

## **Our 3 Centuries of History**

### **A Short History of First Church of Christ in Simsbury, Connecticut**

**By Donna M. Hopkins, Church Historian**

Simsbury is one of the oldest towns in Connecticut, its first settlers arrived in 1638. By 1669 there were about 20 families living in the fertile Massaco valley town named after Symondsburry, the town in England from where many of them had come. They were Puritans and felt the need to build a meeting house to serve their religious and social needs and to serve as a meeting place in which to conduct their democratic form of self-government. The town voted in 1671 to build a meeting house, but it took twelve years until 1683 to accomplish this task. The male voters changed their minds many times over the choice of location. The long-standing need to establish a church with an ordained and settled minister to shepherd their souls was finally met in 1697. Twenty year old Dudley Woodbridge agreed to accept the call to minister to the good people in Simsbury. He remained at his task until he died at a young age. His kinsman, Timothy Woodbridge, took over his pastorate and also married his widow, this being the most practical and sensible thing to do! Thus began the remarkable and intriguing history of this Congregational church in the remote wilderness of north central Connecticut Colony. Beset by Indians on occasion and by hardship and poverty these people persevered armed with determination and an unshakable faith.

The church as a body of faith has had three meeting houses. The First Meeting house was built in 1683 and served until 1739. The town argued for fifteen years over the location and cost of the Second one, and it took a vote of the General Assembly of the colony to settle the issue. It was to be built on Drake's hill - also the location of the Third Meeting house still in use today. In the midst of the meeting house controversies in 1736 it was also voted by the colonial government to split the town into four parishes. The once-large territory of Simsbury was separated into Wintonbury (part of Bloomfield), Salmon Brook (Granby), Turkey Hills (East Granby) and the First Society (Simsbury).

The Second Meeting house, built in 1740, was first used for worship in an unfinished condition in 1743. It took until the occasion of the ordination in 1777 of the third well-known minister, Mr. Samuel Stebbins, to add clapboards, shingles and window and door frames. By 1806 the Rev. Stebbins, who had been here during a time of surprisingly few controversies, decided to retire from active ministry in this congregation. He served as a substitute in local churches and as chaplain at Newgate Prison in Turkey Hills.

Sam Stebbins was a colorful and shrewd man known locally for his ability to turn a profit on his farm and in business ventures as well as for his knowledge of human nature and great wit. One of the most famous of the "Stebbins Stories" is this one about Thomas Jefferson, with whom Mr. Stebbins did not agree. When Jefferson was elected President in 1800 Mr. Stebbins thought it a great misfortune and omitted the usual prayer for the President. When remonstrated by one of his

parishioners he replied the following Sunday with: "Oh, Lord, bless our President and endue him with wisdom and common sense, for thou knowest how much he is in need of both."

In 1809 Mr. Allen McLean, whose influence and name is still to be seen in Simsbury, was ordained minister at First Church. When it was decided in 1830 that the old meeting house was serviceable but insufficiently attractive and that a new one was needed Mr. McLean oversaw the whole building process. The 1740 meeting house was taken down and the new one became a reality in six months with no arguing and no accidents. Mr. McLean made sure that the church raising and the meal that accompanied it were influenced only by the drinking of cold water. Mr. McLean served a long and influential pastorate - fifty years - until his death in 1861. He was best known for his advocacy of temperance, religious revivals, education and the family dynasty he left.

The inside of the 1830 meeting house has seen many redecorations and revisions. One of the most controversial redecorations occurred In 1883 when it "suffered" the application of stained glass windows and Italian frescoes on the ceiling. Many parishioners felt this was inappropriate in a New England congregational church. In any event an explosion in 1892 at the Ensign Bickford Company across the street took care of the windows. The explosion broke many of the windows and they had to be replaced. The church was also faced with redecoration to prepare for its 200th Anniversary in 1897. The offensive frescoes were painted over and the windows replaced with the more acceptable plain glass. During this time the minister was Mr. Charles Stowe, son of renowned author Harriet Beecher Stowe. He served from 1891 - 1899.

One of the stained glass productions was a special Memorial Window dedicated to our first four well-known ministers - the four mentioned above: The two Woodbridges, Stebbins and McLean. It was installed in the wall behind the altar. It was removed unharmed in 1892 and then installed in a chapel built in 1895. There it remained until the catastrophic fire in 1965 which caused the demolition of the 1925 north wing and the old chapel as well as extensive damage to the original 1830 meeting house. As fate would have it the memorial window was undamaged and was later sold to a private individual. As part of the preparation for the 300th anniversary in 1997 the beautifully wrought window was returned to First Church. It has been restored and reinstalled in the latest addition built in 1998 dedicated to Mr. Robert Naylor who served here from 1987 until 2001.

The 1830 meeting house was restored after the fire of 1965 and in 1985 a new addition to the church was dedicated to Mr. Lyman Potter who served this church from 1963 until 1986 during that challenging era. An aerial view of the church now shows the 1830 meeting house, the 1985 Potter Wing to the south and west, and the 1998 Naylor Wing to the north and west. This church, both the body of faith and the physical plant, have undergone many changes during 300+ years but remains true to its call to serve the Lord.

Updated in January 2003

For your information and reading a history of First Church of Christ at Massaco,

Simsbury, Connecticut "**To Sette Ourselves in Gospel Order**" was published in 2002 by Minister Emeritus Lyman G. Potter.

Minister Emeritus  
Lyman G. Potter

For copies of this complete and up to date history contact the church office at 860-651-3593 or by email at [first.church@1stchurchsimsbury.org](mailto:first.church@1stchurchsimsbury.org). Cost is \$20 (plus shipping if applicable).