

**HISTORY OF**  
**THE ROWE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

Written for the 175th Anniversary Celebration 1838 - 2013

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Picture it: the Town of Milan in north central Dutchess County – 1838. Martin Van Buren, a Kinderhook, Columbia County, resident is in the White House. Twenty-six stars fly on our nation’s flag. Samuel F. B. Morse publically demonstrates his new invention, the telegraph. Edgar Allen Poe publishes his first novel. Tennessee becomes the first state to support prohibition. Iowa becomes a territory, and Frederick Douglass begins his perilous journey to freedom from the bondage of slavery. Across the pond, the coronation for Queen Victoria is held in London. Locally, however, the Town of Milan is still very young having been founded in 1818, and the population is approximately 1,700 residents. A new building is erected in this small country town – a building where those who are enclosed within its four walls can worship God in complete freedom through prayer, song, silence, and praise. This building, and its people who meet weekly to worship, would prove to stand as a testament of time.

While we are celebrating 1838 today, our Church heritage goes much farther back in history. Johannes Rowe, a Palatine German, immigrated to America in 1710, and eventually became one of the first settler in the Town of Milan in 1760. He purchased 911 acres from Chancellor Robert Livingston and built his stone house near this present site. Rowe’s deed still exists today and is kept in a safety deposit box to protect it from the elements. However, it is on display today – make sure to look at this historic document after the Service.

Johannes Rowe’s association with the Methodist



Remains of 1766 Johannes Rowe house photographed in 1940. Located originally across the street from the Church.

movement began shortly after settling in Milan when he met Bishop Francis Asbury, the leader of the Methodist movement in America, and who organized the first Methodist Society in the Town of Milan in approximately 1765. Johannes Rowe died in 1771 and is buried in the Rowe Family Cemetery across the road. His son, John, continued as a leader of the Methodist Church in Milan. He was ordained a Deacon in 1784, and the first Methodist Church was organized in 1790. Early services were held most likely in his home until the first Church was built around 1800. This first Church burned, and with it our earliest records, and our current edifice was built under the patronage of Johannes Rowe's grandson, John I. Rowe, in 1838. John Rowe died in 1863 and is also buried in the cemetery across the road.

Thus begins the history of this building with thousands of people walking in and out of its doors. I wonder what the walls would say if they could talk! So many weddings, funerals, celebrations, observances, and services have occurred here in the last 175 years. Much of the Church has not changed over the last 175 years, and I think John Rowe would still recognize the building and most of its contents. However, some changes necessarily occurred. Outside, there used to be a carriage block, which was used by the congregants, especially the ladies, when they stepped out of their carriages. It was also used as a coffin block. The coffin would be unloaded from the hearse and then set on the block for the pall bearers to carry it into the Church. Rows of horse sheds lined up next to the Church in our present parking area at the top of the hill. At the end of the row was the ever-necessary outhouse. Our "double-seater" outhouse has stood the test of time and is now used for the storage of lawn equipment. Go ahead and visit the outhouse after the service today – you may find it surprisingly too close for comfort inside for our privacy!

A major project for the Church over the years was the basement. Originally, a basement did not exist under the Church. There was only a small room just large enough for a furnace. This was a huge project for the Church, and it was completed in 1968. The building was lifted from the foundation, huge steel beams were placed under the structure, and the cellar was dug out by bulldozer. While this renovation was in progress, Church services were held across the road at the Town Hall. When the project was completed, a basement with a small kitchen, indoor plumbing (no more outhouse!), and room for the Sunday School resulted. Previously, Sunday School classes were held in different corners of the Church. The Pastor and the Organ must have been relatively loud to cover the noise made by the children during Sunday School classes! With the completion of the basement, the huge wooden beams we now see became visible for the first time since the Church was built. Some say that several of these beams are from the original Church built in 1800.

Many people have wondered why two pews in the back of the Church are facing each other. Some may think that if the Pastor's sermon wasn't particularly good on a given Sunday, people might go rear of the Church and sit with their back to front of the room! But, there is a reason for this, and it doesn't involve the Pastor and their sermons! Before the furnace days, two stoves were located in the back of the Church, one on each side, and congregants could sit facing the stoves when they arrived at Church on a very cold morning to warm up. Once you were warm, you went to sit in your regular pew (and make sure you sit in the right pew so you don't sit in someone else's seat!).

I don't know of many Churches which have three organs in the building, but we do! Initially, a pump organ was used to provide music for Church services. An old pump organ with

only one manual and no foot pedals is in the choir loft. It still works, and I will play it later in the service. We also began a new tradition of playing it at our Christmas Eve Service when we sing “Silent Night.” The beauty and angelic tones of the old pump organ make our Christmas Eve Services even more special and nostalgic. Former Organist Kathryn Gassett reported in her Church History of 1988 that on an Easter Sunday when the Church was full, she would go home from the Service with achy fingers! The faster the hymn, the faster her feet would pump – it was just an automatic thing! She might start out slowly, but by the time of the second verse, her feet were going as fast as she could move them. Then she would realize she was pumping away furiously and slow down. The more stops that were open, the harder it was to play because it required more air to be pumped through the instrument. Eventually, the first electric organ was purchased from a neighboring Church, and this organ is downstairs and not in working order. The first new organ was purchased for this Church in 1981. This is our present organ – it has two manuals and a complete set of foot pedals. Better, yet – it requires no pumping! This organ was used for the first time on Palm Sunday, April 12, 1981.

