

The Pigeon Creek

The Pigeon Creek Church was founded by Rev. John McMillan, August 24, 1775. It is the oldest church west of the Monongahela River. The current church is the fourth church building for this congregation. The first was made of logs in 1773. They also held services in the groves beside the log cabin. In 1778 a second church was built using round logs. In 1797, the third church was built of stone. Then in 1829, the fourth church was built of brick. This is the church we still use today. The foundation stone for this church, came from the stone of the third church. Over the years, many renovations and upgrades have been made.

The cemetery is among the oldest, if not the very oldest in this section. The first burials were about 1777. Beside the ones appropriately designated, there were nearly four hundred unmarked and unknown graves in it.

In 2025, Pigeon Creek is celebrating their 250th anniversary.

The Pigeon Creek Story

The settlement of the region of country lying at the western base of the Allegheny Mountains was an entering wedge to the various other forward movements of civilization which closely followed. The real pioneers of western civilization were the men who, at the first, scaled the Allegheny Mountains and settled in Southwestern Pennsylvania. The planting of the Presbyterian Church in this region was a great historic event and the period in which it occurred was an historical epoch, for the planting of the church and the settlement of the country, were not simply contemporaneous events they are really identical. They constitute one and the same great social movement.

Soon after Penn proprietaries in 1769 had opened their land office in Philadelphia for acquiring titles to land west of the mountains, settlers began moving into Southwestern Pennsylvania. At the close of the Revolutionary War, and after the obstructions arising from conflict of jurisdiction between Virginia and Pennsylvania had been removed, a constant stream of Presbyterians, as well as other immigrants, flowed into the country. They came, some of them, directly across the Atlantic, a few from New Jersey and Virginia, but for the most part from Chester, York, Lancaster and Cumberland counties in Pennsylvania, Cecil County in Maryland and New Castle County in Delaware.

In racial descent these people were predominantly Scotch-Irish and possessed the well known traits of that historic people. Taken collectively they were of fervid temperament, quick intellect, and ready speech. They had conspicuous energy and persistence of purpose and of achievement, and, and were exceedingly firm in their convictions. Perhaps it should be added that they were naturally inclined to take part in public affairs. In respect to moral and religious character it cannot, of course, be claimed that they were, without exception ideal Christians. It is to be noted that even when they failed to practice piety, they were apt to remain loyal to gospel truth.

Without disparagement of what was done by other denominations of Christians, it may safely be said that the bulk of religious influence exerted in the West in that day, was that which came from the Presbyterian Church—using the term Presbyterian in its broader sense

as inclusive of the Associate, the Associate Reformed, and the Reformed Presbyterian bodies, as well as our own.

It was in this setting that the church at Pigeon Creek had its beginning. Pigeon Creek Church in Somerset Township, Washington County, Pennsylvania, ten miles east of the city of Washington, constituted part of the first pastoral charge established west of the Allegheny Mountains. Rev. John McMillan preached the first sermon within its bounds, on Tuesday after the 4th Sabbath of August, 1775 (Aug 29th, 1775). The following year he accepted a call to become pastor of the United Congregation of Pigeon Creek and Chartiers. It is possible, though unlikely that these churches had been organized before he preached at the settlement in the summer of 1775. Many Scotch-Irish had settled along Chartiers and Pigeon Creeks and they were intensely eager to have religious services in their settlements. Occasionally Presbyterian Clergy-men on tour, among whom were Charles Betty, George Duffield, and Levi Frisbee, preached at Fort Pitt and one or all may have come to Chartiers or Pigeon Creek. Certainly John Power, in the summer of 1774, for three months did missionary work in what are now Allegheny, Fayette, Washington and Westmorland Counties, and preached both at Chartiers and Pigeon Creek.

Without question, John McMillan is the Father of Presbyterian Church in the West. He was the first settled pastor of the Presbyterian Church west of the Alleghenies. Itinerant ministers had preached there but McMillan was the first to accept a call to serve in any of the Parishes. He realized there was great need for Christ and His Church and gave his whole self, unselfishly, with immense ability and great good sense and unending work to carry out the mission which had brought him to Western Pennsylvania.

Dr. John McMillan was of Scotch-Irish descent. His parents left Country Antrim, Ireland in 1742. They probably landed at Philadelphia or one of the Delaware River ports as did most of the Scotch-Irish. New England was not hospitable to these people and so most of them came to Pennsylvania or went farther South. The McMillans traveled westward as far as Fagg's manor in Chester Conty, where they purchased a farm from a man named Pinkerton who had been issued the patent by William Penn's grandson.

