

**PLAINS  
UNITED PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH**

**1806 – 1981**

**On the occasion of the  
175th ANNIVERSARY  
of**

**PLAINS UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
R. D. 4, Box 63 Evans City, Pennsylvania  
(Cranberry Township)**

**October, 1981**

## HISTORY OF THE AREA

Ten thousand years ago the Wisconsin ice sheets extended into Western Pennsylvania. As the glacier retreated, it deposited the earth and rock which it had carried southward while streams from the melted ice sculptured the distinctive landscape of northern and western Butler County. South of this terminal moraine, as it is called by geologists, the land stretches out into more gently rolling hills.

Erected under authority of an act of legislature of Pennsylvania, approved March 12, 1800, Butler County was officially born. At that time the county numbered 3,000 to 4,000 in its population. The county was named in honor of General Richard Butler, a distinguished member of General George Washington's staff.

Cranberry Township was one of four townships which comprised Butler County before 1804. Even its name refers to a time far back when a cranberry bog existed in the southern part of the township. Today the area encompassing Butler County is comprised of 814 square miles divided into 33 townships and 22 boroughs.

First settlements were established in the Brush Creek area of Cranberry Township as early as 1796. Pioneers who arrived that year were Benjamin Johnson and his family, Matthew Graham, William Graham, John Henry, Alexander Ramsey, Paul Vandivort, and Samuel Duncan. Benjamin Davis and George Stoolfire arrived in 1797; David Garvin, his son Alexander and their families in 1800; William H. Goehring in 1801; James Cooper in 1807; and Jacob Stout and his father in 1811.

Samuel Duncan's sawmill, erected before 1803 on Brush Creek, was probably the earliest commercial enterprise. Duncan also operated a distillery which had a wide reputation for excellence. Matthew Graham also erected a sawmill on Brush Creek and built the first grist (grain) mill in 1833.

The Venango Trail crosses Cranberry from a point north of Warrendale along present Franklin Road to the eastern boundary at Evans City. George Washington and his aides traveled the old Indian trail on assignment to Fort Venango (Franklin) in 1753.

Route 19 was known as the Pittsburgh-Mercer Road when Matthew Graham operated the Black Tavern, a popular stop in 1813.

Cranberry Township was rich in coal and oil, but early settlers were primarily farmers. The Freeport vein of coal was found in the bed of Brush Creek. The vein at this point reached a thickness of five feet. Brush Creek coal and Bakerstown coal were mined for many years for domestic use. The Brush Creek oil field industry became active in 1896, about ten years after the first wells were drilled in the Mars area. Principal fields at the time were Henderson, Garvin and Duncan.

Early schools were conducted on the subscription plan. Among the first teachers were Silas Miller from Middlesex Township, Job Staples, Andrew Dodd, and Rev. Reid Bracken. One of the first conventions, or teachers' institutes, was held at Plains Church in February, 1852.

The first post office was established at Hendersonville, but was superseded by Mars after construction of the railroad to that point. For many years Ogle (Indian name meaning "Pleasant

View”) was the local post office. It was situated on the old Pittsburgh and Mercertown Road, opened in 1805. The office was discontinued after establishment of rural free delivery in 1903. The building used as a post office in Ogle was also used as a grocery store and for voting.

Hendersonville was a thriving hamlet as early as 1830 when Robert McKee operated a tavern there. He also manufactured wagons and farm implements. Criders Corners, one of the old settlements, was a station on the Harmony Shortline. The place name has been preserved although it does not appear on present-day maps.

Agriculture continued as the chief industry until the 1940s, but then began the change to the township’s present suburban character. Construction of the Pennsylvania Turnpike, Interstate Route 79, and reconstruction of Route 19 attracted a variety of commercial interests and began the township’s transition from a rural, agricultural region to an outlying industrial, commercial and suburban area. Cranberry Township, in the southwest corner of Butler County, is widely regarded as the fastest growing area in the entire county.

Rapid development increased the population from less than 2,000 in 1957 to more than 7,000 in 1974, with projected growth to 13,150 by 1990. The four one-room schools were replaced by Rowan Elementary School on Rowan Road in 1951, and Haines School on Haines Road in 1966.

The township was served by an elected constable until 1963 when the first part-time police were appointed. A full-time police force was established in 1972.

The first large residential development was Fernway Park. This tract in Cranberry West was developed by the Dover Company in 1957. It consists of 450 homes. Other residential developments followed rapidly: Sun Valley and Cranbrook, both on Freedom Road. One of the largest developments in Cranberry East is Ryan Homes Fox Run Plan on Rowan Road. Adjacent to this plan is Canterbury Heights where two and a half acres is the minimum lot size. Also on Rowan Road are townhouses consisting of 75 units. Franklin Acres on Peters Road was the first real estate development east of Route 19.

