

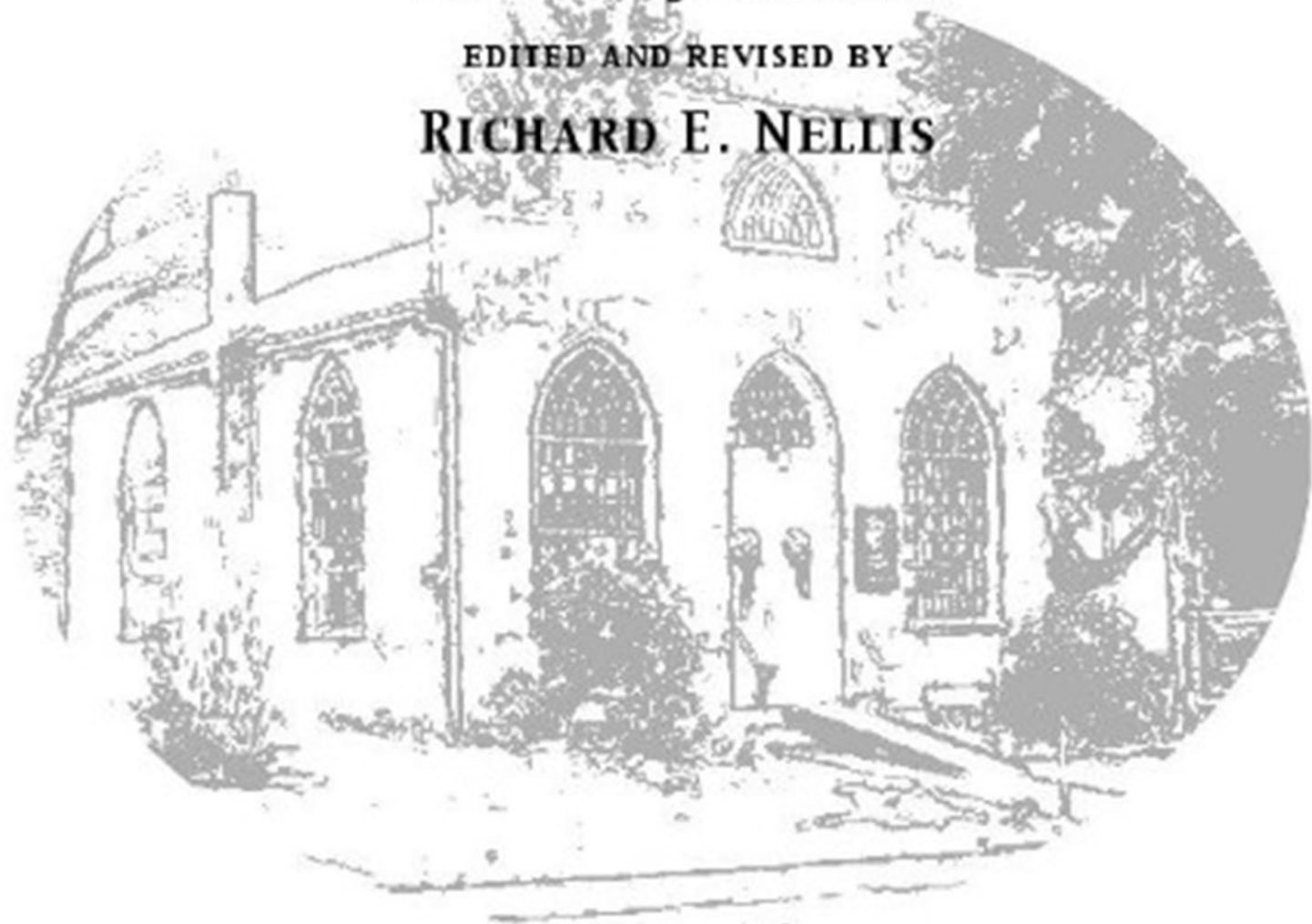
# THE JOSEPH PRIESTLEY MEMORIAL CHAPEL

BY

WILLIAM J. WESTON

EDITED AND REVISED BY

RICHARD E. NELLIS



published in commemoration of  
The Bicentennial of the Life and Legacy of  
**Joseph Priestley (1733-1804)**  
for Priestley Chapel Associates  
P.O. Box 333  
Northumberland, PA 17857

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## *The Joseph Priestley MemorialChapel*

### **Introduction**

I'm pleased to introduce the revised and updated history of the Joseph Priestley Memorial Chapel prepared as part of the commemoration of the life and legacy of Joseph Priestley.

