94 Years
Episcopal Church
Dunkirk
Aug. 51944.
Rev. Leslie Chard
"NINETY FOUR YEARS OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN DUNKIRK."

Being a paper read before the Chautauqua County Historical Society on Saturday, August 5, 1944, by the Rector, the Reverend Leslie F. Card, B.D.,

On a July evening in the year 1850, the prominent Dunkirk attorney, the Honorable Hanson A. Risley, a tall distinguished-looking man in his early forties, might have been seen descending the steps of his residence on the west side of Center Street between Fourth and Fifth. He walks towards the lake on the wooden sidewalk bordering the dusty unpaved street. Looking north, the only other buildings between his house and the corner of Third Street are one dwelling, and the very handsome hotel called the Loder House, named after the president of the almost completed New York and Erie Railroad, Benjamin Loder. He crosses Third Street and the unfinished railroad bed, and enters the business district of the village. Stopping at one of the buildings there, he ascends the stairs to the second floor office of Lawyer Ernest Mullet. The little room is quite crowded with some thirty men, members of the recently formed Episcopal congregation in Dunkirk. They are met to formally organize a Parish, for as yet there are only two organized Christian congregations in the village -- the Baptist and the Presbyterian, both of which have fine church buildings and settled pastors, and have been in existence twenty years or more. Most of these Episcopalians are substantial business men -- men of influence in the community. There are two physicians among them, Drs William Wilson and Daniel Gould, the latter, proprietor of the local drug store. Four lawyers are present: Mr. Risley, Ernest Mullet, James Bassett, and Thomas P. Grosvenor. There are two blacksmiths -- important personages in all small 19th century communities -- Edward Keyes and Elijah West. Thomas McNeight, architect of the Railroad is present, and so are Jacob Schoonmaker in whose versatile establishment one might purchase a bushel of potatoes, a keg of whiskey, or the
material for a lady's dress: Mr David Blackham, father of the future physician, George E. John M. Havens, later the president of the New York Central Railroad, and others of similar caliber. No women are present, for these are the days before women suffrage, either in Church or State, and Susan B. Anthony is yet to be heard from.

Now a gentleman enters wearing the black frock coat and the white tie of a clergyman, and the men rise to their feet in welcome. He is the Reverend Charles Arey, son-in-law of William Risley of Fredonia. For two years Rector of St. Peter's Westfield, he had recently resigned because of ill-health; now after a long rest at his wife's home in Fredonia, he was eager to resume his ministry, and had been largely instrumental in starting the new Parish in Dunkirk.

The meeting being called to order by Dr Wilson, Mr Arey was unanimously elected chairman, and Lawyer Bassett secretary. As decision to organize was made on St. John Baptist Day, June 24, the meeting decided to adopt St. John as the patron saint of the new parish. Hanson A. Risley and Dr Wilson were elected Church Wardens, and Dr Gould, Ernest Mullett, Thomas Forster, Jacob Schoonmaker, Elijah West, Abner Camp, James Bassett, and John M. Havens were elected vestrymen. According to the minutes of the meeting, "a committee was appointed to wait on the village trustees to secure a suitable location for a church edifice from the lands held in trust for such purposes".

On August 2, 1850, the new vestry met, and unanimously elected Mr Arey as Rector. He accepted the call, and entered upon his new duties immediately.

The Year of our Lord 1850: General Zachary Taylor was President of the United States; California had just been admitted to the Union; Queen Victoria had occupied the throne of England for 13 years, and still had 50 years to reign; the population of the United States was 23,300,000. There were only 79,982 Communicants of the Episcopal Church in the
entire country, or one to every 292 persons. The Right Reverend William Heathcote De Lancey, a scion of the old New York Huguenot families, was Bishop of Western New York, having been elected to that office in 1838, when the Diocese was set apart from that of New York. His Diocese then included 29 counties. Today the dioceses of Central New York, Rochester, and Western New York are comprised in this same area, with about 115,000 communicants -- more than there were in the entire country in 1850.

