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Individual Moral Majority of Poughkeepsie: 18th - 20th century

Poughkeepsie, New York has a long history stretching from its first founding by the Dutch in 1716 to present day. Over time, Poughkeepsie has become the focal point of cultural and religious diversity of the region. The various churches in the area, including the Dutch Reformed Church, the First Congregational Church, and the Catholic Church, demonstrate the intimate connection Poughkeepsie has between religion and the cultural shifts that have taken place throughout its diverse history.

The First Dutch Reformed church was the very first religious community in Poughkeepsie. The church was founded by a congregation of immigrants including the Van Kleecks and Jacobs Van den Bogert as well as over 70% of villagers that wanted to keep their customs and religion alive in this foreign land. These two families were very influential in building the first church and maintaining a congregation.¹ The community's lack of leadership combined with the English influence led to the formation of the Presbyterian Church. However, it also compromised the foundation of the Dutch Reformed Church and its prevalence in the Poughkeepsie community.²

¹ Webster D. Hasbrouck, *A History of the first Presbyterian Church of Poughkeepsie New York*. (Poughkeepsie: New York, First Presbyterian Church, 1923), 5.

² Joyce C. Ghee and Joan Spence. *Poughkeepsie Halfway up the Hudson*. (Grand Rapids: Michigan, Tempus, Limited, 1997) 9.

The Dutch Reformed Church's inability to assimilate with the American culture and maintain its own religious convictions caused a great deal of confusion and turmoil within the church. Jonas Michaelius, the first leader of the Dutch Reformed Church in New Netherlands, reflects this turmoil, though he did not preach in Poughkeepsie per-say. Through Michaelius's example, the Dutch Reformed Church flourished in the city, but was short lived due to his adamant request to be sent home and his inability to form lasting bonds with people.

Michaelius served in North Holland for twenty years during which he married and had three children. Then, in 1624, he was asked to serve for the church in San Salvador, Brazil. However, he was rerouted to the New Netherlands with his sick wife and family. Upon arrival to the colonies, his wife died and left him widowed with three children and a struggling church. The Dutch Reform Church showed promise in the beginning. Michaelius' goal was to assemble settlers into an organized church, of which he did in 1628 with fifty members who were of French-speaking Walloons and Dutch descent. Though his congregation showed promise, it was plagued with controversy when Michaelius attempted to convert Native Americans who were considered savage beasts not capable of forming organized religion. From this dissent the Dutch Reform began to separate from authorities. Through these challenges Michaelius "became increasingly bitter"³ and requested permission to go back to the Netherlands, where he served in Amsterdam until 1638 when he was rejected by the governing board of the West India Company for not complying with the leadership. Michaelius clearly had a different agenda and was unwilling to follow the appointed leaders. From this point, he was sent to serve in Yarmouth

³John A Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, eds. "Michaelius, Jonas" *American National Biography*, (New York, NY: Oxford UP Vol. 15, 1999), 413-14.

England and then to a Reformed Pulpit in Zeeland in 1641. After this there is no record of what he did or where and when he died, but it is suspected that he died a few years later in Zeeland.⁴

As a result of Michaelius's hasty departure and difficulties, the Dutch Reformed Church was not able to form a concrete religious structure in the colonies which left the fate of the religion in the hands of a community with little guidance and leadership. In fact, within the first twenty-five years of the church being established, it had a minister for only two years. Over the next fifty years they had over six different ministers, of which a majority lasted for less than four years.⁵ This lack of direction and Michaelius's rebellious nature led to the growing separation between the Dutch in New Netherlands and colonial Poughkeepsie. The leadership of Jonas Michaelius, however lacking, lends credence to the Dutch and English culture that would come to assimilate in the next fifty years and create the foundation for Poughkeepsie as a vibrant city.

