

Greensky Hill Church

About three miles northeast of Charlevoix, just off old US31/Major Douglas Sloan Road/County Road 630, stands Greensky Hill near a bluff that overlooks Susan Lake. For many, many years, this was a spot of deep significance to the Indigenous people of the northwest corner of Lower Michigan. About thirty tribes would gather here from all over to discuss tribal affairs, hold feasts, iron out differences, in general keep the social fires burning. To mark their solidarity, the tribal chiefs planted a circle of up to thirty maple saplings, which they bent and tied to the ground with basswood thongs to form an L-shape as they grew. This deformation was done to hopefully prevent the mature trees from being harvested for lumber.



To consolidate their belief and hope in mutual trust, the tribes made a vow to remain at peace with one another as long as the trees bore leaves. Less than ten trees remain now, with one especially having aged and threatening to go at any time. The council trees, as they have long been called, are on private property, so access to them requires permission.

When Christianity came to this region in the early 19th century, many of the Indigenous took to the new faith. According to former tribal historian Simon Otto, "Indian missionaries came to Greensky Hill to preach the word. A crude church was built not far from the council grounds and the first church was called 'Wag-nog-aug.' It was constructed of saplings bent into a rounded shape, tied together with basswood thongs

and then covered with elm bark. It had a dirt floor where a fire was built to keep them warm. The smoke left through a hole in the roof."

Peter Greensky (b. 1798), a converted Chippewa missionary and translator, heard of this important plot of land and came up, along with 27 families of his congregation, from Old Mission Peninsula located to the south of Charlevoix in 1839. "A log house was built for him in the center of the council trees and later a larger building was built. Soon the congregation was growing and they needed a bigger church. They decided to build a large log church. Indians came from all over to help build it."



Photo at right: Courtesy Little Traverse Historical Society, Petoskey, MI

Teams of oxen hauled the felled, straight tall pines to the site where they were cut to 30-foot lengths, "squared and dovetailed at the corners (bottom left photo), most logs being 18 or 20 inches thick when squared off." Woodwork for the door, windows, and trim was brought up by birchbark and dugout canoes from Traverse City, taken into Lake Charlevoix, and laboriously dragged overland from there north to the church site. There is not one trace of metal in the entire original construction. It took about a decade over the 1850s to complete the job because of the meticulous hand work required.



Greensky Hill Church was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972.

Today Greensky is affiliated with the United Methodist Church and welcomes visitors of all faiths. Services are on Sundays at 10 a.m. Sometimes hymns are sung and sacred passages are read in the Odawa language.

