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Life

Old Dutch Church marks milestone

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The Old Dutch Church is aptly named. The high-steepled stone structure, an anchor in the center of Kingston's Uptown district, turns 350 this year.

The "big anniversary weekend" that features a festival called Pinkster, is planned for May, when the familiar red tulips should reach full bloom delineating the perimeter of the church yard. But the kick-off for that weekend and other celebrations throughout the year, scheduled Friday, is the popular 86th annual George Washington Dinner, named to honor Washington's visit to the church five years after Kingston was burned to the ground during the Revolutionary War.

In addition to Washington, numerous other prominent historic figures have played roles in the church's history, including two other Georges: George Clinton, who served as governor of the state from 1777 to 1795, and George H. Sharpe, who was a general in the Union Army during the Civil War.

Their significance to the church, designated as a National Historic Landmark last year, has not been lost on the Rev. Kenneth Walsh, its pastor.

"Every time I stand in that pulpit, I'm keenly aware of the history and those who've come before me," he said. "And of course we're sitting in a graveyard that represents 1,400 of the past souls that were a part of that church."

Church member and Kingston historian Edwin Ford said Washington arrived at Old Dutch Nov. 16, 1782, after staying the night in Stone Ridge, then passing through Hurley the next morning. After reaching Kingston, he addressed elders, deacons and church leader "Dominie" George Jacob Leonard Doll. Later Washington sent a letter of thanks for the "high mark of public esteem" he received.

Ford said Washington and George Clinton were "best friends" who even purchased land together in the state's Mohawk Valley. Clinton, who was in charge of the militia in the Hudson Valley during the Revolutionary War, sent as much aid as possible to Washington, Ford said, during the winter struggle at Valley Forge.

Clinton's connection to Old Dutch Church is a bit circuitous. He married Cornelia Tappen, a member, but he is said to have been Episcopalian. Even if he had chosen to attend the church, the challenge would have been to understand sermons in its founders' native language, a practice that continued during the Revolution, Ford said, the period when Clinton was in the area.

"To go and listen to a sermon in Dutch when you didn't know anything about it," Ford said, "you might not be too keen about it."

Despite Clinton's somewhat slim connection to Old Dutch Church, it nevertheless claimed him. One century ago, as activities were getting underway for the state's tercentennial celebration of Henry Hudson's 1609 voyage, it appeared Kingston would receive little recognition.

Members of the church who had political clout changed that, said Roger Wells, supervisor of the museum at Old Dutch Church. They successfully petitioned to have Clinton's body brought from Washington, D.C., to Kingston for re-interment on the grounds of the Old Dutch Church, in view of the Ulster County Court House where Clinton, in 1777, had been sworn in as governor.

"When the body left Washington, there was a huge parade," Wells said, "and all of Congress turned out to pay homage to Clinton.

"There was a tremendous hoopla about this. People had pictures taken with the corpse. That was a vogue thing to do at the time."

Clinton's body and monument, which made a stop in New York City before traveling in a flotilla on the Hudson to the Rondout, received full Naval escort during the entire trip, Wells said.

He and assistants James and Jeffrey Werners, brothers and members of the church, are gathering supporting photos and additional materials about Clinton and other historic figures connected with Old Dutch for a rotating anniversary display in the church's Bethany Hall.

The research also includes the third George, the one that has not garnered as much publicity as the other two despite his role in history and membership at Old Dutch Church. He is Civil War Gen. George H. Sharpe, leader of New York's 120th infantry.

"He actually raised that regiment, in part, on the steps of the Old Dutch Church," said Wells, who learned through research for the museum that three of his great-great uncles served under Sharpe.

The general was "very well thought of," Ford said, but he also played a role of which most people are likely unaware.

"He was really the initiator of the Secret Service," Ford said. "He studied enemy troop movements and where they had been, how many there might have been — put together to guess what the enemy was up to and where they might move next."

In a rare move of his own, he had a monument erected in honor of the troops who served under him. Most troops erect monuments to their generals, Wells said. "Patriotism" stands in the Old Dutch Church yard, testament to the man as much as his regiment.

Sharpe, Washington and Clinton, all three were unusual and important, Ford said.

"They were considerate and thoughtful about the people," he said. "George Washington, even though he was an aristocrat, I would say was in touch with the people, and George Clinton the same way. In fact that's how he got elected governor of New York State. ...

"I would say they all three had great influence, because (in the words of Lincoln) they were 'Of the people and for the people'."

Walsh said something similar about the church he leads. Symbolically, the continuity of the church's history and spirit are both significant, he said, representing within the community stability, a rare commodity in the 21st century.

In fact, he said, Old Dutch also was the only church in the area for about 150 years. In addition, it is the sixth oldest Reformed Church in America as well as the parent of 50 daughter churches, in New York and Pennsylvania.

Walsh, who is also chair of the church's anniversary committee, said a celebration of 350 years is "awesome."

He hopes the entire community will take part. So does Men's Club president Seth Allen, who serves on the anniversary committee.

"Our story almost reflects the narrative of the whole nation," he said. "The people who came to Kingston, to live here, were seeking freedom, were seeking a new life. They came here, and they started from scratch. They built a life for themselves.

"Not only are we trying to preserve the actual structure, the actual building itself for years to come, it's also preserving that legacy and the history of this community that is so unique and so worth preserving for generations to come. That's something we're very proud of."

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