The identity of a religious congregation is shaped, in some measure, by the structure in which it worships and lives out its common life. The history and meaning of a structure and the history and purposes of communities of people create a shared identity.

The Joseph Priestley Memorial Chapel was a natural garden in which to plant The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley. The chapel is a precious component in the common life of the people who constitute the congregation. And those caretakers who protected it in the years when it was not home to a congregation share this communal identity.

The chapel's historic significance in representing the ideals of religious freedom and democracy and the principles and sources of Unitarian Universalism continues to lend significant meaning and purpose to the identity of the congregation that has worshiped in the chapel since 1992.

The current congregation shares in the legacy of Joseph Priestley who was a brilliant and courageous theologian and political activist. Over the years as liberal religion was preached from the pulpit the walls of the chapel have been soaked in Joseph Priestley's commitment to free thinking and the unfettered search for religious truth.

The preaching continues and the chapel is a vital home for proclaiming the progressive ideas for which it was built. Once again the dreams and ideals of Joseph Priestley are a living entity found in the vibrant worship and community life of the people who are the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley.

The Rev. Barry L. Stopfel

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### Forward

This small effort is dedicated to the myriad people of the Northumberland community, the Northumberland Civic Club, the Northumberland County Historical Society, and the Priestley Chapel Associates who, with great effort, kept the Priestley Memorial Chapel vital and sound through years of disuse and near-neglect. The present structure and grounds are a monument to them as well as to Joseph Priestley.

Bill Weston wrote the original of this study in the early 1990's and many of the revisions come from his later work, some of which appeared as "A Bit of History" in The Phoenix, monthly newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley (Northumberland, PA). The most drastic revisions I made concern the pulpit and the organ. Bill's writing concerning the sanctuary is conflicted and I deleted the implication that the present setup is original. With regard to the organ, James McFarland, the man who restored it, gave me a story which differed in several respects from what Bill wrote and, in such cases, I used McFarland's version.

Many friends helped with this revision and I am grateful to all of them; to attempt an enumeration would be to risk missing some. The sources given at the end are Bill's.

--Richard E. Nellis

1/10/04

### The Beginning

In 1794, Joseph Priestley left England to escape religious and political persecution. Although a world-renowned theologian, philosopher, and scientist, he was, for years, subjected to increasingly bitter criticism by his countrymen. His unorthodox religious beliefs and his ardent support of the American and French revolutions made him a target of the supporters of the English monarchy and the Church of England. The persecution culminated in the destruction of his house, library, and laboratory by a mob which also threatened his life.

At age 60, he arrived in America and settled in Northumberland, Pa. He built a house (which has been preserved) and lived out the last ten years of his life here. In spite of the deaths of his wife, Mary, and youngest son, Harry, and his failing health, his time in Northumberland was fairly tranquil and productive. He conducted Unitarian services in his home and in a nearby

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schoolhouse and managed to attract a small group. This was the first congregation in the United States to call itself "Unitarian"<sup>1</sup> but it was not as successful as he would have liked when he died in 1804.

One son, William, moved to Louisiana and the eldest son, Joseph, Jr. moved back to England in about 1813, which ended the Priestley presence in Northumberland for that time. Fortunately, a grandson, Joseph Rayner Priestley, returned to Northumberland, at age 19, and married his childhood sweetheart, Frances Dundas Biddle.<sup>2</sup> They had a large family and were members of the Unitarian congregation formed by Rev. James Kay from the remnants of Priestley's original group. For several years they met in the Union church in Northumberland, which they shared with three other denominations.

