

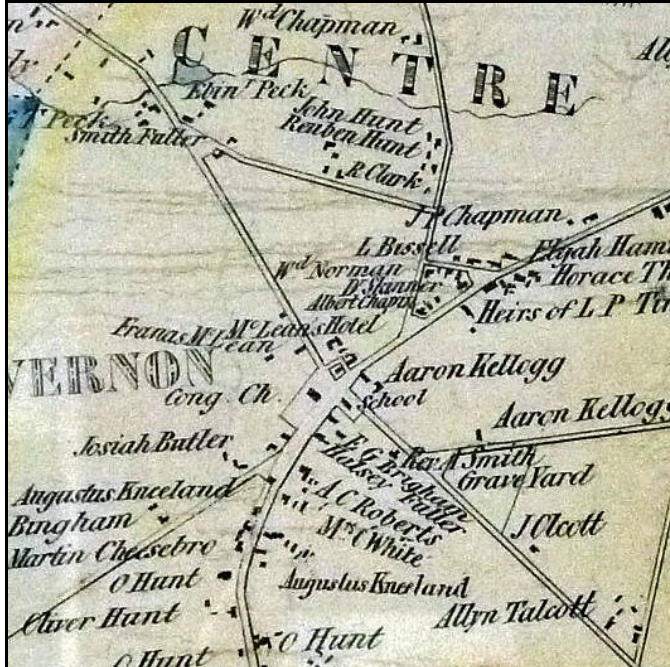
Francis McLean & The Vernon Center Church

The McLean family in the early 1800's owned much of the land at the Vernon Center crossroads. In 1793 **Alexander McLean (1747-1806)** and his son **Francis McLean (1777-1861)** built a house plus a tavern and hotel that also served as a stagecoach stop. Later a post office was added.

When the McLean's moved to Vernon Center there was no Rockville (Francis won't build the Rock Mill until 1820), but stages were beginning to run on Hartford Turnpike. The meeting house was on Meetinghouse Hill as was the first school, which Francis attended.

The area was a prime location for a tavern/inn as Tolland Turnpike, Bolton Road and West Road intersected there. And the McLean's were savvy business men.

But the venerable meeting house on the hill had served its purpose and church leaders looked for a more central site for their new meeting house. In **1828** in two deeds Francis McLean sold property to the Ecclesiastical Society for the new house of worship. The descriptions and conditions tell us a lot about the times.



1853 Woodward map.



The only image we have of Francis McLean.

According to the 1853 Woodward map Francis house was on Center Street where Samuel Moses house was in the 1960's (could they have been the same house?) and the church memorial garden is now. Across the street was the McLean tavern, inn and a post office.

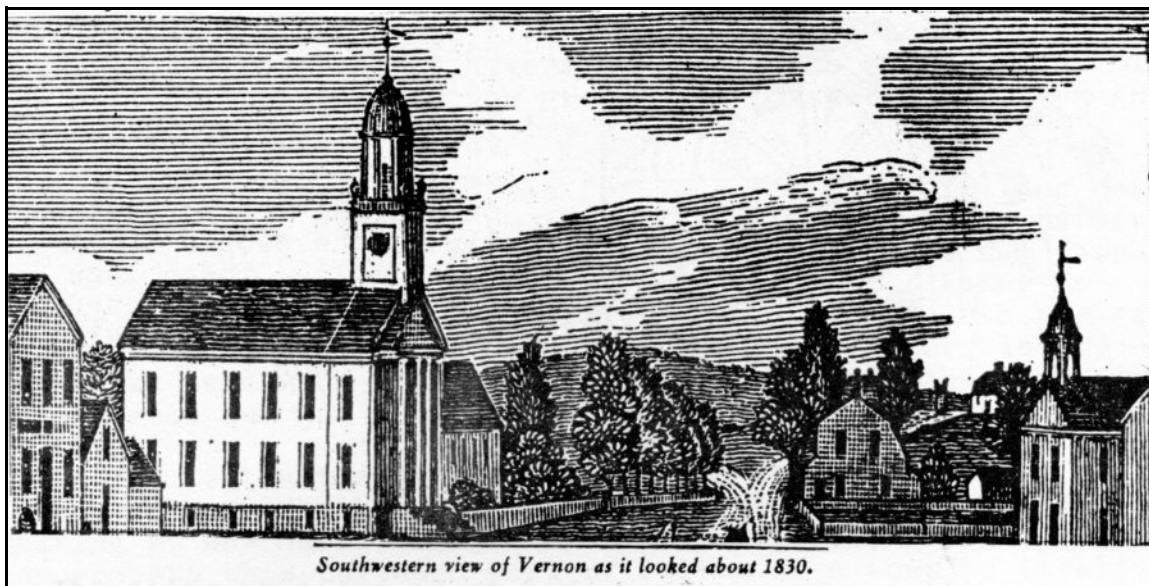
Francis sold the Ecclesiastical Society about an acre and a half for \$250. The boundary begins at the gate post next to his house, passes his peach orchard and lays out the lot.
(Vernon Vol 2, page 350)

His conditions were that it shall be a meeting house lot and there can only be one meeting house on it. No other buildings shall be erected except for horse sheds and other out buildings needed for the society and they must be on the west side of the church, in the rear of the meeting house. The remainder of the lot not occupied shall be for a public green and walks. It was signed April 21, 1828.

