

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE FIRST CHURCH IN SALEM

By the Rev. Jeffrey Barz-Snell

The First Church in Salem is one of the oldest churches founded in North America. Its 377-year history began when thirty of the newly arrived Puritan settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony gathered together to form a church on August 6, 1629. Among the members present were Roger Conant, the founder of Salem, and John Endicott, the first Governor of the Colony. On that day, the church called two Puritan ministers who had made the voyage from England with the other colonists. The Rev. Samuel Skelton became the church's first Pastor and the Rev. Francis Higginson was called as the church's first Teacher. It was Rev. Higginson who composed the now famous Salem Covenant at its founding, the very same covenant that has been used by each generation of church members down through the centuries and is recited even today during the weekly Sunday services:

*We Covenant with the Lord and one with another,
And doe bynd our selves together in the presence of God,
To walke to together in all His waies,
According as he is pleased to reveale him self unto us,
In his Blessed word of truth.*

It is clear that the Puritans who founded the First Church in Salem saw themselves as being on pilgrimage to the City of God, to use the famous Augustinian metaphor. As a result, they believed that they could somehow perfect their world and community. Along with the Salem Covenant and its language of "walking together," this belief in the church's ability to move towards the Kingdom of God here in this world has reverberated down through the centuries, inspiring and informing how the church developed. While the original Calvinist theology of the founders transformed over time, some of the Puritan values and practices have remained.

The First Church describes itself as not only one of the oldest protestant churches founded in North America but also the first to be governed by congregational polity. This qualification represents an amicable concession to First Parish Church in Plymouth, which was formed by English Separatists in Holland who then migrated to what became Plymouth in 1620. To this day, members of the First Church are proud of their history as the original Puritan church founded on these shores. They are also proud to be the place where congregationalism began. Since its founding, the First Church has been democratically governed by its voting members. The precedent for self-government without the aid of bishops or presbyteries began here in Salem.

This independent-minded streak has been the source of the church's greatest achievements and its worst failures over the centuries. During the early years, the church's penchant for autonomy became clear. The church's third minister was none other than Roger Williams. Williams came to Salem in 1634 after the deaths of Reverends Higginson and Skelton. While his ministry lasted less than two years before he was banished from the colony in 1636, he managed to voice many concerns and criticisms that have echoed down through the years. It was Williams who first argued that the Native Americans should be compensated for their land. It was Williams who questioned the power of the colonial government (i.e. The General Court) over the local church.

He argued that the “distinction between the church and the world must always be kept clear, otherwise the wilderness of the world will invade the garden of the church.” As a result of these views, he was condemned and ordered to return to England. Instead, he fled the Massachusetts Bay Colony and moved south to start his own community which he named Providence. There he founded a new church in his Rhode Island colony, one that rejected the practice of infant baptism thereby becoming the first Baptist church in America.

Williams’ successor was no less illustrious in many ways. The Rev. Hugh Peter became Pastor of the church in 1636. He was involved with creating the first seminary in the colony and argued for its placement in Salem. Governor Winthrop and others disagreed with Peter and instead chose another site across the Charles River in Cambridge for the newly formed Harvard College. Peter left the Salem Church in 1641 to return to England. He later became Oliver Cromwell’s personal chaplain and participated in the execution of Charles I. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, Peter was condemned for “regicide.” He was beheaded and then drawn and quartered.

Among the other early settlers associated with the First Church was a certain George Downing, whose parents were two of the founding members of the church and whose uncle was Governor John Winthrop. Downing would go on to become an influential Puritan minister turned soldier and diplomat in England. He was awarded a prized piece of land by Charles II. This area of London was later renamed Downing Street, famous today as the location of the British Prime Minister’s Residence.

Coming back to this side of the Atlantic, other well-known individuals from the early history of the church include the Rev. John Higginson, whose ministry spanned an incredible 48 years from 1660 to 1708. Rev. Higginson was the son of the church’s first Teacher, Francis Higginson. The church to this day retains its earliest records because of efforts of this Rev. Higginson. In or around 1660, he took it upon himself to start a new record book, seeing that the old one was “wett and torne.” He copied all of the old entries into this new volume, thereby saving the records for the first 31 years of the church as a result. The record book he started was used until 1734 and remains a prized possession of the First Church.

