

HISTORY
of the
Congregational Church
of
Tolland, Connecticut

1723-1923

History of the Congregational Church Tolland, Connecticut

1723-1923

The early settlers of Tolland brought with them the same spirit to honor God in their new home which characterized New England colonists generally. In locating a settlement the chief desideratum was a hill which might become a "Meeting-House Hill."

Such an elevation was not difficult to find in this region to the eastward from old Windsor. Nature had been lavish with hills and had crowned her work with that commanding height known from early times as Grant's Hill.

Nevertheless when the families, about seventeen in number, whose forty-acre lots ranged along the slopes of this noble hill, decided upon the location of their Meeting House they chose a site to northward upon a lesser height. As nearly as we can gather from meagre town records the "Meeting House Hill" of old Tolland was the somewhat rocky eminence where now stands the home of Miss Bessie Terhune, at the south end of your "Street."

THREE HOUSES OF WORSHIP

I. A simple structure, forty-five feet long, thirty-five feet wide, first used in 1723, never entirely completed, situated a little to the east of Miss Terhune's residence.

II. A larger building, fifty-six by forty feet, adorned with a steeple and a bell, located at the south end of "Meeting House Green," about opposite the present town hall, occupied first in 1755.

III. The present edifice in the middle of the Street, west side, dedicated October 25, 1838, the interior altered and repaired 1893.

It was November 19, 1719 when the town fathers passed their first vote to build the meeting house so essential to the happiness of the twenty-five families scattered from Grant's Hill as far as the Willimantic River on the East and Snipsic Lake on the west. Noah Grant, William Eaton and Joseph Benton were appointed a committee "to order its affairs."

In the three years before the vote materialized there was evidently discussion and difference of opinion as to size and location.

The cost of furnishing was met by a tax of four-pence on the pound. It must have been a primitive sort of "furnishing." Probably there were benches at first rather than pews for we read that in 1726 it was voted "to build pews upon that part of the floor which was raised above the rest. Two years later a house about twenty feet by fourteen was erected near the meeting-house to accommodate the inhabitants from a distance "with a place to spend the intermission between services without troubling others." A hint here that Sabbath hospitality had been taxed to the limit! We may hope that a stove was allowed in this noon rest-house so that toes and fingers chilled during a long service in a cold church might be warmed.

The town voted, December 9, 1731, that “the selectmen should procure at the town’s cost what is necessary for the pulpit,” and in the next year “to do something towards repairing and finishing the galleries.”

Largely from these votes it has been inferred that the first meeting-house was never entirely completed before it was outgrown by an increasing population.

From time to time liberty was given to various applicants “to erect pews in the galleries at their own expense and for their own accommodation.”

Before thirty years had passed, at a town meeting held January 28, 1751, one hundred and ten persons voted, seventy in the affirmative, forty in the negative, as to a new building “for public worship in town.”

There was an even greater difference of opinion over its location and it became necessary to appeal to the General Court for a settlement. The vote of the majority was confirmed and this second House of Worship placed at the southern end of “Meeting House Green,” about opposite the present town hall. Horse sheds extended from the rear southward along a ledge of rocks since removed.

This church served its purpose without the adornment of a steeple until 1792 when, despite some opposition, it was voted that “the town will build a steeple to the meeting-house, Provided that a bell can be procured and given to the town without burdening the town with any expense for said bell.”

Subscriptions were promptly secured by Mr. Hope Lathrop although citizens in the western section, still cherishing their disappointment that the location was southward instead of northward in the Street, refused to give. We may sympathize with Hope Lathrop for becoming exasperated at such pettiness and declaring that those who would not give anything for the bell should not hear it ring!

These very human pioneers in our town were probably mollified to some extent when they saw what profound interest the finished steeple, a hundred feet high, aroused far and wide throughout the county. And it may be that the mellow, resonant tones of the installed bell, sounding over hill and dale on Sabbath mornings, allayed their unholy emotions.

A certain Oliver Arnold, gazing in admiration upon the steeple, as he one day passed through the village, is said to have exclaimed, with lofty poetic feeling,

“Poor Tolland! Grand People!

Old meeting house and new steeple!”

Into this doggerel has been read by one of our town historians mingled sentiments such as envy, contempt and sarcasm. Doubtless the young and growing town had but little pocket money to spend. Doubtless too they “felt grand” to be already a county seat with a court-house, a jail and a tall steeple, perhaps the only one in the county. The building was then about thirty-seven years old, youthful as church lives go.

The interior was fitted up with square pews, seats upon three sides of them. Thus the attentive members of a family might face the preacher, the sleepy one sit with back towards him. Little Thankful and Ebenezer might quietly play on the floor about mother’s foot stove or the warm dog useful to keep father’s feet comfortable, and the big pew walls would shelter them from the gaze of neighbors.

Some old records discovered a few years ago, give welcome touches to the old time picture of village and church life.

In 1803, this second House of Worship having stood nearly fifty years, became in need of repair. It was decided to reshingle, paint it, reset broken glass, and “make other necessary repairs.” William Cogswell, the carpenter to whom the contract for shingling was given, received forty-four dollars in payment. Several men are named who made journeys to Hartford with their “teams,” to fetch the hand-riven shingles. Joseph Ladd brought 16,000, for cartage of which he was paid \$5.34, while Jabez Kingsbury, a selectman at the time, made two journeys for shingles and asked but \$2.00. Perhaps the latter mixed church loyalty with his business aspirations and so put down his price! This same Jabez was one of the “Committee about Meeting House” and other items reveal that he was generous of time and money.

The only painter’s name to appear in the ancient records is that of Hubbard Phillips but doubtless others worked with him for we read that “Ashdel Steel was paid \$8.75 for Boarding Painters for seven weeks at \$1.25 per week!”

The wage of various workmen on these church repairs is mentioned as sixty-eight cents a day!

