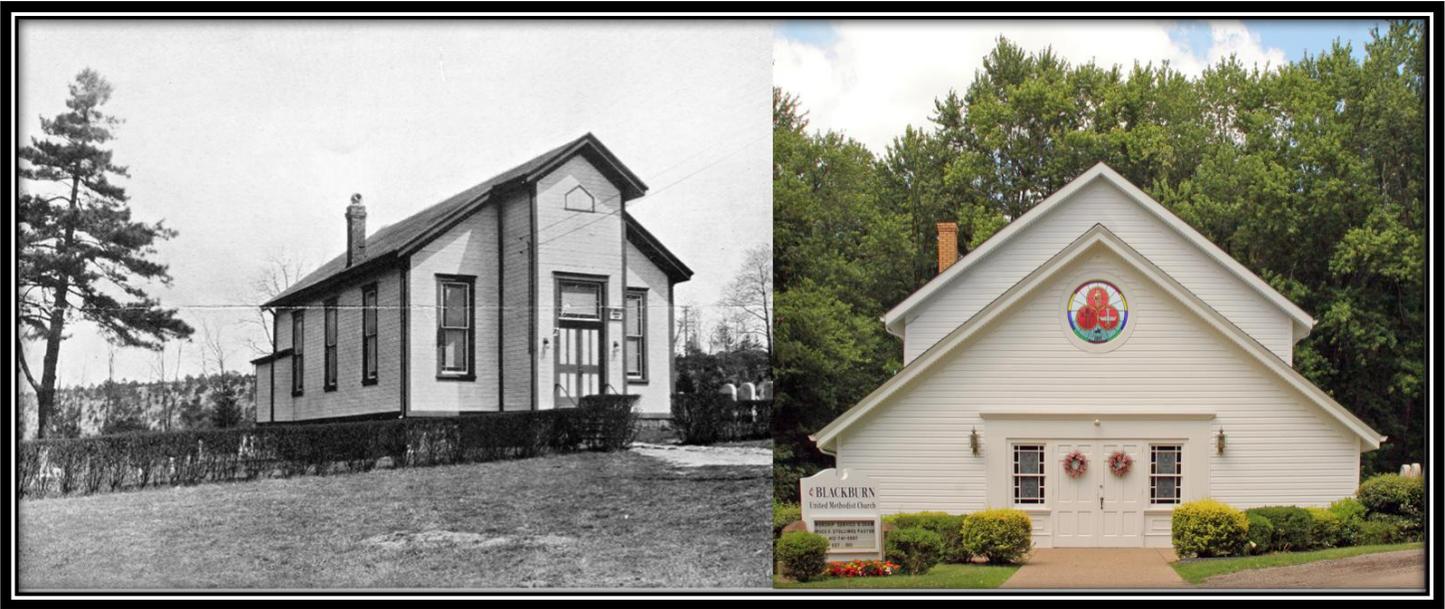
The chapel stood empty for a number of years before being dismantled for the bricks. Grave markers were also removed and vandalized with the remnants eventually moved into a cluster at the edge of the site.

Today, the only visible evidence of the pioneer chapel and cemetery is an earthen outline of the building's foundation and rows of gentle depressions marking unknown graves belonging to generations of Big Sewickley Creek Valley families.

*"Out by the headwaters of the Big Sewickley Creek is a quaint old brick chapel or church known as Hopkins Chapel that is well worth a Sunday afternoon visit, both because it is a beautiful ride with plenty of different routes for the return trip, and because it is a place with a history...where the service is attended by people coming from the farming country for several miles around, where the worship is conducted in the simplest way...there is a great charm about the simplicity and earnestness of this worship in the little brick chapel with its old-fashioned pine pews and the rustling of the forest trees and the freshness of the hill breezes coming through the broad open door..."*

**[Sewickley Herald 5 August 1916]**

Reverend A. B. Leonard served Hopkins Chapel during the Civil War's early years. He would later write in reference to the First Battle of Bull Run (1861), *"At the close of a Sabbath afternoon service at Hopkins Chapel the news was received of the defeat of the Union forces and their retreat toward Washington City."*