Religion was so much a part of the Scotch-Irish that the religious activities followed close upon the establishment of the home. It was probably not by accident that the McMillians procured a farm adjoining the Fagg's Manor Church. Samuel Blair, the Pastor at this church, could well have been instrumental in John McMillians decision to enter the ministry.

We can be assured that John was instructed in the Word of God as soon as he was old enough to talk and to memorize. It may be assumed that John was sent to a school of some kind when he was a boy. Schools were considered a necessity in every Scotch-Irish settlement. John Knox had advocated a system of education that included a school in every parish and his plans were considered very much the order of the day by all Presbyterians. John Calvin, another great name to all Presbyterians was a strong advocate of education. Henry Barnard writes, One has only to examine the curriculum of the early

colonial schools and he would find that until the time of the American Revolution, the Bible and the Catechism constituted the bulk of materials used.

John McMillan studied in Fagg's Manor until 1767. At that time John Blair was called to the College of New Jersey and young McMillan transferred to Pequea Academy where Robert Smith was the principal. During his stay at Pequea a revival converted most of the pupils in the school. McMillan has told his part of his life story: "While there the Lord poured out His spirit upon the students and I believe that there were but few who were not brought under serious concern about their immoral souls, some of whom became blessings in their day, and were eminently useful in the Church of Christ-but they are all gone now to rest. It was here that I received my first religious impressions, though as long as I can remember, I had some checks of conscience and was frequently terrified by dreams and visions in the night, which made me cry to God for mercy: but these seasons were of short duration, like the morning cloud and early dew, they quickly pass away. I now saw that I was a lost, undone sinner, exposed to the wrath of a justly offended God, and could do nothing for my own relief. My convictions were not attended with much horror, though I felt that I deserved Hell, and in all probability that must be my portion; yet I could not feel that distress which I ought to feel, and which I thought I must feel before I could expect to obtain relief. I felt also much pride and legality mingled with all the duties which I attempted to perform."

Heretofore McMillan had taken for granted, his religion. Now there was purpose to his life. He soon became recognized as one who stood out, towering over the usual commonplaces of frontier life. This early training and spiritual revelations prepared him for the task that he was to assume a few years later in the country west of the Alleghenies. This training prepared him to bring the west not only Presbyterianism, but to instilled in him a strong desire to promote institutions of higher learning. At least as early as 1780 Dr. McMillan began a Latin school known as the "Log College". So energetic was McMillan in his teaching and encouragement of schools that contemporaries called him "Father of Education in Western Pennsylvania". Beside the Log College, he gave assistance to many other schools. Out of these early schools later came Canonsburg Academy, Washington Academy, and finally Jefferson College and the Western Theological Seminary.

Many years later McMillan wrote to John Carnahan concerning his training at Princeton: "I had not been long there until a revival of religion took place among the students, and I believe at one time there were not more than two or three who were not under serious impressions. On a day which had been set apart by a number of the students as a day of fasting and prayer, while the others were at dinner, I retired to my study, and while trying to pray, I got some discoveries of divine nature which I had never had before. I now saw that the divine law was not only holy, just, and spiritual; but that it also was good, and that conformity to it would make me happy. I felt no disposition to quarrel with the law, but myself, because I was not conformed to it. I felt that it was now easy to submit to the Gospel plan of salvation; and felt a calm and serenity of mind to which I had hitherto been a stranger. And this was followed by a delight in contemplating the divine glory in all His

works, and in meditation on the Divine perfections, I thought that I could see God in everything around me.”

Much more might be said about the great man who preached and taught with a zeal seldom seen. Dr. Clarence E. McCartney says a statement is recorded that one declared he had heard clearly at the distance of a mile McMillian’s voice as he said his sermon, “The Sovereign Grace of Almighty God.”

The first church building was erected near the center of the present cemetery. The date of erection is not known but was probably about 1778. The first winter it was used for worship it was neither chucked nor daubed and was without heat. It was build of round logs, and the roof and door were of clapboard. The lady worshipers came from homes where the luxury of a “dish of coffee” was only enjoyed on Sabbath morning. The Sabbath dress of both sexes was plain homespun. They came to church to hear the Gospel.

The second building was of stone. Preparation were commenced in 1797 and the house was finished in 1800. The structure was plain and unimposing. The aisles were earthen. The pew holders made there own seats which were as varied as the fancy of the makers. The building stood at the southeast corner of the present cemetery. During the summer when the weather was favorable, the preaching services were conducted in a grove, a few rods southwest of the church building.

The present church edifice was built in 1829. It is seventy by fifty-six feet. This structure was made of brick which were made on the property site. The cost, including plastering, pew, etc was \$2,714. It was worthy of note that the cost was promptly met, and no debt was left hanging over the congregation. The building has been repaired and remodeled several times, the last major remodeling comes in 1950.

