

The Pittstown Union Sunday School – A Building “Suitable for Religious Edifice”¹

By Lois Crane Williams

Few remember the Pittstown Union Sunday School – it has been 50-plus years since there were Sunday school classes in the building on Pittstown’s Race Street. I was a regular from the time I was a four-year-old through high school graduation in 1950.

I have the warmest of memories of Sunday school, and I can clearly recall later years of sitting with “my” group at one of the six tables in the large room – now it would be called an open classroom. Still, I can’t remember any lesson or anything we talked about. I’m sure we didn’t have a workbook or any student materials, but each week we had a good discussion.

Sunday school opened with a hymn and a few words and a prayer from the Superintendent, and closed with another hymn. We must have talked about a Bible verse or story, but I don’t recall that there were Bibles at any of the tables, and we didn’t memorize Bible verses, as many Sunday schools did. Certainly there were hymnals and a piano – I have good memories of lustily singing hymns.

Sunday school was held year ‘round – this was not a summers-off kind of place. But I do remember the annual Sunday school picnics! I was in third grade, just before World War II, when my family went to the Sunday school picnic at Washington Crossing State Park, and we went again after the war. And I recall a couple of post-war Sunday school picnics at Butler’s Amusement Park on the Musconetcong River near Washington, NJ.

I recall one or two Christmas celebrations in the building’s upstairs auditorium before World War II. The high point was Santa Claus distributing candy canes to the good children of Pittstown. Wartime’s gas rationing brought an end to this tradition. I was also part of the Inter-Church Junior Choir – an offshoot of the famous Flemington Choir School – that practiced on a weekday evening at the Pittstown Union Sunday School.

Background – The Union Sunday School movement dates to the early 1800s, and originally provided religious instruction independent of churches.² In areas without schools, Sunday schools also taught children to read. As public schooling became available, Union Sunday schools continued serving areas where there were no nearby churches with Sunday schools.

¹ United States Department of Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places, Pittstown Historic District, Section 7, p. 14. Internet. Pittstown was designated an historic district in 1990, and the Pittstown Union Sunday School (#13) is one the Pittstown Historic District’s 79 “contributing buildings.” Section 7, p. 2.

² Rice, Edwin Wilbur, *The Sunday-school Movement and the American Sunday School Union*, 1917, pp. 49-54. Internet.

A Union Sunday School is one serving families of several denominations as well as non-church families,³ and in Hunterdon County, I believe, the Pittstown Union Sunday School was uniquely non-denominational.⁴ “Even parents who did not regularly attend church themselves generally insisted that their children go to Sunday school,” believing “regular Sunday school attendance was an essential component of childhood.”⁵

As described in the Pittstown Historic District document, “Pittstown has never had a house of worship, as churches representing three denominations were within three miles distance of it as early as the 1760s. In the 1870s, however, the Sunday School Union of the county apparently was prevailed upon to construct a building within the village on land obtained along Race Street, the residents desiring some form of religious service within walking distance, especially for children.”⁶

Hunterdon County was prosperous during and after the Civil War, and the decade following the end of the war was a high point in church building.⁷ Sometimes a Sunday school was established before a church, and one or another of the local denominations may have seen an opportunity to expand into Pittstown.

The Historic District document attributed impetus for the new building to “the Sunday School Union.” The American Sunday School Union headquartered in Philadelphia was a central bureau of information and provider of printed materials.

The Building – The Pittstown Union Sunday School was housed in the purpose-built “Pittstown Hall.” The Pittstown Hall Association was incorporated in 1875, with capital stock authorization of \$2,830 at \$10 a share.⁸ The incorporation document envisioned “a suitable building for Sabbath school religious services and all intellectual entertainments

3 Greenagel, Frank L., *Less Stately Mansions: The 18th & 19th Century Churches of Hunterdon County, New Jersey*, 2014, p. 25.

4 The Hunterdon Historical Society Bound Manuscripts listing includes documents dated 1886 to 1891 (#343, #344) related to a Union Sabbath School at Sunnyside, an unincorporated community between Clinton and Pittstown.

5 Larsen, Timothy, “When did Sunday school start?” Internet.

6 Pittstown Historic District, op. cit., Section 8, p. 11. Churches near Pittstown at the time the Sunday school was initiated included Bethlehem Presbyterian Church at Grandin (founded in 1730, with the present building built in 1871), Cherryville Baptist Church (built in 1850, remodeled in the 1880s), and Quakertown Methodist Church (built in 1840, rebuilt in 1879). These were the Inter-Church Junior Choir churches.

7 Greenagel, op. cit., p. 24.

8 Corporations of New Jersey, List of Certificates Filed in the New Jersey Department of State, From 1846 to 1891, Inclusive. Internet.

in the village of Pittstown, subject to control of a board of directors to be elected by stockholders.”

