Chapter 1: 1843 – August 1875

In the early 1800's there were no churches between Cranbury and New Brunswick, nor between Kingston and Old Tenant. No religious services, prayer meetings, or Sunday school classes were carried on in our community.

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The earliest record, which is supposedly authentic and which I found in a hurried search, is that of the South Brunswick Township Committee, dating back to about 1843, and it was about this time that the development of the Dayton Church was discussed.  Thomas Schenck had been converted and had joined the Second Presbyterian Church in Cranbury.  After attending a Communion Service there, he requested some men to come to Dayton that afternoon and hold a prayer meeting at his home.  He hurried back to Dayton, and went around to the various homes inviting them to attend.  This started a prayer meeting that was held each week for more than 50 years.

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Beginning about 1843, the minister from the Cranbury Presbyterian Church alternated in conducting a service with the minister from the Baptist Church from Hightstown in the Dayton School.  Records show that a Baptist Mission was formed in Dayton in 1847 under Rev. George Young.

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In 1848, a Baptist Church was built across the way from the present manse in the middle of the cemetery. However, the number of Baptists dwindled until there was too few to support a church.  Because of discord it ceased to function. D.D. Applegate acquired the building and moved it to the lot near the home of Thomas Kane (the old Wesley Applegate place) a few doors north of the cemetery.  It was used to shelter a steam saw mill.  On the gable end of this building, as related by Rev. Thomas Long, the inscription "First Baptist Church - 1848" was still legible at the 25th anniversary of our Presbyterian Church in 1894.  It then disintegrated into complete disrepair with the help of a heavy wind storm.

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At about 1850, the Pennsylvania Railroad sent a lawyer, William L. Dayton to Dayton to see if they could buy the lot, right where our present railroad cross is on Georges Road.  Where our first school was built, so a railroad could be built through there from Longbridge Farm, now Monmouth Junction - to Freehold in Monmouth County and thus to the shore.  Dayton was known as Crossroads at this time in history.

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At first the people rebelled, but when Dayton told them he would build a new school free of charge about where our present school stands they then agreed.  This spur line connected with the main line - a juncture - and ran thru Monmouth Junction to the shore.  This resulted in changing the name of that community to Monmouth Junction.

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Early in 1863 interest in religion became greatly increased.  The leaders of this new interest were devoted laymen with little ministerial help.

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About 1866 there was a call for a meeting to be held on March 25, 1867 simply signed "Many Citizens" and read as follows:  "All persons friendly to constituting a Presbyterian Church in our Village are requested to meet on Wednesday, the third day of April next, at 4:00 o'clock, to consult and take measures to accomplish so desirable an object."  This notice was supposed to have originated with Andrew Rowland and Dr. Slack; the former a member of the Baptist Church and Dr. Slack, who had worked with Lincoln during the war - then built the house in which the Ken Pattersons live just south of the chapel, became the doctor of the community and was a friend of the church.

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One Sabbath morning, Dr. Slack called on Mr. Rowland as the church bells were ringing in Cranbury.  One said to the other, "Why can't we have a Presbyterian Church here?"

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No further record of the organization of our church was found until March 18, 1869.  At a meeting held in the meeting house of the Citizens of Dayton, resolutions were adopted resulting in the organization of an Executive and Building Committee, which was given the responsibility of raising funds and building a church not to exceed $8,000 in cost and not to begin building until at lease $3,000 in cash was on hand.

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Andrew Rowland and T.S. Pullen both offered to donate a lot for the church building. The one offered by Mr. Pullen, the present location, was thought preferable and accepted.  This lot was 150 by 300 feet.

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On October 5, 1869, Richard McDowell and Thomas Schenck were sent to a meeting of the Presbytery to petition for the organization of a a Presbyterian Church.  The Presbytery granted the petition and a committee of Rev. J.G. Symmes, Joseph Van Dyke, J. Gordon Mann and with Elders Derrick, Perrick and Gordon Van Dyke came on October 16, 1869 and the church was duly organized.

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The Committee reported to the Presbytery that they had performed the duty mentioned.  Rev. John H. Schofield was pastor elect of the new organization which proceeded to secure funds and erect a church building which was dedicated August 31, 1870.  Rev. Joseph W. Hubbard was installed pastor on March 10, 1870. During the pastorate of Rev. Hubbard the manse was built and other improvements were made.

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At about 1863 William Dayton, now working with President Lincoln, heard about the new church being discussed for Crossroads. He contributed liberally to that cause before being sent to France as Minster Plenipotentiary by Lincoln.

At the same time the people of Crossroads began to dislike the name because of several other Crossroads and their mail was often mis-sent. A meeting of the citizens was called to change the name of the community. They were given two names upon which to vote: Lincoln – for the President; and Dayton – for William L. Dayton whose generosity was not overlooked.

William L. Dayton received the most votes – a great honor – and now Crossroads became Dayton, New Jersey about January 1866. It was never known if he heard of the honor, because, in the interim, he became ill and died.

The newly organized church in 1869 consisted of 57 members of 7 different denominations.  The building had begun before this date, for a meeting of the trustees, on November 3 voted to borrow $1500 to complete its building.  They met in the old Baptist Church until the basement of the new church was completed.  They purchased the parsonage lot, 50 by 300 feet from Mr. Pullen for $300.

The total cost of the church, lot and furniture was $10,390.07;  the total cost of the manse, lot and barn was $4,128.68.

 Rev. Hubbard’s pastoral relationship with the church was dissolved at his own request, by the Presbytery on August 3, 1875 since he had been elected president of Northern Illinois College.