

# 350 Years

*The First Church  
Of  
West Bridgewater, Massachusetts*



1651-2001

# A HISTORY OF THE FIRST CHURCH OF WEST BRIDGEWATER

## INTRODUCTION (1651 - 1664)

The birth of the First Church coincides with the first settlements in Old Bridgewater in the year 1651. Some of the settlers were people from Duxbury, and what is now West Bridgewater was then known as “Duxburrow New Plantation.” It is assumed that given the religious tradition and piety of those first settlers there were regular meetings in peoples homes for worship and spiritual oversight. And early reference is made to Deacon Samuel Edson who built the first mill. (1)

By 1656, the plantation had grown sufficiently to be incorporated as a separate town with the name of Bridgewater. The first recorded preacher was a young man named Benjamin Bunker from Charlestown who served for a year in 1660 - 61 for twenty pounds and his “diet.” However, the first settled pastor was the Rev. James Keith who served for 55 years until 1719. Keith came from Scotland, educated at Aberdeen, and arrived in Boston in 1662. He began his ministry at about that time and was granted a plot of land in the town. On February 18, 1664, he was ordained in a service of ordination and covenanting. The Keith homestead on River Street is still standing and may be the oldest house in West Bridgewater. Keith was recommended to the early settlers, many of whom came to this area from Salem, by none other than the Rev. Increase Mather of Cambridge, the well-known Puritan cleric, who later became the President of Harvard College.

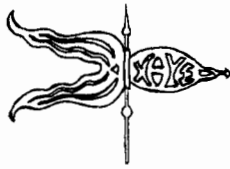


*The Oldest House in West Bridgewater, Mass. Built 1662*

The location of the first meeting house, built of logs in 1661, is disputed, but it probably faced the river near the present intersection of River and Arch Streets. (2) The first burying ground was nearby, and the gravestones were without inscriptions at that time. They were removed in 1853 by the owner of the land. Oral tradition says that Rev. Keith preached his first sermon from Pulpit Rock near the town river, and the text he used was from Jeremiah 1: 6 “Behold, I cannot speak for I am a child.”



“The terms of his settlement were liberal, a double house lot of 12 acres with a house built thereon and a purchase right, so called, being a 26th part of the original grant: 40 pounds annual salary, 20 pounds to be paid in Boston in money, the other half at home.” (3)



## THE FORMATIVE YEARS (1664 - 1831)

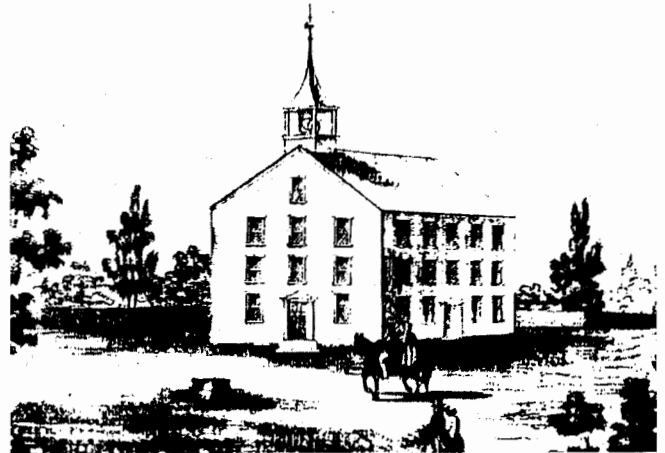
In the early years, the town was “a most praying and pious town,” according to the Mathers. However, the poverty of the people made the financial support of the parish problematical during much of its early life. Even after 25 years, the town instructed “David Perkins, John Ames, and Samuel Washburn to get in Mr. Keith’s salary by all loving and legal means.”

Rev. Keith married Susannah Edson, daughter of his deacon, for his first wife, and after her death, he wed Mary, widow of Thomas Williams of Taunton. The Keiths parented six sons and three daughters.

The original log meeting house was dismantled in 1674, and a second building was erected near the present war memorial at the intersection of Routes 28 and 106. It was forty feet by twenty-six, and fourteen feet high inside. It was strongly fortified, with a storeroom and hall, that it might serve as a fortress or a church as occasion should require. This was a precarious time for the settlement. King Philip’s War in 1675 - 76 raged around them, and although actual fighting did not occur here they were sorely afraid of attack and suffered economically, as the war affected the entire region. At this time, there were only 64 men

over nineteen years of age in the primitive settlement. In 1676, Rev. Keith convinced the colonial authorities to spare the lives of “King Philip’s” wife and son after the war.

The third meeting house was built in 1731 on the same site and served as a house of worship for 70 years. It was known as the Old Town-house or the “Three Decker,” because of its three rows of windows.



The fourth church building moved to the present site and was constructed in 1801. The older facility was then used for town meetings until it was taken down in 1823. “For nearly 150 years the people of all the Bridgewater came to this spot for their town meetings.” (4)

From the founding of Plymouth Colony in 1620, church membership and citizenship were one and the same. In 1631, a General Court in Boston decreed for the Massachusetts Bay Colony “that for time to come no man shall be admitted to the freedom of this body politick but such as are members of some of the churches within the same.” (5) The vision of the Pilgrims was to establish a holy commonwealth, and the separation of church and state did not come about for two hundred years.