There were two-dozen stockholders. Hiram Deats purchased 35 shares, Samuel Little purchased 20 shares and donated the lot, another Little purchased 10 shares, and the remaining stockholders purchased one, two or three shares. The Treasurer reported \$2,644.70 “Received from all sources,” \$2,618.43 “Bills paid by the treasurer,” and \$23.73 “Remaining.”⁹

Stock purchasers were local men, most already affiliated with the long-established Cherryville Baptist Church (four miles distant) or the Bethlehem Presbyterian Church in Grandin (three miles distant), and in time would join ancestors buried in one of those cemeteries, Quakertown’s Locust Grove Cemetery, or the cemetery of the then-closed St. Thomas Episcopal Church (two miles distant). In the meantime, they wanted a closer Sunday school for their children and envisioned a community hall as appropriate to their prospering village.

The county newspaper announced the new building in 1875: “In the little village of Pittstown [people] have just erected a handsome and commodious structure to be used as a church for all denominations, as well as a hall for lectures and other social purposes.”¹⁰ The building as much as said, “A church is coming soon!”

As described by the Pittstown Historic District document, “Of impressive scale, the building (#13) stands apart from the general appearance of Pittstown for its use of brick and large Italianate windows arranged on the facade in a central grouping with an oculus above.” “Two-storied and gable-fronted, its upper story is about one and a half times higher than its ground story, and viewed by itself recalls a church edifice.” Notably, the second floor has “oversized 12/12 sash windows, round-headed with curved cornices.”¹¹

“The tall, upper story contains an auditorium and stage. The building was used on Sunday afternoons for worship services, with ministers being invited to preach while Sunday school classes were being taught. At other times, the building was used for social activities.”¹² Beginning in the 1860s, churches were sometimes built with a lower-floor Sunday school and a second floor sanctuary.¹³

⁹ Hunterdon County Historical Society Archives, Collection 47, Box 19, Pittstown Hall Association, Lists of subscribers, #789; Bills, Receipts, accounts, 1875-1879, #790, Microfilm reel 104.

¹⁰ Greenagel, op. cit., citing a 2000 *Hunterdon County Democrat* “Archives” item of “125 years ago,” p. 238.

¹¹ [Pittstown Historic District](#), op. cit., Section 8, p. 11; Section 7, p. 6 and Section 7, p. 15.

¹² [Pittstown Historic District](#), op. cit., Section 8, p. 11

¹³ Greenagel, op. cit., p. 184. Churches were also built or remodeled with a full basement for Sunday school and other activities. Quakertown Methodist Church apparently was built with an exposed basement and Bethlehem Presbyterian in Grandin may have been raised in remodeling to create a partially exposed basement. The Cherryville Baptist rooms are an addition at the rear of the church.

End of the Sunday School – A small notebook among the Archives recorded the final meetings of the directors. In 1962, “Status of the Sunday School was discussed. Main problem now was teachers.” Again, in 1964, “The question of not enough teachers.” Pittstown’s Sunday school teachers of old had been teaching every Sunday year ‘round in an era before travel and vacations. The Sunday School was closed in 1964.

The building apparently was unused until the group met again in 1973. “The discussion was what to do and what could be done with the building. Lack of land for sewage, lack of land for parking.” The building was cleaned out and put on the market.¹⁴ A septic system was installed in 1985,¹⁵ and a business, “Hunt Engineering,” occupied the building when the Pittstown Historic District was formed in 1990;¹⁶ the document mentioned the “auditorium and stage (preserved but now used as an office).”¹⁷

The Pittstown Union Sunday School building has had a number of owners, and is now a residence, last changing hands in 2013, when it was advertised as a “Unique opportunity to own one of a kind built in 1891 as a Sunday School house. Property has been updated without losing any of its original character. First floor boasts 35x30 open space housing kitchen/dining/living quarters.” There is new plumbing, new wiring, new insulation, a new bathroom, and “new 20K custom windows.” Upstairs, with its 15-foot ceiling, the stage is still there, and the building is “Perfect for artist/potter/dance.”¹⁸

Race Street is no longer one of Pittstown’s major streets and the former Pittstown Union Sunday School is almost obscured by trees, so almost no one sees it. It is tastefully painted, with the upper level cream, the window trim and lower level bricks a warm brown, and a deep red on the front double doors and recessed side door. The up-sloping ground is terraced and nicely landscaped with a variety of annuals and well-maintained plantings.

14 HCHS Manuscript #527, Pittstown Union Sunday School, Minutes, 1962-1973.

15 Advertisement, *Hunterdon County Democrat*, April 2013.

16 Pittstown Historic District, op. cit., Section 7, p. 14.

17 Pittstown Historic District, op. cit., Section 8, p. 11.

18 Advertisement, op. cit.

The building is still a “handsome and commodious structure.” Only a bronze plaque next to the side door reminds us of earlier times – it honors five men “Who left Pittstown Union Sunday School to serve in the World War,” which we now know as World War I.¹⁹

¹⁹ Clayton Case Alvatter, Frank Correll Dalrymple, Howard Carrel Reading, Harold Merton Opdycke and Joseph MacIlroy Tharp.