Large mobile home courts have been established. These include Cranberry Village on Haines School Road, Forest Park on Powell Road, and Oak Springs on Bear Run Road and Route 19. Another mobile home park on Rochester Road with a small number of units is Hannibal Park. Mobile home parks in existence for many years are Lone Oak Court and Route 19 Mobile Court.

There are ten churches in the township with a combined membership of approximately 6,826.

The Cranberry Industrial Park, established as a result of the efforts of the supervisors and citizens, with cooperation of a local landowner, is filled to capacity. The success of this unique endeavor was accomplished without cost to the community. The program has been used as a guide by the Pennsylvania Department of Commerce for other communities. A second industrial development, called Thorn Hill Industrial Park, is still expanding. Expected to employ 10,000 people, this will be the largest master-planned industrial park in southwest Pennsylvania.

Businesses and industries are located predominantly along both sides of Route 19, with the heaviest concentration near the Turnpike. Opening in late 1980, Cranberry Mall brings to the area a variety of stores and restaurants, making shopping a pleasant experience.

Proceeding north, the roadside is built up with motels, service stations, restaurants and

taverns, real estate agencies, industrial plants, antique shops, a veterinary clinic, medical center, auction barn, truck terminals, and mobile home sales lots. There is also a community park with several ball fields and tennis courts. Approaching Zelenople the roadside begins opening to farms and countryside. Lateral roads east and west off Route 19 extend back into pleasant rolling countryside. Here one finds farms, fields, woodlots, schools and churches, several residential developments and many scattered homes. Roads wind through expanses of farmland and undeveloped land.

The influx of industrial and residential development has had considerable impact on land values and stimulated interest in public services. The need for expanded school facilities becomes increasingly evident.

The challenge of the future will be to preserve the natural environment while taking advantage of superb transportation, new industry, a broadening tax base, and also meeting the needs of education and expanded public services.

## **PLAINS UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH HISTORY 1806-1981**

The origin of Plains Church is not clear. Mention is made in a “supplication” to the Presbytery of Erie in its meeting of April 13, 1802, for preaching at Breakneck, which is thought to be the settlement around the present Plains Church. The first official reference to the church is made in the minutes of Erie Presbytery indicating that Mr. Reid Bracken, a licentiate of the Presbytery of Ohio, went “in the year 1806 to Butler County where he received calls to the pastoral charges of Mount Nebo and Plains.” On April 20, 1808, the Rev. Reid Bracken was ordained and installed as pastor of Plains Church and served until October 7, 1819.

The year 1806 is reckoned as the date of the founding of Plains Church rather early in the history of the nation, when one thinks about it. The last purchase of Indian land in Pennsylvania for white occupancy had been made just fourteen years previous. Ohio had been a state for only three years. George Washington had died just six years before the church’s founding, and Thomas Jefferson was serving the second year of his second term as president.

For some years the congregation worshipped in a tent. Between 1820 and 1824 a log building was erected on a plot of ground donated by Mr. Benjamin Davis (the site of the present church). This church building had all the characteristics of the log houses of that day, including a slab door with a familiar latch string, slab seats without backs, and a block of wild cherry for a pulpit.

For a number of years the church appears to have been without a regular pastor and relied upon supplies. It was visited however, from time to time, by the Rev. John Andrews who organized the Fairmount Church in 1822, and other ministers, and services were held with some regularity. From 1828 to 1831, the Rev. John Moore was supply and pastor. He also served at Pine Creek, Cross Roads, and Deer Creek. As time passed, the visits of ministers became less frequent and it may be said that the old church was practically disbanded for it is not named in presbytery records for several years.

The Rev. Aaron Williams, a teacher in the School of Manual Labor in Zelienople, preached some in the vicinity of Plains. The members were New Light Covenanters, Associate Reformed Presbyterians, and of other beliefs, until the union on January 1, 1838 with the Cross Roads Church in Allegheny County, and the calling of the Rev. L. R. McAboy as pastor on September 25, 1838. At that time there were 32 members of the “Plains” congregation: William Graham, Sr., Elizabeth Graham, Hannah Graham, Matthew Graham, Margaret Bowman, Eleanor Wilson, James Garvin, Ann Covert, Margaret Boggs, Jane Boggs, Margaret Dunbar, Susanna Staples, Margaret Richardson, Andrew Boggs, John Covert, Mary Rowan, William Graham, Jr., David Graham, Nancy Garvin, Robert Boggs, Sr., Samuel Boggs, Ann McGrigger, Job Staples, Joseph Richardson, Mary Coats, Mary Ann Boggs, Mary Covert and Rebecca Bolender.