In those early years, the life of the church and the town were inseparable, and undoubtedly Rev. Keith and his deacons administered rites of baptism, served communion, admonished wayward

sinner and inactive worshipers, and played leadership roles in the business and political affairs of the settlement. The Pilgrims and their descendants were separatists from the Church of England, and both doctrine and administration of church business was under the authority of the local congregation, hence the origin of their identification as Congregationalists.

In the New England of that period, Harvard College was founded to educate and train clergy to serve the congregations of the area. The early faculty were orthodox Reformed churchmen, and Harvard was the center of Puritan theology. The sovereignty of God, the authority of the Word of God in the Bible, the depravity of man, salvation by grace and not works, the saved as the chosen people, and the predestination of everyone were undoubtedly themes of Rev. Keith's preaching in those early years. At seventy-four years of age, Rev. Keith preached a sermon at the dedication of a meeting house in the newly formed South Parish of the area where he condemned "the scandalous and horrible abuse of rum, which threatens ruin unto this land and to this place; a ruin to all our dearest interests, both civil and religious." (6)

One report says that when Keith's daughter Mary was married to her next door neighbor, Ephraim Howard, he was opposed to the match and soon after preached a sermon on the text from the Bible that said Ephraim is joined to an idol. Then, later, "he preached another sermon from this text: Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he a pleasant child? For since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still, therefore my bowels are troubled for him. I will surely have mercy upon him, saith the Lord." Apparently, Keith came to terms with the union and accepted his new son-in-law.

Not only were church and state combined, but scripture and everyday life were joined in a community devoted to taming and farming the land while creating a religious commonwealth of order and peace.

Rev. Keith died in 1719, and was succeeded by the

Rev. Daniel Perkins who was ordained in 1721. Rev. Perkins probably lived in a house on Center Street just west of the church. He came from Topfield, MA, and was a graduate of Harvard College in 1717. His second wife, Mme Hancock, was the mother of John Hancock, Governor of Massachusetts and one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. (7)

Records still remain of baptisms in the church in the early 1720s, and there are countless entries in the minutes of their meetings of what was called "Administration of Censure and Reconciliation." It appears that the primary sins that were censured were thievery, intemperance, fornication, and absence from public worship. For example, one entry relates how in 1733, the church "publicly admonished Paul Edson the Second for the sin of intemperance and his incorrigibility therein." Or in 1722, "Barry Richard confessed his injuring his Neighbour and was restored to the Church." And in 1732, "Joseph Lathrop publickly confessed his Breach of the 7th Commandment and was restored to Charity."

The records also indicate that during this time there were slaves in the community who were considered members of the church. There are two entries, one in 1736 of John Snell's Negro man Amos and another in 1738 of Zipporah, John Snell's Negro woman, who had confessed sins and been restored. Two other names, a Jane Negro and a Sarah Kips are recorded in 1742 who were "admitted to church privileges" after confessions.

Other activity in the congregation during this period as recorded in the minutes of the Congregational Society were the selection of deacons by casting lots, responses to requests from neighboring parishes for delegates at ecclesiastical councils to examine and ordain clergy and for persons who could give counsel when there was conflict in a congregation. It is interesting to note that even in a congregational polity where the freedom of the local church was exalted, parishes relied heavily on one another for credentialing ministers and resolving church conflicts.

Rev. Perkins' tenure of 61 years took the church through the Revolutionary War and into the early years of the new republic. He died in 1782 and his ministry was remembered as "not only long, but peaceful and efficacious." Another account, however, tells of a theological struggle that resulted from the Great Awakening that swept many churches in New England in the early 1700s and eventually led to a split in the congregation.

During the early years of Rev. Perkin's ministry, New England was experiencing a growing tension between two interpretations of Christian faith. Those who became known as New Light Christians emphasized the need for a faith rooted in one's personal experience through conversion and a more orthodox theology. On the other hand, Old Light Christians were less strict in defining church membership and less dogmatic in theology. Jonathan Edwards in Western Massachusetts and George Whitefield, an English evangelist who preached throughout the area in 1740, were leaders of the movement that swept New England and produced a revival of enthusiasm and piety in many churches, now known as the Great Awakening. We have the testimony of a Baptist minister, Rev. Albert Copeland, published in 1877, about the beginnings of a conflict in this parish soon after George Whitefield's revivals in the area. "John Porter was Pastor of the North parish, and Daniel Perkins pastor of the West parish in Bridgewater, and as the churches were of the same order, frequently exchanged pulpits. Mr. Porter was converted under Whitefield's preaching. Soon after this event, he exchanged with Mr. Perkins, and on the day of the exchange Mr. Perkin's theme was 'The Good Old Way,' while Mr. Porter's theme was 'The New and Living Way.' The impression made upon Mr. Perkin's people by Mr. Porter's preaching was such that Mr. Perkins ever after declined to exchange with Mr. Porter."

His account goes on to describe the schism in this way: "Originally there was but one church in Bridgewater, and it was of the Puritan order, or as we of today say, strictly Orthodox Con-

gregationalist. We find this church maintained purity during the pastorate of its first pastor, Rev. James Keith. And for aught we know, for the first few years of its second pastor, Rev. Daniel Perkins. But in 1748 we had the church begin to be troubled by Separatists; probably these were the fruit of the "great awakening" or possibly the result of the preaching of John Porter, whose sermon "The New Way" so excited the ire of Mr. Perkins."

