

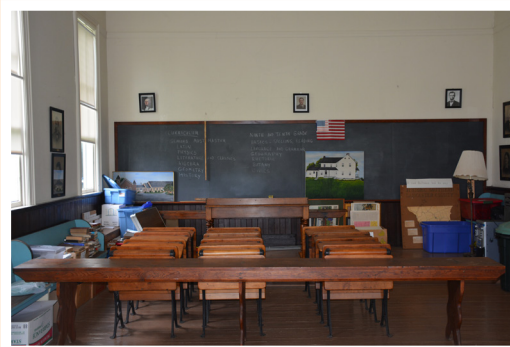
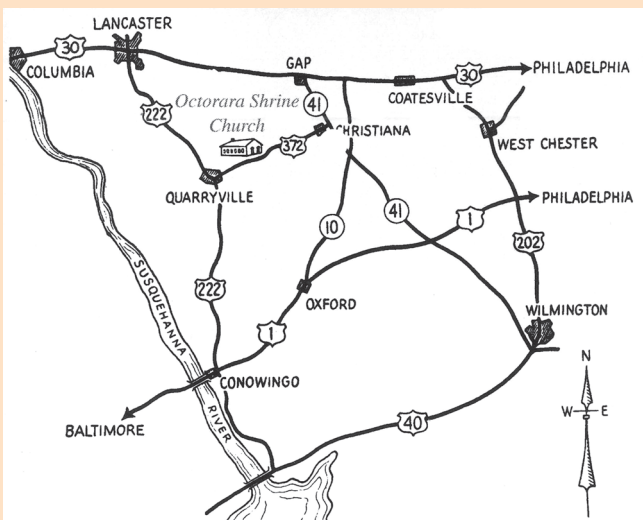
Using the Church

The church building and schoolroom are available to church and community groups to use for worship, meetings, conferences, retreats, rest, meditation, and prayer. The property is now owned by Middle Octorara Presbyterian Church located across the road from the Covenant Church. Trustees of the Octorara Covenant Presbyterian Foundation maintain the church and schoolroom and Middle Octorara maintains the remainder of the property. The Octorara Covenant Presbyterian Foundation is a 501 (c) 3 organization. Arrangements for use of the church can be made by contacting the Treasurer of the Foundation. At this writing, 2018, the Treasurer is Donna W. McCool, PO Box 187, Cochranville, PA 19330-0187, phone # 610-593-6989, email dwmccool@gmail.com The Foundation's website: www.oldcovchurch.com The Foundation's Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/CovenantChurch/>

The church has both heat and light and can be used throughout the year. The sanctuary seats 200 people and the museum room will accommodate approximately 50 people.

Directions to the Church

The historic Octorara Covenant Presbyterian Church is located on Valley Road (Route 372), three and one half miles east of Quarryville, and one mile west of Route 896. It lies just across the road from the Middle Octorara Presbyterian Church. It is approximately 18 miles southeast of Lancaster, PA. Please see map below for additional information.



Octorara Covenant Presbyterian Church

*...the oldest of the
Covenant Presbyterian
Churches of North America*

Formation of the Church

According to historians, men and women immigrating to America from Scotland and Northern Ireland were searching for new homes in the American colonies. These immigrants longed to worship God as they pleased. To fulfill their desire for freedom of worship, in 1753 a group called Covenanter or Seceder Presbyterians formed the Octorara Seceders congregation. In 1754 they were able to build their first church building. These settlers, inspired by their devotion to Jesus Christ, were building a piece of American history. Their leadership during the American Revolution is particularly noteworthy. Their church is now known as the Octorara Covenanter Presbyterian Church, and it is located at 1188 Valley Road, Quarryville, PA 17566.

Why the names Octorara, Covenanter, and Seceders?

Octorara

The name Octorara is taken from local history and signifies both the name of a nearby stream and the name of one of the Indian tribes then living in this part of Lancaster County.

Covenanter

The name Covenanter springs from a group of Scots Presbyterians. In the early seventeenth century these Scots made a covenant with King James VI of Scotland to support the King in return for his support of the Scottish Presbyterian Church (Kirk) in its struggle against Catholic influence. If he became King of England, James promised freedom of religion to the Scots and pledged to make Presbyterianism the state religion of England, Scotland, and Ireland. When he became James I of England in 1603, he did not keep the covenant. In fact, he tried to get the Kirk to accept Anglican bishops. It got worse when the Solemn League and Covenant was signed with King Charles I. The Covenanters promised to support him in his war against Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans. Cromwell won the war, executed Charles I and defeated the Scots at the Battle of Dunbar. The Covenanters then helped Charles II to come to the English throne and he promptly turned on them. It was called the "Killing Times" when thousands of Covenanters and other Scots were slaughtered. By the time freedom of religion was established in England in 1689 many of the surviving Covenanters had fled to Ireland. Many of them immigrated to America in the 18th century, and a large number of them settled in Lancaster County. The historic Old Church founded by these Covenanters stands as a memorial to their early influence on America's spirit of freedom of religion.

