**A HISTORY OF ZION EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

**ON THE OCCASION OF ITS l5Oth ANNIVERSARY**

**Dobbs Ferry, New York 1833 - 1983**

by Susanne Dickinson Sanzo

‘Zion, n. • . . . heaven . . .’ *Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*

‘Sesquicentennial’. ‘One Hundred Fifty Years’. Such words evoke thoughts of

antiquity, of things ancient or, at least, of great age. Let us return to those days of yore,

to that delightful and beloved little church which antedates even the incorporation of the

Village of Dobbs Ferry by forty years - Zion Episcopal[[1]](#footnote-1) and relive those years in its

history.

In the 1820s, Dobbs Ferry was just several narrow dirt roads and a small cluster

of houses. In 1823 a small group of Christians met in a bam on the property of Peter Van

Brugh Livingston, near Hatch Terrace in Dobbs Ferry.[[2]](#footnote-2) They founded South Presbyterian

Church, the ‘little white church’, ‘out on Ashford Road’, the first church that Dobbs

Ferry, called ‘Livingston’s Landing’ in those days, had ever seen.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It was very difficult to organize a church at all in those days because of the

influence of the powerful tribe of Indians that continued to thickly populate this area.

In the early 1830s Van Brugh Livingston, who had become the church’s presiding elder, and who also owned a large portion of the local land, lost a power struggle with some of the other parishioners over a proposal of total abstinence from alcohol. As a result, he resigned and offered some of his property in ‘Livingston’s Landing’ for the creation of another church.

Another very influential and religious man who lived just north of Dobbs Ferry and held lay services every Sunday afternoon, was Oscar Irving, Washington Irving’s nephew.[[4]](#footnote-4) Though he was at first displeased with the location of the land offered by Livingston for the new church, he soon became a wholehearted supporter of the effort. In fact, Irving turned out to be the chief preparer of the way[[5]](#footnote-5). There were several other avid supporters of Livingston’s and Irving’s dream, including the prominent Judge Anthony Constant and Mr. Howland. This group invited Reverend Crosby, the rector of St. John’s in Yonkers, to preside at the formal organization of the parish. This was held on October 4, 1833, in the school house adjoining Andrew Storm’s property, near the hamlet of Ardsley (Ash ford). The original minutes, signed by Oscar Irving, state that Oscar Irving and Joseph Howland were chosen wardens, and Livingston, Anthony Constant, Henry Lockwood, William Waring, Everett Brown, Joseph Conklin, William Odell and Anthony Storms were chosen vestrymen. The name ‘Zion’ was adopted. Reverend Crosby agreed to be the rector at a salary of $200 a year, payable half-yearly.

On October 31, 1833, the Church was incorporated under the name “The Rector, Church-wardens and Vestrymen of Zion Church in the Town of Greenburgh”. The original proprietary deed, dated February 16, 1834, covered nearly one acre. With financial aid from Trinity Church in New York City, a small Gothic stone church of only eighteen pews (sixteen of which were to be rented for between $5 and $40 annually and two of which were to be free) was erected on a hill overlooking the Hudson River, with other lovely views in every direction. Its tower rose one story above its roof and had a crenelated parapet. Before long, afternoon services commenced.

On Tuesday, in Whitsun week, 1834, the little church building was consecrated by Bishop Onderdonk, “a noble looking father of the church, of commanding presence and glorious voice with warm and earnest accents. . . . The simple altar with its new silver even as a polished mirror, the fine snowy linen drapes and flowers in profusion, all indeed seemed a taste of heaven,” said Warden Constant’s wife, the sole female communicant. In the Fall of that year, Zion was admitted to the union of diocesan conventions. And that December, Reverend Crosby resigned and was succeeded by Deacon Mead. Mead was ordained to the priesthood at Zion in 1835 and left in 1836 to serve at St. Paul’s in Ossining.