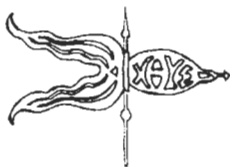
Copeland goes on to report a series of meetings in the church to discuss what to do with members who were worshipping separately in people's houses. After a year of discussion and meetings, twenty-eight members of the church were suspended for their separatist views. Although it took more than thirty-six years for the 1st Baptist Church to be formally organized in West Bridgewater by Separatists, the schism must have impacted The First Church. For example, in 1768, nineteen years after the exclusion of the Separatists, the church voted "That no relation of experience should be required of persons desiring admission to the church, nor be improved unless the person desiring admission desired." Throughout this period the struggle between these two theological camps must have been a major theme. (8)

Rev. Perkins died at the age of 86 after sixty-two years of ministry. His successor was the Rev. John Reed who graduated from Yale College in 1773. Reed was ordained in 1782 after serving as a colleague with Rev. Perkins from 1780. Prior to his ordination, Reed served as a chaplain in the Continental Navy and later as a Congressman for six years (1794-1800) during George Washington's second term and during John Adam's presidency. He was a friend of Washington and an invited guest in the President's home. Known as an articulate and able preacher, Rev. Reed was much respected in ecclesiastical councils, and was later granted a Doctor of Divinity degree. "Many years before his death, he became blind; but he continued to preach, and with his psalm book open in his hand, he would

recite a whole versified Psalm from memory and also the scripture lesson.” (9) He died in 1831 at seventy-nine after fifty-one years of ministry.

These three long pastorates, from 1664 - 1831, rooted this church deeply in the life and development of West Bridgewater. The church had survived threat of war, economic deprivation, and theological schism, and continued to monitor the religious and civic life of the town into the nineteenth century. One vignette from August 6, 1790 illustrates the church’s role in maintaining moral conduct in the community.

“At a meeting of the Church properly notified - the church voted to suspend Isaac Johnson from their communion on the account of his intemperance and unbecoming conduct - Voted also that Mr. John Reed and Deacon Elizabeth Snell (note a female deacon) be appointed a committee to inform Isaac Johnson of this procedure of the Church with respect to him, and to converse with him respecting his unchristian behavior.” (10)



## THE UNITARIAN CHAPTER (1832-1901)

The new century dawned with the building of a new building on Howard Street, the old church in the center of town having been touched by fire two years before. There is a certain amount of mystery surrounding this fire as there is no actual record of the date and extent of damage. There are several references in minutes of meetings in following years to “the fire” but nothing concrete. One could conclude that the fire failed to destroy the building because there are records of its use by the town up to 1823. On the

other hand, there are references to some church records being destroyed and the bell being slightly damaged by “the fire” leading one to deduce that it might have been significant. We do know that when the town took over the building in 1802 it was minus the steeple and the bell. There are no records connecting the two events.

In retrospect, it was quite remarkable that this congregation of relatively modest means, was able to find the funds and manpower necessary to build, what was at the time, a very imposing new structure. Although there is no mention of it directly, it is probable that at least a portion of the expense was borne by a tax levy. It was quite tall by existing standards, with two rows of ten-foot tall windows up to a bell tower and steeple. The shell of the current church is actually the same as the original building, having undergone window modification and additions through the years. It featured the very simple exterior of the day with three entry doors across the front. Town folklore has it that this was because the center door was for the entry of the landowners and Gentry that “owned” pews downstairs, while the outside doors were for access to the balconies by slaves (yes, West Bridgewater had quite a few slaves) and those non-property owners who, though encouraged to attend church, were not allowed to mingle with the parishioners. There are also records showing the vote in 1903 to add sheds or protective shelters on the north side of the building to house the horses while parishioners were attending services.



Despite the new house of worship, the congregation often had to struggle with finances and the hiring of a spiritual leader, the two being forever linked. Meanwhile, the Town continued to hold its "Town Meetings" in the church for free, having to get the permission of the voting congregation or Parish Committee each year. The arrangement appears in the records as being a little strained, and one year the Town made an offer to buy the church for use as a "Town Hall". The following year, when the Town asked to use the hall again, the vote for the first time was not recorded as unanimous and granted on the condition that the Town "clean up its mess, including sweeping the hall". (12)

## THE CONVERSION

In the period of conversion from 1820 to about 1831 the minister of record was the Rev. John Reed. However, he was of poor health, being in his 70's and having served this congregation since 1780 (a remarkable 51 years) he was often absent from the pulpit. This resulted in the hiring of "pulpit fill". Readily available from Harvard was a supply of young ministers of the "New Wave", being of Unitarian rather than Calvinistic persuasion. These were often employed for a week or a month or two as finances allowed. The Unitarian/Universalist records kept in Boston show the conversion of the church to Unitarianism as taking place in 1821, however this is open to question and at best was hardly an epiphany. Church records show the conversion as a rather gradual assimilation starting with the employment of occasional pulpit supply, to the actual hiring of the first "settled" Unitarian minister, the Rev. Mr. Richard Stone in June of 1834 for the annual sum of \$500. With the "conversion" of denomination came a number of additions to the parish as well as a number of prominent defections. The church records have perhaps as many as twenty families (20%) leaving the parish and joining other church groups mostly the "New Jerusalem" Churches of Bridgewater and East Bridgewater (Elmwood). The First Congregational Church (Unitarian) as it

became known, welcomed about an equal number from many different traditions, further broadening its membership base, as is true even today.