The Bell Ringer was an important personage in those old days. His task was no light one in the way of physical exercise and called for carefulness and dexterity. Seth Eaton is named as an early ringer, from November 6, 1802, and for a year’s service, including also “sweeping meeting house,” he was paid twenty dollars. The salary for this work was gradually increased until we find a contract in 1816 between the Selectmen and Hymen Smith that he should “Ring the Bell and Toll for all deaths and funerals within the town and on all other occasions where it is necessary for the bell to be rung and to sweep the meeting house when necessary for the sum of \$35.00 per year.”

Fancy loves to regard the old bell as a faithful companion to generations of men, women and children of this town during the one hundred and thirty-one years of its life up to the present day. In early years it seems to have suffered many ills. Quaint records tell us of frequent repairs on its tongue, the hook, the yoke, the “giting” and the “wheal.” In 1807 Hymen Smith “received \$3.69 for Ringing the Bell at the Death of Phillice and for helping Capt. Ezra Chapman mend the Bell and for 1 qt. of Brandy used at that time and for mending the Sealing Hammer. In five years a new “roap” became necessary. Could it be that frequent ringings and tollings wore it thin within the horny-handed grasp of the ringer? Or did a bit of mischief spring from that disgruntled “west part of town”?

Despite these variations of health the bell has persisted to a lusty old age and still sounds forth its call to worship in pleasant, friendly tone though it is heard less often than of yore when the daily noon hour was struck and also the curfew at nine. Climb to the present belfry, its second home, and you may read upon the sides of the bell bits of its life history as follows:

South side.

“1010 lbs. Clinton H. Meneely Company, Troy, New York.”

North side.

“Congregational Ecclesiastical Society of Tolland, Conn.”

“This bell was originally cast in the year 1792. Recast same year—again in 1826—refounded in its present form in the year 1880. “Let Him That Heareth, Come.”

The second House of Worship was taken down in the summer of 1838, after a beneficent ministry of eighty-four years on “Meeting House Green.”

Again an increasing population demanded a more spacious building. Today we may look upon the original exterior of the third House of Worship although a modern door replaces the older one through which Reverend Abram Marsh first led his flock on the eventful dedication day. Plain glass windows were exchanged for a fancier style considered to be more in keeping with the modern interior by those who made the extensive repairs of 1893.

Of those repairs it should be noted that they are the result largely of the generosity of two Tolland citizens, men who appreciated the church and were eager to make it as convenient and comfortable as possible. Mr. Radcliffe Hicks started the movement with a generous gift and was himself upon a committee to make the repairs, the other two members being Mr. William Sumner and Mr. William Holman. About three hundred dollars were collected from church people. The chief responsibility for the changes were laid upon Mr. Sumner who spared no time no thought nor money in the completion of the undertaking.

There are many who remember vividly sitting in the buttoned-up pews somewhere along in the years between 1838 and 1893, and looking up to the preacher in the high pulpit with its red velvet cushioned top upon which lay the big Bible. As children we liked to watch the iridescent crystal "dangles" upon the tall brass lamps, one on each side of the pulpit. Or, when immature brains failed to follow the "fifthly" and "sixthly" there were the long stove pipes at either side, extending from two stoves in the rear to holes far up the high walls in front. The wire arrangements for upholding this suspension tunnel for smoke to travel through, furnished food for reflection, as did also the wasp nests in the corners of the lofty ceiling. The child was never afraid of unpleasant contact with the tiny specks circling far above, for to his mind the height seemed almost as great as that of the sky out-of-doors.

The galleries on three sides were spacious but rarely occupied within remembrance. In one of the corners of the rear gallery stood a big bass viol, silent reminder of past days when Judge Waldo, with skillful touch, played to accompany his daughter Cynthia who was mistress of the melodeon and the choir. Members of that choir, still living, have tales to tell of mischief which went with the music behind the red curtains, now and again. And they recall the gift of a diamond ring which expressed to Cynthia the choir's affectionate regard when she married and left the village.

Until nearly 1880 Sunday School was held in the church. The Basement, previously used for Singing School, Lyceum and miscellaneous purposes, was then made into rooms in some degree suitable for the church school and prayer meetings. Important changes for the better were made in the superintendency of Mr. J. Edward Underwood and from time to time during the years since, culminating with repairs and improvements with special reference to our late celebration of the 200th Anniversary of the church.

Work in the kitchen at this time was undertaken by the Ladies' Aid, Mrs. Tilden Jewett, President, and included enlargement, new cupboards, serving tables, linoleum on the floor, fresh paint and a second oil stove. The church treasury was responsible for several improvements and paint in the other two rooms of the "vestry."

The noble, old church building starts therefore upon the fifteen years which will round out a century of existence, better equipped for service, more attractive and inviting, in the care of a recently-appointed sexton, Mr. Thomas Neill.

MINISTERS WHO HAVE SERVED THE CHURCH

1. Rev. Stephen Steel..... 1723-1758
2. Rev. Nathan Williams, D. D..... 1760-1829
3. Rev. Ansel Nash..... 1813-1831
4. Rev. Abram Marsh..... 1831-1869
5. Rev. H. M. Holliday..... 1869-1870
6. Rev. Charles N. Seymour 1874-1889
7. Rev. Aurelian H. Post..... 1892-1902
8. Rev. Henry T. Barnard..... 1904-1907
9. Rev. Robert M. French..... 1908-1913
10. Rev. Burt F. Case 1914-1920
11. Rev. William Darby.....1920

In addition to the above there were several men who filled in between regular pastorates for a shorter or longer time:

Rev. George E. Sanborn for more than a year; Rev. I. W. Fitch, one year, between Mr. Holliday and Mr. Seymour; Rev. G. W. Morrill from 1890-1892, following Mr. Seymour.