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The first meeting of the Presbytery of Redstone, west of the Allegheny mountains, was within the bounds of Pigeon Creek on September 19, 1781. Members present : Rev. John McMillan, Moderator; Ministers James Power, Thaddeus Todd, Elders John Neil, Demas Lindley, and Patrick Scott.

The first revival service was held by the church commencing near the close of the year 1781, and continued with little interruption till the close of 1787. The second took place during the pastorate of Rev. Mr. Gwinn. It was known as the “Falling Work” and commenced at the beginning of 1800 and continued till the close of 1802. During the ministry of Rev. William C. Anderson in 1832 to 1836, two hundred and thirty -two persons cast in their lot with God’s people. At the beginning of the year 1857, during the pastorate of Dr. Sloan, the Spirits converting power was especially displayed and at the following March Communion, seventh-eight publicly renounced the world and came out on the Lords side. The whole number added to the church that year was one hundred and

two. Dr. Sloan's pastoral work converting a period of eighteen years, was blessed by the addition of three hundred and six to the household of faith.

About the first of November, 1867, the church being vacant, a precious season of grace was experienced, and on the following December Communion, sixty-eight made and open profession of faith. The work began in a prayer meeting, few in number, in a private dwelling. It was transferred to the church building, and in a few evenings a crowded house, impressive solemnity, and an earnest congregation, proved unquestionably that the Holy Ghost was present by an influence that brightened every Christian wit joy and melted the hardest heart.

In the year 1814 a class of young men met in the church on Sabbath morning for the purpose of studying the scriptures, the Catechism, and holding religious conference. This marked the first meeting of Sunday School at Pigeon Creek. Some of the members of Session or older members of the church were always present as instructors. The first Sunday School proper was organized on May 17, 1822. The first superintendent was Aaron Kerr; David Hart, Senior teacher of male Bible Class; Sarah Smith, teacher of the female Bible Class. The other teachers were Joseph Kerr, John Stevenson, Robert Moore, Ralph Atkinson, James Mercer, Robert Mercer, Andrew Smith, James Smith, Aaron Gamble, Flora Ferguson, Sarah Dawson, Margaret Stevenson, Phoebe Kerr, and Ruth Gamble. The total membership at that time was two hundred and twenty-two. The church membership at the time was two hundred and seventy-five. The average congregation on Sun-day was two hundred and seventy-five.

On the 24th of August, 1875, the congregation held a centennial commemorating the preaching of the first sermon within its bounds by Dr. John McMilian. The assembly was immense. Children, grand-children, and great grand children of the first worshipers came long distances to the spot, around which clustered so many hallowed associations and impressive remembrances.

Pigeon Creek Congregation

This church situated in Somerset Township, Washing-ton County, is one of the oldest in the country in union with Chartiers, gave a call to Rev. John McMillan, at a meeting of the Donegal Presbytery, April 23, 1776, at which time he was ordained with a view to his settlement among them as their pastor though he was never formally installed. Whether this congregation was organized previous to this time is uncertain. Dr. McMillan in his journal, speaks of his ordaining elders, baptizing children, etc., Nov. 17, 1776, among them soon after he was ordained; but not expressly of his organizing the church. As he received a "call" from the two churches, they must have been previously organized, unless the term "call" be taken in a lesser sense. In this church, which then covered a very wide field, were, from the first, some eminently pious people who had emigrated from Nottingham, Chester County, and here the Spirit of God was remarkably poured out several times during Dr.

McMillan's ministry among them, which continued till near the close of the last century. This congregation has enjoyed many revivals of religion, and is one of the strongest and most flourishing churches in our connection. It has passed through many severe trials from its earliest days. The old Presbytery of Redstone met here oftener than anywhere else; and here, by the remarkable ordering of Divine Providence, they held their first meeting September 19, 1781. Dr. Mc-Millan preached his first sermon within the bounds of Pigeon Creek in 1775, in the open air as there were no buildings. The first meeting house was a log structure, with clapboard roof and door, during the first winter it was not heated. This building and the stone one that succeeded it were situated within the bounds of the present cemetery. On one occasion while services were being held the floor gave away, carrying the audience down with it, but fortunately no one was seriously injured. The families PROVIDED THEIR OWN PEWS, and it is said the variety of styles was almost as great as the number of pews. In 1829 the present brick building 70 x 56 feet with four doors was erected on the hill north of the cemetery. In 1790 there was no fence about the church or cemetery, and each grave was enclosed with a fence of poles or logs or any material that could be easily procured. In 1871 a parsonage was built at a cost of \$4,000.00, at this time (1935) the church built in 1829 is still in use, and I believe it is one of the best preserved in western Pennsylvania, and I believe it is the oldest building that has been in constant use for church purpose in this part of the country at this time, 1935, it is 106 years old.