Throughout this period, the Church struggled to meet its expenses, often being unable to pay the Rev. Stone his salary on time. This forced him often to rely on the "goodness of the people" to feed and even cloth him. Yet he chose to stay and guide his flock through this difficult time. This financial dilemma was further exacerbated by the enforcement in 1833 of the law of "Separation of Church and State" which no longer allowed the church to assess the townsfolk by way of a tax for maintenance of the building. All monies raised then became voluntary by way of pledges and sale of pew space for the year. An attempt to charge the Town for the use of the parish hall for Town Meetings failed to get a vote at this time, but with the resignation of the Rev. Stone in Sept of 1842 due to insufficient funds to pay him, the church rethought its actions and begun to charge everyone for the use of the hall.

During this time, the members also decided to replace the steeple bell (whose tone was of "questionable merit"), and a new bell was ordered in the spring of 1814. The actual decision to replace the bell came with a vote in November of 1802 hinging on a decision not to put the old bell into the steeple of the new building. The original bell had caused some problems through its years, having cracked in cold weather only 5 years after its purchase from the Paul Revere bell company, and then after recasting, cracked again when rung after the fire in 1798. The old bell, having been removed from the old building, was traded into the Henry H. Hooper Company of Boston, then located in Natick, where it was melted down and became part of the larger 1600 pound bell that presently occupies the belfry. (note: Henry H. Hooper is recorded as having been the grandson of Paul Revere and served in his early years as an apprentice in the Paul Revere Bell Co.) With no available funds, the church borrowed the money and repaid it by subscription. This was the first recorded "capital drive" to be followed to this

date by many, many, more. The delivery of the bell being contingent on payment, and the casting of a new iron frame to support it, it was 1839 before delivery was accepted and it was hoisted, with considerable fanfare, to the belfry. When researching the history of the bell, a sales slip was discovered from "The Perkins Foundry of Bridgewater" (not the same one as currently exists) for the delivery of a wagon load of bell yokes to the Hooper Co. in Natick Mass. where the shipping cost was seventy five cents each.(13)

It should be noted that the name of Captain Benjamin Beal Howard, the munificent benefactor of the church and indeed the whole town, is not mentioned anywhere in the church records until 1844 when he was appointed as a member of a "search committee" to look for a new minister. From that point on, nearly every meeting contains his name for nearly 20 years. This, despite other records showing his activities being centered in the Fall River and New Bedford area where he owned various businesses and factories. Captain Howard, it should be noted, did not acquire his rank as a sea captain. Rather, it was the rank he achieved (bought?) as a member of the Plymouth militia following the war of 1812. The good Captain died in June of 1867 and the town convened a special town meeting for the purpose that, "Captain Howard be held in grateful remembrance for his many excellencies of character and for his munificent bequests for the promotion of education and other useful objects in this, his native town." (14) The histories of the town and those of the Howard family are filled with anecdotes and vignettes of the prowess of the Captain to obtain the best deal or the finest result, usually for the town rather than for himself. Upon his death, his will left the sum of one hundred and two thousand dollars to establish three charities in the town.

The first was the sum of eighty thousand dollars to be used to support a High School or Seminary of higher learning to be called the "Howard School". The second was twenty thousand dollars to the "First Congregational (Unitarian) Society of the

Town" to be known as the "Howard Parochial Fund to support Unitarian or Liberal preaching." The third was two thousand dollars, the income from which was to be used to support scientific lectures in the town. This "Howard Parochial Fund" is what you see in the annual report of the Church each year as four to five thousand dollars of income from the "Howard Fund". Twenty five thousand dollars of the original eighty thousand was combined with fifteen thousand from Otis Drury and fifteen thousand from G.H. Packard to fund the building of the "Howard School for Girls". The classroom building, named after Capt. Howard doubled as a public High School until it burned in March of 1947, while the Drury and Packard monies built dormitories, dining rooms, and other facilities for the school for girls. Some of the Drury money was also used to purchase the bell that hung in the tower of the High School until it burned. It was a common sight in the early and mid 1900's to see the students of the girls school marching, almost in formation, over to the "First Congregational (Unitarian) Church" on Sunday mornings to participate in worship.



In February of 1846, in line with the many creative ways employed to raise money for the church, the society voted to do extensive renovation to the building. The major thrust being the "decking over" of the sanctuary and moving the pews and pulpit to the second floor. This allowed a meeting hall to be created on the first floor that could be rented to various groups "without regard to their



piety". (15) Money was raised for the project (\$2500) by selling "stock" in the church property to be bought back as money became available. If one enters the downstairs meeting hall, it becomes immediately obvious where the edge of the original balcony was, as the support columns have a heavy square base. Where as the "new" columns added to support the decking above are very plain cylinders from floor to ceiling. With the new meeting hall, the members of the church felt justified in asking a higher fee to the town for using it for Town Meeting. This once again increased tensions between the church and the town at large and many contentious Town Meetings were held to deal with the problems. The end result was that in the annual meeting of the Town in 1891 the town voted to build its own "Almshouse and Grange Hall" on North Main Street, (16) thus ending the relationship between the church and the town that had existed for 250 years.

