THE PERSISTENCE OF THE PURITAN VISION:
CONFLICT AMONG EVANGELICALS IN BERGEN, NEW YORK

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The Puritan vision which inspired New England has exerted a powerful influence within the fabric of American life. The grandeur of that original vision motivated the idealism and practical longings of those who shared it. Alan Simpson has described their "determined effort to erect a holy community" under an "apocalyptic view of their place in history ..." 1 Geographic separation from England would give like-minded Puritans a new freedom to implement their vision, a freedom not to be extended to others with visions of their own. 2

Whether admirable or despicable, misguided or heroic, the Puritans' New England experiment withered throughout the colonial period. 3 Yet it has continued profoundly to influence our culture, even though its effects "represent selections and adaptations of the original experience." 4

The history of American religion displays an endless variety of thought, style, and organization. This diversity began in the colonial period, but always against the background and resistance of European patterns of church-state relations. 5 The Puritans were certainly most ambitious in their attempt at symbiosis. The larger English colonial system tried to transplant an Anglican establishment, but yielded to toleration as a way of attracting immigrants and uniting a vast array of religious and ethnic traditions around the state which permitted them to exist. 6 The impulses of sectarianism, often fueled by revival, and the "huge body of religious indifferents facilitated the advance of toleration." 7 Enlightenment

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6 Richard Hofstadter, America at 1750, (New York, 1973), 189; cf. 204, 205 for a classic description of an established church.
7 Ibid., 190; 194-198.
rationalism and Deism were little moved by the formulas of internecine Protestant debate. Life in New England increasingly demanded adjustments in the application of the Puritan vision, and further shocks came from the Awakenings and the requirements of the frontier.

America became, if reluctantly, the ideal environment for a proliferation of churches, each with its own characteristic ethos and constituency. Since the advent of modern social thought, it has been impossible to view this plethora of religious movements in isolation from their social, political, and economic contexts. In particular, H. Richard Niebuhr demonstrated the considerable extent to which such factors as social class, ethnicity, and sectionalism have influenced the separate development of American churches and sects, and have stood in the way of their effective cooperation or union.9

Winthrop Hudson, on the other hand, has found in the history of denominationalism a viable, constructive expression of Protestant ecumenism. Tracing its roots to 17th century English Puritanism, Hudson sees denominationalism as the creative remedy for rigid intolerance and persecuting zeal, at least within the Reformed tradition.10 Sydney Ahlstrom, following Hudson, has described denominationalism as

... a repudiation of the idea that all Christians under any government must be comprehended in a single church. More positively, the theory affirmed an inclusive conception of the church, whereby each communion was respected, and within limits, none was denied the right to the Christian name.11

Such ideas were less than welcome among New England Puritans, but ideally suited to the realities of an increasingly pluralistic New World.12 Clearly there were rather severe limits to this early toleration, yet here was the theoretical foundation for the flexibility of institutional arrangements that would become such a conspicuous feature of American religion.

If denominationalism began with English Calvinists and gained cultural and political momentum from the Enlightenment, it won mass appeal through the teaching and organization of John Wesley. While never hesitating to argue his own convictions, Wesley sought fellowship with evangelicals of whatever brand.13 The same evangelical dynamics appeared

8Ibid., 181.
9H. Richard Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism, (New York, 1975) (1929), 16. In The Kingdom of God in America, Chicago, 1937, Niebuhr qualified these arguments by stressing the catholicity of Christian faith in time and space, and its renewable vitality and role as initiator within culture. Even with these additional reflections, his earlier analysis remains valid and helpful.
12Ibid.
in the First Great Awakening, where a shared commitment to revival could transcend traditional, institutional barriers.\(^\text{14}\)

In the camp meetings, revivals, reform and missionary enterprises of 19th century evangelicalism, the paradox of interchurch competition and cooperation proclaimed the victory of denominationalism in America.\(^\text{15}\) The expanding frontier offered the advantages of heterogeneity and experimentation, but New England’s commitment to orthodoxy and order guaranteed resistance.\(^\text{16}\) While its effort to maintain the “Standing Order” in Connecticut, for example, proved unsuccessful, Congregationalism did not relinquish its position as the state church until 1818.\(^\text{17}\)

Even after disestablishment, the Puritan vision continued to color the life of Protestantism in an increasingly denominational society.