### Construction of the Chapel

By 1834, the congregation had grown sufficiently to build its own church. John and Hannah Taggart donated a small plot of land, 50 by 60 feet, on Front Street upon which a small plain brick building, 36 by 27 feet, was constructed. It was a typical English-style country church, a design popular in 19th century America (and strikingly similar to St. James Episcopal Church in Muncy which was built two years earlier, but razed in 1858). It cost about \$1,000 to build and, by 1836, according to a letter written by Rev. Kay, "all but \$100 was paid for."

The structure was brick with a plastered interior, a double-door entryway, and two windows in each of the four walls. The windows had 15 panes in both upper and lower sashes; the upper sashes were fixed and the lower sashes were operated by means of ropes and pulleys. The pulleys were probably removed when interior shutters were later added; one pulley remains yet, it is at the top of the front window on the right wall (facing the pulpit).

It is unclear what comprised the sanctuary, but the semi-cylindrical cabinet which stands in front of the present pulpit, and which is contemporaneous with the building's construction, may have served as a lectern or altar. There were two small pews for the elders, or perhaps a choir, at one side of the pulpit and others at each side on the north wall, otherwise there were no pews in the nave. Movable settees provided seating for the congregation.

The roof was supported by trusses in a small attic accessed by an arched window in the front (north) wall. Some "fancy" touches included a vaulted ceiling, arched Gothic sashes over the windows and front doorway, and a stepped parapet atop the front wall.

This 1834 structure is the same building that stands today as Northumberland's oldest place of worship. Its preservation is due to a combination of circumstances and the efforts of several dedicated individuals over the years. While most other church buildings in the area were rebuilt, torn down, or converted to other uses, the little chapel persisted in spite of the decline of Unitarianism in Northumberland. The congregation thrived under Rev. Kay but after his death, in 1847, it was difficult to find an able minister who was content to work in the rural setting.

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<sup>1</sup> For corroboration, see Jack Mendelsohn: "Meet the Unitarian Universalists" (Boston, Unitarian Universalist Association Pamphlet, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> For a more complete account of the Priestleys in Northumberland, see William J. Weston: *Priestley Chronicles* (Northumberland, PA, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley, 1998).

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Rev. Kay mentions in one of his letters that, "Within a few years [after 1834] an organ was secured for the chapel." It is still in the chapel! It is a small cabinet pipe organ probably built for use in a home. It may have come from the Leighou family as John Leighou was one of the original chapel trustees and was a piano maker. The organ was built by John Wind, a Lancaster organ and piano maker and shows a date of 1815, older than the building itself. It is one of only two John Wind organs still known to be in existence. It originally stood next to the pulpit but was later moved to the loft over the entrance vestibule. The instrument was conceived as an "organized piano", that is, a combination organ and piano, but Wind didn't complete it; the piano mechanism was never installed 'though the cabinet was built to accommodate one.<sup>3</sup>

### 1878-1910: Doldrums

Although there were, perhaps, five or six other families who were active in the congregation, it was the Taggart and Priestley descendants who kept it going until about 1890. One of Joseph Rayner Priestley's sons, Joseph Priestley, MD, had 4 daughters who were active in the church. Hannah married Rev. Haskett D. Catlin who was the Unitarian minister for the congregation from 1873 until he moved away in 1878. After that date, Annie Priestley conducted the worship service and Sunday School and her sister, Jean (aka Jane or Jennie), played the organ and led the singing. Annie and Jean and the fourth daughter, Frances, all left small legacies for the maintenance of the chapel.

By 1890 the congregation had dwindled to the point that regular services were discontinued and the chapel remained vacant for several years. From 1904 to 1909 the building was rented to the school district for use as a classroom to relieve overcrowding. A blackboard and electric wiring were installed, a pot-bellied stove, where the pulpit now stands, and storm doors (not the present vestibule which was added sometime between 1910 and 1939). It was reported that the antique organ was undisturbed.