In the Annual meeting of the church in 1858, motions to change the name first to "The Union Church", then to the "First Unitarian Church" were both defeated preferring to keep the active name of "The First Congregational (Unitarian) Church of West Bridgewater" complete with parentheses. However, the name "Union Hall" was moved and accepted for the downstairs meeting area.

## **THE CIVIL WAR PERIOD**

The official church minutes are surprisingly devoid of mention of the war between the states. The only recognition found is a "one line" statement in 1862 that a parishioner was forgiven of his pew assessment because he was away "in the service of his country's military." (17) There is no basis in any of the church records to believe that the often repeated folk tale the Church was involved in the "underground railway" movement or that the Howard home on the southwest end of Howard street, (now the Howell home) was part of the network.

One might even suspect, by reading between the lines, that the situation was quite the contrary. A number of families in West Bridgewater had owned slaves (or indentured servants to be politically correct for the period) and any attempt to change the status quo was not met with any enthusiasm. The unusual thing is that many of these indentured servants attended church regularly (sitting in the balcony) and often were voted to be "associate members". The abolition movement in West Bridgewater was strongest amongst those of Baptist persuasion in the West end of town and was not openly embraced by those of the First Church. Meanwhile, the local Ku Klux Klan continued to hold its regular monthly rallies in the field off North Elm Street now occupied by Hartshorn St., Brewster and Goldie Roads until well after the turn of the century. (18)

In fairness to those of the "First Congregational (Unitarian) Church" who would, by this action appear to be bigots, this was not at all the case. First, there appears to be two somewhat conflicting groups in the church. The first being the "day-to-day" supporters of the church who were quite progressive and liberal and who supported abolition. The second being those of the governing "society" of the church, made up of merchants and gentry, who were happy with the status quo and did not wish to do anything to jeopardize their business contacts in Boston or in the near south.

The second point was that those who maintained "slaves" treated them quite differently than those in the south. In many cases, they were accepted members of the households as cooks and nannies and the thought of selling or trading them would be quite unacceptable. Those who worked for the various merchants often worked side-by-side with the indentured apprentices learning trade skills and sometimes received small stipends for work well done. Often, after a period of time, they were allowed to become "freemen", although most stayed with the security of their former owner. The merchants saw no reason to upset a system that appeared to work to the benefit of all.

Prior to the war, in 1850, the then current minister of record, Daniel Forman, preached a sermon condemning the "Fugitive Slave Act" that had been recently passed by Congress. This apparently caused quite a furor amongst the congregation, resulting in the resignation of Rev. Forman who later became a Chaplain in the Union Army. Embarrassed by this action, and finding it difficult to find a minister, a deacon of the church named Captain Jeremiah Kingman at the urging of the Rev. Russell A. Ballou, offered the following resolution at a regular meeting:

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"Whereas we deem it the right and privilege of all men, clergymen as well as others, to hold such opinions, on all subjects as to them appear right and true, and also publicly to express those opinions, whenever and wherever they shall believe it their duty to do so, they alone being responsible for those opinions.

Therefore:

Resolved, that whomever be employed to accept the pulpit of this society, shall be left perfectly free to vetting all of his moral convictions, with no restraint, but such as his own sense of justice shall impose, as due to the feelings and opinions of his auditory.

Voted and passed.(19)

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All of this is not to say that the men of the First Congregational (Unitarian) Church did not participate in the preservation of the Union. The census of the day showed that there were 208 men of the Town that were eligible to be conscripted. The records also show that 54 of these men volunteered to serve in a joint company of men from West, East, and Bridgewater, while seven joined the navy. No men were ever conscripted from the Town such was their patriotism. The monument in the center of town gives tribute to the 31 that gave their life. "To the preservation of their

Government" in this war. (20) Many of the names on the monument are family names long associated with the church. Records kept both in the Town Hall and at the Old Bridgewater Historical Society give detail to occasions of courage and bravery by this small group.

In 1867, shortly after the death of Captain Howard, the Rev Mr. Forman visited the church, 16 years having passed since his resignation, and preached for two Sabbaths.(21) His return was greeted with such enthusiasm that he was invited to again serve the church as its pastor and did so for the following five years and then on occasion for the next three years. He was indeed one of the most popular Unitarian ministers ever to serve this parish. His earlier resignation, having been regarded as "an act of principle", further enhanced his position with the society.

## THE UNITARIAN YEARS CONTINUED (1900-1954)

For the First Church of West Bridgewater, the 20th century began with a celebration in 1901 of its two-hundred and fiftieth anniversary and of one hundred years in its present building. An Anniversary Hymn, written by Helen Keith Frost for that occasion reflects her understanding of the history of that time

"From four centuries benedictions  
Rest on those who worship here.  
Loyalty to their convictions  
Led to change in faith austere.  
Pastors who have been undaunted  
And free speech devoutly taught,  
Have before all others planted  
Winged seeds of liberal thought.

Former creeds were made to teach us  
Truths we only see in part,  
God was manifest in Jesus  
But he enters every heart  
Source of life, vouchsafe Thy guidance

Ever help us do Thy will.  
May our souls reflect Thy presence,  
May our hearts Thy law fulfil.