Dunkirk in 1850 was an odd combination of old country village and roaring frontier town. It was the designated terminus of the New York and Erie RR., and as a consequence the little lake port was booming. Immigrants, mostly Irish, were arriving by boat loads. There was much speculation in real estate, for many people thought Dunkirk was about to become an important railroad center and great metropolis. An old map of the city dated 1851 shows streets laid out to the south numbered up to 17th, and all of Point Gratiot laid out in building lots. Houses were going up by the hundreds, although most of them were mere shanties, hastily constructed of rough hemlock boards. East of Lion Street -- now Main -- was a thickly populated and turbulent colony of squatters, mainly composed of laborers on the railroad right-of-way and their families. There were numerous saloons, but only two churches.

Such was the community in which Mr. Arey began his work. He had as a nucleus about 30 families formerly affiliated with Trinity Church, Fredonia. The Convention of the Diocese met in Geneva in August of that year, and we find him reporting as follows: "I find it difficult to make a formal report, having been called to the charge of this Parish only a short time previous to the sitting of this Convention. As the terminus of the New York and Erie RR., Dunkirk is soon to become an important commercial town, and the early organization of the Parish will enable the Church to take advantage of the rapidly increasing interests of the place".
But it was uphill work. The lack of a church building was a serious handicap. A lot on Center Street had been donated by the village trustees, but the little congregation was as yet financially unable to erect a building. Dr Arey's report to the Convention of 1851 has a note of discouragement. He says: "The Parish numbers about 40 families, and is constantly receiving accessions, but its progress is seriously impeded by the want of a suitable place of worship. The only only room obtained can only be occupied for Evening Prayer on Sundays. The other Festivals and Fasts have necessarily been omitted altogether. Any system of collections, under the circumstances is impracticable.... The erection of a temporary chapel to be completed this Fall is in contemplation".

But the proposed chapel did not materialize, and it was not until late in 1852 that the congregation found a permanent home. Then, due chiefly to the generosity of Mr Risley, a little wooden church was built on the lot on Center Street. The site is now occupied by Kresge's 25c to $1.00 Store. The Church was 24' wide and 40' long: 15' in height to the eaves, and 33' to the ridge-pole. In architecture -- strictly "carpenter's Gothic". The only picture of it in existence, so far as I know, is a sketch made in 1862 by a contractor who proposed to remodel and enlarge it. Richard L. Cary Jr., writing to the Dunkirk "Observer" under date of January 25, 1911, on the subject, "Dunkirk as it was in the early sixties" describes it as follows: "Standing well back from the street was St. John's Episcopal Church, a little brown wooden building, surmounted by a gilded Cross".

Now the congregation had a church, it found itself without a priest. In November 1852, Dr Arey resigned to become Rector of St. Paul's, Erie, and the Reverend Israel Foote, the Rector of Trinity, Fredonia, acted as pastor for the next two years. In 1854 the Rev. William B. Edson was appointed Rector, serving until 1860, when he was succeeded by a
Canadian, the Rev. H. C. Eyre Costelle. He only remained a year, and again the parish was cared for in the interim by the Rector of Fredonia. In 1864 the Reverend Pascal Kidder of St. John's Willockville was called as Rector, and with his coming the Parish entered upon a period of great expansion. A New Englander, graduate of Yale, and a convert from Congregationalism, Kidder was a tireless pastor and an aggressive champion of the Church's faith. During the eight years of his pastorate, he baptized 253 persons, and presented 155 to the Bishop for Confirmation. In addition, he evangelized the countryside, and in 1869-70 he reported holding services at Sinclairville, Irving, Forestville, Hanover Center, Smith's Mills, Nashville, Perrysburg, Sheridan, Portland, and Cherry Creek! Remember, this was long before the era of concrete roads and Mr Henry Ford. In addition to his strenuous activities in the Lord's Vineyard, the good Rector also found time to raise a family of eight daughters and one son!