### 1910ff: Major Alterations

The year 1910 brought major changes to the building and to Northumberland Unitarians. Rev. Haskett Catlin, back in town, emerged from retirement and resumed regular weekly services. The few remaining Taggarts and Priestleys deeded the building over to the American Unitarian Association (AUA) to preserve as a memorial to Joseph Priestley and extensive repairs and renovations were made. A basement was dug, a coal furnace installed, and a loft added for the organ. By this time the shutters had already been installed as evidenced in a photo taken about 1910 by Nelson F. Davis.<sup>4</sup> This is probably when the present sanctuary was built, as evidenced by the kerosene lamps which flank the pulpit; kerosene was not developed until well into the last half of the 19th century. Further, it has been reported that the pot-bellied stove still occupied that space in 1909.

On Oct. 24, 1910, representatives from the AUA and from Unitarian churches in several states convened at the chapel and rededicated it as the "Joseph Priestley Memorial Church", but the interior makeover was not completed until 1912 when the stained glass windows were installed on

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<sup>3</sup> John Wind and the chapel organ are described in *"That Ingenious Business": Pennsylvania Organ Builders* by Raymond J. Brunner (Birdsboro, Pa: The Pennsylvania German Society, 1990), chapter 26. A copy of chapter twenty-six is in the UUCSV library at King Street Commons.

<sup>4</sup> In the Bucknell University Archives.

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either side of the pulpit. One window was the gift of the Priestley sisters and honors their father, Joseph Priestley, MD (great-grandson of JP). The other window, a gift of the Misses Mary and Anna Taggart, honors the doctor's wife and their aunt, Hannah Huston Taggart Priestley. The shutters for those windows were taken down, probably because they hid the tops of the windows. Rev. Catlin reported an average attendance of 25 persons in the beginning, but the renaissance was soon over. With the oncoming war, attendance dropped off and in 1917 Catlin's death brought an end to services once again.

### World War I and More Disuse

During World War I the building was used for Red Cross activities, but after that, until 1930, it was not used for anything at all. The effects of 20 years of neglect would have been disastrous except for the intervention of another Priestley descendent; in 1928 J. Priestley Button of Philadelphia sponsored repairs and repainting of the chapel.

In 1930, the AUA sent a representative to Northumberland to assess the possibility of reactivating the church but the report was negative. At that time there were only 3 Unitarians in town. The same year Mrs. Frances Forsyth, the last survivor of the Priestley family in Northumberland, died leaving a bequest of \$1,000 for maintenance of the chapel. Despite the negative assessment, the AUA decided to try to revive interest in the chapel by engaging Rev. Robert S. Miller of Lancaster to preach a service. The results were encouraging enough to warrant turning the electricity back on and holding annual memorial services .

### Late 1930's: More Activity and Another War

In 1939, it was decided to install pews to replace the caned-bottom chairs that had been used in the nave. The funds were provided by the interest earned on the Priestley family bequests and by the sale of 48 chairs at \$1 apiece. The pews were built by a local carpenter, Fred Troxell, to match the original ones beside the pulpit. Eight remaining chairs were stored in the cellar and sold in the mid-1990's for somewhat more than \$1 each.

Attendance was so impressive at the annual service that, in 1940, Rev. Miller agreed to try monthly services. Some improvements were made at that time, such as cementing the cellar floor, replastering the cracked ceiling, installing better lighting, and rebuilding and replacing the shutters for the stained glass windows. The monthly services were fairly well attended at first but with the onset of another world war attendance fell off and they were discontinued once again.

### Post WW II: Disuse Again

After the war some special services were held in some years but none on a regular basis. By 1951 the chapel needed repainting again and, again, the interest from the Priestley and Taggart bequests was used. During the 1950's there were sporadic services such as pilgrimages by the Harrisburg and State College congregations in 1952 and after. There was a serious attempt made at that time to form a new congregation but the response was insufficient.

Mr. C. Warren Gutelius, a local publisher and historian, had been caretaker of the chapel for almost 25 years and had written several historical articles about it. In 1954, the Northumberland County Historical Society asked him to speak at their meeting to be held in the chapel. Unfortunately, after he finished his talk and sat down, he died of a heart attack. He was buried from the chapel to which he had given much of his life. He, also, provided a bequest in his will for the building's preservation.

