

“To Spread God’s Light from Age to Age”

**A History of St. Paul’s Ev. Lutheran Church
Eggertsville, New York
1827-2013**

The land known as the Niagara Frontier was a sparsely settled area in the early days of this country, and

most of the people clustered close to the Niagara River. Because of its strategic location on the border of Canada, several battles of the War of 1812 took place here, including the one that resulted in the burning of the village of Buffalo by the British. But following the war, growth was spurred by the westward expansion that swept the country. Even so, large numbers of people did not settle the area until the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. Almost immediately a flood of immigrants began to use this easy route to the West. Many came this far and decided to stay. Many of these settlers came from Western Europe. Some were forced to leave their homes because of religious persecution, others because of political upheaval, and still others because of a lack of economic opportunity in their native lands.



Colonies of German-speaking immigrants began to establish themselves in this area. In 1826, Rev. Vincent Philip Meyerhoffer - formerly a Roman Catholic priest and chaplain in the Austro-Hungarian army - came to the area. Meyerhoffer was born in 1784 in Hungary to a politically prominent family. At 23 he was ordained a priest in the Franciscan order. He had a colorful past, including action on both sides in the Napoleonic Wars. Meyerhoffer was taken prisoner, but paroled by Bonaparte himself, and after a number of adventures, rejoined his regiment, which eventually served to escort Napoleon to the coast on his way to exile on Elba. Following the wars, he served a parish in Bavaria, but became disillusioned with the

Rev. V. P. Meyerhoffer

corrupt practices of the church, and determined to immigrate to the United States, which he did in 1819. His disgust with the corruption he saw here led him to leave the priesthood and the Roman Catholic Church. He married, studied, and decided to affiliate with the German Reformed Church. He came to Buffalo and served four congregations inside and outside the city, one of these being St. Paul's. He subsequently became an Anglican priest, served for some 30 years in parishes in Canada, and died there January 15, 1859. These previously unknown details of Rev. Meyerhoffer's life came to light unexpectedly in the process of organizing materials in anticipation of the 175th Anniversary of this congregation, which he founded, and which was officially incorporated on December 18, 1827.

The congregation consisted of two distinct groups - the "Northbushers" - primarily from Alsace-Lorraine who settled in Getzville, and the "Southbushers" - mostly from Prussia and central Germany who settled in Cheektowaga. The original grant from the Holland Land Company was 50 acres in Cheektowaga, but a request was made for land closer to the center of the parish. The new site on Main Street placed the church on neutral ground between the two factions. Descendants of some of the original members are still part of the congregation. The congregation retained title to the fifty-acre parcel and rented it out to be farmed until the Depression when they could no longer pay the taxes.

Few records are available from the early days of the congregation. In 1828, Rev.

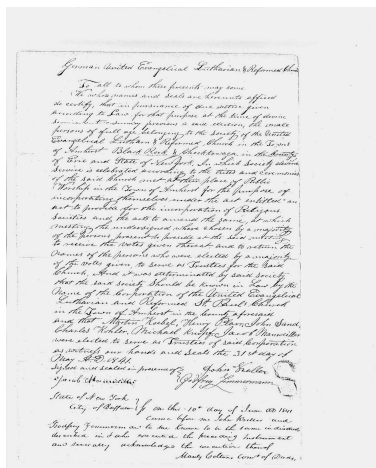
Meyerhoffer was succeeded by Rev. Keller, who performed the earliest recorded baptism, administering the sacrament to Salome, the daughter of Heinrich and Magdalena Lorenz on April 25th, 1829. Rev. Schmidt followed Rev. Keller in 1841, and he, in turn, was followed by Rev. F. W. Bindemann (1844-1846), in whose handwriting the earliest entries in the parish records were made. His successor, Rev. J. M. Forschner (1846-1848) served for barely three years before succumbing to