Such a list of names suggests the human element which makes a church, whether it be housed in primitive simplicity or in cathedral grandeur. The life of these ministers and the generations of people served by them, is the life of the Tolland Congregational Church. For this reason we search old records eagerly to find how they looked, where they lived, what they did day by day, how they thought and felt, what contacts they made with the life-currents of their day, and what are the evidences of their Christian influence.

Unfortunately the church kept no records for a hundred years and what little we discover is by way of votes passed in town meetings, for the town managed church affairs here as throughout New England until early in the nineteenth century.

As early as 1719 "at a meeting of the inhabitants of Tolland they did choose Joseph Benton to go to see if he can get a minister to be amongst us to preach the gospel amongst us." This was before the first meeting house was built or a church body organized. Mr. Benton was so successful in his task that the Rev. Stephen Steel was beginning pastoral work the same year. Tradition has it that a log house served to hold the Sabbath congregations in those first three or four years.

Various town notes reveal the fact of a little difference of opinion as to Mr. Steel's salary and as to whether he or the people should build his house. One, under date of January 31, 1721, reads "they would not agree with Mr. Steel no otherwise but as it was last voted, to wit: seventy-five pounds and he to build his house." At the same time it was agreed "that his salary should begin when he began to preach with us, except the time when he was wanting."

It was perhaps difficult to gather the seventy-five pounds "to be paid in money or provisions," for after a few months a committee was appointed "to recon with Mr. Steel to see what was paid to him and what was behind of his due."

It appears that no church could be organized "until a prayer should be put into the General Assembly." There is on file in the records of the state at Hartford the following document:

“To the Honorable, the Governor, Council and Representatives in General Court assembled, in Hartford, May 10, 1722. The prayer of Joseph Benton, of Tolland, humbly showeth: that under the conduct of Divine Providence, and by the favor of this honorable assembly, the aforementioned town of Tolland is settled with a competent number of inhabitants; and having obtained a suitable person to preach the gospel amongst us to the good satisfaction of the inhabitants, we are desirous to enjoy the benefits of all gospel ordinances amongst us, to which end, we, as our law directs, apply ourselves to this honorable assembly for their approbation therein; and by a vote of said town, your petitioner is empowered to make his application to this honorable assembly; and your countenance herein will be a further obligation to your petitioner ever to pray, as in duty bound, Joseph Benton.”

Both the Upper and Lower Houses granted this petition and the town promptly provided for the organization of the church and the ordination of Mr. Steel, the latter to be at the town's expense and under the supervision of Noah Grant and Daniel Cook.

Mr. Steel was a young man of twenty-seven when he began this ministry which proved his life-work for he served thirty-five years, until failing health caused him to retire. He died in Tolland the following year. The house where Mr. Steel's son lived and where it is believed he also lived on “his lot and allotment” of one hundred and ten acres, stood where the Hick's Memorial School now stands, and thus conveniently near to the little meeting house on its Hill, equally convenient to the second “neat and tasteful structure,” opposite on the Green. Perhaps as a young man, full of hope and fiery zeal the minister worked with the men who built the first house of God. Thirty years later, though no longer vigorous enough for manual labor, he must have watched daily to see the home of his dear people grow into size and shape, must have thrilled with pride over the wondrous steeple and listened expectantly for the warning tones of the bell.

Nine little Steels there were, to play about the spacious yard and Green and to fill the minister's pew. Some of their descendants, by various names, may be found about our borders today.

Mr. Steel once preached the annual election sermon at Hartford and this fact is considered an evidence that he was a man of unusual ability as a thinker and a preacher. There is no written fragment remaining of his manifold sermon writing, to prove this. His correspondence with the town at the beginning and close of his ministry, indicate a conciliatory spirit. He went through all the pioneer experiences of a young town born from an “unbroken wilderness,” shared the hardships, sacrifices, joys and sorrows of the people, saw them increase from twenty-five families to a thousand persons and led many of them nearer to God. The honor is due this man of building into the foundation of our town, the stones which mean faith and reverence, uprightness and neighborly good-will. Without such beginnings communities shape themselves selfishly, coarsely, lawlessly.

We might paraphrase the repeated statement of the old Chronicles in the Bible made in regard to Israel's kings, the good and the bad, and say of the second minister, Rev. Nathan Williams: Nathan was twenty-five years old when he began to reign and he reigned sixty and nine years in Tolland: and he did that which was right in the eyes of Jehovah.

Judge Waldo, in his history of Tolland asserts that Dr. Williams “has done more than any other person to form the character of its inhabitants” and the implication is favorable to the character formed.

As in the Bible we advance out of the dim light of primitive tradition into the noonday of historic fact so in such a study as this we grope about among a few ancient and brief records for fifty years then find stepping stones, which, as we walk them lead us into an open field of actual recorded incident and description. This is what we seek after—the details from which pictures may be made.

Back of the hay scales near the Blacksmith's Shop, stood an old barn in our childhood. This was the decrepit descendant of a fine old house to which young Nathan brought his bride, and where he and she lived their beneficent life in the community. By some unusual good fortune a pen picture has been handed down, not alone of the Dominie himself but also of Mistress Williams with a few rays of light falling upon the household.

Dr. Williams was about five feet, nine inches, in height, inclined to stoutness but well-proportioned. His manners were punctilious, yet easy and graceful. Always precise in his language and careful of his personal appearance, he was quite the gentleman of the village, yet it was the gentleman-of-the-old-school type, ringing true from the inside out.

One chronicler says, "his public performances were very creditable and quite acceptable to his parishioners." In the library of the Connecticut Historical Society at Hartford are preserved seven of his sermons all of which indicate thoughtfulness, more than the average intellectual keenness and, in general, orthodoxy with a tendency to liberal ideas. When it came to Tories and Methodists, Dr. Williams was found in his "hook-and-ladder mood." During the war of the Revolution, as one record states, "he was unwilling that a sympathizer of the English government should be a member of his church." Yet another statement is made that "with the exception of two or three odd, crusty, eccentric men, who generally opposed what others approved and who were in the main respectable persons, whose whimsical opposition was generally amusing, there was entire unanimity in Tolland from the first manifestation of opposition to the tyranny of England until the final establishment of American independence." We may therefore infer that Dr. Williams was never actually subjected to the Tory test in church fellowship.