The cultural demographics of Poughkeepsie shifted with the influx of both freed African Americans and the expanding abolitionist movement as can be seen through the influential members of the First Congregational Church in the early to mid 19th century. The Dudleys were founding members of the Congregational Church and active abolitionists, signifying the impact of local leadership within the town. On the other hand, abolitionist leaders like Samuel Ringgold Ward reflected the cause on a national level. He was a prominent civil rights activist that preached in the First Congregational Church of Poughkeepsie. Combined, these abolitionists represent both the local and national recognition of the civil rights movement present in

⁴ Ibid, 413-414.

⁵ Russell L. Gasero, ed. *Historical directory of the Reformed Church in America, 1628-1992*. (Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1992), <http://images.rca.org/docs/archives/hdchurches.pdf> (accessed November 25, 2008).

Poughkeepsie, as well as the diversity of the African American community that formed during this period and is still prevalent.

The First Congregational Church formed from the ashes of a spilt between the First Presbyterian Church and the Second Presbyterian Church. One prominent family that follows the history of the First Congregational Church is the Dudley family. James Hervey Dudley and his wife, Charlotte, lived in Poughkeepsie for over fifty years in a house Dudley built for his wife. After the failure of the Second Presbyterian Church, Dudley helped form the First Congregational Church. Dudley reflects the spilt of the Presbyterian Church between the old and new, which ultimately resulted in the First Congregational Church (FCC). As a founding father of the church, he was a strong supporter of the abolitionist movement. The Poughkeepsie Anti-Slavery Society (PASS) had strong authority over the church, as can be seen in that the “first minister and four of its five founding deacons were signatories on the call.”⁶ Dudley, a carpenter, lumber merchant, and architect, further lent his services not as a preacher, but as the architect and builder of the first sanctuary. He also served as the clerk and trustee of the church for over twenty years. Dudley embodies the local abolitionists, who on a small level affected the local people of Poughkeepsie and demanded a change and recognition of the African American population within Poughkeepsie.

Moreover, Dudley’s wife Charlotte Wiltsie and his son Guilford were also prominent figures in the church. Charlotte was an active member of PASS and signed several antislavery petitions.⁷ Guilford Dudley did not shy away from servicing the First Congregational Church in any way

⁶ “First Congregational Church of Poughkeepsie: A Site on the New York Underground Railroad Heritage Trail,” (Poughkeepsie: NY, First Congregational Church).

⁷ *Ibid.*

possible. Guilford was as active as his father in the First Congregational Church. His obituary stated “together with his father they served the church as clerk for a period covering seventy years.”⁸ Dudley was also elected Deacon for life in 1885 and gave a large donation, in memory of his late wife, for the “construction of the triple archway entrance structure, the purchase of a lot,” and many other things.⁹ The Dudley’s are embedded in the history of the First Congregational Church as they devoted their lives to the promotion of the anti-slavery cause and the establishment of the Congregational Church as an integral component of Poughkeepsie’s history. Their contributions demonstrate the Abolitionist movement through the First Congregational Church in the work of these ordinary people who devoted their lives to growth of not only the church but all of Poughkeepsie.

On another note, the abolitionist cause within the First Congregational church is further advocated in the short, but significant stay of Samuel Ringgold Ward. Ward, an outspoken and freed slave, was a prominent abolitionist. Though much of Ward’s history extends beyond the town of Poughkeepsie, his presence demonstrates the significant role Poughkeepsie played in the abolitionist cause by attracting such a prominent figure to the area. Samuel Ringgold Ward was born a slave in Maryland and later escaped to Greenwich, New Jersey. He then settled in New York City, where he attended the African Free School and worked as a clerk for David Ruggles and Thomas L. Jennings. Ward recalls in his autobiography, that this was when he was “initiated . . . into the antislavery fraternity.”¹⁰ In 1839, he decided to move to Poughkeepsie where he became a licensed preacher for the First Congregational Church and taught at the Colored

⁸ Getting to Know: Guilford Dudley. Poughkeepsie, NY: First Congregational Church.

⁹ Getting to Know: Guilford Dudley. Poughkeepsie, NY: First Congregational Church.

¹⁰ Garraty, John A., and Mark C. Carnes, eds. "Ward, Samuel Ringgold." American National Biography. Vol. 26. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 1999. 649-650.