In 1825, Washington Irving returned to America from a seventeen year stay in Europe, during which he had written many of his best works and his name had become a household word in this country.[[6]](#footnote-6) He bought the ‘Van Tassel Cottage’ and enlarged and beautified it into ‘Sunnyside.’ Reverend William Creighton, who succeeded Mead in 1836, was an intimate friend of Irving and this established the relationship between Irving and Zion. The relationship proved mutually beneficial: the spiritual inspiration that Irving received from Zion shines forth from his writings, while Zion was not only honored to include Irving’s name among its members, but Irving served its vestry and parish most devotedly. He subscribed for improvements to the church property and represented Zion as a delegate to the diocesan conventions in 1837, 1838, 1839 and 1840, and was a member of the ‘Church Committee’ which had charge of its temporal affairs. Zion’s baptistry has been named ‘The Irving Corner’ because he volunteered so often to serve as a godfather.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In 1840, two of Alexander Hamilton’s sons, James Hamilton and Alexander Hamilton, Jr., joined Irving on Zion’s vestry.[[8]](#footnote-8) Alexander, Jr. had bought and embellished the estate in Irvington, which he named ‘Nevis’, after his father’s birthplace in the same year that Irving had bought ‘Sunnyside’. The two families were great friends; they sang, played music, sailed and had many social evenings and ‘pie parties’ together.[[9]](#footnote-9) At Zion, James Hamilton was also very generous with his services. From 1845 to 1853 he was the church’s treasurer. In 1842, Washington Irving was appointed Minister to Spain where he remained for four years. In 1845, Reverend Creighton resigned from Zion to give his full attention to Christ Church in Tarrytown which he had organized in 1836 and where he has been the rector all the time that he was serving Zion.[[10]](#footnote-10) When Irving returned, he followed his good friend and became a member of Christ Church.

Reese tells us that Creighton was succeeded, in May, 1846, by the Reverend Grant Hayer, whose resignation was not recorded but did occur some time before 1851, when he “imbibed Unitarian sacraments which led him, soon after, to separate altogether from the church”[[11]](#footnote-11) for that new Faith. This left Zion with no rector until the accession of Reverend William A. McVickar, on July 19, 1852, for a one year trial. That trial turned into a long term commitment on April 23, 1853. When McVickar arrived, he designed and executed an enlargement of the original edifice to more than triple its size. Zion’s poverty at that time, which was evidenced by a reference to a $250 debt as a “heavy burden”, also caused the proposal of a wooden, rather than stone, addition. But, thanks to the devotion and liberality of Mr. Minturn, a parishioner from Hastings, stone was chosen. The tower, which interrupts a Greek Revival style pediment on the facade, was raised another story and decorated with diamond shaped windows featuring carved stone tracery and with buttresses.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The church was extended. About thirty-five feet from the front wall, the masonry charges from a warm brownish-red to a grayer tone on the addition. Also, a stained glass window was installed above the altar. Bolton comments, in reference to the window, “For admirable harmony of color and generally satisfactory effect I have never seen any glass made in this country superior to this specimen . . . There is not a particle of glass in the window that is dull or flat in effect. The ruby is particularly varied and rich in tint and treatment. And the tone of the whole together--the cool colors decidedly predominating--is exceedingly fine.[[13]](#footnote-13) Reese explains that the rear extension, the replacement of the narrow chancel which had projected into the body of the church and the removal of

the large old wooden pulpit and reading desk provided space to seat 100 more people.[[14]](#footnote-14) All of this cost $2,000. And, on July 24, 1854, the new church was consecrated by Bishop Jonathan Mayhew Wainwright.

In1855 Reverend McVickar started going to Hastings every Sunday afternoon to conduct services on certain of Mr. Robert Minturn’s lots.[[15]](#footnote-15) In the same

year, McVickar established another branch of Zion in “Dearman” (now Irvington): a chapel school called St. Barnabas, which soon became an independent church. In 1856, McVickar sent a deacon who assisted him, to hold bi-weekly services in Hastings, first in Mrs. Constant’s house, then in the “Mission Room” above the Post Office, to accommodate the rapidly increasing attendance. In 1859, McVickar left Zion for St. Barnabas and was succeeded by the Reverend Henry Williams. Then, in 1863, Zion received a $500 donation from Admiral Farragut of Hastings, who was active both in the church and in the Civil War, toward the construction of a chapel in that village.

In 1865, Reverend Williams resigned and the vestry extended a call to the Reverend George Birkham Reese in Ohio, who began to serve Zion on November 19 of that year. Unexpectedly, in 1866, Mr. Minturn died. He had long dreamed of a church in Hastings on the lots where McVickar had conducted his services. His heirs gave that property to Zion, along with a liberal donation, to fulfill Minturn’s dream. Zion started construction of Zion Chapel in Hastings, in the fall of 1867. That October 2, Reese laid the cornerstone. The building, a frame Gothic structure seating 300 people, was first located on Main Street, near Warburton, and was moved to its present location, on the southeast side of Main in the the 1930s.[[16]](#footnote-16) Farragut contributed a total of $1,000, which was his share of the first distribution of prize money from the Union government for the capture of Confederate warships. The construction was finished by the spring of 1868, having cost $6,000. That summer services commenced in Zion Chapel.