Rev. F. W. Bindemann

tuberculosis at the age of 38. He was buried in the Amherst Township Cemetery, and re-interred in the Skinnersville Cemetery. The congregation purchased a handsome tombstone which can still be seen there. The next pastor of St. Paul's

1841 Certificate of Re-incorporation was the Rev. C. Albert Ebert (1848-1852) who was responsible for compiling and recording a "Baptismal Appendix" to the parish

records with information on baptisms that occurred between 1829 and 1844, pre-dating the earliest record book. (It was the discovery of this appendix that proved conclusively that no records were lost in the fire in 1879.) Following him in rapid succession came: Rev. Walther - German Reformed Church (1852-1853), Rev. J. Philip



Conradi - United Evangelical Church (1853-1858), and Rev. William Schmidt (1858-1861) also of the United Evangelical Church.

The Civil War era brought the Rev. Gustav Bochert, a Lutheran, to St. Paul's. He must have been a familiar figure in the area, having also served congregations in Clarence Center and Niagara Falls before coming to Eggertsville. Parish records also indicate that he served as chaplain of the "Poor House" which was located on what is now the South Campus of the State University at Buffalo. At least one son of the congregation went to war and fought for the Union. Johann Stephen Diegel was killed at the Second Battle of Bull Run. Rev. Bochert left for other fields in 1865.

A new era in the life of the congregation was ushered in with the arrival of the Rev. Adolph C. W. Boettger in 1865. Rev. Boettger was a man of many talents. Born in Saxony in 1820 and educated at the Royal Academy, he studied art and traveled widely through Europe. He came to this country in 1850, landing in New York City and making his way on foot to Buffalo! He was unable to find work as an artist, and his pastor convinced him to study for the ministry. He did so and was ordained in Canada where he served St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Hamilton, Ontario for four years. In 1865 he accepted the call to St. Paul's Eggertsville, where he was to remain for the rest of his life.



Rev. Adolph C. W. Boettger

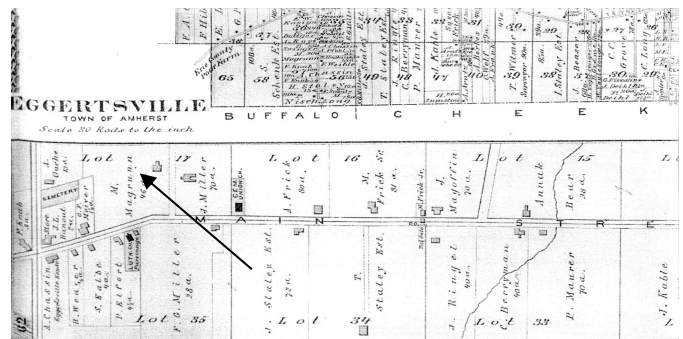
In 1856, Mr. Boettger had married Augusta Seeband, and in the years that followed, ten children were born to them. Both the children and the congregation grew and prospered, and by 1868 things were getting crowded in the Eggertsville church. Rev. Boettger decided to gather parishioners in the village of Williamsville into a new congregation, and St. Paul's in Williamsville was formed. For several years Rev. Boettger served both parishes, leading worship on Sunday mornings in Eggertsville and Sunday afternoons in Williamsville.

Most of the church members were farmers. They were thrifty, law-abiding and hospitable, and liked to socialize at husking bees, barn dances, and sleigh rides. When a man threshed, butchered or built a barn, all his neighbors showed up to help. They liked their new pastor. He preached a good sermon. He not only knew his Bible, but was well versed in history and literature. He was friendly and understanding and firm in his faith. His salary was a meager \$500 per year. His parishioners often brought him whatever they had a surplus of - vegetables, eggs, chickens, and pork sausage when they butchered.

The congregation continued to grow, and in 1872 a constitution was adopted which remained in effect until 1934. From it we learn how the congregation functioned in those days. Funds were raised through "pew rents" which were collected annually. Unconfirmed persons and children were not permitted to be present for Holy Communion, but were dismissed before the sacrament was administered. Proceedings of the congregational meetings were recorded in the same book as the constitution. The earliest minutes tell of a financial crisis that arose when the congregation's tenant

farmer fell behind on his rent - his horses were sick and he couldn't haul his produce to market!