This study is an exploration into the causes of a pattern of social conflict which remains a central fact of life in one western New York community. To a degree uncommon in our ecumenical age, the relationship between the First Presbyterian (formerly Congregational) and the United Methodist (formerly Methodist Episcopal) Churches in the Town of Bergen, Genesee County, is one of constant dissonance. Pastors and congregations have difficulty in planning and conducting ecumenical programs. Often a combined service will attract only a small contingent from each congregation, and may produce more tension than fellowship. Since the Presbyterian Church has been influenced dramatically in recent years by the charismatic movement, many have attributed the conflict to attitudes regarding “the Baptism in the Spirit.” Others point to individuals or incidents the might be responsible. But the rift predates all these “causes,” reaching back to the beginning of religious pluralism in the town.

The Presbyterians established their church in 1807, the second church of any kind west of the Genesee. More than two decades later a Methodist class incorporated as a church in 1831. Today they are the only Protestant churches in the village. During the intervening years small Baptist and Episcopal congregations formed and disbanded. A Roman Catholic church established more than a century ago is flourishing today. In 1828, disaffected Congregationalists formed the Second Congregational Church (now Stone Church Presbyterian) south of the village. Another Presbyterian Church was formed in the hamlet of North Bergen. None of these developments has significantly altered the difficult relationship between the two churches in question.\(^\text{18}\)

The relationship which these churches have so long endured is part of the legacy of conflict between the Puritan vision of church and society

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\(^{\text{17}}\) Ibid., 46, 47; 54, 55; George Claude Baker, \textit{An Introduction to the History of Early New England Methodism, 1789 - 1839}, (Durham, N.C., 1941), 48.
and the pluralistic realities of American denominationalism. Bergen's first settlers came from Connecticut with expectations for their transplanted religious and social life. As Congregationalists, they would be "accustomed to social dominance just as they have been in New England." 19 They had lived in Connecticut during the first successful insurgency of Methodist circuit riders. They must have heard or read sermons warning of the threat to social and religious order which Methodism represented. Methodists appeared in Bergen (c. 1828) with their own well-established view of Calvinists and their churches. 20 The two denominations already had a history of unpleasant interaction (not, however, without its interludes or sense of humor) which could not be forgotten, even in a new place.

Patterns in evidence in Connecticut before and during the migration were repeated in Bergen. Differences in theology, as we shall see, provide an instructive exception, since they do not appear in Bergen. The two churches remained very much divided, but for less obvious reasons.

Bergen Methodists struggled for an acceptance of denominationalism among former New Englanders and their descendants, whose place of origin had "lagged behind other regions of the United States in arriving at such acceptance." 21 In the First Presbyterian Church the Puritan vision has lived on in a multitude of expressions of assumed hegemony. The juxtaposition of these two visions has been an enduring source of friction.

The pattern of conflict follows a logical and chronological sequence, beginning with the preaching of Jesse Lee in Connecticut in 1789. Assumptions which developed there remained with those who migrated to the New York frontier. More specifically, the pattern appears among people migrating from East Guilford and vicinity to Bergen, where their religious ethos was transplanted. A generation later, their vision of church and society would resist that of new settlers.

It is not surprising that Lee met with opposition in Connecticut, for toleration was antithetical to the Puritan vision. Other preachers and movements had also been opposed, or grudgingly tolerated under legal strictures which protected the establishment. 22 Especially suspect were

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the uncontrollable revivalists, whose "enthusiasm," unconventional training, heterodoxy, and intrusive itineracy would upset the "order and harmony" of the colony/state. On the other hand, the Methodists, propelled by fresh evangelical fervor, saw the establishment as little more than the fossilized remains of a once glorious experiment. Emotions ran high in such a conflict. Each vision cherished values, embodied in differing ways of life, and each side felt justly indignant over the attacks of the other.

Elements in the conflict included the simple fact of priority in time. Puritans had explored and settled the land amid memorable hardships. They had built the towns and given shape and direction to society. Their vision gave a sense of purpose and destiny to everything New England was. Despite recurrent dissent, Connecticut had held on as a predominantly Puritan enterprise. Methodism was beginning to flourish elsewhere following the Revolution, but Bishop Asbury delayed sending his preachers into New England because of the number of its churches and their characteristic hostility toward outsiders. It was only when Jesse Lee made his extensive evangelistic tour that a viable Methodist network was established in Connecticut.