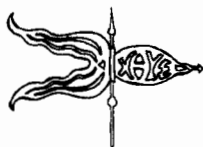
In the order of service for this commemoration, the Declaration of Faith and Purpose tersely reflected its theology.

“Our Faith is in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God.

Our purpose is to co-operate for the study and practice of Christianity.”

Except for newspaper reports of this celebration in 1901, there are almost no existing records of the activities of the “First Congregational (Unitarian) Church” during the first half of the twentieth century. One exception in the files of the Old Bridgewater Historical Society is a yearbook for 1930-1931 of “The West Bridgewater Branch of the General Alliance of Unitarian and other Liberal Christian Women,” listing the programs and activities of each monthly meeting. Four of the meetings were addressed by guest speakers who were clergymen.

It is also known that in 1914, women from the Unitarian Alliance formed a service organization to help the war effort in Europe. The group called itself the KA Club and met in the church. With the entry of the United States into World War One, the women dedicated their services to our soldiers overseas. The KA Club is still active today as a social group with 21 members, but it no longer functions as a service club. Although there are no records, John (Jack) Eldridge maintained that his mother, Alice Eldridge, was the clubs first president.



## THE REUNION (1954 - Present)

From the rapid succession of Pastors after World War I, we can surmise that the church fell again on hard times and by the early fifties, questions about its survival must have been troubling. At the same time, another West Bridgewater congregation, the Sunset Avenue Congregational Church, was experiencing dwindling membership and support and looking at a similar future. This congregation had been a new church start by the Massachusetts Conference of Congregational Churches in 1920. After months of conversations and negotiations, the two churches agreed to merge in 1954. At the time of the merger, the Conference Yearbook reported 78 members for the Sunset Avenue Church and an average attendance of 29 for Sunday worship. Eighty one children and 31 youth were listed, and the pastor of record was the Rev. D. R. Dunbar. The Congregationalists sold their building to a candy factory and moved into the First Church.

The reunion of these two Christian traditions after nearly 120 years of separation was a relatively smooth transition theologically speaking. Throughout its Unitarian years, the official name of the church had remained the “First Congregational Church (Unitarian) of West Bridgewater”. In 1956 the name was amended in the Constitution and Bylaws to read: “The First Congregational-Unitarian Church of West Bridgewater”. This language remained until 1989 when the present name of “The First Church of West Bridgewater” was selected. The church is currently affiliated with the two denominations of its past: the United Church of Christ, (founded in 1957 by the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church), and the Unitarian Universalist Association (founded in 1964 by the Unitarians and the Universalists). After nearly 120 years, the church reaffirmed its historic roots and an ecumenical vision of the future church.

At the outset of the merger, however, there were tensions around the question of pastoral leader-

ship, statements of covenant and purpose, and renovation of the building. Though it had been previously agreed that both pastors would resign at the time of the merger, the Rev. Paul Lauffer was selected to continue as the minister and served until 1959. Theological issues were settled by the adoption of dual covenants in 1956 :

A. Unitarian: "In the love of truth and the spirit of Jesus, we unite for the worship of God and the service of man".

B. Congregational: "Acknowledging Jesus Christ to be our Savior and Lord, and accepting the Holy Scripture as our rule of faith and practice and the duty of uniting ourselves for Christian fellowship, the enjoyment of Christian administration, the public worship of God and the advancement of His kingdom in the world. We do now, in the sight of God and invoking his blessing, solemnly covenant and agree with each other to associate ourselves to be a church of the Lord Jesus Christ as warranted by the word of God. We agree to maintain the institution of the Gospel, to submit ourselves to the orderly administration of the affairs of the church, and to walk together in brotherly love and this we do depending on our Heavenly Father who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son for our salvation, and of Jesus Christ who has redeemed us with his blood and of the Holy Spirit our Comforter and guide.

In short, the members of the newly constituted church agreed to live in harmony with both a Trinitarian and Unitarian faith.

In the nearly fifty years that have transpired from this reunion, there is now one covenant, adopted in 1988, that speaks to the church's present faith and purpose:

"We, the members of The First Church of West Bridgewater, united by the love of one another and guided by the teachings of Jesus Christ, hold it to be our purpose to maintain a welcoming house for the worship of God: to teach and study the lessons

of our faith; to develop programs for those in need; and to sponsor fellowship opportunities. All this we support in order to build a sustaining and caring community of Faith."

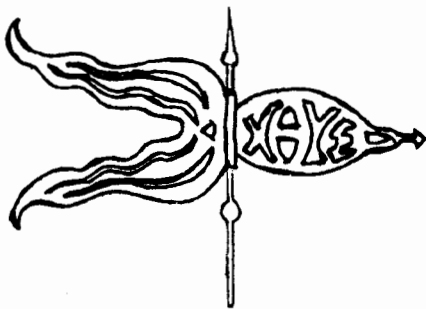
A third area of tension within the church was the question of renovating the building in response to the increased activities and programs resulting from the merger. In the fifties and early sixties, the Sunday School grew rapidly, and the Christmas party had to be held at the new High School because of its size. Likewise, the annual Sunday School picnic was held for several years at the Middleboro YMCA camp with hot dogs, hamburgers, watermelon, softball, and swimming for all who wished to participate.