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In the early 1960's, the Joseph Priestley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship was formed by families from the environs of the village of Penns Creek. The Fellowship held several of their meetings in the chapel and met there for other special occasions. When the denomination published new hymnals, the fellowship secured for the chapel forty copies of the old edition from the UU church of Berks County. Otherwise there was little use made of the building and even less maintenance for almost twenty years. It slowly deteriorated with the passage of time and the grounds were neglected and overgrown.

In 1964, Miss Mary Taggart died at the age of 91. She was the last member of her immediate family and the last member of the 1890 Unitarian Congregation of Northumberland. She, also, made provision in her will for funds to preserve the chapel.

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### The Community Gets Involved: the 1970's & '80's

The Northumberland Civic Club cleaned up and decorated the outside of the chapel for the 1974 Christmas season. The nation's bicentennial celebration awakened widespread interest in local history and preservation of historical sites and there was an attempt to have the borough assume ownership and care of the building but this failed. Finally in July 1976, John Romberger, a Maryland Unitarian who had been raised in Northumberland County, became interested in the chapel. He worked closely with the Northumberland County Historical Society and with the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) in Boston to make immediate repairs to the building. A new roof was installed with new trusses, in the nick of time to prevent collapse.

The Historical Society sponsored a committee to establish a permanent organization for the preservation of the chapel. In 1979 the first meeting of the Priestley Chapel Associates (PCA) was held with John Romberger as president. The formation of the PCA, and the execution of an agreement between the PCA and the UUA (dated 12/1/1982) assured the future of the chapel once again. This organization of talented and hard working people have accomplished much in raising funds and restoring and preserving the chapel.

One of the first projects undertaken was the restoration of the antique organ which had not been used for over 50 years. Jean Priestley was probably the last regular organist to use it, and by 1931 it was described as unplayable: some wood was rotten and pipes were missing. The Priestley Chapel Associates, with the help of the Northumberland Civic Club, the Geyer Foundation, and other generous community members, had it restored by the McFarland Company of Millersville, a really major job. The project was completed in 1982 and since then the organ has been kept in fine condition by the McFarland people. It is understood that John McFarland wrote a history of the organ, but a copy has not been located at this writing.

The circumstances of buying, selling, dividing, and redividing over the years, left the chapel bounded on the east and south by an "L" shaped parcel of land then owned by Herbert and Mabel Diehl. The PCA acquired this property through two conveyances (11' x 90' and 30' x 60') in the early 1980's thus enlarging the chapel grounds to 61 x 90 feet and providing space for the memorial garden which was later added.

### A New Congregation and a Big Rejuvenation: the 1990's

Other projects undertaken and financed by the Priestley Chapel Associates included replastering, reglazing, repainting, replacing of old wiring, and repointing brickwork. However, problems remained and in 1991 the PCA hired architect Richard Williams of Wilkes Barre to make a comprehensive review of what was needed to finish the rejuvenation. The review was completed in 1992 and a multi-phased program projected to cost \$36,000 was adopted. Stimulus was provided with the rebirth of a Unitarian congregation in Northumberland, the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley (UUCSV), which came about chiefly as the result of efforts by Rev. John Morgan, who, in 1990, was engaged by the Joseph Priestley District of the UUA to revive Unitarianism and Universalism in northeast Pennsylvania.

By the end of the summer of 1995 the rejuvenation program was successfully completed, under budget by about \$1000. With the aid of a \$10,000 grant from the Joseph Priestley District Chalice Lighters (through the UUCSV) sufficient funds had been raised. A low brick wall, which appeared to be the original curbing, was removed, new walks and railings were placed, and the property landscaped. The exterior trim was painted and the bricks sealed. Inside was more dramatic.