Seceders

The Presbyterian Church of Scotland (Kirk) was hopelessly divided over several issues most of which related to the struggle with the British government. Those called Seceders split with the Kirk because it accepted Anglican bishops and thus did not acknowledge that Christ, not an earthly king, was king of the church. Seceders also did not agree because acceptance of Anglican bishops was not based on a "covenanted" settlement. The Seceders formed the Secession Church and Associate Presbytery. Later splits over whether Scottish civil officials should take an oath to the British crown, and over whether the Kirk could choose its own ministers led the Seceders to join the Anti-Burgher Synod of Scotland.

Early Beginnings of the Church

According to the Rev. William F. Campbell, a son of the Octorara Seceders, "it is a fact that Seceders in the vicinity of Oxford (Chester County) and of Octorara Creek (Lancaster County), PA, petitioned the Anti-Burgher Synod of Scotland again and again to send a minister to break unto them the bread of life. It is a fact that these prospective congregations were ripe and anxious for settlement and each had their log meeting house in readiness."

In 1751 the Synod authorized the Rev. John Cuthbertson to serve, not as a settled pastor, but rather as a roving missionary, traveling extensively throughout this and neighboring colonies. He maintained his residence near Bartville and chief field of operation at Octorara. Cuthbertson was the first Covenanter minister in America. In the early summer of 1753, the Synod sent them the Rev. Alexander Gellatly accompanied by the Rev. Andrew Arnot. These men were authorized to organize congregations and a Presbytery with two or more elders. According to records, they did organize the Associate Presbytery of Pennsylvania on November 2, 1753 at the Associate Octorara place of worship in Lancaster County Pennsylvania and Rev. Gellatly became the first pastor.



Church Appearance over the Years

The first church was built on seven acres of ground. The church had an entrance at both the east and the west ends that opened onto a large aisle running the full length of the church. The aisle was wide enough for a communion table with communicants seated at both sides, as well as room for the elders to pass along both sides. A high pulpit stood at the north side of the church. The pulpit had sides and a front so high that when the preacher sat down he was entirely hidden from view. In 1849 the original church was rebuilt and the present building resulted. Although sources differ on when the schoolroom Academy was added to the Church (perhaps as early as 1873 during the pastorate of Rev. William Easton), it is likely that an addition to the manse, and a stable were built during the pastorate of Rev. David Anderson who served from 1880 to 1890. The schoolroom was built to educate children of both Octorara congregations as well as neighborhood children. When the Academy was closed, the Board of Trustees rented it to the school directors of Bart Township. In 1903, it became the township's first high school. The school room is now a museum and contains many very old church artifacts as well as a wealth of information on Bart Township schools, Scottish history, and genealogy.

Dedicated as a Shrine

During World War I, membership declined and regular services in the building were discontinued. In the 1930s, a Board of Trustees was formed to raise money and restore the church and schoolroom. Rev. George H. Shea, D.D., pastor of Middle Octorara Presbyterian Church, led this effort. A large picture and plaque in the schoolroom museum offer a tribute to his dedication and leadership during restorations in 1939 and 1958. In 1939, the building was dedicated as a Shrine by the United Presbyterian General Assembly as one of their first acts after the union of the United Presbyterian Church of North America and the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. During the restorations, great care was taken to discover and duplicate the exact colors used in the original painting of the church. The interior arrangements, furnishings and equipment are, as nearly as possible, replications of the originals. Most of the pews are original. A pewter communion set brought from Scotland and communion tokens used by the Octorara Covenanters are on display in the museum. Several items that were sold when the Church closed were returned. These include a small table, several of the benches, and a settee and two chairs. The old sofa and two chairs used at the "Old Church" were also returned to their place behind the pulpit. The design of the wall lamps is authentic to an early period. The graveyard just west of the church stands as a memorial to the Covenanter families who founded their church on the American frontier. The restored church was dedicated as a shrine and national monument, with appropriate exercises, on November 11, 1961. In 2017, craftsman Robert M. McCullough designed and built a new pulpit for the church. It is a "period piece," a Victorian expression of the original footprint.

1753

First congregation established by Reverend Alexander Gellatly.

1754

First church building constructed.

1782

Reverend Ebenezer Dickey installed over Oxford and Octorara congregations.

1849

Original church renovated into present building. Reverend William Easton presided for the next 51 years.

1880

Manse enlarged. Stable built. Academy used for educational purposes. Reverend David Anderson presided.

1901

Academy closed. Rented to School Directors of Bart Township and became their first high school building.

1939

Building dedicated as a shrine by the United Presbyterian General Assembly.

1958

Church restored by the General Assembly.

1961

Restored church dedicated as a shrine and national monument on November 11th.