Not a great deal seems to have been published concerning Dunkirk's part in the Civil War. We know, however, that two regiments of infantry, the 72nd and 187th, were raised in this vicinity. St. John's Parish gave generously of its sons in that conflict, just as it is doing in the present war. Colonel William O. Stevens, who was killed at the Battle of Chancellorsville in 1863, and after whom the local GAR Post was named; George E. Blackham, later a distinguished physician, who enlisted in the 187th, and was present at Lee's Surrender at Appomattox; Emmett Beardsley, served in the Naval flotilla on the James River; also Thomas C. Jones, merchant and hotel-keeper, later a vestryman, was in the 187th: Major James N. Edmonstone, regular Army Engineers, builder of the first breakwall in the harbor, first Master of Dunkirk Lodge of Masons, was another Civil War veteran who served on the Vestry during the 70's. No doubt there were many others, but the records are silent concerning them.
At the close of the war, times were hard. Money was tight, work was scarce, taxes were high. But in spite of this, the hard-working and courageous Rector of St. John's decided it was time his congregation had a new Church. English immigrants who were communicants of the Mother Church: large numbers of converts attracted by the stately dignity of the Episcopal services, and the obvious love and loyalty of her members, had increased the number of worshippers that the little Church on Centre Street was no longer adequate. The business section was beginning to move up between Third and Fourth Streets, and a good price could be obtained for the old property. The lot on Fourth Street between Lark and Eagle Streets, was available at a bargain, so the Rector prevailed upon the vestry to buy it. On January 1st, 1867, he issued a pastoral letter to his flock, asking for funds to build a new Church. By the end of May, $4400 was subscribed, and on the 1st of August, the cornerstone was solemnly laid by Bishop Coxe. The Church was built of native brick from the Hilton brickyards at a cost of $12,000 -- no inconsiderable sum for those days, when a dollar a day was the average wage for a laboring man with a family to support. It was used for the first time on August 9, 1868. The following entry is found in Bishop Coxe's diary: "August 9, Sunday (ix after Trinity) Dunkirk. Celebration of completion of new Church. Celebrated the Holy Eucharist. Preached and catechized".

It was a great day for the people of St. John's. The people assembled at the little Church on Centre Street for the last time, and went in procession to their new building on Fourth Street. It must have been pathetically bare inside, for its erection had just about exhausted the resources of its people, and little money was available for furnishings. The tiny altar from the old Church stood in the sanctuary, unadorned by frontal, cross, flowers, or candles. There was no pulpit
or lectern -- simply a plain wooden reading desk for the officiating clergyman. Music was furnished by a small melodeon, also brought from the old Church. The tower was unfinished, plain white glass filled the windows, and the porch on Lark Street had not yet been added. The architecture of the Church was blessedly simple in a day when unbelievably ugly structures were being erected to the glory of God. While from the strictly architectural point of view it has many technical defects, it is a dignified and pleasing Church, and after three generations have worshipped and prayed in it, it has acquired an atmosphere of reverence, a warmth and attractiveness very often lacking in more expensive and architecturally correct buildings.

Mr Kidder resigned in 1872 to accept the position of Diocesan Missionary offered him by the Bishop. He was succeeded by the Rev. Charles B. Champlin, a brilliant and saintly young man whose comparatively short pastorate of seven years was to exercise a profound and lasting influence on the Parish. He was only 27 years of age, educated at Racine College, and had come under the High Church influence of its great warden, the famous and holy James de Koven, as well as under that of the learned Bishop of Illinois, Dr Seymour. He had spent a large part of his boyhood with his grandparents, who lived in Fredonia, St. John's was his first parish, and to it he brought all his youthful zeal and enthusiasm. 1873 was a year of bitter strife and turmoil in the Episcopal Church. Following several years of contention and discord, the Calvinist party in the Church seceded to form the Reformed Episcopal Church, and for a time it looked as if the Church might be split from top to bottom. Fortunately the danger passed, and the schism turned out to be of minor importance, while the Church, freed of its discordant elements, became more united than ever before. The High Church or Catholic Revival was gathering momentum. Churchmen were rediscovering their historic heritage. They were reviving dormant beliefs and practices contained in their
Book of Common Prayer all along, but neglected or forgotten in the
dismal days of the eighteenth century, when rationalism and deism
were in the ascendant. The learned Bishop of Western New York was
editing a translation of the writings of the early Fathers of the
Church for American readers; his poetry extolled the glories of the
Apostolic Church. Episcopalians, dissatisfied with the chilly formal-
ism of contemporary services of worship, were becoming interested in
liturgics, ceremonial, ecclesiastical music, and the proper adornment
of their Churches. Champlin was one of this school, a convinced Anglo-
Catholic. With a deep piety and a conviction of the truth of his faith,
he combined a fiery persuasive eloquence, and a most winning personality.
Fearlessly and tirelessly he preached the Faith that has been taught and
practiced ever since in this Parish; he obtained the dignified Altar
still in use: he influenced two of his men to donate a Cross to place
upon it; others gave flower vases: he commenced the use of colored stoles
and chalice veils, in those days considered the mark of the extreme
ritualist. He instituted the first early service in Western New York,
and during Lent he celebrated the Holy Eucharist daily. Inevitably he
encountered opposition, for the Low Church party had its supporters in
Dunkirk as elsewhere, but his wardens and vestrymen and an overwhelming
majority of his parishioners supported him loyally, and gladly embraced
the faith he preached. The effectiveness of his ministry may be gauged
by the attendance at weekday -- not Sunday -- services during Lent:
In 1878 it totaled 3220, or a daily average of 80, and in 1879 the daily
average was 107. Champlin, never a well man physically, resigned in 1880,
and died the following year at the early age of 35.