Lee's Journals reflect the resistance he encountered on that tour. Once, after being denied the use of various houses and an orchard ("she said we would tread the grass down") as suitable preaching places, he spoke in the road to a Norwalk congregation of twenty. He kept testing the water in search of places that might support classes and societies, and in Stratfield, where clerical opposition had apparently worked to his advantage, Lee formed his first class. Summarizing his first year in Connecticut, he wrote:

In most places, I have met with a much kinder reception than I could have expected, among persons holding principles so different from mine; but yet I have been much opposed, and have been under the disagreeable necessity of spending much of my time in talking on controversial points, sometimes in public and oftimes in private.

Methodists encountered similar reactions wherever Calvinist churches enjoyed priority in time. When Puritans settled and structured their communities, in or outside of New England, they gave to their churches a central and, to the extent possible, exclusive position. Thomas Ware discovered this near Albany (1793), when a Congregational deacon told
him "to go home; or, at least, to desist from disturbing the order of things among us." Similarly, Nathan Bangs noted the difficulty of introducing Methodism (c. 1804) into Marietta, Ohio, "the oldest town in the state, and in which the Congregationalists held religious sway."31 Priority in time and establishment assumptions played a central role in defining the conflict, in and beyond Connecticut.

These factors were accompanied by a theological confrontation which focused most often on the twin Calvinist doctrines of predestination and eternal perseverance.32 The Methodists preached instead that each person is endowed with the freedom, opportunity, and responsibility to accept God’s universally offered salvation. Even after conversion, the possibility of “backsliding” denied the protection offered by the doctrine of eternal security. This debate was a constant in the interaction of the two groups. To it the Methodists added Wesley’s “peculiar doctrine” of Christian holiness.33 The boldness of the doctrine, in spite of the careful ways in which Wesley presented and defended it, was bound to stir up opposition.34

There were exceptions to this theological division. Appalachian camp meetings were shared by ministers and churches that usually fought over doctrine.35 In New England, there was a weakening of the old Calvinism within Calvinist churches, in spite of the formidable efforts of Edwards, Whitefield, and others to reconcile the new evangelism with the old theology.36 So successful was Arminianism in the Second Awakening that some of its chief champions were Congregationalists and Presbyterians.37 While many factors contributed to this (never universal) transformation of Calvinism, Methodists were happy to take at least their share of the credit.38 Yet while the theological debate changed over the years, its effect was lasting.

Troubles also arose from contrasting modes of organization. Congregationalists were accustomed to the “lawful parish,” local in authority

33 John Wesley, quoted in Leslie Ray Marston, From Age to Age a Living Witness, (Winona Lake, Indiana, 1960), 134.
35 Clark, Op. Cit., Vol. III, 201; 221; 226; 230; 233; 249; 253; 261; 445.
and focus, whereas the Methodists were forming local components of new regional networks.\textsuperscript{39} The travels of circuit preachers took them over vast territories and across parish jurisdictions.\textsuperscript{40} Settled preachers resented these ubiquitous evangelicals, whose accountability lay elsewhere, beyond the local community. Parish clergy received reliable, tax-funded incomes and were established leaders in communities where they held long pastorates.\textsuperscript{41} Methodists were forever on the move, supported by meagre offerings taken at informal preaching stops, unlikely to remain on the same circuit, let alone the same town, for more than a year. Each side found reason to see either entrenched stagnation or fly-by-night irresponsibility in the other's standard operating procedures.

