

## Richville's Welch Church

by Bryan Thompson



The Welsh have a long history of liturgical independence. Christianity was brought to Wales by the Romans and was well established by about 300 AD. The Roman Legions withdrew from Wales in the 5th century. Anglo Saxon invaders over ran southern England but they could not conquer the sturdy Welsh.

The Welsh church was cut off from the Celts in Scotland, Cornwall and Cumbria and developed on its own course. Great Welsh monasteries developed in this time period.

After the English conquered Wales in the middle ages the local churches chafed under the tutelage of Canterbury. They became Protestant during the reign of Henry VIII.

Henry VIII banned the use of the Welsh language which lead to a religious rebellion in the country. The Welsh began to look to the teaching of Calvinism more and more.

Under Queen Elizabeth I the English Parliament passed the An Act for the Translating of the Bible and the Divine Service into the Welsh Tongue 1563. In 1567 William Salesbury, Richard Davies and Thomas Huet completed the first modern translation of the New Testament into Welsh and the first translation of the Book of Common Prayer (Welsh: Y Llyfr Gweddi Gyffredin) These acts are thought to be responsible for the survival of the Welsh language.

Local Welsh parishioners demanded to receive their prayers in Welsh not in English. Several law suits ensued over clergy who did not know Welsh. The local language prevailed.

This rebellious spirit led in the late 18th century to the rise of Welsh non conformist faiths. (Methodist, Congregational, Baptist)

You can see here the roots of the attitudes of our Welsh pioneers in establishing this church.

At the time of the 1850 US census there was but one Welsh family in the town of De Kalb, that of James and Anna Griffis and Evan Griffis. By 1860 the Welsh population of the town had swelled to 42 people. Names such as Jones, Davies, Thomas, Rees, Griffith, Etheridge, Lewis, Rowland and Williams were added to the community. Richville had been founded half a century earlier and by 1855 the hamlet had a population of 250 people. So the Welsh settlers made up as much as 20% of the community.

What were the conditions like in Wales at this time that would lead the the emigration of so many? In Southern Wales most people were tenant farmers. They struggled to pay the rent and make a go of it. From 1839 until about 1841 the weather was extremely wet and very little grain was harvested. Farmers had

to rely on selling butter and meat to make ends meet. Then in 1842 the prices of these commodities collapsed. Tenant farmers could not pay their rents and tolls.

This led to the Chartist rebellion in November 1839 followed by the Rebecca riots of 1839 to 1842. These were protests against the local tolls charged on all roads for moving crops and animals to market. They were called the Rebecca riots because local men would dress up as women to avoid punishment and burn down the local toll gates. The movement was started by one Thomas Rees. Any connection to our pioneer is unknown.

The local agricultural economy remained in dire straits through out the decade. Then in 1848 Irish famine refugees began to arrive in southern Wales pushing the local charities to their limits. Some 30,00 arrived in one year.

The early Welsh settlers talked of a crossing that took up to six weeks. It was not an easy decision to take such a journey leaving house and home. Many of the Welsh settlers here came from Ceredigion (formerly known as Cardiganshire) county in South Wales or the neighboring Carmarthenshire county. They came from three villages in the area: New Castle Emlyn of the River Teifi, Brongest Troedryaur, or Glynharthen Penbryn.

Many had lived in these villages for several centuries. An example would be John Jones of Brongest. His obituary noted that he had learned the blacksmith trade in the shop in Brongest where the Jones family had been practicing the trade for seven generations. If I have done my math correctly that would mean they had operated the Brongest smithy since at least 1650.

Most of the emigrant from South Wales came rather directly to Richville on arrival in North America. A few traveled around before settling in Richville.

Another group moved to Richville in 1854 from Turin in Lewis county where they had lived for a few years. These settlers were the Evan Jones and Joseph Rowland families. I found no record for where in North Wales Evan Jones was born but Joseph Rowland was born in Llanrhaedr-yng-nghinmeirch Denbighshire. They seemed to have moved to Richville to be among others that spoke the mother tongue. Joseph Rowland had been a Methodist in Wales and lead church services onboard ship on the way to the new world.

At first the Welsh settlers who knew very little English affiliated with the Congregational church. But in their historic tradition they soon longed to worship in their own tongue. Encouraged by Rev G Cross they began to meet at the Griffis stone house for services in Welsh. A group was formed in 1856. In 1858 they hired their first pastor Rev Thomas Rees. They met in member homes until 1859 when they raised \$550 to build their own church. Ebenezer Griffiths built the church.

The church thrived for several generations until the Welsh speakers died out. The last regular service was in 1919.

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These remarks were given at the annual Meeting of the Welsh Society of Richville in August 2019.