In those days, the lawn around Zion was used as a graveyard. Between 1861 and 1863, Zion Church Yard recorded many deaths from diphtheria, mostly of persons born in the late 1700s, and from strange-sounding causes of death such as ‘consumption of the bowels’ and ‘puerperal convulsions.’ By the 1880s, there were only two or three interments in the graveyard surrounding Zion.[[17]](#footnote-17)

 To the rear of the church and facing Oak Street stood the oldest building in the village.[[18]](#footnote-18) Built in 1783, it was a clapboard structure that had been the home of Captain John Smith, famed Hudson River Sailing master whose sloops carried on trade between Dobbs Ferry and Manhattan. This house was purchased, in 1865, for $7,900, to become Zion’s first rectory.

In 1870, a second enlargement and thorough renovation of the church took place. Two rear wings and an octagonal shaped apse were added, their masonry being rock-faced, rectangular, and coarse, which is to say, completely different from the rest of the building. Their window framements, however, which are brick throughout, match the older part of the building.[[19]](#footnote-19) The whole interior, except the gallery and ceiling, was made new, giving the church a spacious recess chancel, vestry and organ rooms. And a slate roof was put over the entire structure.[[20]](#footnote-20) All of this cost $9,000, which was

raised entirely by subscription. At the same time, the rectory was greatly enlarged and improved: Two large rooms were added to each floor and a third story was built, resulting in a twenty-three room house. This was paid for by ‘a parishioner’ whose name was not publicly mentioned because it was actually the Reverend Reese’s wife. Finally, the church was totally refurnished for $1,200, from the proceeds of a festival run by some of the devoted female members. The result of all these efforts, was the Zion that we see today. The difference between the cost of the first and second renovations is good evidence that the problem of inflation is nothing new.

One’s sense of familiarity with the Zion of over a century ago is substantially enhanced by browsing through the Zion Church Ledger, July 1874 - July 1876. The biggest source of income was pew rental -- $2,577.50 a year. Subscriptions brought in about $1,000 annually, and the collection money for the entire year was only $304.45. The rector’s annual salary then was $2,500, and the church allotted money for carriages and sleighs to be used by the clergy and Sunday school children. There was no water bill because a well was used for the rector’s water supply. However, in those days, churches did have to pay school, town and corporation taxes, just like everyone else. 1874 must have been the year that Zion decided to discontinue its graveyard. Under ‘Sundries’, is noted ‘Advertising removal of corpses, $4.00.’ The projected income for the coming year was $2,800, and the projected expenses were $3,800!

In 1875, Reese noted that Zion’s grounds were in chaotic condition. Not surprising, considering the recent ‘removal of corpses.’ So he had them graded and then had roads to the church and manse put in and constructed a commodious horse barn--all for $1,500. In the following year, the manse received a new stucco exterior and a mansard roof and there was an additional enlargement of the church, which was then dedicated by Bishop Wainwright.[[21]](#footnote-21) The bishop’s great-grandson was John Wainwright, hero of Corregidor, whose picture was given, during World War II, to Zion, where it still hangs, next to Mayhew Wainwright.

The year 1880 found Reverend Reese once more adding to his beloved church. This time it was an organ that he bought at a sheriff’s sale at the Church of The Redeemer in New York City. The organ had to be entirely dismantled and rebuilt for its installation in Zion’s new organ room. Then, in 1881, he had J. and R. Lamb redecorate the interior of the church and he judged their work to be ‘a marvel of cheapness and beauty.’ In view of all these material improvements, lest the reader infer that Reverend Reese was overly pre-occupied with the architectural aspects of the church, here are a few words from his Historical Sermon of 1884: “(Zion’s) spiritual history . . . must be known only to the searcher of hearts. . . . Unbroken harmony has prevailed among us so long. During my entire pastorate I have not to treasure up a syllable calculated to leave behind a sting. . . . The Lord hath done great things for us, wherefore we are glad.”