During Higginson’s tenure, Salem and the Colony experienced significant growth but also major upheaval, punctuated by political events in England and assorted conflicts and battles with the Native Americans here in the colonies. This anxiety became the backdrop for the most infamous episode of the church. For the record, many people in Salem like to point out that the witch episode really began in Salem Village, or modern day Danvers. In 1692, a few teenage girls reported seeing visions and accused several members of the Salem Village church of witchcraft. One of the girls was the nine-year-old daughter of the parish minister, the Rev. Samuel Parris. Hysteria spread throughout Essex County that resulted in some 138 people being arrested and imprisoned. Twenty people were tried for witchcraft and executed. Members of this church caught up in the hysteria included Rebecca Nurse and Giles Corey, who were full members of the First Church until they were excommunicated and sent to their deaths. For the record, their memberships were formally reinstated during the Tercentennial observance of the Witch Trials in 1992. At that time, an appropriately somber memorial was erected in downtown Salem to remember the 20 people who lost their lives during one New England’s darkest

episodes.

As for others who were involved during the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, perhaps the most well known is the Rev. Nicholas Noyes, the “junior” minister of the First Church. Noyes fanned the flames of religious hysteria as a vocal persecutor of the accused during the trials. Unlike Samuel Sewall and John Higginson, he never expressed remorse for his involvement in the hysteria. It is said that he died of a curse since one of the accused witches at her execution is reported to have told him that “God will give you blood to drink.” In 1717 Noyes apparently died of an unusual throat disorder during which he asphyxiated on his own blood. This local story later inspired the 19th Century Salem author Nathaniel Hawthorne; in The House of the Seven Gables, Judge Pyncheon is cursed in a similar way.

Hawthorne was a direct descendant of one of the judges during the witch trials and was clearly influenced by his family’s Puritan heritage in Salem. Like many of his fellow Unitarians, Hawthorne creatively rebelled against the harsh theology and opinions of his Puritan forbears. In some ways, Hawthorne embodies a paradigmatic figure for what transpired in Salem in general as a result of the witch hysteria. Those of us who live in Salem believe that what is most interesting about our city is not what happened in 1692, but rather what occurred as a result.

In the decades following the Witch Trials, Salem began to change and become more cosmopolitan and worldly. During the 18th Century, Salem flourished as a center of maritime activity becoming an important port. During this period, the First Church split several times, first to meet the needs of the growing population in Salem and then because of arguments over ministers. Once again the fierce belief in independence and self-governance asserted itself.

Perhaps the most famous episode concerning church splits has to do with the Rev. Thomas Barnard and his son, the Rev. Thomas Barnard, Jr. In 1772, the First Church split over whom to call as their next minister. One group wanted the current minister’s son, the Rev. Thomas Barnard, Jr. Another group wished to call the Rev. Asa Dunbar (later the maternal grandfather of Henry David Thoreau). Since no agreement could be reached, the church divided into two. The First Church called Rev. Dunbar and the newly formed North Church in Salem selected the Rev. Barnard, Jr. as its first minister.

This North Church in Salem was full of ship captains and merchants who would play an important role in Salem’s participation in the Revolutionary War. Indeed, many people locally believe that the War for Independence actually began here in Salem. In February of 1775, the British Colonel Leslie was dispatched from Boston to seize a munitions depot in North Salem. It is reported that Rev. Barnard upon learning of the British regiment marching through town, left his pulpit during Sunday worship and went down to the North Bridge in Salem where Colonel Leslie and his troops were standing. Rev. Barnard and local officials negotiated with the British officer and brokered a resolution to the conflict, permitting the soldiers to march to the other side of the river and then turn around and return to their ship without “molesting anything.” As a result, local historians conjecture that the Revolutionary War almost began here in Salem, two months before April of 1775 and the “shot heard round the world” in Lexington and Concord. To this day, the First Church tells the story of “Leslie’s Retreat” and keeps on display a scale model of the first Meetinghouse of the North Church where Rev. Barnard served as Pastor.

Any treatment of the Church's history must include another significant figure from this period: the Rev. William Bentley, Minister of the East Church in Salem from 1782 to 1819. The East Church had split without incident from the First Church in 1717 as result of the growth in Salem. Rev. Bentley is perhaps most famous as a chronicler of life in Salem just after the Revolutionary War. A gifted scholar and certifiable polyglot, Rev. Bentley was able to read and/or speak 16 different languages. He kept a voluminous diary about Salem which to this day is considered one the best treatments of the period. In addition, Bentley was fiercely independent and avowedly Unitarian in his theology. As a result, he was an early advocate of interfaith and ecumenical understanding. In 1792, he famously hosted a young Catholic priest who had been sent to Salem to minister to the growing immigrant population. Rev. Bentley made arrangements for the priest to say mass at a local social hall and thereby helped found Salem's first Roman Catholic Church, what is today the Immaculate Conception Parish.

