

Churches at the Koshkonong Prairie, Wisconsin

By Blaine Hedberg, 1995

Author: Oddvar Natvik (08/25/2005)

For over 150 years, the Koshkonong prairie of Wisconsin has been home to both Norwegians and Norwegian-Americans. Koshkonong is considered by historians to be the sixth Norwegian settlement founded in the United States and the third in Wisconsin.

Because of the many immigrants over a widespread area, the Koshkonong settlement was divided into two parishes. In the fall of 1844 the Koshkonong area was visited by Norwegian minister, Johannes Wilhelm Christian Dietrichson. He held services and organized meetings in both the western and eastern settlements of Koshkonong.

Rev. Dietrichson was called to be the Church's pastor in 1845. A log church was built on a half acre of land purchased by Pastor Dietrichson. This first home to the East Koshkonong Lutheran Church was dedicated on January 31, 1845. He held this post until his return to Norway in 1850. At Koshkonong, Dietrichson left, in his parish journals and church records of parish membership and ministerial acts, an important written legacy.

Dietrichson's successor, A.C. Preus also kept a detailed listing of Koshkonong members. It was in 1858, during his tenure at Koshkonong, that a stone church building was erected and dedicated. Pastor Preus continued to serve the Koshkonong parishes until 1860 when Rev. Jacob Aal Ottesen became Pastor. During the first part of his pastorate he served the East and West Koshkonong churches as well as the Liberty Prairie, McFarland and Stoughton parishes. Health problems forced Ottesen to restrict his workload and in 1870, Rev. Jacob D. Jacobsen was called. Jacobson remained only a short time in Koshkonong.

Rev. Ottesen suggested that the parish be divided so that the Liberty Prairie and McFarland areas could form a separate parish. Around this time, Stoughton called a Pastor of its own. Liberty Prairie vetoed the idea of separation, but agreed that Ottesen should call an assistant to replace Jacobson. The Rev. Gudbrand Amundsen Lunde was called and he assisted Ottesen until 1875. During this time, Stoughton and McFarland withdrew to form their own separate parish.

Following this division, Ottesen again served alone until 1880, when Pastor Ole Mortensen Saevig was called. It was during his term that the church was split over a controversy on predestination - which centered on the paradox between the primacy of God's grace in salvation and the responsibility of the people to whom God's grace was given. Because of this controversy, many churches including East Koshkonong split in the 1880s.

In 1893, First East Koshkonong Church was built west of the old stone church. Four years later, the old stone church was taken down and much of the stone was used in the construction of the basement of the present East Koshkonong Lutheran Church. This church is said to have been modeled after the Vestre Aker church in Oslo. Saevig served for four years and was succeeded by Rev. Gunsten Gunstenson Krostu.

The merger of three Norwegian church bodies in 1917 restored spiritual unity to the Koshkonong community. Today the Koshkonong churches, First East, East and West Koshkonong stand on their original grounds. Krostu served the the three Koshkonong parishes until his resignation in 1927. It was during his service at Koshkonong that the transition from Norwegian to English became ever more noticeable. During Krostu's service at East Koshkonong, he was assisted by Pastors Ditlef G. Ristad, Ole L. Klevjord, Oddmund O. Amdalsrud, John Halverson and Adolph O. Alfsen. Pastors Olaf Borge and Henry Thompson served the congregation until the late 1950s.

A new parsonage at East Koshkonong was dedicated in 1959. Two years later brought about the national merger of the American Lutheran Church and subsequently the merger of the two East Koshkonong churches. Subsequent Pastors have included Roger Knutson, Robert Witte, Chester Christensen, Merill O. Herder, Paul M. Hasvold, Jerald Check, Quintin Schowalter, A. Stanley Christensen, John A. Milbrath and Richard P. Sansgaard.

With the initial organization of the East Koshkonong congregation, came the need for a cemetery. Little is said in the church record books about the cemetery, except that Pastor Dietrichson thought it necessary to preserve a certain order in the location of the graves. During his pastorate at Koshkonong, a sexton was elected and it was their job to select a place for burial, to see to it that the graves were dug three "a len" deep, and to charge outsiders 37 cents for adult graves, and 18 cents for a children under age 14. For each service, the sexton received 6 cents and the balance went to the congregation.

Gunnel Olsen Vindeg was the first sexton at East Koshkonong. Following his death in 1846, he was succeeded by Ole Severtson Skatter. Many years ago the Cemetery at East Koshkonong was transcribed. This listing has been updated several times since. The latest transcript includes cemetery markers through the mid 1970s, with some updates to 1995. The transcript is available at Vesterheim Genealogical Center, 415 W. Main Street, Madison, WI 53703-3116. Phone: 608 255 6842.

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