(Diehl)

(Glenn Lewis)

**Then & Now...** Blackburn Methodist Church is located on Blackburn Road in Sewickley Heights Borough.

**Organized by Reverend McClelland** in 1811, a Sunday School class first gathered at Elizabeth Frazier’s home in future Sewickley Heights Borough. It was in November 1830 that James Moore sold an acre for a Methodist burial ground and if desired, a church. Sale price was fifty cents. The first church was built of logs in 1833, but was replaced with a brick building in 1853 under the direction of Reverend William P. Blackburn. This was an old-style church with two front doors, one for men and one for women who sat on opposite sides inside.

Following a fire caused by a lightning strike, the brick structure was determined to be unsafe (c1890) and the decision was made to rebuild on the same foundation, recycling many of the old beams. The congregation was fortunate that its neighbor Mrs. W. P. Snyder, Sr. took a special interest in the small country church. Over-time, Mrs. Snyder paid for remodeling and upkeep, including paying the pastor’s salary.

Country churches were once the social centers of their communities, hosting box socials, picnics and the like. Blackburn’s importance declined as family farms were replaced by country estates of wealthy industrialists and the new Allegheny Country Club became the area’s social center.

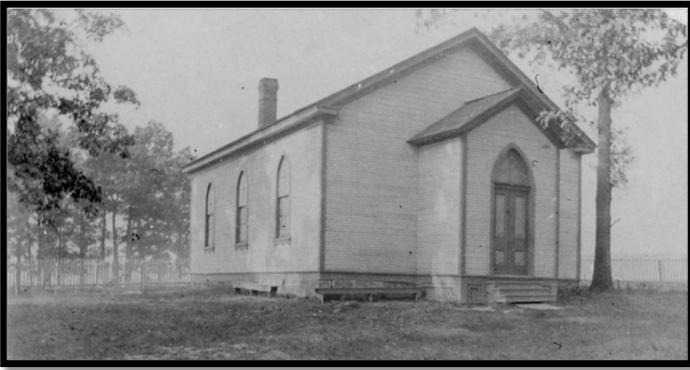


(Glenn Lewis)

Blackburn’s congregation grew smaller as farm families left the area, however, there are members of those same families who have continued to make Blackburn their church home. Blackburn now shares a pastor with its near neighbor Little Hill Methodist, another of the area’s pioneer churches.



(Glenn Lewis)



**First known as** the Little Log Church at Pine Creek, the Franklin [Ingomar] Methodist Church was organized in 1837 and shared ministers with Hopkins and Blackburn churches. Shown is the 19<sup>th</sup> century sanctuary in future Franklin Park Borough.

*"In the days when the old Franklin Methodist Church was organized, the country north of the Ohio was filled with bears. These animals were for the most part welcome sources of meat, but at times their presence was not altogether welcomed. One of the seven men who founded the church was James Pinkerton. He had long been a friend of the circuit riders who treaded the wilderness of the Shenango Circuit. When He built a log barn in the wilderness, care was taken to add a stall for the circuit rider's horse. Many times, the saddlebags of the weary pioneer minister were unstrapped at his dwelling. Usually, when the frontier minister stopped there, it was carried away with him ample provisions, the form of bacon or poultry.*

*On one unusual occasion, notice had been given ahead of time that the minister would arrive on a given date. After consulting with his good wife, it was decided that a present of unusual value should be given to the minister at this time. It was to be nothing less than a ham, which had been taken to the village of Perrysville to be cured in a large smoke house where several of the pioneers carried their pork to be smoked. On the evening of the appointed day, Pinkerton walked across the hills to the village of Perrysville to secure the preacher's ham. He selected a large one, and one that was properly cured. To lighten the task of carrying it home his foresight had provided a grain sack.*

