

The First Presbyterian Church of Avon

The First Presbyterian Church of Avon is one of eight Avon properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Very simply, this Register is administered by the National Park Service, and is responsible for identifying significant cultural and architectural sites and buildings throughout the country that play a part in American history at a local or national level. Being listed does not restrict the owner regarding changes to the property, however it does increase the eligibility for grant funding.

The First Presbyterian Church of Avon was listed in 2005. As the oldest brick church in the surrounding counties, it is the last of the historical buildings standing at the four corners of East Avon. The National Register nomination was based on the Federal style architecture and its contributions to our early settlement history.

In 1812, John Pearson initiated building the structure. Stones were gathered from local farms for the foundation, timbers were sawn at Josiah Watrous' sawmill on Little Conesus Creek, and the bricks were produced at a kiln south of Henty Road. Pearson was simultaneously building the White Horse Tavern across Rts. 5 & 20, but unfortunately he died on December 23, 1812, leaving both building projects in the hands of others to complete. Severe epidemic and the War of 1812 also slowed the process. By 1815 the brick structure held a roof and supported a wooden steeple, providing the congregation with only a unfinished shell and seating of rough wood benches. The steeple collapsed a few years later, requiring a replacement. The congregation often met instead in a nearby schoolhouse, until the new steeple and interior were finished in 1827, at which time it was dedicated as a Congregational Meetinghouse.



Two more steeples followed the original wooden structure and its replacement: 1841, and the present steeple installed during the extensive 1866 renovations. Also changed were original doors, which can be seen in Figure 1. as bricked over. The first bell was installed in 1845, but was cracked by an exuberant striker in 1864, requiring replacement, which eventually happened in 1903.

Many shifts in membership occurred in the early years. In 1822, the congregation voted to join the Presbytery of Ontario, becoming fully Presbyterian in 1844. With the addition of the local railroad in 1854 came increased commerce in the village of Avon, which lured a group to establish a congregation there. The pressure to upgrade the East Avon church was made clear. The renovations in 1866 were made to the aging building to help retain members and entice new ones.

Figure 1: Photograph. Courtesy of Livingston County Historian, Mt. Morris.

Stories about the church have been passed down through several accounts. One claimed the pews were shifted from facing south to north in response to the Civil War, symbolizing a turning of their backs on the south. Accounts of protecting slaves who were escaping persist to this day, most notably because of a small enclosure with a door latch that can only be secured from the inside. There is a window nearby looking to the west towards the site of the Pearson home (now Pioneer Truck Sales), which was also thought to be a partner in the Underground Railroad, leading to the possibility of the exchange of signals at the busy crossroads.

Trees were planted in the 1850s to bring the feeling of a park. (See Fig. 2) And more changes to the interior continued: The first pipe organ was installed in 1875, the first fellowship hall was built to the north in 1879, and replaced in 1923. To conserve energy, a barrel ceiling was installed in 1955, blocking the gallery. In efforts to become listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the ceiling was removed and the stencils in the gallery repainted, restoring the church to the style of 1866.



Figure 2 Photograph. Courtesy of Livingston County Historian, Mt. Morris. Circa 1930

The four corners of East Avon are honored by the presence of this historic church. Its neighbors – the White Horse Tavern, which burned in 1955, the Pearson/Taintor home, which was destroyed in 1956 for a gas station, and the Wilbur home to the south – are all gone. (Photos can be seen at Avonpreservation.org/hamlets). We are fortunate to have clerks and historians maintaining the records of this landmark, a legacy started in 1810, and a congregation that keeps the building in excellent condition, so that it may stand as a testament to our local history for years to come.

Compiled by Clara Mulligan, 2017 using the following resources:

Excerpts of “First Presbyterian Church of Avon 1795 - 1945” by S. Augusta Taintor, 1945.
Livingston County Historian, Mt. Morris.

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for First Presbyterian Church of Avon,
www.cris.parks.ny.gov

Nancy Toland, “*History of The First Presbyterian Church of Avon, New York*”, 2012

Rev. Dr. Thomas E. Taylor, oral history