With the Methodists, however, he improved opportunity to the full and rigorously opposed their entrance into the religious life of Tolland in the year 1791. His habits of thought did not readily bend to the newer, freer, more expressive ways of these zealous people. He, like so many others, could not at first recognize that such fervor of outward life was a satisfaction for an inward experience and that the experience might be as deep and sincere as his own. It is a tribute to his Christian spirit that later when the Methodists were established in the town he invited them to hold one of their prayer meetings at his home.

Mrs. Mary Williams comes down in our history as a "perfect model for a minister's wife." The praise given her in one account can only be equaled by that given to the worthy woman in the Proverbs. "Intelligent without vanity; complacent without sycophancy; devotedly pious without any forbidding pretensions, she exercised a salutary influence without any apparent effort. She taught by example as well as by precept; and the duties of a wife and mother were not neglected nor forgotten in the pursuits of those that belong to the visionary philanthropist or the chimerical moralist."

It is told that Dr. Williams had some income beyond his salary but "it was never ostentatiously used." So particular were the parents that their children should be

democratic and friendly with all other children of the parish that Mrs. Williams, hearing of certain boys and girls who were obliged to go to church barefooted because of poverty, removed her children's shoes and took them, barefooted, to her pew.

In the year 1773, the South Congregational Church of Hartford extended a call to Dr. Williams but he declined it and continued to devote himself to his growing country parish.

During the first thirty years of this pastorate the "half-way covenant" was in vogue for persons not feeling ready to take upon themselves full church membership. Just about the time that method fell into disuse, in 1791, apparently as the result of constant, steady religious instruction and exhortation, fifty persons united with the church. No marked "revival" seems to have swept through the parish in these years.

Failing health was the cause of the church giving a colleague to Dr. Williams in 1813, viz:—Rev. Ansel Nash, twenty-five years of age, graduate of Williams College and Andover Theological Seminary. The salary which, when Dr. Williams began his work, was \$266.66 and in 1803 was advanced to \$300, took a long jump to meet the requirements of Mr. Nash, even to \$600. A few years later he generously relinquished one hundred dollars annually out of consideration for the church.

After sixteen years of joint service during which we must suppose that Mr. Nash carried most of the work in pulpit and parish, Dr. Williams' death left Mr. Nash sole pastor of the church. He remained about two years and was then dismissed at his own request.

The impression gained in reading of this, the third Tolland pastorate, is that a really brilliant man filled the office. "To a mind naturally quick and active was added the polish of a finished education." In the pulpit he was logical and argumentative and while not eloquent, perhaps, possessed the enviable power of holding the attention of his hearers. In prayer he was direct and personal. There is a quality of modernness about Mr. Nash. Social and educational matters were of concern to him. He interested himself in public improvements. The Tolland Academy which was carried on for some years in a building on the east side of the street, was largely the result of the efforts of this broad-minded minister.

Perhaps Judge Waldo personally knew and valued Mr. Nash for in his history of Tolland, after paying to him a warm tribute as a "valuable member of society" he adds that he was a "most constant and sincere friend."

During the eighteen years of this pastorate there were two marked revivals one in 1816 and one in 1822. The church received into membership two hundred and sixty-five persons.

A diary is extant, kept by a devout woman, member of the Baptist church in its beginnings. Several entries refer to the revival of 1822 which evidently swept through the town, leaving the three churches enriched. Under date of November 30, 1822 she writes,

"During the week the anniversary of the day set apart for public thanksgiving to God has returned and it was a day of thanksgiving indeed. The glorious work which God has wrought in this place within a few months calls for warmest gratitude and praise. Oh! how changed the employment of our dear youth! The season which they have in time past considered peculiarly favorable for vain amusement they have now spent in the service of God in meeting together to communicate their joys and unitedly to offer their prayers and their praises to God. Bless the Lord O, my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name!"

January 19, 1823, "To the Congregational church have been added recently about ninety persons' souls, the most of whom were lately careless and unconcerned in sin. More than twenty have united with the Methodists. Six have been added by baptism and letter to our church (Baptist, . . . I do still feel the low estate of this little vine and though God has given us a few mercy drops, we by no means feel satisfied. We are still extremely needy and have no place of our own in which to meet for the worship of God."

It was on May 30th, 1831 when the Rev. Abram Marsh began the work which was destined to extend through thirty-seven years. A Dartmouth and Andover man, he brought to this task a trained mind and an earnest spirit.

There are many living who recall the tall and dignified figure of Mr. Marsh in the latter years of his life when his hair was white. "We children always took the other side of the street when we saw him coming," is the testimony of one woman who nevertheless looks back with sincere regard for her pastor. Another remembers that he loved the children and sometimes lifted her to his shoulder, an alarming attention for she kept thinking, "It is so far to fall!"

Mr. Marsh was a man of strong convictions and yet kindly in his attitude towards individual offenders and when it became necessary to speak for his principles he attacked the sins and spared the sinners. In this connection it is told of him that, being strongly opposed to the sale of intoxicants in our town he preached a vigorous sermon upon the subject with plain reference to a certain distillery but without allusion to the man running it.

With all of his seriousness, dignity and even sternness, there was something of the "saving sense of humor" about this modern Abram, "man of faith." It was possible for him not only to appreciate but to perpetrate a joke, even a pun. At the foot of Jail Hill lived Mary Bliss, a capable maiden, engaged to Lucius Fuller. It was arranged to have the marriage at the house early in the morning and after the ceremony Mr. Marsh enlivened the wedding circle by remarking that Lucius no doubt chose that hour so that he might enjoy a longer day of Bliss!