*However, Pinkerton had not reckoned with the fact that bears were yet to be found in the forest and they had a great fondness for ham. In the valley near the site of the old Willoughby mill [Sloop Road] Pinkerton heard the sound of cracking twigs behind him, turned and found a good-sized bear trotting down the trail after him. Pinkerton decided to run. The same idea had already occurred to the bear. Closer and closer came the hungry bear. The path led uphill and Pinkerton soon was out of breath. He was spurred on by conflicting emotions - fear of the bear, regard for the preacher and the desire to save him the ham. The bear won. Pinkerton dropped the ham and a few hundred feet further on he paused and watched the bear tear the sack to shreds and devour the ham he had meant for the preacher's breakfast. He hurried on home and secured his trusty rifle hoping to make the bear pay for the theft with his life. However, the bear had finished his meal leaving only the torn pieces of the sack. The circuit rider had lost his ham.*

(Excerpt from *A History of Ingomar and the Franklin Church* by Reverend Hodge Eagleson, 1937)

*"Another of the founders was James Wakefield, and his wife, affectionately known as Granny Wakefield. They were Methodists of the old-fashioned kind. Granny was known through the community as a "loud praiser". They purchased a farm bordering the present site of the Ingomar Church.*

*The next summer [c1844] after the purchase of their farm, they started a camp meeting. To this meeting people came by scores and hundreds...Out of this grew the Mt. Sewickley Camp Meeting.*

*...It should be related that Mr. Wakefield had to withdraw the use of his property as a camp meeting ground because the worshippers and alleged worshippers tore down the barn for firewood. This was the end of the Wakefield camp meeting. One of the young vandals who did this tried a similar feat at the old Franklin log church, but the preacher caught him in the act and lit into him with his fists and administered a sound thrashing." (Excerpt from *A History of Ingomar and the Franklin Church* by Reverend Hodge Eagleson, 1937)*



Ingomar United Methodist built its current 600 seat sanctuary in 1991.



Built in 1894, Little Hill is the third church to stand on the same Magee Road hillside.

**America's first "home-grown"** religious denomination was the Church of the United Brethren, which originated in late 18<sup>th</sup> century Mennonite and German Protestant churches of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. By 1800, envoys from the United Brethren or U.B. Church had reached Western Pennsylvania.

Little Hill was first known as Creese's U. B. Church. Land for the church and cemetery were given by Elizabeth Creese Long, daughter of Johannes Creese, patriarch of the large Creese family of Franklin Park, Ohio Township and the Sewickley Valley. The two-acre property was deeded in 1844, although the site was in use much earlier as evidenced by grave markers dating as early as the 1820s.

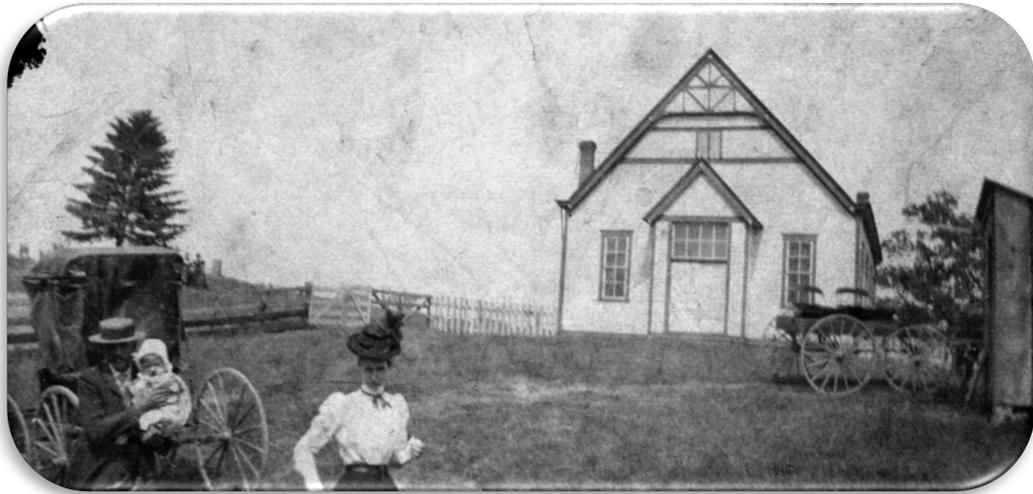
The early log church was replaced with a frame structure c1844, which was razed when the current church was built in 1894. The late Katherine Schuring Bashaar, a Creese descendant, reported that Philip Creese, son of Samuel and grandson of Johannes, walked to Red Bank in Clarion County, Pennsylvania with his uncle where they purchased pine timber, which was floated down the Allegheny River to Pittsburgh where it was cut into boards for the new church. Mrs. Bashaar also told how her grandfather John J. Schuring, a carpenter, helped build the new church. *"It was at his insistence that frosted glass was used instead of clear panes in the windows. His contention was that if a young man rode up on horseback for Sunday service, he would have to attend service to find if his favorite girl was there."*