Important Dates

- August 24, 1775 Rev. John McMillan preached first sermon at the home of Arthur Forbes
- April 22, 1776 Rev. McMillan called to Pigeon Creek and Chartiers Hill Churches
- June 19, 1776 Rev. McMillan ordained by Donegal Presbytery
- 1778 First Log church built
- 1781 Beginning of revival – 45 members added to the church at one communion
- September 19, 1781 First Presbytery organized west of Allegheny Mountains, Redstone, met for 1st time
- 1797 Stone Church completed
- 1801 Second great revival
- 1822 Sabbath School officially organized
- 1829 Present Brick Church built
- 1857 One hundred two members added to church
- 1949 Men of the church, excavated the basement
- 1950 Church substantially remodeled
- 1957 Storm hit Church, it took half of the roof. The roof and the pews were all replaced at this time.
- 1957 *Rev. Purnell retired in 1957 & took church records with him. He would not give them back. Even when he died, his family refused to give them back. Not sure why? Just found scripted notes stating this.*

1969 Coal sold for \$8,000, new manse built
1980 New Storm windows put on church
1983 Parking lot paved

List of Pastors

1775 to 1793	Rev. McMillan called to Pigeon Creek and Chartiers Hill Churches.
1794-1798	Rev. Boyd Mercer. (Buried at Pigeon Creek Cemetery)
1800-1817	Rev. Andrew Gwinn.
1817-1822	Church without a pastor.
1822-1829	Rev. Andrew Wylie. President of Washington College, Stated Supply.
1829-1830	Prof. William P. Aldrich, Stated Supply.
1832-1836	Rev. William C. Anderson.
1837-1842	Rev. Ebenezer S. Graham.
1844-1862	Rev. James Sloan.
1863-1867	Rev. Samuel M. Henderson.
1868-1884	Rev. John S. Marquis.
1884-1888	Series of Stated Supplies.
1888-1893	Rev. Harry O. Gibson
1895-1900	Rev. T. Ross Paden.
1901-1907	Rev. F. E. Vernon
1908-1915	Rev. J. C. Laughlin.
1917-1924	Rev. C. E. Snoke.
1926-1944	Rev. Jacob C. Ruble.
1944-1945	Rev. Bruce Morgan
1946-1947	Rev. William Hulick
1948-1957	Rev. Walter B Purnell
1959-1961	Rev. Ernest J. Cubbon
1961	Supply Rev. Harry C. Coleman, Stated
1962-1966	Rev. William R. Marvin
1969-1974	Rev. Richard A. Davis (died while pastor at Pigeon Creek)
1975-1984	Rev. James A. Gillespie
1985-1991	Rev. Ed. DeLair, Jr
1992-1994	Rev David D'Alession
1995-1996	Rev. Dr. Jeff Kisner (Interim)
1996-2000	Randy Schreurs
2002-2010	Raymond Bruno (died while pastor at Pigeon Creek)
2011-2013	Benjamin Robbins
2013-2015	Eric Powell
2015-2024	John Dykstra

Rev. Jacob Ruble served here for eighteen years from 1926 to 1944. Although he served the longest of our modern pastors, he never lived in the manse here at Pigeon Creek.

Rev. Bruce Morgan was here from 1944 to 1946. He came to us with the understanding that he would be released as soon as the way was cleared for he and his wife Ruth to enter the Foreign Mission Field.

Rev. William Hulick was here from 1946 to 1947.

Rev. Walter B. Purnell served from 1948 to 1957. It was during his pastorate that the church building was remodeled in 1950.

Ernest J. Cubbon came to Pigeon Creek as a student pastor in 1958. In 1959 he was ordained and served another year.

Harry C. Coleman served as stated supply for about three months in 1961. He came here from Donora where two churches had been merged.

William R. Marvin came here in 1962 and remained until 1966.

Mr. Marvin left to work on what many of you remember as the "50 Million Fund."

From 1966 to 1969 the church had many supply ministers. The one most will remember, he having served the longest time, was Frank Penick. He was working in this area for the "50 Million Fund".

During the time he was here he made arrangements for and played an important part in raising the money to build the new manse, that was done in 1969.

Rev. Richard A. Davis came here in 1969 and served until his untimely death in 1974. He was very much interested in the Bicentennial of our church and we all regret that he could not enjoy this historic event. It was during Mr. Davis ministry that Pigeon Creek became a yolk charge as he began to minister to the church at Cokeburg.

Early in 1975, Rev. James A. Gillespie was called to minister here. He has been well received and we are looking forward to some solid growth in the church. We hope to see growth in our present members and in the membership of the church as well.