The church prospered under the Rev. McAboy’s ministry. Among the members admitted in the fall of 1838 were: William Vandivort, Nancy Vandivort, Phoebe Vandivort, Mary Hutchison, Jane Hutchison, Martha Goehring, Nancy Boggs, Eliza Vandivort, Susanna

Vandivort, Philip Covert, Esther Covert, Thomas Hamilton, Alexander Parks, Margaret Parks, William Nesbitt, Emma Nesbitt, Mary Croft, and Sheldon Coats.

Early in 1839 four elders were chosen to assist the pioneer elder Morris Covert. They were William Graham, Sr., Andrew Boggs, James W. Garvin, and William Vandivort. In 1839 a brick house was erected close beside the old log church by Matthew Graham, John Rea, and other old members. The brick was made on John Goehring's farm (now the Robert English farm) and Thomas Evans was the contractor.

The society was incorporated November 16, 1849, the trustees being David Garvin, James W. Garvin, and James Sample.

In April, 1858, the Rev. Newton Bracken succeeded Mr. McAboy as pastor. Thomas W. Boggs, John Graham, Josiah Covert and John Rowan were elected elders. Early in 1860 Mr. Bracken left the church and the former pastor, Mr. McAboy, the Rev. Milton McMillan and others preached here at intervals until 1863 when the Rev. John W. Potter was called as pastor. At that time the society united with that at Fairmount in a call to Mr. Potter and the "Plains" Church was transferred from the Allegheny Presbytery to the Allegheny City Presbytery. Mr. Potter died June 10, 1866.

From June, 1866 until 1868 the churches were without a pastor. In 1868 the Rev. Samuel R. Kerr received a call from the two churches, was installed pastor and served until July 1, 1869. The Rev. Levi Risher came in November, 1869, but was not installed pastor until June 27, 1870.

In 1876 seventy-six members were admitted on examination and three on certificates, bringing the total membership to 215. The Rev. A. G. Baker, an evangelist from Nauvoo, Illinois, aided Mr. Risher in the revival services which drew so many new members into the society. Mr. Risher was released as pastor October 31, 1876. The pulpit was supplied by a Rev. McLean, the Rev. William Wilson, and the Rev. R. J. Criswell who came in April, 1877, and was called as pastor on June 4 of that year and was installed on June 20. In September, 1877, Andrew Boggs, Josiah Covert, John Rowan, James Sutton, R. A. White, Thomas W. Boggs, and James Thompson were named as elders.

In January, 1878, services were authorized to be held in the Baptist Church at Evansburg. In March of that year the question of building a new church was discussed and finance and building committees were appointed. James Sutton, Samuel McClelland, J. M. Covert, James Thompson, and Samuel Graham formed the finance committee, and Thomas Graham, R. A. White, B. F. White, William Croft, John Staples, Nicol Allen and John Rowan were on the building committee. The old church was torn down in May, 1878, and the new church was dedicated November 3, 1879. On March 31, 1878, there were 231 communicants reported and 160 attendants at Sunday School.

From January to June, 1880, the Rev. George Scott filled the pulpit while Dr. Young, E. P. Louis, A. W. Lawrence, G. W. Stewart and G. W. Shaffer visited the church from June to October, 1880. The Revs. Shaffer, Junkin, Minton, Pollock, McMahan and several others came

to fill the pulpit until December 1881 when the Rev. G. M. Potter began his labors as stated supply.

The organization of the church at Evans City was considered on February 18, 1883 and thirty-nine members were dismissed from Plains Church to form the new Evans City Presbyterian Church.

The Rev. R. C. Yates was moderator in June, 1885, and continued to preside until June, 1888. During this time many new members were gained, as many as 35 at one time. On October 8, 1888 Mr. Yates was elected pastor, but the minority being forty-four in a total of ninety-four votes, the choice was not passed. John Rowan, Josiah Covert, James Thompson, J. M. Covert, Matthew Graham, John Goehring, and O. P. Graham were the elders at that time.