In 1866, the church was renamed Mount Union. By the turn of the century, membership fell to where the remaining congregation could no longer financially support a minister. The church closed in 1902. Had Mt. Union remained inactive for a period of ten years, the property would have passed to another German Reformed congregation. A group of church women approached neighbor W. W. Riley for help, despite his being a member of nearby Fairmount Presbyterian.

With encouragement from Mr. Riley, Mt. Union collected pledges to guarantee a minister's salary. With that in hand, Riley travelled to the 1906 Annual Conference to appeal for a minister. A month later, a newly appointed minister arrived at Riley's door. W. W. Riley served as a Mt. Union trustee for the next fifteen years while continuing his membership at Fairmount Presbyterian.

In 1924, a basement was built on the hillside behind the church and the building was moved to its present location. In 1928, the church was renamed Little Hill. In 1968, the denomination with which Little Hill was affiliated merged with the Methodist Church to form the new United Methodist denomination.

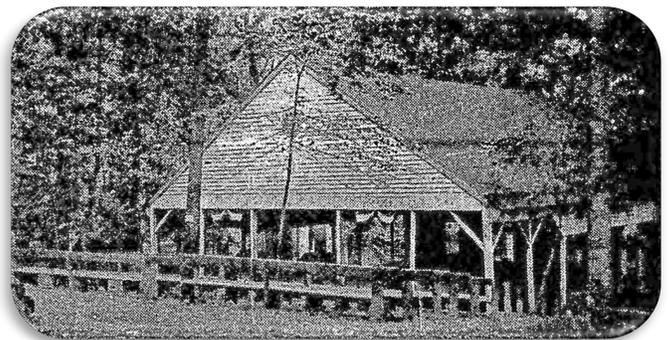
Little Hill and Fairmount Presbyterian shared a special bond. Not only did W. W. Riley, a Fairmount member, serve as a Little Hill trustee, but during construction of its new sanctuary in 1902-03, Fairmount held services at Little Hill. The names of both churches were used in naming the Fairhill Playground recreational facility in Sewickley Hills Borough.



Mr. and Mrs. Robert Creese and daughter are shown standing in front of the 1894 Mt. Union U. B. Church before it was moved to its present location.

### Mt. Sewickley Camp Meeting

In 1868, Methodists from Sewickley and Allegheny City [Pittsburgh's North Side] purchased twenty-three acres of wooded hilltop in future Leet Township for use as a camp meeting ground. Located on Camp Meeting Road, the camp operated for nearly a century until being sold in 1963. As many as three hotels, a store and seventy-three cottages and a pavilion that could accommodate as many as 400 persons once occupied the site. When not participating in religious services, campers enjoyed a variety of recreational activities.



Undated post card (left) and a 1921 view of the pavilion where religious services were held.

*“Ever since noon yesterday the visitors have been pouring in. The excursion trains both up and down were literally packed with men, women and children. Your correspondent stood at the entrance gate from 8:00 to 10 and during that time there was one continued line of vehicles carrying the throngs to the grounds. The inhabitants for miles around seem to be possessed of an irresistible desire to attend the meeting today and it is really amusing to notice the conveyances of every description which were pressed into service for the occasion. Thus, the vehicles came, for hour after hour, wending their way as speedily as possible to the camp.*

*Of the crowd on the ground I can say that it was simply immense, and for the five or six years that meetings have been held here, no day ever exceeded this one in the number of visitors. It would be difficult to give the actual number, but from tickets taken at the gate, and personal observation, it would not be an over-estimate to place the number at 4,000..*