1880 Map of Eggertsville – arrow shows church property



By the 1870's, the church building which had been erected in 1833 was in a bad state. It was determined that a new building was needed. The cornerstone was laid in 1874, and the building was completed soon after. However, the new building was not as structurally sound as might be hoped. In a translation of Rev. Boettger's own words, "...it left very much to be desired, because as often as it rained hard, the steeple became a copious fountain." Despite this, "...everything was going well; peace and unity between pastor and congregation, and unless the weather was too severe or particular events occurred, the services were at all times well attended. In short, we



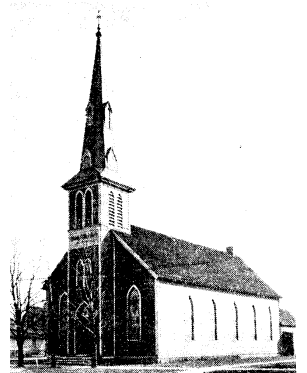
enjoyed in rich measure the bliss of that peace which passes all understanding. The congregation also has to thank God for his manifold protection against severe infectious diseases and accidents."

This last was not an idle remark. In those days before antibiotics, epidemics were common - several cholera epidemics had swept Buffalo in the middle of the century. Dysentery, scarlet fever, and typhus were all too common. In 1873 Pastor Boettger had, in just two weeks, buried seven members of one family who died of diphtheria. It was not uncommon for two or three children in a family to die before age five, and young mothers often died of "childbed fever" caused by unsanitary delivery conditions.

Then came August 7, 1879 - a watershed date in the annals of the congregation.

A couple of boys had been smoking behind the church sheds and left their matches. Edwin, the youngest of the Boettger children found the matches and struck one. When it flamed, he became frightened and dropped it — right into the straw. His frightened screams brought his father running. It took only a moment to assess the situation. Rev. Boettger ran to ring the church bell — the only fire alarm in the community — and to snatch up the parish record books. The community gathered quickly to fight the fire, but the "bucket brigade" was hampered by the hot, dry August weather and a corresponding shortage of water. The church, parsonage, sheds, and a neighboring house and barn all burned to the ground. A reporter from the fledgling Amherst Bee was dispatched to "the scene of confusion and conflagration," and concluded his account, "We understand it is the intention of the Lutheran people to rebuild as soon as possible." This was indeed the intention of the congregation, and within two months, plans were drawn up for the new sanctuary.

A solemn ceremony marked the cornerstone laying on October 5, 1879 (the date is on the cornerstone), with pastor, trustees, and deacons of the congregation participating. A German catechism, a copy of the New Testament, and a brief historical sketch of the congregation were enclosed in the stone. From this last, we gain a glimpse of the steadfast faith of the pastor and congregation: *"Hoping that this report may remain in the cornerstone until it be taken out because of the intention to enlarge the present church or to erect another larger building, therefore in all orderliness and quietness we put it down there in the name of the Triune God."* (This document came to light in 1933 when the building was moved and renovated. It was copied and translated at that time. The original was then replaced in the cornerstone.) The new building was completed by early 1880 and was decorated with murals by



St. Paul's church — built 1879 Pastor Boettger. While the new sanctuary was being built, the congregation held services in the Skinnerville Cemetery Chapel (adjacent to the State University North Campus).

With the loss and devastation his family suffered in this fire, it is perhaps no surprise that the eldest Boettger son, Rudolph, was one of the founders of the Eggertsville Volunteer Hose Company. Pastor Boettger did not feel that the congregation would be able to afford to rebuild the parsonage, so he purchased some land on Eggert Road to build a new home for his family. It was located on what is now Cloister Court and the adjoining property.

