



# The Cumberland Churchscape: the early religious architecture of Cumberland County, New Jersey

*Frank L. Greenagel*

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Construction of a church in the rural areas of the county was driven largely by the activity of the circuit-riding Methodist preachers. By the 1850s other forces were afoot—a rising affluence, a merchant class in the large towns, and in general a popular culture that expressed itself as refinement. By that time, Methodists were the largest denomination in the state, and their buildings in the cities reflect that altered situation. In the small black and the miniscule Jewish communities, financial resources severely constrained the architectural expression of their piety. In mainstream Protestant congregations there were liturgical changes, too, as well as new manufacturing and construction methods which helped to shape the churchscape. Those factors will explain much of the distinctive characteristics of the county's antebellum churchscape. There are 80 surviving churches, meetinghouses and synagogues in Cumberland County that were erected before 1900, a third of which were erected by Methodists. Two are Quaker, five African Methodist, 12 Presbyterian, 14 Baptist and 32 Methodist (including four Methodist Protestant congregations). About 60 percent were erected in the decades following the Civil War. With a bit of imagination, one may find modest examples of the main currents in American architecture in the county, but few that merit more than a footnote in any textbook on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century religious architecture. This is in contrast to the several excellent brick residences in the county whose initials, dates and patterns in glazed brick are remarked on as a distinctively American regional style. Although the nineteenth century in general was a period of great social and political upheaval elsewhere in the state, it appears that Cumberland, like much of south Jersey, was relatively less affected by the massive immigration, industrialization and urbanization experienced in north Jersey. We should expect to see more continuity in the area's architectural styles, albeit with a modest degree of change in the architectural details, until the post-Civil War period, when new affluence and a shift in attitude in favor of more comfortable and stylish churches is to be seen.

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