In recent history, the Church had a facelift in 2004 to replace the aging wallpaper and fix the moldings in the ceiling after dust and small pieces of the ceiling were found on and around the piano bench. A Rededication Ceremony was held with a packed Church in the fall of 2004. The piano has been replaced with one that (hopefully) stays in tune more often than our former piano. Our most recent facelift was the bathroom downstairs thanks to the generous donation from the parents of our immediate former Pastor, Sung Moy. We continue to hold rummage sales throughout the year to raise money for the Church and to show people that our doors are open and that our Church is alive. Discussions continue regarding new projects for the Church

including painting the downstairs, buying and installing a new sign perpendicular to the road, making the downstairs of the Church handicap accessible without ruining the historical integrity of the building, fixing broken cemetery stones, and continual daily maintenance.

There are some interesting people from our Church's past which are worthy of mention along with the Rowe Family. Irene Wilcox is probably one of the most important people in our Church history. She was a benefactor of the Church and, because of her, the Church was renovated with a new basement, the parsonage was redone so it could be livable again, and, when she died in 1977, she left an income for the Church to use. Thanks to her generosity, our Church gives scholarships every year to our members and community residents attending college. Another notable figure was Anna Jacoby, who was a Sunday School Teacher here for over 50 years. She would supply fresh flowers from her garden for the Church Services every summer.



Irene Wilcox.

A third is Ferris Jackson, an African American who lived with his sister, Emma. Ferris served as organist of the Church and would arrive early every Sunday to provide beautiful music as the congregants arrived. Ferris also served as Church Treasurer and sang in the choir with his rich bass voice. Ferris and Emma were strict observers of the Sabbath. They walked to Church every Sunday so the horse could rest. At Church dinners, he would be the last to sit down – he would wait until he was sure everyone else had a seat. Ferris Jackson died in February 1940. His funeral was held in this Church on a day with a heavy snowstorm. Even with the storm, so many people attended his funeral that the Church was standing room only.

Today, there are very important people who keep this Church alive. I call them “the faithful few” who are always at the Church Council and Trustee Meetings, always helping with the Community Dinners on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Friday of the month and at the Rummage Sales, and who attend Church regularly. Please stand and remain standing when your name is called: Edie Platt, Janet Ohlson, Phyllis Ronner, Susan Juchem, Walt & Cora Marie Shook, Dave & Bev Groth, Karen Orton, Linda Ahlin, and Alice Benson. These present Church members are the Church of NOW! They keep the doors open, bills paid, activities planned and advertised, and the walls standing. They are the “faithful few” who show the Church is alive in the Town of Milan. They also are the major organizers for this 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration today. They deserve our appreciation and thanks. At this time, would all former Pastors please rise and be thanked for their leadership and service over the years.

I am a relative “newbie” to this Church. I began attending 10 years ago in 2003 when Cora Marie Shook, a fellow Grange member, asked if I could play the piano for her when she went to Florida for the winter. I graciously accepted (I’ll admit, mostly for the extra gas money, which is important to a high school student with a car), but I had no idea that it would change my life. I grew up Catholic and attended the Catholic Church in Bangall with my father, but I never felt I gained as much by sitting (and standing and sitting and standing) in the Catholic Church than I did when I visited my Grandmother’s Presbyterian Church in the small town of Byron in Genesee County, New York, about 30 minutes west of Rochester. My Grandmother is the organist of this Church. I found the Rowe Church to be very similar to my Grandmother’s Church, and my mother and I decided to come to this Church regularly and, eventually, became members. When I was in college, I asked Cora Marie if I could play the organ instead of the

piano for the Sunday Services. I had never played the organ before, but after watching my Grandmother and Cora Marie play, I wanted to learn how. Cora Marie gave me her blessing and I learned how to play the organ on this organ here, and the congregation was always supportive of my learning and throwing something different and jazzy into the service, even when I played something too fast or too loud or when I made mistakes and missed a note or hit the wrong key (or many keys sometimes!). Every now and then, I would be asked to play at a different Church for a Sunday here and there while their regular organist was away. Then, a new door opened in April 2010 when the First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Poughkeepsie asked if I would be their new regular and permanent organist. I play there every Sunday (they graciously gave me today off so I could celebrate with everyone our great Church milestone), but I truly miss being here on a weekly basis. Now, I can only attend the annual Christmas Eve Service. But, I got my start at playing the organ in this Church with our wonderful organist to whom, along with my Grandmother, I am truly indebted.

So, here we are 175 years later in 2013 with the first African American in the White House and gas at around \$4 per gallon. The Town of Milan remains small and rural, and our Church remains on the hill with its historic cemetery across the road. I truly believe this Church is a rare gem. No other organization in the Town of Milan has survived 175 years and counting. However, as time goes on and the times become more modern and fast, people have trouble finding time or space in their hearts for Church and religion. As a result, attendance at Church has dropped, even in the last 10 years from when I first started attending. Some blame it on the Pastor (we've had five Pastors since I started coming to this Church). Some blame it on the activities. Some blame it on the congregation. Some blame it on something that doesn't relate to

this Church at all. I, unfortunately, happen to be part of this attendance decrease because I cannot be here every Sunday. If we have 10 or more people here on a Sunday (not including the Pastor and Organist), we consider that a full house! Today is truly an exception! Therefore, here is my urgent plea – we cannot, we must not, we shall not, lose this rare gem in the Town of Milan. As the only Church and the oldest organization in the Town of Milan, and also because of the spiritual ministry, guidance, healing, and offerings we can give to those who step in our front door, we cannot let this Church become something that is talked about in the past tense only. We are more than the cute little white Church on the hill. We are alive and ready to welcome you into our Church, assist those in need both physically and spiritually, help people in our community, care for and support each other, support people facing difficulty, welcome diverse opinions and beliefs, and guide others to find the deeper meaning of this Church and themselves. This is the reason I decided to join this Church – the people, the fellowship, the friendship, the services, the message, the music, the food, and the family atmosphere make this Church what it is today. Become part of this Church like I did and become part of its rich history and heritage – I promise you won't regret it.

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