Different also were the educational backgrounds of ministers.\textsuperscript{42} "Puritans expected their clergy to be distinguished for scholarship, and during the entire colonial period all but five per cent of the clergymen of the New England Congregational churches had college degrees."\textsuperscript{43} In some ways the tremendous educational gap hindered circuit riders, who were often despised for their lack of the usual clerical credentials.\textsuperscript{44} Yet Congregationalist Henry Jones listed this deficiency as a distinct missionary advantage:

\begin{quote}
\ldots Methodism commends itself in various respects to the sympathy of the people. Its preachers are taken directly from the body of the people, and without any extended course of preparation, enter on their work with their previous habits of intellect and feeling still unchanged. Thus they are able to address the people more in accordance with their own mode of thought, and carry their sympathies more entirely with them in their public devotions, than one can easily do, who has raised himself by years of study, and of communion with the choice minds of the world's history, to a higher sphere of thought and emotion.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

To many whose experiences, social class, and manner of expression were not those of the Congregational clergy, the circuit rider appeared as "a man who is on our side."\textsuperscript{46}

It is necessary to add, however, that Methodist preachers gave a great deal of attention to self-education, and that their attitudes toward formal education would undergo considerable transformation through the 19th century.\textsuperscript{47} Observers warned that Methodist success could become a

casualty of the scramble for education. Yet in these early years, the educational gap, with its assets and disadvantages, remained a factor in the tension between the two churches.

Closely related was the broader issue of social status. In the typical New England situation, according to an unfriendly source, Methodists appealed primarily to "the most weak, unlearned, ignorant and base part of mankind." George Baker's survey of church records concludes that "Methodists began with those of the poorer class, with few exceptions." For a time this was the picture everywhere in America. For good or ill, Methodism rose in social status through the 19th century, but accustomed attitudes, reinforced by lingering similarities, would prevail beyond their time.

Finally, no attitudes were more divisive than those regarding spirituality and style of worship. Worship has always been central to Christianity, and differing patterns and theologies of worship have been notorious sources of conflict, as well as social and personal transformation. Forms of worship were seen as accurate representations of spiritual life. This does not mean that each side correctly interpreted the other's piety or public worship. We are dealing here not so much with the accuracy, but the power of their perceptions.

Bishop Asbury's view of "the awful state of the churches" in New England echoed that of George Whitefield a generation earlier. Puritanism had become a religion of the mind, cultivated by a learned clergy, built upon the sophisticated theological tradition of Calvin, expressing itself in a rationally conceived society. Henry Jones acknowledged that Methodism reaped great benefits from "the formalism, the worldliness, and the want of vital piety in the prevailing order." Methodism, in the vigor of its youth, saw the establishment as empty of real spiritual power.

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50Ibid., 16-18, 41, 42.
51Marston, Op. Cit., 152; Also Nathan Bangs, Op. Cit., Vol. 2, 145: "... Methodism made but slow advances in New-England; those who first joined its standard were generally those of the poorer class. . . ."
On the other hand, many New Englanders would have agreed with Devereux Jarratt's early impression of a Virginia Methodist meeting (1776): "the assembly appeared to be all in confusion, and must seem to one at a little distance more like a drunken rabble than the worshippers of God." To those "at a little distance," the spectacle of Methodist worship often obscured its purpose: the attempt to build a church around continuous revival. Its distinct theology and polity were not its primary reasons for existence. Methodism was synonymous with evangelicalism; it was in the "conversion of sinners" and the cultivation of a systematic Christian life that its preachers saw their chief end. In their frontier setting, the more controlled, liturgical aspects of Wesley's approach to worship never fully carried over into American Methodist practice.

The Connecticut of Bergen's immigrants was home to a large, venerable establishment, irritated by "persons, who were much despised ... on account of their religion, and their attachment to the Methodists." Soon after Jesse Lee's incursion, New Englanders were moving into upstate New York in search of land, their faith reinforced by the clergy, teachers, and traditions of home. Circuit riders who ventured into the region with their brand of Christianity came mainly from other sections, where Methodism had been stronger and longer established. Churches competed for the attention and loyalty of pioneers and their settlements, and tended to divide the advantage of "who got there first." Yet there was a priority of experience which gave the Presbyterian/Congregational preachers a ready audience. Wherever New England churches determined the community structure and culture, Methodism would compete as an outside force.