While selling a prime piece of his property Francis also protected the area on Center Road facing his businesses.

On the same day Francis McLean and Cornelius Roberts sold the Ecclesiastical Society strips of land along the roads for a public green and sidewalk for \$1. Roberts lived across Hartford Turnpike from the church and McLean at this time owned the corner lot where the new school will be located. Also mentioned is the minister's house, on Bolton Road at the time. With this deed they are creating safe paths for those walking to church. (**Vernon Vol. 2, page 349**)

The Barber drawing below shows Vernon Center about 1840 as the Center School is on the right. The building beyond the church may be McLean's tavern. And the roads diverge with West Street branching on the left.



In **1852**, near the end of his life, Francis sold or transferred much of his property. One small piece was sold to the church which needed a bit more land, but it shines light on another aspect of early church life . . . and death.

Francis sold 90 rods or about a half acre of land in the rear of the church to the society for \$100. The description, again protecting his property, tells us more about the church in the mid 1800's. (**Vernon Vol. 8, page 102**)

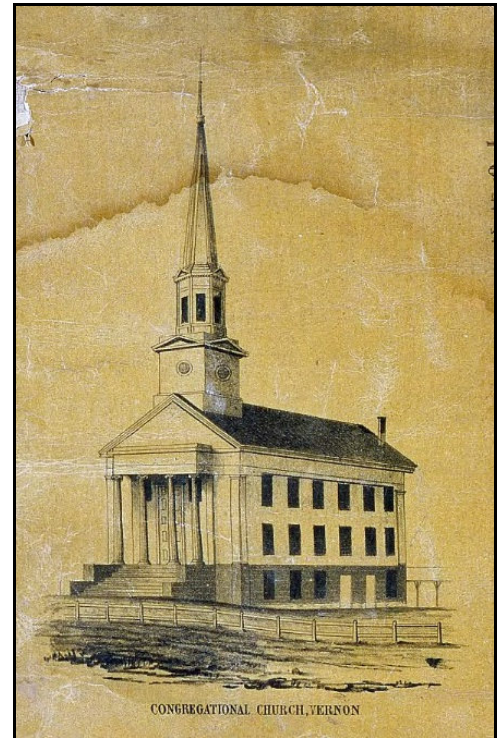
Beginning at a corner of Josiah Butler's land (Butler owned the future parsonage west of the church) and running north behind the **horse shed** to the north corner of the **hearse house** continuing to Center Road. The strip added to church property was about a hundred feet wide.

McLean seemed reluctant to sell this piece adjoining his property as he was protective as follows: "The society shall maintain and keep up the line fence the entire distance of the horse shed and hearse house and the society shall not erect any building on said lot northerly of the hearse house and agrees that the apple trees and the fruit thereof are not conveyed in this deed and that the apple trees may stand and continue on the premises.

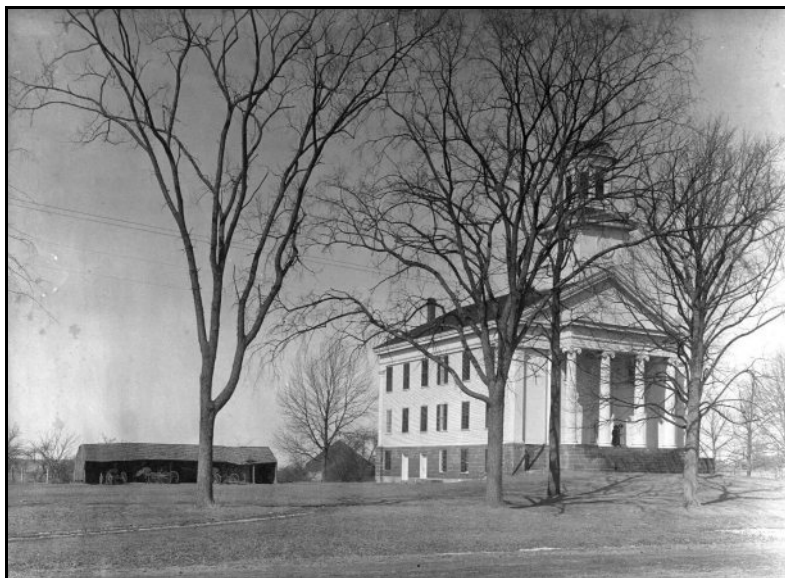
Orchards were important to property owners during this time as apples were used for making cider, a source of cash.

During the 1800's parishioners arriving at church with horse and wagon could purchase a place in the horse shed as they did with their pews. These were often passed down to sons in wills. There was a horse shed on Meetinghouse Hill too.

The 1910 photo of the church seems to show the shed in the background.



*First image of the new church.
Shown on the 1853 Woodward map.*



In wealthier churches the church society owned a horse drawn hearse to take the deceased from the church to the cemetery - primarily Elmwood in this case.

We don't have much information on the Vernon Center church hearse, but Coventry does have a well maintained church hearse. In 1861 Francis McLean likely rode in such a hearse to his grave in Elmwood.



Coventry's hearse.

In Mildred Willes 1974 church history she notes that the hearse and hearse house and pulpit were disposed of at an auction January 22, 1883. Could they still be in town?

*Jon Roe
September 2, 2026*