Lancastrian School. From 1841-1843, Ward served as the minister for two pastorates in upstate New York, of which one was entirely comprised of white people in the village of South Butler, Wayne County. He is most notable for preaching against northern prejudice and slavery, believing that “slavery should be attacked with political weapons as well as with moral suasion.”¹¹ *True American* and the *Impartial Citizen* are just two of the papers Ward wrote editorials for while on tour lecturing for abolitionists cause. Though Samuel Ringgold Ward had a full and influential life, he died poverty stricken and alone on the island of Jamaica in 1866.¹²

Ward had a strong impact on the antislavery movement in the town of Poughkeepsie. With the support of the First Congregational Church, Ward demonstrated like many of the other prominent abolitionists the relationship between the religious and political activism in the African American community. Michael E. Groth proposes that before and during the abolitionist movement, Poughkeepsie was fervently prejudiced despite the presence of various abolitionist churches. Ward, a man who devoted his life to the abolitionist cause saw little hope stating, “[m]ost places on the Hudson River” are “thoroughly and hopelessly proslavery”.¹³ Through his depictions, Poughkeepsie is portrayed as hopelessly conservative compared to other regions in New York State and in need of more help than he could give. However, Ward’s efforts as a member of the First Congregational Church allowed freed blacks to form a sense of an independent community gaining values of self-help, improvement, and thrift. Though the African Americans continued to have a marginalized presence in Poughkeepsie, it was through the help of people like the Dudleys and Samuel Ringgold Ward they were able to form an identity of their own.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Garraty, John A., and Mark C. Carnes, eds. "Ward, Samuel Ringgold," 649-650.

¹³ Michael E. Groth, "Fording Freedom in the Mid-Hudson Valley," pg 296.

Poughkeepsie experienced another shift in the social structure with the influx of German and Irish Catholics to the Hudson Valley in the mid nineteenth century. These two groups were looking to expand their business opportunities by moving North. Many Irish came to Poughkeepsie to work on the railroad, whereas Germans came as skilled workers trying to create businesses of their own. The German community brought Nativity Church and the Irish brought St.Peters. The two catholic communities faced a great deal of adversity as a result of their isolation from both the locals of Poughkeepsie but also from within the two Catholic communities. It was not until 1844 when Fr.Riordan was assigned to the pastorate at St.Peters that Catholics began to be accepted “into the fabric of Poughkeepsie life.”¹⁴ After Fr.Riordan’s death in 1870, Fr.Nilan filled his shoes in the community and is remembered to this day for his unflinching servitude to the church and his futile attempts to unite the two ethnic churches in the area.

Upon Fr.Riordan’s arrival to St.Peters parish he was faced with many unanswered questions pertaining to the fate of Catholics in Poughkeepsie. He wondered whether they would ever be regarded as fully American and able to relate to each other. He also had to contemplate how the church would teach the children and continue the traditions in Poughkeepsie. Each of these issues played an integral role in his leadership.

Fr. Riordan arrived in Poughkeepsie in 1844 as a naïve, 30 year old priest faced with the task of building a parish that was poor, struggling with internal factions, and had an uncertain future. He was successful throughout his thirty years of service, integrating Catholics into the Protestant population. Edmund Platt stated that Riordan had guided St.Peters Church “safely

¹⁴ Louis C. Zuccarello, “The Catholic Community in Poughkeepsie 1870-1900: The Period of Testing” in *New Perspectives on Poughkeepsie’s Past: Essays to Honor Edmund Platt*, (Dutchess County Historical Society Yearbook Vol 72: 1987), pg. 105.