The Rev. Frederick W. Raikes succeeded him as Rector. The 80's and 90's
were years of material prosperity for the Parish. In 1869 Horatio G.
Brooks had leased the Dunkirk shops of the Erie RR., and started the
Brooks Locomotive Works, bringing a large increase in population, and
much wealth to Dunkirk. His partner was Marshall L. Hinman, a wealthy man whose wife was an ardent Episcopalian, and a most generous giver. She showered the Church with many costly and beautiful gifts, so that it began to be very different in appearance from the days when it was first built. The income of the Parish increased to such a degree that the final indebtedness on the building was cleared early in 1882, and it was eligible for consecration, so on St. John Baptist Day, June 24, the Church was solemnly consecrated and set apart from all worldly uses by Bishop Cox.

Mr Raikes resigned at the end of 1885, and Mr Kidder reassumed charge temporarily. On January 1st, 1887, The Rev. Robert Harris became Rector. About this time vested choirs were becoming fashionable, and every little cross-roads church aspired to imitate the English cathedrals by installing a chancel choir. Chancel choirs are unsuited to most small churches, and St. John's is no exception. Nevertheless, the new rector proudly recorded in the Parish Register the organization of a vested choir of "men and boys, 36 in all", and proceeded to destroy the simplicity and beauty of the chancel by the installation of seats there for them. More commendable was the acquisition of a fine new organ at a cost of over $2000.

This incredibly energetic clergyman formed no less than ten organizations in his little parish, among them the "Church Decorating Guild", the "District Visiting Guild", and a boys' club rejoicing in the euphemistic title of "Boys with a Purpose". But the most intriguing of them was an organization called "The Twenty Minute Society". Was this group pledged to see that the Rector's sermons were kept within reasonable limits? History is silent on this point. In 1889 the present Rectory was built, but Mr Harris never occupied it, as he resigned in December of that year.

Early in 1890, the Rev. William Wallace Rafter was inducted as Rector, a position he occupied over a long and fruitful ministry of 17 years.
He brought new beauty and dignity to the services of the Church, and the parish choir gained a deserved reputation for its fine choral music. For some time the choir master and organist was Samuel J. Gilbert, brother of Sir W. S. Gilbert, the famous English composer. In 1891 candles were placed upon the Altar, the first processional cross used in Chautauqua County was given by Mr Anson Sutherland in memory of his wife, and the full Choral Eucharist was instituted. In 1897 the Rector reported 186 communicants, 125 children in the Sunday School, and offerings of $2000, exclusive of pew rents which formed the chief source of the Church's income in those days. Happily this iniquitous and undemocratic method of raising money has now been abolished.

A word about some of the laymen who were active in the parish from 1850 to 1900. St. John's has always been fortunate in the caliber of its lay leaders -- men of deep piety, broad vision, great generosity, and unusual consecration. Hanson A. Risley, first Church Warden and donor of the first Church building, has already been mentioned. Son of one of the pioneer families in the county, noted lawyer, county clerk, friend of the great statesman William H. Seward, Mr Risley was appointed a U.S. Treasury Agent by President Lincoln in 1862. He died in Denver Colo., in 1893 at the age of 80, and is buried in Fredonia.