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The entire building was cleaned out of the accumulation of 160 years. In the cellar a gas furnace replaced the coal furnace and the coal bin removed. Concealed cold-air returns improved the warm air flow and the chimney was equipped with a stainless steel flu liner. In the attic the ceiling supports were reinforced to retard the perennial cracking of the plaster down the center, and additional circulation was provided. The stained glass windows were removed for cleaning and refurbishing. All cracks in the plaster were repaired, the entire interior, including the pews, was repainted, and the floor was refinished and recarpeted. An unobtrusive ceiling fan was installed to provide cooling on warm days and to distribute heat on cool days.

When the shutters were removed to facilitate painting, it was virtually unanimous that the chapel was dramatically brighter and more cheerful, so they were stored in the cellar and not put back up. When all else was done, as with the 1910-1912 remodeling, the stained glass windows were put back in with protective plexiglass sashes on the outside. The event was celebrated with a large, full-color photo on page 1 of *The Daily Item* for June 9, 1995.

At this writing the chapel stands attractive and sturdy with a dignified memorial garden in the back, its outside appearance largely the same as when it was built, but with an interior that would hardly be recognized by the builders. It is not only a memorial to Joseph Priestley, but to James Kay who inspired the original congregation to construct it, and to the wonderful folks of the Northumberland community who kept it ready for the rebirth of a Unitarian congregation.

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MINISTERS OF THE NORTHUMBERLAND UNITARIANS

1794-1804	Joseph Priestley
1804-1806	William Christie
1806-1821	Vacant
1821-1847	James Kay
1848-1850	Thomas Lathrop
1851	? Butts
1852-1854	Thomas Weston
1855-1864	Unclear
1865-1869	Aaron Porter
1869-1873	David Clark
1873-1878	Haskett Catlin
1878-1910	Vacant
1910-1917	Haskett Catlin (in retirement)
1917-1931	Vacant
1931-1937	Robert Miller (annual services)
1937-1940	Harvey Swanson (annual)
1940-1941	Harvey Swanson (monthly)
1941-1992	Vacant
1992-1993	John Ickes (quarter-time)
1993-1994	Danna Wall (intern)
1994-1995	John Ickes (quarter-time)
1995-1998	John Morgan (half time)
1998-1999	Barbara Campbell
2000-2003	Barry L. Stopfel (half time)
2003-	Barry L. Stopfel

Others, dates undetermined:

Eli Fay  
Fielder Israel  
Samuel Longfellow  
Samuel Daniels (or McDaniels)  
Liberty Billings  
? Lane  
? Boarse

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Sources  
for the original edition

- I. The Churches Which Joseph Priestley Established in Northumberland and Philadelphia by C.Warren Gutelius 11-12-1954.
- II. Minutes of the Northumberland School Board 1904 to 1910.
- III. Letterbooks from the American Unitarian Association archives now held at Harvard-Andover Library, Cambridge, Ma. This collection contains letters from Ministers at Northumberland to the AUA from 1825 to about 1890.
- IV. Priestley Biographies by Holt, Gibbs, and others.
- V. Minutes of Priestley Chapel Associates.
- VI. History of Northumberland County by Bell.
- VII. Article in Public Press (Northumberland) 1881 quoting Helen Taggart Clark, wife of Minister David Clark.
- VIII. Deeds in Northumberland County Courthouse, Register of Deeds archives.
- IX. 1910 Rededication Program.
- X. Interviews with John Romberger, Fred Troxell, Molly Troxell Udybe, Mary Poff, Richard Nellis, and Owen Anderson.

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CHRONOLOGY

XI. The Early Years

- A. Constructed in 1834, the building is 36 by 27 feet.
- B. The upper window sashes were fixed and the lower sashes were operated by means of ropes and pulleys.
- C. Original furnishings
  - 1. The semi-cylindrical cabinet, or alter, which now stands in front of the present pulpit
  - 2. The two small pews at the side of the pulpit.
  - 3. Two small pews attached at each side on the north wall.
  - 4. Movable settees for the congregation.
- D. "Within a few years" the organ was secured and placed next to the pulpit.
- E. Indoor shutters were later installed on all the windows.
- F. Electricity came to the building in 1904.