through the Native American or Know-Nothing agitation and brought it greatly increased strength and respect.”¹⁵ Fr. Riordan quieted the Irish Protestant suspicion that Catholicism was the “religion of the foreign Pope, of the drunken, brawling immigrants and of the strange practices and lifestyles of celibate priests and nuns” through refurbishing the church, building a parish school for girls and later boys, and organizing various societies devoted to temperance.¹⁶ When refurbishing the church, he made a statement to the Catholic resistance in Poughkeepsie by putting the inscription in Latin on the front of the church, “Thou art Peter and upon this Rock I shall build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”¹⁷ This imagery signified the presence and identity the Catholic community was beginning to have in Poughkeepsie. The St.Patrick Day parade and festivities sold over two thousand tickets and brought together both the Protestant and Catholic Irish in the “St.Patrick’s Mission and the Permanency of Its Fruits” further demonstrating the integration of the Catholic community.¹⁸ Riordan’s influence on the incorporation of Catholics in Poughkeepsie was vast and paved the way for Fr. Nilan, who continued Fr. Riordan’s efforts in uniting the various ethnic fractions of the Catholic Church and creating a firm foundation in Poughkeepsie.

Fr. James Nilan, the pastor of St.Peter’s, served Catholics in Poughkeepsie for over forty years. He believed in the “Americanization” of immigrant groups and was a tireless worker for the city of Poughkeepsie. He caused controversy in his efforts to assimilate the German Catholic population. Fr. Nilan, a liberal priest for the Irish population and scholar, did not condone the isolation of the German Catholic population in the Nativity Church. He was under the persuasion

¹⁵ Louis C. Zuccarello, “The Catholic Community in Poughkeepsie,” pg. 106.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

that immigrant Catholics should try to incorporate the Catholic traditions of the American culture since this was their new country. This notion would later surface in the “German Question” controversy in July 1891, where Archbishop Corrigan allowed the German Catholics permission to open a Calvary Cemetery near Vassar College as well as sell beer at an outing.¹⁹ This combined with the series of other actions including a dedication ceremony, complying with new rules of attire, and the use of catholic nuns in the public school caused a divide between the Poughkeepsie pastorates against the Church of New York. In fact the saying came about, “the brains in the archdiocese are up the Hudson” and therefore away from the true decision making.²⁰ This controversy between Bishop Corrigan and Fr. Nilan reflects a shift to a more hierarchical centralized American church. Fr. Nilan’s position on this issue demonstrated his influence on and personal devotion to the acceptance of the Catholic community in Poughkeepsie, in addition to its recognition as a part of the church hierarchy of New York.

Fr. Nilan was again forced to accept a new wave of Italian and Polish immigrants into the fabric of Poughkeepsie in the nineteenth century. Attracted by working opportunities with the Central New England Railroad, both Italian and Polish Catholics immigrated to the Hudson River Valley. True to form, they insisted upon their own ethnic parish and continued the trend of Catholic isolation.²¹ Fr. Nilan played a key in the organization of a strong Italian community through his ability to speak fluent Italian. He became the advisor of the Italian Benevolent Society, assisting in various religious celebrations such as the “L’Assunta” (Our Lady of the Assumption, August 15th) and the efforts to organize an Italian parish.²² In fact, with slight

¹⁹ Louis C. Zuccarello, “The Catholic Community in Poughkeepsie,” pg. 109.

²⁰ Zuccarello, Louis C, interview by author. Notes taken. Poughkeepsie, NY., 10 November 2008.

²¹ Louis C. Zuccarello, “The Catholic Community in Poughkeepsie,” pg. 114.

²² Ibid, pg. 115.

reservations Fr. Nilan supported their petition for the building of what would become Mt.Carmel church. Through Nilan's constant support and civic responsibilities for Poughkeepsie his influence stretched farther than simply St.Peter's Church and he became the leading Catholic voice in a diverse city. Mayor Ketcham referred to him as a “. . . tireless worker for the good of the city and its people.”²³

Poughkeepsie vast history stretching over the past four hundred years is demonstrated through the wealth of religious traditions and individuals that shaped not only the church communities but the city's culture and identity. The prominent religious figures of the Dutch Reformed Church, the First Congregational Church, and the Catholic Church illustrate that many of the cultural and social shifts of Poughkeepsie resulted from the formation and practice of various new and old religious orders. The influx of immigrants and the creation of these local churches have allowed the social history of Poughkeepsie to be documented and seen as truly significant.

²³ Ibid, pg. 107.