Col. William O. Stevens, also mentioned earlier, was a devoted son of the Church. He too was a prominent lawyer, being elected district attorney in 1859. Upon the outbreak of the War between the States, he organized a company of the 72nd Volunteers, and went to the front as its captain. Promoted colonel commanding, he was killed at Chancellorsville, May 3, 1863.

The Colmans, Truman and Harlan, organizers of the Lake Shore National Bank, were devoted Episcopalians, and members of the vestry.

Theodore H. Whittlesey, partner in the firm of Cary & Whittlesey, was a highly respected and influential citizen, and churchwarden at the time of his death in 1887.
Charles D. Murray, prominent lawyer, former mayor of Dunkirk, candidate for Congress on the Democratic ticket, was one of the Rev. C. B. Champlin's closest friends and supporters. For over forty years he served as Churchwarden. His son, Lewis N. Murray, is now the beloved senior warden of this Church, father and son having the distinction of serving their Church in this capacity for nearly eighty of the 94 years of its existence.

The Hon. Thomas P. Grosvenor, county judge from 1877 to 1881, was also a Churchwarden. He married a daughter of General Elijah Risley of Fredonia, and their daughter was the wife of Milton B. Cushing, eldest of the four famous Cushing brothers.

Dr George E. Blackham, also mentioned before, was nationally known as an authority on the diseases and treatment of the eye, an amateur photographer of wide reputation, and an authority on local history. Dr Blackham's funeral on December 31, 1928, was the first one conducted by the present rector after assuming charge of the Parish.

Miss Adele Rafter, daughter of the Rev. & Mrs W. W. Rafter, was an unusually gifted and beautiful young woman. Possessed of a lovely singing voice, she was for several years a member of the famous light opera company known as the "Bostonians". Our present Bishop, on one of his visits here, recalled seeing her over forty years ago, as Maid Marian in "Robin Hood", and observed appreciatively that she looked extremely lovely in tights.

These are only a few of the long list of saints who have served this fine old parish. Time does not permit the mention of others that many of you would recognize as faithful servants of God and their fellowmen in this community.

I had intended to confine this paper to the first fifty years of our Parish history, but I cannot close without a deserved tribute to my immediate predecessor as Rector of St. John's, the Rev. Edmund Sills. Possessed of unusual personal charm, splendid training, and many talents, Father Sills
completed the work begun so well by Champlin in the '70's. He was an accomplished musician, possessed of a fine tenor voice, and an authority on liturgical music. His knowledge of ecclesiastical art was exceptional. Under his wise guidance and unerring good taste, the Church was equipped with many lovely ornaments and beautiful vestments. Building on Champlin's foundation, he restored the Eucharist to its rightful place as the chief Service of the Church, giving it its proper accompaniment of correct music and ceremonial. He instituted Perpetual Reservation of the Blessed Sacrament for the Communion of the Sick, and laid a strong emphasis on worship, and sacramental teaching and practice. Father Sills resigned after twelve years of constructive service to become Rector of St. Peter's Westchester, New York. The present incumbent took office on December 15, 1928.

Today St. John's Parish has over 300 loyal and devoted communicants. As in the past, they will be found serving their community, their fellowmen, and their God, with that faithfulness and devotion which demonstrates so beautifully the deep reality of their religion. One sixth of the communicant membership of the parish is now serving in the armed forces of our country.

I am happy to stand here today, and have the opportunity to say that I am wonderfully blessed to be the parish priest of a congregation numbering some of the finest and most loyal subjects of the King of kings it has ever been my privilege to know.

Moreover it is my firm conviction that He Who once laid in the Blessed Virgin's arms, and Whose baby eyes shone with glee at the glittering of of the Wise Men's gold, is much more pleased today with the love and sacrifice made to Him by His faithful lay people, and I am convinced that He accounts the lay people of St. John's Dunkirk in particular as among the most precious jewels in His Crown.