In order to minister more efficiently to their mobile and scattered emigrants, Congregationalists and Presbyterians agreed upon a Plan of Union (1801), under which new churches of the Puritan tradition in New England were to be Congregationalist, while those west of New England were to affiliate with Presbyterianism. Bergen and other congregations would vacillate between consociation and presbytery, however, exercising local autonomy to reach what seemed the best arrangement. Planners were convinced that regional coordination, as demonstrated by the Methodists, would be useful on the frontier.

\[\text{[56]In Winthrop Hudson, "Shouting Methodists," } \text{Encounter, Vol. 29, no. 1, n.d., 75; cf. Hofstadter, } \text{Anti-intellectualism, 60, 61.}\
\[\text{[57]Hofstadter, } \text{1750, 229.}\
\[\text{[59]Jesse Lee, } \text{A Short History of the Methodists (etc.), } (\text{Baltimore, 1810), 163.}\
\[\text{[61]Cross, } \text{Ibid., 14, 15.}\
\[\text{[62]Ibid., 9.}\
\[\text{[63]Ibid., 19; Walker, } \text{Op. Cit., 524ff.} \]
Increasingly, the evangelical churches were using rivals to compete for the conversion and incorporation of western New Yorkers. Strident competition and antipathy remained characteristic of the era. According to Whitney Cross, "At the fountainhead of all the streams of intolerance, flowing at different levels, stood the Presbyterians and Congregationalists." He explains:

In most sizable villages and towns they had founded the first church. Members and ministers alike had been reared in the special privileges of New England establishments. Their doctrine was the one historically orthodox in the parent section. It was habit and circumstance rather than malice which made the competition of another denomination seem to be either heretical, wild, and extravagant, or at the least, unethical.

In many communities there emerged a transplanted New England, so that in 1827 the Orleans Advocate could say: "What New England was fifty years ago, the western section of New York . . . had in many respects already become."

William Colbert, in his travels through upstate New York, recorded several encounters with Calvinists, one occurring as he reached the New Town (Elmira) area in December of 1792. There he met a man "who was honest enough to tell me he never liked the Methodist doctrine." Colbert and his Methodist successors competed within the framework of denominationalism, though the methods of their rivalry often transgressed today's standards of acceptability. At certain points, they even "endeavored to enforce the necessity of union among Christians." But the everyday realities were those of competition, "sheep-stealing," and heated debate. When an encounter with a Calvinist was cordial, Colbert could only show surprise.

The missionary and revival activities which poured out of New England and across New York were part of an ongoing communication between the settlers and the people back home. Often pioneers came as families or delegations from communities, so that customs and relationships naturally exhibited a great deal of continuity. George Peck observed that "Missionaries were dispatched to these newly settled regions to teach people the orthodox doctrines of the 'old standing order,' and to reclaim

64Cross, Ibid., 10ff., 42-46.
65Ibid., 46.
66Orleans Advocate, Albion, N.Y., August 29, 1827, in Cross, Ibid., 54.
68Ibid., December 26, 1792.
70Colbert, Ibid., November 16-18, 1793.
apostates from Calvinism.”72 The “apostates” he had in mind were New Englanders converted to Methodism. Peck welcomed the competition, believing that it would usually work for the advancement of his church.73

In the far west of the state, where New England style communities were set up, the subsequent arrival of Methodist competition produced predictable results. In Buffalo, by the time Glezen Fillmore reached his 1818 appointment, Presbyterians and Episcopalians were already meeting, though only in public buildings.74 Fillmore arranged to use the school house during times when the Episcopalians would not be needing it.

It was not long before the Methodist meetings began to make quite a stir in the little town and, as would seem, awakened some jealousy.

The Presbyterian minister sought an opportunity to speak with Mr. Fillmore... asked him if he intended to have regular appointments in Buffalo. The answer was: “Certainly; nothing short of it.” He then proceeded to say that Buffalo was a small place, and could do no more than support the preachers who were already settled there, and he wished Mr. Fillmore would have the kindness to leave.75

Refusing, Fillmore was bumped from the school house through the offices of the Presbyterian pastor. To the “universal astonishment” of the community, Fillmore’s Methodists actually built their own church, with financial assistance from the denomination and from Joseph Ellicott. They managed to fill the new church and secure its future and his support.