On August 10, 1890, the following minute is recorded: "A petition which had been handed to J. M. Covert by the Rev. R. C. Yates was read asking for certificates of dismissal for the following persons to organize a church at Callery Junction. 'Resolved that the certificates be granted on condition that the paper containing the individual signatures be presented.'" This paper having been received, the Session issued certificates of dismissal to the following named petitioners: James Staples, Mandanna Staples, Maude Staples, William Staples, Joseph West, Maria West, Fleming West, Margaret West, Ida West, Mary West, Andrew West, Annie L West, Seth P. Staples, Nicol Allen, Nancy Allan, Annas Metz, Mary Metz, Alfred Richardson, Elizabeth Richardson, Annie Richardson, Sarah Richardson, Joseph Davis, Jane Davis, John Vandivort, and Tillie Goehring. After this group withdrew the church had 135 members on its roll.

From 1890 until 1920, eight ministers filled the pulpit: the Rev. T. M. Potter and the Rev. J. P. White, who were supplies, the Rev. James M. Thompson, the Rev. Henry E. Snyder, the Rev. John Waite, the Rev. Plummer Harvey, the Rev. John Harris Moore, and the Rev. Hugh S. Shaw.

In 1919 Hope Lutheran church was organized, largely by members who left Plains Church.

In 1920 the Rev. W. L. McMillan was called to be pastor and served for 18 years. The elders during this time were Chris Hoehn, William Davison, W. W. Vandivort, A. M. Covert, and Thomas Croft. In 1920 the Cemetery Association was organized, its success due largely to the combined efforts of Mr. Lewis Hartman and the Rev. W. L. McMillan.

In the period from 1938 until 1959 the church was served by five ministers: the Rev. Walter B. Hill, the Rev. Ernest Anderton (1945-1948), the Rev. Homer Steffens (1949-1950), the Rev. J. A. Backora (1951-1952), and Dr. William S. Irwin (1953-1959). During vacancies in that period the pulpit was supplied by W. S. Bingham, Henry Meyers, Lawrence Kurtz, E. B. Lawrence, and W. L. McMillan.

At a congregational meeting in November of 1949, it was decided to put a basement under the church. The work, done by members of the church, was started on New Year's Day of 1950 and four years later the basement was finished at a cost of about \$11,200 for materials. The

sanctuary and outside of the building were remodeled and second floor classrooms were added in time for the 150th anniversary celebration in 1956. The Sesquicentennial Celebration and rededication service were held on September 13, 1956, led by Dr. William S. Irwin, at which time the new organ was dedicated.

In the spring of 1958 the congregation voted to enlarge the parking "lot" which is the present driveway behind the church. This action came as a great relief to those members who had been parking in the area where the old grange hall had been located and walking through the cemetery.

In 1958, with the merger of the United Presbyterian Church of North America with the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. was organized and Plains Church became a part of that denomination and a member of Beaver-Butler Presbytery.

In September of 1959, the Plains Church and the Crestview Church of Callery, which had been yoked together for many years, considered the possibility of each church calling its own minister in view of the growth in the area. They were advised by the presbytery that it would be better to remain yoked and strengthen their ministry by calling an energetic minister who could help build up both congregations. It was felt that a membership of 200 was needed in order for a church to sustain a ministry of its own.

On June 12, 1960 the Rev. Lester W. Phillips was called to serve as pastor of Plains and Crestview Churches. During his pastorate, the Session was organized into committees with each one having responsibility for a specific area of the church's ministry. Because of the tremendous growth in the Cranberry Township area, the church was involved in a survey of the Fernway development to determine the need for a new church in that area.

In 1961 a portion of the Gibson property was deeded to the church, and in 1963 a driveway was constructed around the church, providing additional parking space.

In 1965 the church was asked to consider relocation to an area along Route 19 for better visibility in the hopes of attracting new members from the west side on the township, but the church chose to remain in its present location.

Following the lengthy illness and death of his wife in 1966, the Rev. Phillips requested that the pastoral relationship be dissolved in October of 1966 in order that he might move to a new pastorate. A seminary student, Timothy A. Koah, began to serve the two churches in April of 1967. In July of 1967 Plains Church was given permission by the presbytery to seek its own pastor, with Crestview Church to be yoked with the Old Union Church, Mars. When the Crestview and Old Union Churches could not come to an agreement, Plains Church agreed to remain yoked with Crestview, rather than create a hardship for them. Mr. Koah was ordained in December of 1967 and was installed as pastor of the yoked field.

A soundproof room with speakers was constructed at the rear of the sanctuary in the fall of 1968 for use by mothers with small children. Later a fire exit was added at the front of the sanctuary.

In the spring of 1969 a tradition began with the church sponsoring a Good Friday Breakfast for men and boys of the community.