During this period, over 150 children participated in an active Sunday school program with a summer Bible school. Three choirs, under the leadership of Gladys Haggland, the director for 25 years, sang in regular worship and at special events. There was a senior choir, a junior choir, and a cherub choir. In addition, a Unicon (acronym for Unitarian/Congregational) bowling league for both men and women, a senior/junior youth group, a boys basketball team, a couples club, a women's "fellowship", and a Deacon's breakfast for men and boys filled a busy social calendar. The church also sponsored both a Boy and Girl Scout Troop, and Brownies met in the vestry every week. At this time, the vestry had a stage at the north end, and the kitchen was in what is now the nursery. The vestry seemed to be always occupied with square dancing, whist parties, church suppers, an antique show, and occasionally a dramatic play on stage. On Sunday, of course, it served as the Church School.

Late in 1967, a committee was appointed to plan an addition to the church to accommodate its growing program and ministry. It focused on the building and the new structure, and its plans were approved in 1969. A second committee was formed in 1970 to implement the plan and the construction of the two-floor addition. The stage was removed, and the kitchen and rest rooms were put

in on the first floor. On the second floor, a church office and conference room were built, as well as a study for the pastor. The original plans called for the cellar to be excavated for new Sunday School classrooms, but there was no funding for this step.

In 1951, the steeple of the church was struck by lightning and taken down. In 1975, a new pre-fabricated aluminum steeple was erected. The weather vane at the top was designed by Karen Turner, and features a stylized fish (an early Christian symbol). The Greek word for fish, IKTHUS, incorporated in the design, became an acronym for "Jesus Christ, God's Son and Savior."



Several years later, Warren and Betty Turner with their own hands attached three clock faces with gold hands, constructed at the Southeastern Regional Vocational School, that continues to toll the hours.

In the early 1950s, the church purchased a parsonage for its pastor, the Rev. Nelson Cheney. When the Howard School for Girls was razed in 1950 the Howard Trust enabled the congregation to purchase the "Perkins House" next door to the church for a parsonage. Later, this property was sold because pastors preferred housing which they could own and build equity in.

A major undertaking in the 1980s was the construction of an elevator from the ground level to the Fellowship Hall and then on up another floor to the sanctuary. \$55,000 was raised in a special campaign. This addition has proved invaluable to the elderly and disabled in our congregation and community.

Most recently, a capital campaign was completed in 2000 that provided \$90,000 to repair the steeple, purchase new windows for the sanctuary and Fellowship Hall, acoustical dividers for Sunday School classrooms, repaving the parking lot, repainting and recarpeting the sanctuary, reupholstering the pulpit furniture, and repairing the organ.

Vatican II in the early 1960s offered the church an opportunity to expand its ecumenical vision. The priest at St. Anne's Roman Catholic Church around the corner was invited to preach at the First Church, and later the congregation presented St. Anne's with a flowering cherry tree that was planted on their front lawn and still stands today.

In that spirit, an annual Thanksgiving Service was organized with St. Anne's and the Cochesett United Methodist Church. To this day, the three congregations alternate their sanctuaries and ministers for a community Thanksgiving Celebration. Recently, the First Church and St. Anne's have shared joint Lenten programs, including a healing service and the Stations of the Cross. On Good Friday, the Cochesett United Methodist Church and the First Church share a service and luncheon to commemorate the seven last words of Jesus.

In 1962, two boys graduated from West Bridgewater High School who were confirmed at the First Church: Robert Anderson, son of Howard and Jessie Anderson, and James Anderson, son of Gustav and Marie Anderson. Although they did not at that time indicate an interest in theology, they later entered seminary and were ordained for Christian ministry. Rev. James Anderson now serves a Lutheran Church on Long Island and Rev. Robert Anderson a Baptist congregation in Boston.

The present pastor, the Rev. Marguerite Unwin Voelkel came in 1994 as the first settled woman minister in our history, although both of our denominational traditions ordained women in the mid-1800s. The profile of the congregation today is similar to the experience of many churches and

in keeping with our history as a community church. Given the ecumenical spirit that is evident here, the current membership of 240 consists of persons from most of the major denominations and traditions. Perhaps what is most characteristic of our particular heritage is a non-creedal theology that honors historical creeds of the Church but uses them as testimonies of faith rather than tests of faith.

The Bible is a source of inspiration and guidance, and the Communion is an open and inclusive table. As the community becomes more diverse, so does our membership. Sunday morning worship is central to our life and includes lay liturgists, a choir and congregational singing, Biblical preaching, children present for part of the service, special services for Baptisms and Blessings, and a monthly celebration of Communion. We use an ecumenical curriculum in the Sunday School and the minister preaches from the Common Lectionary.

The minister teaches a weekly confirmation class for youth, 14 years and older. Two Bible study groups meet weekly, and the church allocates 8% of its pledged income for local and world-wide mission projects. Recently, the congregation joined the Brockton Interfaith Community, a coalition of churches and synagogues in the greater Brockton area, working on community and social justice issues. In addition, Fellowship Hall is used weekly by the Girl Scouts and an Alcoholics Anonymous group. In November 2000, a special service commemorating "Kristtlnacht" was held in the sanctuary in conjunction with the Klal Yisrael congregation in Stoughton.

Therefore, as we celebrate these 350 years in West Bridgewater and move forward into the 21st Century, we praise God for such a great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us and continue to serve today.