A preacher named Paddock, assigned to a circuit which extended sixty miles along the Ridge, from Clarkson to the Niagara River, often encountered similar opposition.76 Describing clerical interaction generally, he said:

... those were times not particularly distinguished for catholicity among the different Churches. Anything like ministerial courtesy was scarcely looked for outside one’s own communion. The ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church, in particular, were regarded and treated by those of most other Churches as “blind leaders of the blind.”77

Each group pursued its vision of church and society in this fluid situation. If one saw western New York as a transplanted New England, the other could envision it as “the garden of Methodism.”78 Their relationship, however, was little improved over that in New England.

Social and economic differences can be seen, as early as Colbert, in the buildings used for worship and the attitudes of the people.79 The familiar patterns of clerical education and worship style persisted as well.

73Ibid., 163.
74Ibid., 350ff.
75Ibid., 351.
76Ibid., 354, 357.
77Quoted in Peck, Ibid., 356.
Colbert demonstrated the determination of circuit riders to increase their learning under adverse circumstances, but he would never be a Yale graduate. Yet, as we have seen, during the pioneer decades of the 19th century, such a ministrv worked well and produced a viable, competitive church. 80

Bergen's history can only be understood against the Connecticut background of its early settlers, and specifically that of East Guilford (Madison), from which most of them came. 81 Beginning in the summer of 1789, when Jesse Lee preached "the first Methodist sermon in Guilford," the Methodists wanted a church in that area. 82 Their hopes were not to be fulfilled until 1937, when a society was formed in Guilford, and c. 1939, when East Guilford's society was organized by James H. Perry. 83 While these churches began long after the introduction of Methodism to Connecticut and the migration to Bergen, they nevertheless exhibited the same hostile interaction as the earlier periods. In East Guilford,

It was with great difficulty that a habitation could be procured for the accommodation [sic] of Brother Perry's family & with still greater difficulty that the use of any of the school houses could be secured in which to deliver his message so strong was the feeling of hostility to the name of "Methodist" in the town. 84

There is, however, some encouraging evidence of progress toward acceptance:

The following autumn a Camp Meeting was held in the town which drew out the town's people, & there the doctrines & purposes of the Methodists were so well represented that much of the hostility of the most intelligent part of the community wore away. And although an attempt was made during the progress of the meeting to break it up by a resort to legal authority (which by the way failed there being no law to authorize such a procedure) yet so strong [sic] was the sympathy [sic] created in our behalf not only by the correctness of our doctrines & usages but by the actual & apparent good that was done in the conversion of souls at this meeting that these court proceedings were hushed up or denied [sic]. 85

By this time the Awakenings had prepared the way for an understanding or acceptance of ideas that once would have been repugnant to a Congregationalist audience. In addition, there was the undeniable ability of Methodism to do "actual and apparent good" by facilitating even the most unlikely conversions:

83 Steiner, Ibid., 387, 389; Historical Record of the M.E. Church in the Town of Madison, now at the First Congregational Church, Madison, Conn., n.p.
84 Historical Record . . . Madison, Ibid.
85 Ibid.
... the church enjoyed a season of gracious [sic] visitation in the winter of '42-3 in which some of the most hopeless & unprofitable members of the community were soundly converted & have since borne faithful testimony to the truth & have become the most efficient helpers in the cause of the Lord among the Methodists.86

The Methodists were attracting their old clientele — the poor and outcast — and giving them a new way of life grounded in their conversion. Undoubtedly there were skeptics among the “better sort” who appreciated the transformation enough to acknowledge some role for Methodism in their community.

The extent to which Congregationalist-Methodist relations began to improve may be indicated by a resolution from the Ecclesiastical Society of the Congregational Church, dated October 26, 1846. Citing “increased sentiments of liberality and kind christian [sic] feeling manifested by and among the different religious denominations at this day,” the Society resolved on a course of ecumenical programming, “hoping that a mutual good feeling may be cultivated and sustained, and that prejudice and unkind feeling may be done away . . .”87 While a number of factors prompted such a statement, both churches left documentary expressions of their ecumenical concern, and indications that improvement had already begun.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that such formidable obstacles were so quickly overcome. The Methodists were still newcomers in a town which had never seen a viable alternative to Congregationalism. The impressive resolution represents the desire of sincere Christians, but the desire cannot be read as accomplished fact.