In the summer of 1969, Mr. Koah announced he had applied for a chaplaincy in the Air Force. Both Plains and Crestview Churches again reviewed their positions and, with the approval of the Presbytery, the Sessions voted to dissolve the yoke. On November 19, 1969 the congregation also voted to dissolve the yoked relationship. In January of 1970 this action was approved by the Presbytery "to take place at their discretion at the time that the churches become vacant, or at the June meeting of Presbytery, whichever occurs first, provided both congregations still desire to dissolve the yoke." On April 12, 1970 the pastoral relationship between Mr. Koah and Plains Church was dissolved and Mr. Koah left to begin his chaplaincy.

In the summer of 1970 the church began plans to build a manse in anticipation of calling a minister. The building was constructed by the men of the congregation at the cost of \$22,059.87, and was just about completed for the arrival of the Rev. A. Allen Brindisi who began his pastorate on July 4, 1971.

In October of 1971 the Session voted to establish a Board of Deacons. The first group of deacons included: Lewis Goehring, Carol Powell, Mildred Sarver, Mildred Kirsch, Kern Affolder, and Edmund Munford.

In 1973 a paved parking lot accommodating 60 cars, was built on the north side of the cemetery. With a growing church school enrollment, it became evident that additional space was needed for educational purposes. On June 23, 1974 ground was broken for an educational unit adjacent to the church. Beaver-Butler Presbytery gave evidence of their faith in the future of Plains Church by giving the church a grant of \$10,000 plus an additional loan of \$10,000 toward the cost of construction. Dedication of the building was celebrated during homecoming weekend on October 23, 1977. The new building contains a church office, pastor's study, four large classrooms and rest rooms on the first floor, with a new kitchen, large fellowship hall with fireplace, three small rooms, and rest rooms on the ground floor. These facilities have helped the church in its ministry to the community as the building is made available to various groups such as scouts, senior citizens, etc.

On November 17, 1974 the congregation took action to adopt the unicameral system of government. Installed as Elders/Trustees on January 12, 1975 were: Jack Affolder, J. Edgar Anthony, Thomas Anthony, Glen Cookson, David Goehring, Frank Leisie, Richard Magill, Elmer Michael, Dale Nott, Laverne Ripper, Stanley Rowan, Angela Rush, Melvin Sproat, Janice Rowan, and Kathryn Uthman.

In the summer of 1975, in response to an international crisis, Plains Church joined with several other churches in the community to sponsor Vietnamese refugees. Two young men were brought to the area and were assisted in securing housing, clothing, furnishings and employment. The committee worked with these two young men for several years to help them adjust to their new culture.

In 1976 the Deacons sponsored an old-fashioned ice cream social which has become an annual favorite.

In November of 1976 Mr. Brindisi resigned to take a pastorate in New York State. The Rev. Deane F. Lavender accepted the call to Plains Church and began his ministry in October of 1977.

As the population of the township continued to grow, Plains Church joined with Dutilth Methodist and Hope Lutheran Churches in 1977 in a program of visitation to new families moving into the area.

The summer of 1979 provided a unique experience for the congregation when the Rev. Deane Lavender exchanged pulpits with the Rev. Tom Milroy of Monifieth, Scotland, for a period of nine weeks.

In 1981 the goal of seeing the church facilities in use more than one day each week became a reality when a day care center opened in July. A nursery school is anticipated for the fall.

In celebrating the 175th anniversary of the founding of Plains Church, we acknowledge with thanksgiving the faithfulness and dedication of those who have gone before us, proclaiming their allegiance to Jesus Christ throughout these years. In looking to the future, we reaffirm our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and commit ourselves to work together to uphold the purpose of the church as it is stated in our Church's Form of Government:

*“The great ends of the Church are: The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.”*

## MINISTERS OF PLAINS CHURCH

Reid Bracken	1808—1819
John Moore	1828—1831
Leland R. McAboy	1838—1853
Newton Bracken	1859—1860
John W. Potter	1863—1866
Samuel R. Kerr	1868—1869
Levi Risher	1870—1876
Robert J. Creswell	1877—1879
James M. Thompson	1894—1896
Henry E. Snyder	1897—1900
John Waite	1902—1907
Plummer R. Harvey	1908—1913
J. Harris Moore	1914—1915
Hugh S. Shaw	1916—1919
W. Lamont McMillan	1920—1938
Walter B. Hill	1942—1943
Ernest Anderton	1945—1948
Homer H. Steffens	1949—1950
John A. Backora	1951—1952
William S. Irwin	1953—1959
Lester W. Phillips	1960—1966
Timothy A. Koah	1967—1970
A. Allen Brindisi	1971—1976
Deane F. Lavender	1977—