

Orange constructed around historically significant church

By Chris Sykes Staff Writer

When it comes to historical significance, the First Presbyterian Church had it all, in terms of the city of Orange.

Just ask Stephen McNally, a one-time church parishioner who grew up in the church but moved away as an adult, or Robert Reed, 89, of the Short Hills section of Millburn, an “unofficial church historian” who had been a member for nearly six decades before Reed and McNally came back to Orange for the church’s last service on July 18.

Even though Reed was unavailable for comment that day, his unofficial protege, who also knows plenty about the church’s history and its relevance to Orange and the nation, was.

“One of the stories from Colonial times in America states that Gen. George Washington and the Revolutionary Army were retreating from the Battle of Brooklyn.

He crossed Manhattan, came into New Jersey and this church is the point at which the British army stopped chasing him,” McNally said. “The British camped out here in this cemetery overnight. They lost Gen. Washington because he went up Scotland Road, which was all swampland and forest, so they couldn’t pursue him.”

“The British actually chose this spot to make camp because it was the highest elevated spot in the area,” McNally continued. “They camped out here and they were high and dry. There was another story that a little boy came to investigate the British and the soldiers, who were getting drunk and firing their muskets, scared the children and they ran away. It’s an interesting story.”

McNally said, even though the church and most of Colonial Orange actively supported Washington and the revolutionary independence cause, there were still some in town at the time who were loyal to Great Britain. He said their legacy is still known, even though many residents aren’t aware of it.

“Back then, they had people known as ‘Tories,’ who were sympathetic to the British cause,” said McNally. Noting a section of present-day West Orange near the Orange border, he continued, “There’s even a section of town today, just off of Main Street, that is called ‘Tory Corner.’ It’s over by Washington Street School and the people who live there were not greatly liked by the people of this congregation.”

As time went on, McNally said he believes church members took on other socially and economically relevant causes, such as the abolitionist movement to help put an end to the practice of slavery in America. Although he said he was not certain, McNally said he was sure the church served as a way station for the Underground Railroad, which helped slaves who were escaping bondage in the South successfully make it to the North, where they could be free.

“I believe there was a big abolitionist movement that came out of this church during and right before the start of the Civil War,” said McNally. “We have significant roots in the city of Orange Township and the community and that doesn’t go away.”

McNally said he believes knowing and understanding history’s lessons are important. That’s why, he said, it was sad to see the church close. McNally said he believed most residents were not aware of its historical significance. Now that it is closed, he said he was worried its long history will be forgotten.

“The site itself is a historic landmark, where the oldest stone in the cemetery is from the 1600s,” said McNally. “This building is actually the fourth church building that was built in the 1920s, after a fire burned down the old one.”

According to Charles Christian, the custodian of the church building and grounds, the old First Presbyterian was not just located in the center of Main Street on the corner of North Day Street, it was also the focal point and center of life in Orange.

"When this church was created, it was the only church that was here and the town was formed around the church," said Christian. "It was the first public building that was built here and it has given birth to nearly all the other churches around here. The land was bought from the Lenape Indians. The residents used it to settle and build a church and people started coming to it and that's how Orange was developed. First Presbyterian