*The hotels or boardinghouses were pretty well filled as early as yesterday noon, and at noon today it was with difficulty that a meal could be secured, so immense was the crowd. A bed is one of the most difficult things to get...*

*This morning opened brightly and Nature seemed striving to do all in her power to make this an auspicious day, and she succeeded beautifully, for with the sun’s rays came gentle breezes...the only disagreeable feature of the day was the abundance of dust which followed in huge clouds in the wake of every conveyance, blinding the poor souls who unfortunately were in the rear.*

*The singing today was splendid. We had a good choir, a combination of many church choirs...”*

(23 August 1875 **Pittsburgh Daily Gazette**)

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**By the 1720s**, tens of thousands of Scot and Scot-Irish emigres were arriving in the Pennsylvania colony, introducing both their culture and Presbyterian religion to North America. On the forefront of western expansion, they were the first to cross the Appalachians onto the Western Pennsylvania frontier.

As early as c1802, a small group of Presbyterians from the Sewickley area, including farmers from the back country along Big Sewickley Creek, were visited by itinerant ministers.

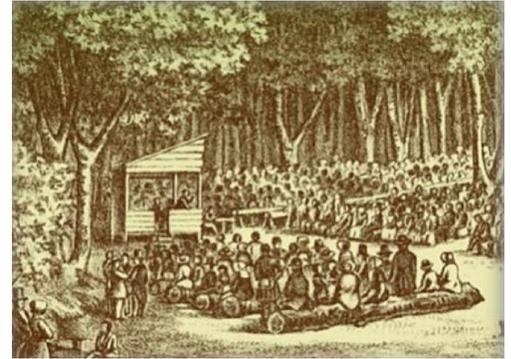
During the 1810s, Reverend Robert Patterson visited congregants who met at Duff’s Mill on the Sewickley Creek’s Rippling Run tributary in future Franklin Park. In addition to being the longtime pastor of Hiland Presbyterian in Perrysville, Patterson was also a Pittsburgh printer, bookseller and author. Pastors had to find ways to supplement meager salaries.

Reverend Patterson often told the story of a conversation he had one Sunday morning with a fellow traveler while on his way to preach at Hiland. *“He was riding out to his church on horseback, on Sabbath morning. The roads were deep and heavy with the Spring mud. A traveler, also on horseback, overtook him, and entered into conversation. As they came near the church, Mr. Patterson said to his companion, “Suppose you stop and hear the preaching, it will rest both you and your horse.” “Who is the preacher?” “One Patterson.” “Did he preach in Erie County once?” “Yes.” “Then I won’t stop. He is the driest old stick I ever heard.”*

(**The Semi-Centennial Celebration of the First Presbyterian Church of Erie, Penn.** 1 June 1875)

In 1822, Reverend John Andrews was assigned to serve both the Sewickley and Duff Mill congregations. That same year, Duff Mill was formally organized with the appointment of ruling elders. Having held services under a maple tree near the mill, the Duff congregation built a meeting house on a nearby hilltop and in 1838, named the church Fairmount. Sharing ministers with Fairmount, the smaller Sewickley congregation was chartered in 1838.

Shortly before retiring, Reverend Andrews oversaw three communion services in the summer and fall of 1831, which are described in the **50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Exercises of the Presbyterian Church of Sewickley, Pennsylvania 1888**. *“These sacramental occasions were notable events, and, in the language of my informant, “were attended by great crowds of people from the [Neville] Island, the hills and bottoms, and across the river, for miles around.” The service, of necessity, was held out of doors, the house being too small to hold the assembly. The minister stood under a tent or canopy of boards. The services began usually on Thursday, with two sermons; a solemn fast on Friday; another sermon and the baptisms on Saturday; two, sometimes three services on Sunday, and again a sermon on Monday. These five days were held sacred; all unnecessary work was suspended, and the whole time given to the church services. Tokens were used and no one was allowed to commune who had not attended the stated preparatory meetings and received the necessary token.”*



**Session** Each Presbyterian congregation elected elders who governed the church and were responsible for members’ spiritual well-being. Meeting quarterly, the Session discussed church business as well as admitting or dismissing members. If a member was thought to have behaved inappropriately, he/she would be called to attend Session where he/she was expected to acknowledge the wrong doing, ask forgiveness and repent. The accused could be suspended or expelled from church membership since it was thought that “wholesome discipline ought to be exercised both for the good of the offender and for the good of the church.”