Bentley's reputation extended far beyond Salem. Amidst a hotbed of Federalist politics, Bentley was an ardent Republican (*i.e.*, Jeffersonian). In fact, Bentley corresponded directly with Thomas Jefferson. When Jefferson was President, all Arabic correspondence from North Africa was placed on a ship to Salem so that Rev. Bentley could translate it. Later, when Jefferson had completed his term and was setting up the University of Virginia, he offered the Presidency of the new school to Rev. Bentley. At the time, Bentley's health was not good and he respectfully declined. Still, this feisty and compassionate Unitarian minister enjoyed an influence that extended far beyond his pulpit in Salem. We can see in someone like Bentley how the Puritan commitment to scholarship and Salem's earlier history informed the developing Unitarian theology, which encouraged the use of reason in interpreting the Bible and fostered religious toleration.

By 1800, the First Church in Salem had split into four different churches, three of them Unitarian and one of them Congregational. Members of these different churches would become leaders of many social initiatives and reforms in the ensuing decades. The famous housewright and furniture maker Samuel McIntyre was a member of the North Church. Some of his carvings and furniture are in the church to this day. The Rev. John Prince was the minister of the First Church during the first part of the 19th century and was among other things an amateur astronomer and physicist. Some of his handmade instruments are in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. The transcendentalist poet Jones Very was a member of the North Church as was the well known organist and composer Henry K. Oliver. The influential biologist and expert on Japanese Culture, Edward Sylvester Morse was a member of the First Church. Local philanthropist Caroline Plummer was a member of the North Church. Inspired by her Unitarian faith, she left money in 1854 for the construction of a new building for the Salem Athenaeum and for the creation of an orphanage and school for wayward boys, The Plummer Home, an organization that continues to this day.

Other prominent members included Nathaniel Peabody and his three well known daughters were members of the North Church. Elizabeth Peabody introduced the Kindergarten system to this country and is often associated with New England Transcendentalism. Sophia married Nathaniel Hawthorne and her other sister, Mary, married Horace Mann, the well known pioneer and promoter of public education.

During the 19th and 20th Centuries, members of the different Unitarian churches that sprung from the First Church were involved with many of the socially progressive movements that characterized the period. Members of these churches were ardent abolitionists campaigning against slavery. Members of these churches worked tirelessly for women's suffrage. Members of these churches promoted early childhood education, prison reform and public health reforms. Members of these churches founded charities and relief agencies that exist to this day in and around Salem. For example, Caroline Emmerton founded the House of the Seven Gables Settlement House, an agency that provided social services to immigrant families and children. In addition, it was members of the Second Unitarian Church that sold some property inexpensively to a local Jewish minion who founded the local synagogue, Temple Shalom. It was also members of the Second Church who stepped in and mediated disputes during labor strikes in local textile mills in the 1930's.

This, then, is the real legacy and history of the First Church in Salem: how a Puritan church in a maritime town that was eclipsed by Boston grew up to become a progressive-minded, community-oriented Christian congregation. The Puritan belief that God's Elect had the ability to improve the world was alive and well in these churches.

As the 20th century progressed, the churches that had split apart centuries before returned to the fold. The First Church and North Church reunited in 1923 and they moved to the second Meetinghouse of the North Church on Essex Street, our current home. The East Church reunited with the First Church in 1956, completing a separate journey that it began in 1719. Through all of this, some of the vision of those hearty Puritans who founded this First Church remained – and remains. The work of this church, after 378 years of schisms and hysterias and wars and infighting, is still not complete. We remain a church whose purpose and mission is still unachieved and whose history is still being written.

In honor of this ongoing mission, the church recently voted to sell a portion of its silver collection. While this was done at first with some sadness, the unanimous vote of the members reflects the energy and passion of the current church. We wish to take that which was considered valuable by our forbears and transform these items into what we consider important in the here and now. The donations of currency, in the form of silver, from bygone generations will give the current church the opportunity to meet the needs of a growing 21st century religious community. Our sense of what is precious has changed. Our mission remains.

After almost four centuries the church remains energized and excited by its vision and its opportunities for ministry in an increasingly interconnected world. Our task and mission is yet before us and we pray that we will be good stewards of all that has been entrusted to us.

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