## SETTLED MINISTERS OF THE FIRST CHURCH

Rev. James Keith . . . . .	.1664 - 1719
Rev. Daniel Perkins . . . . .	.1720 - 1782
Rev. John Reed . . . . .	.1782 - 1831
Rev. Richard Stone . . . . .	1834 - 1842
Rev. Darius Forbes . . . . .	.1845 - 1847
Rev. Jacob Forman . . . . .	.1849 - 1851
Rev. Russell Ballou . . . . .	.1852 - 1856
Rev. Ira Bailey . . . . .	.1857 - 1860
Rev. Daniel Potter . . . . .	.1860 - 1863
Rev. Theodore Dean . . . . .	.1865 - 1867
Rev. Jacob Forman . . . . .	.1867 - 1872
Rev. Frank Hamblett . . . . .	.1872 - 1876
Rev. David Montgomery . . . . .	.1877 - 1880
Rev. William Brown . . . . .	.1883 - 1888
Rev. Samuel Hamlet . . . . .	.1889 - 1894
Rev. Edward Magathlin . . . . .	.1894 - 1916
Rev. Albert Leavitt . . . . .	.1916 - 1917
Rev. Louis Walker . . . . .	.1919 - 1920
Rev. Frank Gredler . . . . .	.1921 - 1922
Rev. John Hayes . . . . .	.1922 - 1926
Rev. Charles Horst . . . . .	.1926 - 1931
Rev. Gerald Fitzpatrick . . . . .	.1931 - 1934
Rev. Horace Westwood . . . . .	.1935 - 1938
Rev. Ernest Brown . . . . .	.1938 - 1939
Rev. John Hersey . . . . .	.1939 - 1943
Rev. Leon Fay . . . . .	.1944 - 1949
Rev. Paul Lauffer . . . . .	.1949 - 1959
Rev. Nelson Chaney . . . . .	.1960 - 1965
Rev. Thomas Pardue . . . . .	.1965 - 1968
Rev. Richard Burton . . . . .	1968 - 1977
Rev. Clayton Witt . . . . .	.1981 - 1983
Rev. Paul Hanna . . . . .	.1983 - 1993
Rev. Marguerite Unwin Voelkel . . . . .	.1994 - 2001
Rev. Dr. Carol Karr Ashton . . . . .	2004 -

The ministers listed above are reported as settled ministers. Over the years, the church has also been served by supply or interim ministers. Only the settled ministers have been named. For the first ten years (1651 - 1661), the congregation met in members homes under lay leadership and supply preachers.

## HISTORICAL SOURCES

One difficulty in writing a brief history of the First Church is the problem of distinguishing fact from folklore, for there is both an oral and written tradition. In this document, we have tried to rely primarily on written documents, although newspaper accounts are also subject to reporting folklore. Following are the sources of information that we have included, relying on the previous research of others as well as on original material.

(1) Old Bridgewater Tercentary (1656-1956)

(2) One major question is the location of the original log cabin meeting house. There is documentation for five different sites, three of them quite extensive. They range from the corner of South Elm Street to the corner of Howard and River Streets, to the corner of Arch and River Streets to Howard Street near the Old Bridgewater Historical Society or some where in between. The most thorough research was done by Lawrence Conant, and we agree with his location near the corner of River and Arch Streets.

(3) The Taunton Evening News, March 11, 1901

(4) The Bridgewater Book, 1908 This is a primary source for much of the material in "the formative years".

(5) Historical Lecture Showing the cause Which Led to the Formation of Baptist Churches in Massachusetts by Albert Copeland, 1877

(6) The Taunton Evening News, March 11, 1901

(7) Ibid

(8) Historical Lecture, Ibid

(9) Sermon Delivered Before the Congregational Society in West Bridgewater - February 7, 1831 after the internment of the Rev. John Reed by the Rev. R. M. Hodges

(10) Records of the First Church from the

Ordination of the Rev. Daniel Perkins in 1721 to the Present Time. (pages unnumbered)

(11) Sermon by Hodges, Ibid

(12) Official Church minutes of the Annual Church Meeting of 1841 (pages unnumbered) kept in the office of the Church.

(13) "Bill of Lading" found in the West Bridgewater file of the Old Bridgewater Historical Society.

(14) Official Town Records of West Bridgewater Vol. 2 1850-1879 PP#252 kept in Town Clerk's office.

(15) Official Church minutes of the Annual Church Meeting of April 1846 (pages unnumbered) kept in office of the church.

(16) Official Town Records of West Bridgewater Vol. 3 1879-1918 PP# 181 kept in Town Clerk's office.

(17) Official church minutes of Annual Church Meeting of 1862 (pages unnumbered)

(18) First person observation, Marge MacDonald, 1924-1925

(19) Official Church minutes of the Special Church Meeting March 2, 1852 (pages unnumbered)

(20) Inscription on the monument to veterans of the Civil War. Central Square, Town

(21) Records of the church 1835-1891 (pages numbered by date)

This story of the First Church of West Bridgewater was prepared by a Task Force appointed by the President of the First Church, Howard Anderson, consisting of Dorothy Seabloom, Warren Turner, and William Voelkel





Detail from front cover

The picture by Burrell was probably taken in 1903 after the horse sheds were built.