It is evident from all records that this long pastorate was a fruitful one and gained for Mr. Marsh genuine confidence and respect from the entire community. When he began there were one hundred and sixty-six members of the church, a decrease from the high water mark of Mr. Nash's day. Perhaps the exit from country village to town had already begun. It certainly became a marked feature of these years, 1831 to 1869. Although two hundred and fifty-five were added to the church from time to time, at the close of Mr. Marsh's ministry there were but one hundred and four members, of whom twenty were absentees. The young men in particular left, as was true in many rural communities. More than three times as many male members were dismissed by letter as were received.

A depleted church therefore meant no reflection upon the affection between people and pastor nor upon the sermons of these thirty-seven years. Possibly there came to be a sameness of a heaviness about the sermons for a record reads that when in the thirty-eighth year a committee visited Mr. Marsh and suggested his resignation they informed him that "the people had come to the judgment that his sermons would be more useful to a people unaccustomed to him and his sermons than here."

It is a tribute to the spirit of this pastor that he quietly agreed with his people and withdrew, to take up work elsewhere for a few years.

In 1842 Mr. Marsh married for his second wife Miss Mary H. Cooley of Norwich, Connecticut who is remembered by many as a homemaker and helpmate in the old house which stood where Mr. William Agard's house now stands. The old chaise and moderate-minded sorrel horse made a familiar picture as they carried pastor and wife on parish business.

In the year that Mr. Marsh left a comet appeared in our church sky in the form of Rev. H. M. Holliday. Some who were children then recall his fascinations. There must have been fascination emanating from the man because when he boldly demanded a salary of twelve hundred dollars, the Society agreed to raise it. It may be said that the men responsible for collecting subscriptions, felt some qualms about such an unheard-of sum but Mr. Holliday, as the clerk's account tells us, "intimated increasing strength his ministry might bring to the church would be ample to meet the emergency."

The recorder adds, "No such strength came but debt instead!"

It was a rash venture in those years to leave the safe and quiet field of a six hundred dollar salary and adventure out into the Land of Big Salaries!

Mr. Holliday was obliged to take his ambition elsewhere in one year.

About four years were filled with supplies until in 1874 the fifteen year pastorate of Rev. Charles N. Seymour began. Mr. Seymour's family occupied a parsonage which the church had acquired by the bequest of one of its members, Miss Ruth Hatch, 1874, situated just below the southern end of the Street.

Unlike the four previous pastors Mr. Seymour was well advanced in years and in pastoral experience elsewhere when he came to us. An active worker he was, tramping the country roads east and west, north and south, to visit his families.

His pulpit work is remembered not so much for its direct and stirring appeal as for thoughtful topic elaboration with perhaps undue reflection upon the present day. Mr. Seymour sounded as if "the old times were better" but acted as if these were pretty good times after all!

There was much fun in the man. There also appeared in his ministry a new impulse in things missionary.

Some of us vividly remember how this pastor freshened the Monthly Concert of Missions by introducing new features, the most striking of which was the "speaking of women in meeting," a daring innovation!

An all-around man was Mr. Seymour in both church and community, frank and fearless in speaking his thoughts, but kindly withal. As one of the School Board he faithfully and acceptably served the town.

In the seventies, an evangelist came at one time to assist and as a result a marked influx of younger and older people was experienced by the church and the Sunday School. Deacon Benton at that time clerk, characterized his pastor as "Active, trusted and beloved by the people, trusted in the churches." Ill health was the cause of Mr. Seymour's resignation in 1889.

Again an interim broke the continuity of pastorates and the regular development of church life doubtless suffered loss.

The Rev. Aurelian H. Post was engaged in 1892 "to serve for a year, more if acceptable," as proved to be the case, so that he was with the church ten years.

A choice man was Mr. Post, scholarly, kindly, genuine, although so modest and quiet that the pure gold of his character was not immediately discovered. He could hardly be called, in modern parlance, a "good mixer," indeed social amenities appeared to burden his retiring nature. Yet in pastoral attentions he was faithful and sympathetic.

One who looks back to Mr. Post as the pastor of her youth recalls the stimulating conversations when he passed an evening with the family. For he could talk upon books and topics of the day in a congenial group. "I never have known any one so thoroughly acquainted with the best literature, both prose and poetry," this parishioner declares, "and he loved to quote from it in his sermons." "Yes," she added, in response to my question, "his sermons were good, strong and thoughtful."

Mr. Post's interesting family never removed from their home in Clinton, New York to Tolland for reasons which were wise, but members of it sometimes visited him here and he often went to them.

In the spring of 1904, after two years of "supplies," the Rev. H. T. Barnard of West Stafford, Connecticut, was engaged "to act as pastor of this church for the year ending March 13, 1905, and to so continue until further action is taken." No further action was desired or necessary for three years, during which Mr. Barnard endeared himself to the church and community by his loving spirit, his kindly and genial social ministries and his helpful words from the pulpit. Both Mr. and Mrs. Barnard brought a valuable asset to the town in the way of music. A village church seldom receives such uplift in its singing power as came by these two voices, Mrs. Barnard's in the choir, the pastor's singing from his place in the pulpit.

It was in this pastorate that the house standing to the north of Mr. William Agard's was first used as a parsonage, the former parsonage where Mr. Seymour and his family lived, having previously been sold by the church. In the year 1913 the Ecclesiastical Society made the house its own by purchase from Mr. William Agard and it has continued to be the Parsonage up to this time.

An indication of the loving regard felt by the townspeople for Mr. Barnard is shown in the warm welcome given him as he returns to visit friends from time to time. An evidence of his own spiritual mellowness was unconsciously given by himself at our late anniversary celebration during the social evening in the vestry. Mingled with his reminiscences he gave a testimony to his Christian faith in such words as these: "After a long experience in this world so often in turmoil and confusion I can testify to the power and sufficiency of the life of God in the soul. And I have reduced my religious creed to three Cs, viz: Confidence, Courage and Charity."