In 1885, Reese’s son was the Bishop of Ohio and Reese was surrounded by innumerable manifestations of the physical and spiritual building that he had accomplished at Zion. But he was deprived of further opportunity to enjoy the fruits of his efforts. He died of pneumonia at the age of 52 and was buried at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. Most of Dobbs Ferry closed down to attend his funeral. A new altar was donated to the church. The Reese Memorial Tablet was placed in the wall of the chancel; and the Parish Hall was given the same rock-faced exterior that the church building received in 1870, and named the ‘Reese Memorial Building’ in honor of the man’s good works.[[22]](#footnote-22)

From 1885 to 1889, an apparently little-known minister named Jacob LeRoy served Zion. Then, on June 25, 1889, Reverend Robert M. Berkley wrote in his ledger, ‘Received call to Zion Church.’ That September 16, Reverend Berkley began his term as rector of Zion. In 1914, the position of rector was transferred to the hands of Reverend Stanley Brown-Sermon, who served for the next ten years. During that time, in 1917, ‘Zion Chapel’ in Hastings became an independent parish and changed its name to Grace Church. In 1919, another outstandingly devoted parishioner, Col. Franklin Q. Brown, donated the impressive Victory Bell that now hangs in Zion’s tower. The church honored the occasion with a festival.

In 1924, a surpassingly dynamic figure took up the reighs of Zion, the Reverend Charles Karsten. Reverend Karsten was also President of the Board of Chaplains of the Diocese of New York and Lieutenant Colenel in the Chaplain’s Corps. Rather than wait to celebrate Zion’s 100th anniversary, he held a special commemorative service on the 90th anniversary of its consecration! Yes, Karsten had great public appeal. Typical evidence of this was Mrs. Alma Wright Peter, Jr.’s donations of frontals, a red carpet and plush cushions to the church.

When Zion’s centennial year arrived, in 1933, the celebration spanned an entire week and was attended by over 2,000 people.[[23]](#footnote-23) Col. Franklin Q. Brown began its opening by introducing Charles de Serry de Fontnouvelle, Consul General of the Republic of France. The diplomat carried his country’s flag, which he presented to Zion in honor of the occasion and in memory of the stirring events of the Franco-American occupation of Dobbs Ferry during the Revolutionary War. His presentation took the form of handing the flag to the Right Reverence William T. Manning, Bishop of New York, who then eulogized Zion, saying, in part: “A hundred years is a long time. It is something of a test of an institution. But through all that time Zion has strengthened all that is noblest and best in the community.” Mannings words were true both in retrospect and in phrophecy. Then came messages of felicitation from the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of the Episcopal Church of America and many other notables. Every night that week there was a different major event. On Thursday’s Community Evening, there was a parade of 1,500 people to the churchyard, where letters from President Roosevelt and Governor Lehman were read and Congressman Millard and a number of other equally distinguished guests gave speeches. Then the church grounds became shrouded in darkness and the windows of Zion flamed light and the organ rolled forth its sacred notes as Washington Irving (impersonated by the distinguished Theodore Wood) delivered an inspiring message from a century ago. Afterwards, there were refreshments and dancing. The person who described this event said: “Never has a greater tribute been paid, so sincere and warmhearted, by the surrounding Community than the one to Zion on October 12 (1933).”

In 1940, Reverend Karsten took one year’s leave of absence from Zion for U. S. Army service. Not long after he returned he was honored to conduct the funeral service for Major Monroe Curtis, former New York State Commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and then director of the Dobbs Ferry Bank and civic leader. Honorary pallbearers included: Messmore Kendall, Col. Franklin Brown (President of the Dobbs Ferry Bank), Sheriff Thomas Reynolds, Councilman Warren Benedict and Mayor Joseph Walker.

One happy day in 1947, Zion was visited by a representative of Schulmerich Carillons, Inc. who brought a test set of electronic chimes.[[24]](#footnote-24) It was perfect for Zion. The parish members loved them and contributed enthusiastically as did community organizations and many other residents of and near Dobbs Ferry. From 6:00 to

6:15 every evening, a program of hymns was played. The boats on the river used to answer by blowing their whistles.[[25]](#footnote-25) The effect of the chimes on people wearied by their day’s exertions was described by one newly arrived couple who said, “the chill air was enriched and warmed by the mellow harmony of the church’s chimes . . . playing to our ears and minds and hearts . . . giving greeting and benediction.” Due to financial limitations, Zion’s current minister, The Reverend A. Dawson Teague, can play the chimes only on very special occasions.