The Methodist Church in Madison no longer exists, but its records provide insight into its continuing struggle to find a permanent place in the community. Reports made during 1871 and 1872 by its pastor, H.D. Latham, indicate the distance between interdenominational hope and reality.88 Lamenting the “heroic” but discouraging progress of his church, he explained that “our converts have been drifting away” to the “larger body,” which enjoyed “The weight of wealth, and social position,” as well as the “drift of popular feeling.” Latham found “little . . . promise for the future,” for though his church had received “an honorable recognition as a Christian church” which has performed “manifold services of good to the community,” yet its work had been done among “reproaches,” within the limits of assumed inferiority. It seems that under a veneer of public good feeling there remained a quiet but effective assertion of power. The Puritan vision, in attenuated form, remained alive in mid-19th century Madison.

86Ibid.
87Records of the First Congregational Church, Madison, Conn.
88Quarterly Conference Reports, Oct. 29, 1871 & Jan. 23, 1872, located with records of the M.E. Church, Madison, at the First Congregational Church.
Bergen lies thirteen miles east of Batavia, the administrative center of the Holland Purchase, and eighteen miles west of Rochester. Never a large town, its business community once thrived as the center for the surrounding rural area. At one time Bergen was a stop of the main New York Central Railroad run from Rochester to Buffalo. Its traditional orientation to the farming community had been modified in recent years by commuters to Rochester industries, and the commercial center of the village has been eroded by the gravitational pull of larger nearby towns. Village population during the last census was approximately 950.

Bergen’s first settlers lost no time in setting up the kind of church and community they had known in Connecticut. They organized the First Congregational Church in 1807, as well as the first school in the area, whose first teacher was a Yale graduate. Before they could raise a church, David Franklin was hosting religious meetings in his barn (the first constructed in the town). The first frame houses were built by Levi Ward and Benjamin Wright, who were also the first deacons. Ward opened Bergen’s first store (1808), followed in 1811 by Josiah Pierson’s establishment. Both were founding members of the Congregational Church. Ward also served as the first Town Supervisor. Several early school teachers were members as well. While church membership was not universal, it remains “difficult to separate the history of Bergen from the history of the Bergen Presbyterian Church.”

In the words of a later Methodist pastor, “These brave and strong principled New Englanders firmly held this field for God’s cause and tilled it well, leaving a noble church and a well trained generation of Christian citizens.” In the late 1820’s, Methodism offered Bergen’s first denominational competition.

1831 was a momentous year for Bergen and for upstate New York. In that year Charles Finney’s Rochester revival engulfed the entire region. Rochester was Finney’s most successful campaign, generating spectacular statistics from hundreds of communities experiencing spinoff concurrent revivals. Within Presbyterianism alone, 1831 could only be described in superlatives.

Bergen was part of “that general work of grace,” and the impact was impressive. A tiny class became the First Society of the Methodist Church in the Town of Bergen. By year’s end, the church had admitted thirty-

89 Historical Record of the First Presbyterian Church, Bergen; Wilcox, _Op. Cit._, 2.
90 Ibid., 1.
91 Ibíd., 2.
93 Historical Record ... Methodist ... Bergen, _Op. Cit._, 2.
four members and would continue to grow. The Presbyterian Church added one hundred four new members that same year, nearly all on confession of faith. As a later chronicler put it: “The general revival of religion which pervaded this region doubtless had a good effect upon all classes of society . . .”

An important feature of this common participation in the 1831 revival was the absence of any recorded conflict over doctrine. The lack of theological difficulty implies that Bergen’s Presbyterians were not strict Calvinists. Nor did they later regret their position, as did the Presbyterians in nearby Brockport. Theological debate is also conspicuous by its absence from a collection of sermons preached by Herman Halsey, Presbyterian pastor from 1819 to 1831. Those sermons reveal no trace of Calvinist doctrine, even where the subject at hand might be expected to raise pertinent questions. Salvation is presented in Arminian fashion, and in one sermon John Wesley appears as a model for Christian life.

The absence of theological rancor is interesting precisely because it did not prevent a fragile and stormy relationship. Speaking of the great revival, a later Presbyterian wrote: “During these years the Methodists were skirmishing along the outskirts of the parish, although this was considered by some a special Presbyterian preserve.” Therin lies the story.