Early Fairmount records reveal situations in which the elders sat in judgement. One woman was denied membership until she apologized for comments made against another woman’s husband. Seen “on the public highway very much intoxicated,” a farmer “promised not again to taste alcoholic drink except when prescribed as medicine.” Another member “drank several drams of ardent spirits and was in some degree excited at a tavern in Perrysville” before arguing with his son and striking his wife. His behavior toward his wife “whom he is bound to protect was unbecoming, unchristian and cruel.” He was suspended until he changed his ways and repented. Couples might also be charged with inappropriate behavior if a child was born less than nine months after the wedding. When one couple was ordered to appear, the husband confessed his sorrow and received a six-month suspension. How successful the elders were in changing members’ behavior is unknown.



Fairmount’s brick church was destroyed by fire in 1902 (top left). Notice the two doors, one for men and the other for women.

The new frame sanctuary (top right), was built by church members and dedicated in 1903.

In 1982, the Fairmount congregation requested that it be dismissed from the United Presbyterian denomination and instead transferred to the Associate Reformed Presbyterian denomination.

**Because ministerial visits** were sporadic, lay persons conducted Sunday School classes when ministers were unavailable. One class was held in a local school house under the direction of Philip Creese, a Sewickley Township farmer, road supervisor and school board member. When the Pittsburgh Presbytery asked Leetsdale Presbyterian to build a mission chapel to serve families on Big Sewickley Creek, Creese’s class became the nucleus of the Van Cleve Chapel that opened in 1876. Built on Big Sewickley Creek Road, in future Bell Acres Borough, the chapel appears as recently as 1906 on an Allegheny County map, however, no information on the chapel’s fate is currently available. The former site is now residential property.

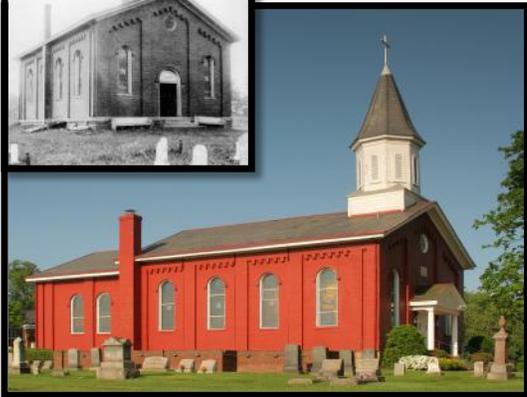


**The Second Great Awakening** was an Evangelical Protestant movement that swept the nation during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was a period of religious fervor when revivals and days long camp meetings attracted large enthusiastic crowds, especially among Methodists and Baptists. It was a time when itinerant ministers, like Reverend Patterson, endured the hardships of frontier travel as they preached wherever the Faithful gathered.

Simple log churches soon appeared across the countryside. As congregations grew in size, log churches were replaced with larger more permanent structures. The first church in the hills behind Sewickley was Fairmount Presbyterian (1822), followed by Blackburn Methodist (1833), Franklin (Ingomar) Methodist (1837), Mount Nebo Presbyterian (1838), Little Hill Methodist (1844), Trinity Lutheran (1845), Hopkins Methodist Chapel (1846) and Franklin Park Baptist (1852). Built by early farm families, the churches have been a reassuring presence in their communities for nearly two hundred years.



Trinity Lutheran (left) was Allegheny County’s fourth Lutheran church. This is an 1880s view of the red brick church that was built in 1868 and continues to stand in Franklin Park on Brandt School Road. Originally built of logs, it stands on the old Kuskusky Indian Path.



The Mount Nebo church has long been an Ohio Township landmark. The early view dates from 1926.



The Franklin Park Baptist Church is located on Nicholson Road.