Thomas Pike, who was baptized and confirmed at Zion, received early instruction and inspiration from Father Karsten, who guided and helped him to become a priest. He is now Rector of St. George’s and Calvary Churches in New York City and is also on the Board of Trustees of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

In 1952, the loyal spirit of Zion’s members shone forth when Messmore Kendall gave an address at the dedication of a plaque which now hangs in the church, in honor of Washington Irving. Also in that year, it is not surprising to learn, Col. Franklin Brown was elected Zion’s senior warden. And when Col. Brown and his wife, both of whom had given Zion over fifty years of devoted service, were dead, their children gave the church a new Narthex in their memory, which was dedicated by Suffragan Bishop Wetmore and which contains the Brown Memorial Plaque.[[26]](#footnote-26)

By 1964, the Parish Directory notes, Reverend Karsten had given Zion forty years of excellent service and he retired. His three sons all became priests and his daughter married an Episcopal priest. He was followed by the Reverend Field Tooley who departed towards the end of 1968. This left Zion without a rector for eight months until the arrival of Father Jack Neitert from St. James Church in Hyde Park, who, with his associate, Tim Parsons, served as rector until January, 1977. He is now at St. Andrews Church in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina. Neitert and Parsons also shared the ministry at Grace Church in Hastings--an experiment which was discontinued. Those were the times when Zion’s limited income required discontinuance of the daily playing of the chimes. Father Neitert recalled some comments that Reverend Reese had made about how difficult it was to stretch the offerings to meet the expenses and followed those observations with: “Sounds familiar to me!” in expressively bold script.

The summer of 1977 arrived and with it came Zion’s current rector, the Reverend A. Dawson Teague, from Christ Church in Tarrytown. Just before that, in January of the same year, Zion was the site, for the first time in its history, of the ordination of a woman, the Reverend Barbara Schlacter, to the priesthood.[[27]](#footnote-27) She served Zion as rector between Rev. Jack Neitert and Rev. Teague. She is now co-rector, with her husband Mel, of the Episcopal Church in Staatsburg, New York. Then, as if to verify that this was not a mere oddity but a sign of a real evolution of religious standards, in May of 1982, the Reverend Sheila Biggs entered the priesthood from Zion. She is now Associate Chaplain at St. Luke’s-Roosevelt Hospital in the City of New York, in addition to serving Zion as Associate Rector.

In his 1884 sermon marking the semicentennial of Zion Church, the Reverend George Reese appealed to the Women’s Missionary Association for ‘clothes and supplies to be sent to families on the Western Frontier’. How little the mission of Christianity changes! Today our rector also called for clothes and supplies to be sent West--this time to help victims along the Mississippi.

At this point, history and today’s news merge and we find ourselves in the present. 1983 marks the l50th anniversary of Zion, its Sesquicentennial and, this time it is being celebrated by special events held throughout the year. The first, on June 26, 1983, began with a moving confirmation ceremony presided over by the Rt. Rev. Walter D. Dennis and religious leaders of the community headed by our own Father Teague and our associate rectors Sheila Biggs and Father William Frankhuizen. This was followed by a performance of heart-quickening bagpipe music and a joyous reception. The Sesquicentennial will be culminated on June 2, 1984, at a dinner dance in the Parish Hall.

In making this journey through time, Zion became an intimate friend to me, one that I had lived with from its birth. I have shared the ups and downs of its life and spent innumerable hours uncovering them. If the reader has also found a friend in the subject the purpose of this paper has been well served.

1. *Life of A River Village* (Centennial) - (1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Dobbs Ferry Register* October 6, 1933. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Op cit. supra, n.1, p.20. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Zion Episcopal Church Directory*, 1970-1971. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bolton, *A History of Westchester County, New York.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Messmore Kendall, *Zion Church Chimes*, Vol 4, No. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Herald Statesman*, January 18, 1954. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Idem.* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Zion Church Chimes*, Vol 5, No. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Dobbs Ferry Register*, November 6, 1933. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Reverend Reese, “Historical Sermon” (1884). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Frank Sanchis, "American Architecture, Westchester County, New York" ( ). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Op. cit. supra, n. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Reese, “Historical Sermon,” (1884) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Op. cit. supra, n.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *The Citizen Register, October 27, 1962.* [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Op. cit. supra. n.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Op. cit. supra. n 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Op. cit. supra. n. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Op. cit. supra. n. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Op. cit. supra. n. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Op. cit. supra. n. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Zion Parish Leaflet, Vol. 6, No. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. M. Kendall, *Zion Church Chimes*, Vol. 5, Nol 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *The Enterprise,* June 28, 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Dobbs Ferry Register,* April 25, 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *The Enterprise,* June 23, 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)