The first circuit riders to appear in Bergen, with typical audacity, requested permission to hold evangelistic meetings in the only available church: “... the Congregational church was opened to them let it be remembered, and a protracted meeting was held there ...” Henry Woods restated this point for emphasis after recounting some of the more difficult episodes in the early encounter: “Let the record be here made however to the glory of God and the credit of those stern old defenders of their faith that they opened their church to the Methodists for a protracted meeting before ever any class was formed.” His admonitions imply that, for a later generation, another memory predominated.

From the beginning, the Methodist Church was relatively poor. It saw itself as “constantly overshadowed” by its larger neighbor as it lived out a precarious existence. The Methodists held services for a time in the village school house, “but it became unpleasant for them to do so in peace. The trustees complained that the Methodists burned too much wood ...” In a revealing conversation, “the pastor of the Congregational
society informed the circuit preacher that this was ‘Presbyterian ground.’”

So the followers of Wesley did as the Pilgrim Fathers themselves had done more than two centuries before, and went away where they could enjoy more “freedom to worship God.” This was found two miles west of the village at the . . . “Town Line” schoolhouse.

The second school house provided some breathing space until funds could be raised for a building of their own. The new church was dedicated in 1838 by Presiding Elder Glezen Fillmore, who two decades earlier had built the first church in Buffalo in defiance of the local Presbyterian pastor. That memory may have enriched his participation. This little “errand into the wilderness” ended in 1853, when the Methodists returned to the village and a larger facility. Though financial troubles were a regular part of their experience, the church enjoyed several “seasons of growth,” and reached out in new directions by establishing classes in other parts of the township.

No further mention is made of the conflict until 1877 and 1878. Woods described a cooperative “week of prayer” which proceeded “with much pleasure and profit.” But when the Rev. J.C. Hitchcock reported a similar event the following year, he said that it “called for more than human wisdom, carefulness and patience . . . that the spirit be not grieved or anything arise to mar good fellowship . . .”

Throughout their history as neighbors in the same village, these churches have helped one another in times of need, and cooperated in community wide programs. Yet in the 1970’s, a letter from the Methodist Administrative Board to the Presbyterian Session requested help in dealing with “ecumenical relationships within the community and especially between our two churches.” Again in 1980, the problem surfaced with regard to an annual series of tent meetings in which they had cooperated. After ten years of aggravated relations, the Methodists withdrew, explaining by letter “that relationships between the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches in this community have not been as good as they should be,” and expressing hope that new ways of relating positively might be found.

During the earliest decades, Bergen’s church relationships were, not surprisingly, exactly reproduced in local politics. Leadership in community affairs was coextensive with leadership in the churches, and one church inevitably predominated. This is understandable in light of Methodism’s late arrival and minority status. Their inconsequential role in community leadership mirrored the relationship between the churches and supported the Methodists’ perception of themselves as “constantly overshadowed.”

102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid., 14.
From available lists of political leaders for the years 1827 - 1854, only one Methodist can be identified with certainty (his name appears in several categories). Presbyterians, especially First Presbyterians, exercised the dominant role in the political structure. Something very much like the Connecticut pattern persisted in Bergen, not only in the attitudes of pastors and congregations, but in the realities of government.

The Puritan vision persisted as it travelled with New Englanders to their new frontier communities, and defended itself against the denominationalism which would dominate American religious history. In Bergen, it became a struggle for position within a community organized under New England assumptions. Like many features of the pioneer phase of community development, this relationship in Bergen has outlasted the original reasons for its existence. To some extent this reflects a kind of historical momentum. Pioneers surveyed the land and laid out the roads on which people still raise crops and travel. An early generation built Greek Revival homes in which a new generation now lives. Even so did they establish the patterns of community life which continue to demonstrate their influence. Personalities and incidents have come and gone, but the conflict remains a permanent fact of life in this village, where one church assumes a dominance which the other subjects.

105Membership and historical records, First Presbyterian Church, Bergen; North Bergen Presbyterian Church; Stone Church Presbyterian Church, and Bergen United Methodist Church; Safford E. North, Genesee County, New York, Boston, 1899, 473, 474; Manuscript Assessment Rolls for Genesee County, and The Republican Advocate, Batavia, N.Y. Complete tables are included in Van Dussen, Op. Cit.