During the interim between the close of Mr. Barnard's pastorate December 1907 and June 1, 1908 the pulpit was supplied by Rev. Mr. Berg, a student at the Hartford Theological Seminary. The Rev. Robert M. French of Hadlyme was then engaged and for five years he grew into the esteem and love of the people, to be followed by the Rev. Burt F. Case who also made for himself a warm place in the hearts of the community. These two, friends of each other and of a wide circle in Tolland, complete the list of pastors who built up and sustained the church in its separate denominational life.

An important step taken during the pastorate of Mr. French was the revising of the original creed of the church and the printing of a manual, completed July 1, 1913. The names of fifty-three persons are given as members in this manual. At one

communion service in 1909 Mr. French received into membership fifteen young people.

Mr. Case will be remembered as the War pastor, among other counts, and an indefatigable, persistent, loyal patriot he showed himself to be, leading the community in "drives" and assisting in other war work.

Mention should be made of the wives of these last two pastors for they won praise and love from many for their efficiency and sweet spirit in church and social life. Those who knew and worked with them then and who still hold them as dear friends, may not eulogize them in such stately phrase as Judge Waldo used for Mrs. Williams but with equal fervor declared them both to be "model ministers' wives"!

These families made valuable addition to the social life of the community. Mr. Case threw himself whole heartedly into the study club which he found existent but in need of the fresh vitality he was able to bring to it. Programs of the years when he led the club show that its educational influence must have been considerable in the community.

There was a rare sympathetic and inspirational quality in the nature of Mr. Case and it showed itself in his sermons which are remembered as personally helpful.

During this, the last pastorate of the Congregational Church, strictly speaking, the Christian Endeavor Society, now a part of our church life, was organized. In former years when the Christian Endeavor tidal wave swept over New England a union society had been formed in 1890 the Methodists joining with the Congregationalists. Meetings were large and enthusiastic. A Junior society was equally alive and useful. The Methodists later formed their own Epworth League and ere long Christian Endeavor seems to have fallen by the wayside to be lifted up by Mr. Case and put upon its feet.

At this writing the active members of the society number but twelve yet the attendance at the regular Sunday evening meeting is considerably more being made up of older as well as young people.

THE FEDERATED CHURCH

It was in tune with the spirit of the times that the two Tolland churches, both small in these later years should begin to consider federating. There were hardly more than twenty-five resident members in either church.

In common with most New England hill towns Tolland has never recovered the numbers lost by exodus from village to city.

After a few months of discussion 1919-1920 the following plan of federation was happily agreed upon.

PREAMBLE

The Lee Methodist Episcopal and the First Congregational Church of Tolland, in order the better to fulfill their common mission to the community, to conserve the resources of the Kingdom of God, and to promote the unity of His disciples for which Christ prayed, do hereby adopt the following Articles of Agreement and constitute themselves the Federated Church of Tolland.

ARTICLE 1—PURPOSE

The churches above named hereby agree to form and act as one congregation for all purposes of work and worship.

ARTICLE 2—THE JOINT COMMITTEE

Section 1. To carry out this purpose each Church, acting according to its polity or discipline, shall appoint three persons to serve for one year or until their successors are chosen, who, with the pastor ex-officio, shall constitute a joint committee.

Section 2. The pastor shall act as chairman of the Joint Committee, except when his own relation to the Federated Church is the business in hand.

Section 3. The Joint Committee shall elect a secretary, a treasurer and, in the absence of the pastor, a chairman.

Section 4. Four members of the Committee shall constitute a quorum.

ARTICLE 3—BUSINESS AFFAIRS

Section 1. The Joint Committee shall have the management of all business affairs, subject to the advice and approval of the constituent churches.

Section 2. Each church, or its society or trustees, shall give to the Joint Committee the use of its land and buildings, and the income of all invested funds, which it holds or may receive, except as otherwise mutually agreed; provided that the Federated Church may relinquish to the church which owns it any building which it does not use.

Section 3. The Joint Committee shall decide the use of lands and buildings, and assume all expenses of maintenance, insurance and repairs.

Section 4. The Joint Committee shall annually make an estimate of the pastor's salary and the current expenses, and shall divide the same between the constituent churches in such proportion as may seem to them equitable. This estimate and division shall be acted upon by each of the constituent churches and according to the method prescribed by its polity.

Section 5. The Joint Committee shall put into operation plan for systematic contributions which shall give every member of the Congregation and its constituency an opportunity to share in the support of worship and benevolences. Each subscriber may designate to which church his contribution shall be credited, and undesignated contributions shall be divided in the proportion or each church's share in the budget.

ARTICLE 4—CHURCH AFFAIRS

Section 1. The members of the constituent churches shall be regarded as members of the Federated Church.

Section 2. Members hereafter added, by letter or on confession, may choose in which church they shall be enrolled.

Section 3. All questions regarding the Ordinance of Baptism shall be left to the conscience of the individual member. The pastor may, if he choose, secure the services of any ordained clergyman to administer the rite in the manner desired.

Section 4. The Lord's Supper shall be observed at such times and in such manner as the constituent churches shall agree.

Section 5. The Joint Committee shall act as a standing committee to advise the pastor and the Federated Church in church affairs.

Section 6. So far as the polity or discipline of the constituent churches permits, the members of the Federated Church shall decide all questions of work and worship, and annually elect such officers as shall be necessary in addition to the Joint Committee.

Section 7. The young people of the Christian Endeavor Society and the Epworth League shall be united in the Christian Endeavor Society, which is to retain its connection with the Rockville Christian Endeavor Union.

Section 8. In the choice of a pastor, the Joint Committee shall recommend one or more persons, and each church shall in its regular way express its choice, it being understood that the ministers of the Federated Church may be alternated denominationally whenever a change of ministers takes place. The one selected must be the choice of both churches and approved by the appointing power of the Methodist Church.