Pastor Boettger was noted for his sense of drama, and even the Roman Catholics came to the Christmas services. A huge tree was trimmed with popcorn balls, paper garlands, silver paper drops with walnut weights, peppermint sticks, and candles. Someone had to stand by with a bucket of water and mop to douse any branches or decorations that caught fire. The popcorn balls were made in pairs and hung over the branches by ribbons. One year, one of the deacons, Mr. Rensch, while standing "mop duty" tried to sneak a popcorn ball into his pocket, but he forgot about the second one which was left hanging down his side. From that time he was called "Popcorn" Rensch!

The years that followed saw the continued growth of the congregation. In May, 1896 a Hinners tracker pipe organ was installed in the balcony, and continued to be used until 1947 when it was replaced by the present instrument. Then, on November 23, 1896, the Rev. Adolph Caspar Wolfgang Boettger fell asleep in Christ. He

served the congregation for thirty-two years — longer than any pastor before or since. His clear, forceful and sound preaching, teaching, and example gave the congregation the character in which it has continued.

Hinners Tracker Organ — 1896

distinctive Lutheran

Within a month of Pastor Bottger's death a new pastor, the Rev. Ernst Burk, was called. During his pastorate a new parsonage was built, and, in 1911 the church and parsonage were electrified and new "Tiffany-style" stained glass windows were installed in the sanctuary. Rev. Burk developed a reputation for being "a bit odd" and decided he



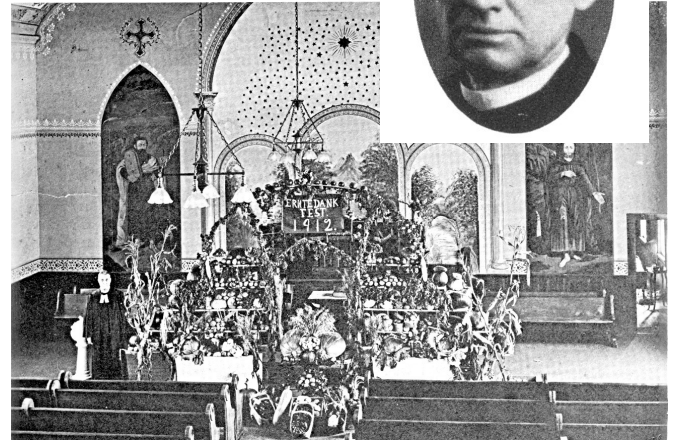
The Rev. Ernest C. Burk
Pastor (1896-1919)

didn't care to record most of his pastoral acts for the last decade or so of his pastorate. The oldest photograph we have of the church interior is a picture of the harvest festival or "Ernte Dankfest" of 1912. Pastor Burk is in that picture, standing by the abundant offerings of fruits,

grains and vegetables.

Erntedankfest —

You can see the new electric lights, as well as the beautiful murals that Pastor Boettger had painted of Moses and St. Paul flanking the altar. There was also a scene of mountains, woods and waterfalls that is mostly obscured by the harvest display. You can also see the old white marble baptismal font - which dates from 1879 - at the far left of the picture. The font and its lid with the white marble lamb are displayed in the Fellowship Room.



The church was the center of much social activity around the turn of the last century. A "Young People's Society" was begun in Rev. Burk's pastorate. Church picnics were enjoyed by all. Then there was the "Ladies' Aid." These ladies met as a social group, an entertainment group, a charitable group, and a support group. They also pitched in eagerly and enthusiastically to help where they were needed in the congregation and community.

1903 Choir — in the classroom behind the church fund-raisers, and it was not unusual Church Picnic

the congregation to look to them items needed to be purchased. They quilted, cooked, baked, and cleaned. important as they were to the life of congregation, they couldn't vote - not community, and not in the church.

suffrage came about in the nation in 1922, but it was 1934 before women could vote at St. Paul's.