XII. Major changes in 1910-12

- A. The cellar was dug.
- B. A coal furnace was installed.
- C. The organ loft added.
- D. Probably the present elevated pulpit was built.
- E. Caned-bottom chairs were used for congregational seating.
- F. The stained glass windows were installed and shutters for those two windows were removed.

XIII. 1939 - 1940

- A. The cellar floor was cemented.
- B. The present pews were installed.
- C. The shutters for the stained glass windows were redesigned and put back up.
- D. The vestibule was probably added.

XIV. Early 1980's

- A. The organ was restored.
- B. The building was rewired and the present light fixtures probably installed.

XV. The 1990's

- A. New walks and railings were placed.
- B. The building was cleaned out of 160 years' accumulation.
- C. The gas furnace replaced the coal furnace.
- D. The ceiling fan was installed to distribute heat on cool days and to provide cooling on warm days.
- E. The coal bin was removed.
- F. The shutters were taken down.
- G. The stained glass windows were removed, cleaned, refurbished, and put back with protective plexiglass sashes on the outside.
- H. The pews attached to the north wall were made free-standing.



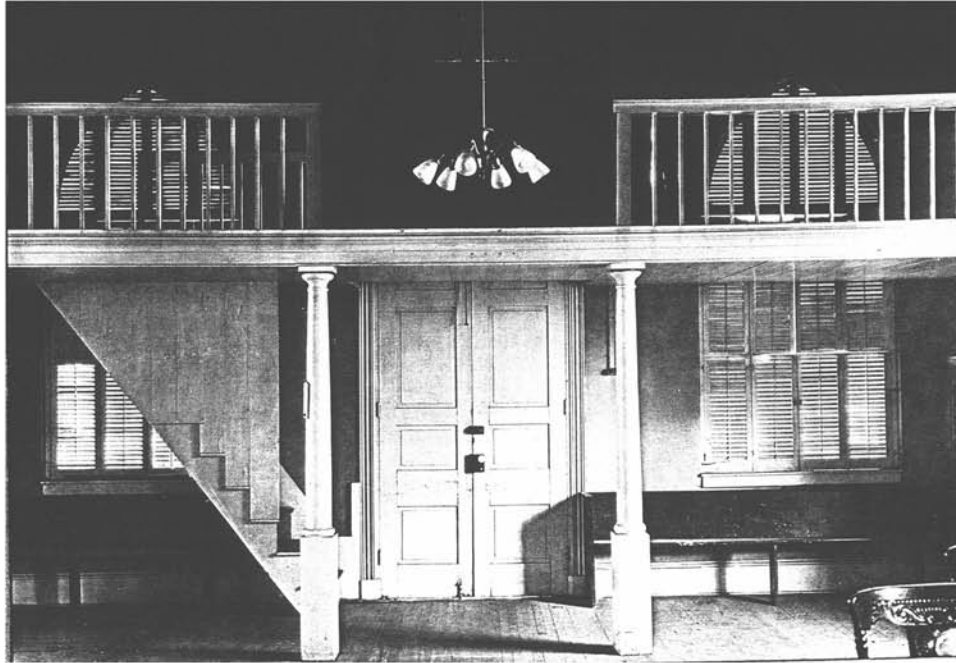
Photo by Nelson F. Davis, Bucknell Archives

## **PRIESTLEY CHAPEL, CA. 1910**



Daily Item photo by Joe Hermitt

## **PRIESTLEY CHAPEL, JANUARY 1997**



taken from a xerographic copy  
The organ loft about 1910; the vestibule had not yet been built.

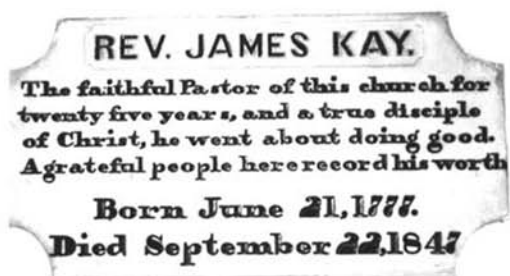


from The Daily Item, July 27, 1993  
The organ and interior in 1993  
before the shutters were taken down.



Interior, 1995

photo by Eugene Royall



Kay Plaque