Section 9. In all meetings of the Federated Church fifteen members shall constitute a quorum.

ARTICLE 5—RELATION TO DENOMINATIONS

Section 1. Each church shall continue unchanged its relation to the denominational body to which it belongs, reporting its work as a member of the Federated Church.

Section 2. Missionary information shall be given and contributions for missions and other benevolences taken in accordance with the plans of the denominations of the constituent churches. Each donor may designate to which denominational board his offering shall be sent and undesignated offerings shall be divided equally.

ARTICLE 6—MEETINGS

The annual meeting of the Federated Church shall be held on the first Thursday of March, and the meetings of the constituent churches to elect their members of the Joint Committee as soon thereafter as practicable. Notice shall be given on two preceding Sundays.

ARTICLE 7—AMENDMENTS AND ADVICE

Section 1. Amendment of these articles of agreement may be made at any meeting of the Federated Church, by a two-thirds vote of the members present, provided notice of the proposed amendment be given in the call, subject to ratification by each of the constituent churches according to its polity or discipline.

Section In case any question shall arise under these articles which the Federated Church is unable to settle, such questions shall be referred to a committee consisting of a representative of the denomination of each of the constituent churches, who, if found necessary, may select additional arbitrators.

ARTICLE 8—WITHDRAWAL

In case at any time either of the constituent churches shall vote that circumstances make it inadvisable to continue this agreement, six months notice shall be given to the other church.

Both pastors, Mr. Barbour for the Methodists, Mr. Case for the Congregationalists, were sympathetic and helpful in bringing opinions into harmony and each retired from his office believing that a new man for a new enterprise was the wiser method.

The federation was consummated in the spring of 1920 and Rev. William C. Darby became the first pastor of the Federated church, preaching his first sermon July 11, 1920 in the Congregational House of Worship, agreed upon as the more suitable building for services.

Although a Methodist by training, a graduate of Wesleyan University, Mr. Darby is by no means a strict denominationalist and therefore possesses one of the first requisites of a federated or union church pastor, viz:—a tolerant spirit.

From the first day throughout the three years now passed the people have found their pastor as sympathetic and intelligent concerning the interests of one denomination as of the other. Both are brought to the fore when specific needs arise, otherwise the idea of denomination is kept in the background, while Truth, practical and spiritual, needed by all alike, is emphasized in various phases.

Mr. Darby and his mother occupy the Congregational parsonage which was repaired and partly furnished by the Methodist constituency, and now made more attractive by gardens which Mr. Darby has unusual skill in developing.

Since this pastorate is now in process we are not able to estimate its full value to the church. We are conscious of benefits already reaped. The community as such is indebted to Mr. Darby, especially the young people, for the interest and actual labor which he has contributed freely in starting a Community Club with the Methodist Church building as headquarters. A beginning has been made, which gives promise of a useful future in the town.

Eight young people have been brought into membership with the church during these three years, the Sunday School has been enlarged and Mr. Darby's talks in Christian Endeavor meetings have been stimulating. We anticipate growing usefulness and power from this pastorate as time goes on.

WOMAN'S WORK

The date of July 28, 1841 should be memorable in the history of our church because it was then that a group of earnest hearted women gathered in Mr. Marsh's home to make plans for organizing themselves so as to be of larger use in the church life. Thirty-two came together that day and they must have taxed the capacity of even

the two large front rooms. Can you not see them as they wend their way from different quarters of the village, some driving from outlying farms, all intent as they chat together, on the duty of the hour? It was the day of full skirts often ruffled to the tight waist-line, of hair looped up under the ears and gathered in a twist low at the back of the neck, sometimes in a net. The beautiful wide collars, hand embroidered, which today we covet, adorned some gowns, no doubt, and were fastened with brooches, cameos in twisted gold setting or perhaps made from the hair of some "dear departed one." One brooch has been handed down from those days, done in braided grey hair under glass, set in tiny pearls.

The full list of these names may be read in the old record book now in the possession of Mrs. Samuel Simpson.

In August, a month later, the organization was perfected and called The Ladies' Charitable Society, with officers as follows:—President, Mrs. Jessie Carpenter; Vice-President, Mrs. Joseph Bishop; Treasurer, Mrs. Theodore Stearns; Secretary, Mrs. Loren P. Waldo. The constitution of the new society was long and detailed, beginning:

"The object of the Society is to promote social and friendly intercourse among its members; while with their hands they do something to relieve the wants of others."

Article 1 reads, "Any lady subscribing to the constitution and paying 12½ cents annually shall become a member of the association."

In 1859 the annual dues were increased to fifteen cents and in addition three cents were contributed at each meeting. Men became honorary members. Families in need were helped, for example, a colored woman, Mrs. Crane, received provisions and a lift in her family sewing.

When the Civil War called for women's ministries, the Tolland women promptly directed some of their service to the soldiers. The record of one box, similar to many, reads:

14 shirts
7 doublegowns
1 pair pillow cases
2 napkins
9 compresses
8 pairs woolen socks

That popular church function known as a Festival in the old days, was much enjoyed and highly profitable. In the treasurer's record of one such Festival held in the old "basement" before repairs had made it worthy of the name "Vestry," in the year 1869, we find items which enable us to reconstruct the scene:—

Pop Corn Tree	\$14.25
Cake table, private and auction sale.....	33.81
Rebecca at the Well, lemonade	7.21
Fortune Telling.....	4.30
Oyster Table.....	14.75
Ice Cream, Coffee and Tea.....	10.07
Fish Pond.....	26.86

In still another, besides the Fancy Table where doubtless tidies were sold and slippers worked in wool on canvass and mottoes on perforated board for the wall, there were also the Art Gallery, the Bachelor's Secret, Grab Bag, and Watch Tree.