They held regular for 1906

when special sewed, But as the in the Women's



The turmoil of the First World War must have shaken this congregation, since many members still had close ties to the "old country." Nevertheless, a number of young men of the congregation took up arms, and two of them - Albert Abt and Charles Halm - died.

For almost a century, German had been the language of St. Paul's. Services were conducted in German. Hymns were sung in German. Sermons were preached in German. Parish records were kept in German. Children learned to read and write German in Sunday School so they could read Luther's Small Catechism and be confirmed in German. But English was becoming the "first language" of more and more people and with the strong anti-German sentiment generated by the war, the German language was used less and less. The last "German Confirmation" took place in 1918.

The Rev. Ernst C. Burk entered into eternal life on Christmas Eve, 1919. He was succeeded by the Rev. George E. Schettler, who had previously served congregations in Hornell and Clarence Center. Pastor Schettler was held in high regard, not only by the congregation, but also by the community. Under his leadership the Sunday School grew so that a parish hall was needed to accommodate the increased enrollment.



Rev. George E. Schettler Before this, the only space for classes to meet was a small room built off the back of the church. In 1927, the centennial year of the congregation, the parish hall was built.

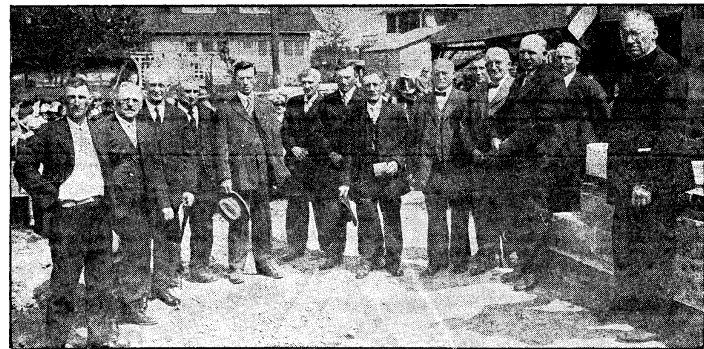
Many changes took place in 1932. On the national scene, with the Depression raging, people were looking for new leadership. Much the same thing was happening at St. Paul's where Pastor Schettler had expressed a wish to retire. The Council initiated a search for a new pastor. The country got Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his "New Deal." St. Paul's got a "new deal" and perhaps a good deal more than they bargained for in the person of the Rev. Gustave K. Huf! In a very short time, St. Paul's - which hadn't even been a member of a synod - was thrust into the mainstream of organized Lutheranism in the United States. The 1872 constitution was translated from the German, abrogated, and a new constitution was adopted according to the model of the United Lutheran Church in America (It was at this point that women received the right to vote on congregational matters.) The Common Service Book and Hymnal was introduced and a Luther League was organized. Pastor Huf had been a missionary in Puerto Rico, and his missionary fervor found a good outlet in Eggertsville!

Rev. Gustav K. Huf

The church building was years of wind and weather had taken their and the clapboards were rotting. The need York State intended to straighten "dead church property. Since the building stood have to be moved.



PARISH HALL GROUND BREAKING



deteriorating. It was a frame structure, and fifty toll. The roof leaked, it was difficult to heat, for action was spurred by the news that New man's curve" on Main Street just east of the only a few feet from the roadway, it would

This was a tall order. Amherst, along with the rest of the nation, was suffering the full effects of the Depression. Jobs were scarce, and pay was low. Nevertheless, a major renovation project was proposed costing \$18,000 - a small fortune in those days! In July, 1933 the cornerstone of the old church was opened, and the project was under way. The church building was moved back 85 feet and faced in brick. The interior was remodeled to include a chancel. The organ was moved from the balcony to its present location off the chancel. A central heating plant was installed - replacing the ancient and inefficient pot-bellied stoves, new light fixtures, the beautifully carved oak reredos, altar, lectern and pulpit were installed in the nave, brass candlesticks and cross, and silver communionware were donated. New pews were purchased for the 110th Anniversary of the congregation in 1937.