The busy women who managed the Charitable Society in these various branches did not forget little attentions to their pastor as the following letter from Mr. Marsh to the secretary, Mrs. Charles Underwood, will show.

To Mrs. C. Underwood

Secretary & Etc.

Please present to the Ladies of the Society, which you as Secretary represent, my grateful thanks for the present, just received, as "a token of their esteem." As a Scarf it is a very nice one and in taste very befitting a minister. When the cold reminds me the most of the good it does me, I should be very insensible not to be reminded of the good will and kindness in the gift.

Your Pastor

A. Marsh

The next decades, that of the seventies, sees a Woman's Missionary Society in operation, evidently supplanting the old Charitable Society. Boxes for home missionary families were sent annually and programs prepared on both home and foreign missions. In this broader outlook of the church women, Mrs. Henry Underwood was one of the leaders, for many years President of the society, holding meetings often at her home, instituting the Thankoffering meeting as an annual feature and sparing no pains to promote intelligence and interest in missions.

The United Study text-book on foreign missions having begun with Via Christi in 1901, were used by the Tolland Society as were the home Missions text-books later. A Mission Study Club came into existence to take care of the study end of the missionary society and this club was a somewhat union affair even before the federation.

The work of the women as it is now carried on in the Federated Church is three-fold.

The Ladies' Aid provides for monthly socials and suppers in the vestry, also holds a Fair annually in the Town Hall two afternoons and evenings, with suppers served at the vestry. By these means financial assistance is given the church in meeting its expenses.

The Missionary Society meets monthly for sewing, taking as its objective some needy school or a Home Missionary family. Business meetings of the Society and the Ladies' Aid are held at this time.

The Mission Study Club meets for programs based upon the study books, during eight months of the year. Missionary money is given through the church for the Hartford Branch of the Woman's Board and for the Home Missionary Union to both of which the society is auxiliary on its Congregational side.

MINISTERS AND OTHER RELIGIOUS WORKERS CONNECTED AT SOME TIME WITH THE CHURCH

In the scant annals of our church kept at the Congregational House, Hartford, appears the quaint heading, "Ministers Raised Up." The reader gains the impression of a motherly church nurturing and training her boys from babyhood for the ministry. As a matter of fact the twelve names given belong to men most of whom were born in

Tolland and so doubtless received here their early formative influences. Yet the contacts of some were brief.

Rev. William A. Benton	1817-1874
" Edwin Bishop.....	1833-1893
" Leverett Griggs D. D.	1808-1883
" Joseph Grover.....	1742-1826
" Caleb Birge	1782-1838
" Jarvis Howard.....	
" Elias Hull.....	1778-1882
" Elijah R. Sabin.....	1776-1818
" Joseph A. Saxton	1810-
" Stephen Wort D. D.	1735-1819
" Henry Chapman.....	1777-

William Benton became a missionary of the American Board to Syria in 1847, served until 1861, then worked in the same field independently until 1869 when he returned to this country. As far as known he is the only foreign missionary "raised up" by this church. He was a son of Azariah Benton and brother of Lathrop Benton, a man whose life was connected with this church many years as deacon and clerk.

Miss Daisy Whiton, daughter of deacon Calvin Whiton, spent several years in state evangelistic work and preaching besides assisting the Rev. C. E. McKinley of the Union Church, Rockville, in his pastoral work.

Miss Kitty Agard, daughter of deacon William Agard, taught under the American Missionary Association in Marion, Alabama for three years.

Unsalariated service in the broad movements of the Kingdom of God has been rendered by several whose names were on the membership roll either in childhood or later life.

To mention those who have faithfully supported and promoted the interests of this church through two hundred years would be an impossible task. The roll of deacons, clerks, teachers and that valuable class called by St. Paul "helps," is a long one. Each pastor would have his own list, written on his heart, of those men and women, some of them plain people, who had the love of God and zeal for his Kingdom stamped upon their lives. They are always the joy and strength of a pastor and perhaps he would be the first to say that they make or mar the purity of Christianity in the church quite as much as does he, himself.

All honor to the rank and file of every-day Christians who have passed on the torch from one generation to the next through two hundred years and so kept the holy flame alive in our community!

RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND OUR CHURCH

The last century was the great organizing century in the line called missionary. Beginning with the American Board in our own land, one by one organizations succeeded each other, those of a general nature, those for women, some national, many state and local. The tide of missionary knowledge and zeal rolled in steadily if slowly and the Tolland church felt the thrill of its touch. There are still to be found here and there between the leaves of the old Family Bible certificates given to our grand-parents because they were shareholders in the first "Morning Star," the little ship which plied among some of the Micronesian Islands.

The pastors, especially in the last third of the century, have led the church in giving to the denominational agencies and when the Apportionment Plan was suggested by the National Council as a stimulating method, it was adopted here.

The present pastor, Rev. William Darby, brought to us a keen interest in missions, so keen as to inspire prayer in all of his pulpit services, for our missionaries and their work whether at home or abroad. His intelligence matches his interest and is steadily having an effect, especially with young people. The modern method of really studying missions from a text-book has been introduced in the Christian Endeavor Society.

The old church has stood through notable changes in religious thought and keeps her face as squarely to the front as any two-hundred-year-old church could be expected to do.

The doctrinal note of ancient days in our pulpit has given place during succeeding years to such notes as Service; Religion in Daily Life; Unity of Spirit; Loyalty to Christ; International Brotherhood; Community Helpfulness.

And that deeper note which is everywhere struggling to be heard, is not wanting here as the church rounds out its second century—the appealing note for a closer, spiritual union with God, through Christ, a “life hid with Christ in God.”

It is a long way to travel from denominationalism and doctrine to federation and Jesus Christ.

The gleaming vision still leads and shall we not follow on?

Mary Daniels

Re-keyed by Bob Bittner
December 5, 2005