



First Congregational Church

Watertown, CT

**THE HISTORY  
OF  
FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
WATERTOWN, CONNECTICUT**

**1739 – 2014**

## CELEBRATING 275 YEARS 1739 - 2014

One generation shall praise thy works to another,  
and shall declare Thy mighty acts

Psalm 145, verse 4

In 1720 Jonathon Scott and Ebenzer Richason ventured into the northwest corner of the town of Waterbury. They each established a farm, setting the roots for a permanent settlement named Wooster Swamp. In 1729 the Garsney family moved to the Guernseystown area. By 1732 this region, renamed Westbury, boasted thirty-two people.

For the families and friends of Jonathon Scott, Ebenzer Richason and the Garsneys, attending worship meant a nine-mile journey to the nearest Congregational meetinghouse which was located in Waterbury. Most walked the distance; others rode in wagons or traveled by horseback.

Participation in Sunday services was a full day affair. The two hour morning service included a sermon of “not less than one hour.” The one and a half hour long afternoon service included a sermon of similar length.

It was taken for granted, or “understood,” that every town would have a meetinghouse and, in fact, every family of the community was expected to support the church by taxation, whether or not they were members of the church or attended services. In later years the law would require payments made only to the church one attended.

In 1732, several men from Westbury sent a petition to the General Court of the Connecticut Colony (the governing body of all civil and religious matters). They asked to establish their own church or at least be granted “winter privileges.” The winter months posed a particular hardship as the Waterbury River, now called the Naugatuck River, was not passable in winter and early spring.

The response from the General Court was, "you may hold winter services, but you must still pay taxes to the Waterbury church." Winter services were then held in private homes.

From 1733 until 1738 Westbury residents sent letters regularly to the General Assembly in Hartford asking permission to form an Ecclesiastical Society.

Permission was eventually granted and the first meeting of the Ecclesiastical Society of Westbury was held in December, 1738. A Court appointed committee was sent from Hartford to Westbury to decide where the meetinghouse should be located. By October 1739 the committee reported to the Assembly that they had "set a stake with stone laid into it in the Southwest corner of Eleazer Scott's barn lot, near to the road or intended highway that ran north and south." Remuneration to Scott was three acres of land or fifty schillings in money.

The population of the area at the time was 338 and familiar names are among those on the registry - Garnsy, Scott, Scoville, Hickox, Judd, Peck, Buckingham, Seymour, Fenn, and Dayton. Politically, Westbury was still part of Waterbury; religiously, it was finally independent.

Rev. John Trumbull began his ministry in 1739 and the first child was baptized. Her name was Rebecca Prindle, and she lived to the age of 99.

By 1741 a frame for the new meetinghouse had been erected. The building was most likely square, with small diamond shaped panes of glass set into lead strips. We do know that the roof was sloped to a center peak from all four sides. A drum was used to call people to worship. A balcony on three sides accommodated boys and on the fourth side was a platform for the pulpit. Simple wooden benches provided seating for women on one side and men on the other.

The building was used for all church and town meetings. It was located at the corner of French and Main Streets on a large sloping piece of land. Behind the church, land was set aside for use as a cemetery. For these people of God Sunday was a quiet day: no work, or cooking and only the minimum of farm chores were completed.

John Trumbull was the minister for this congregation for nearly 48 years. By 1772 a larger membership resulted in the need for a larger church building. Our second church building was constructed where the Town Hall now stands. Such heavy timbers were used in its construction that assistance came from five neighboring towns for the raising.

It was a two story rectangular building with the entrance in the center of the long side facing today's Methodist church. On the narrow end was the belfry with its spire and steeple one hundred feet high. There was a square room at the entrance to the belfry for the bell ringer who rang the bell each night at nine o'clock. Benjamin Bryan, who lived in a house nearby, was responsible for ringing the bell. Unruly boys used to get into the meetinghouse, ring the bell and be gone before Mr. Bryon could get there.

Jeremiah Peck was also one of the bell-ringers. For eight or ten years he tugged on the bell rope every evening of the week, except Saturdays, "precisely at nine o'clock to warn the good people that it was time to be at home." Since Saturday evening was holy time, it was taken for granted that they were at home saying their devotions.

The church contained a sounding board, deacon's bench facing the congregation, and pews which resembled pens or boxes. Between the morning and afternoon service, churchgoers did not return home but retired to Sabbaday or Sabbath Day houses where they warmed themselves before great fireplaces and consumed a cold lunch. The fireplaces in the Sabbaday houses also provided coals to be carried back into the church in foot warmers. Churches did not have heat and could become so cold that Communion wine and baptismal water were known to freeze.

The same year, 1772, Rev. Trumbull built Trumbull House, a new parsonage, across the street from the new church. He and Sarah raised eight children in this home, among them John Trumbull, poet of the American Revolution. During the war John wrote many of his inflammatory poems from this historic landmark.

After Sara's death in 1794 the home was sold to Edmund Lockwood who turned it into a tavern. He added a large ballroom. After its tavern days, the ballroom was removed to form part of a house next door for the innkeeper's son. First Congregational church did not reacquire Trumbull House until 1953.

Rev. Uriel Gridley followed Rev. Trumbull as minister of this congregation in 1785 and continued serving for the next 35 years. It is noteworthy that six young men from Rev. Gridley's congregation entered the ministry.

For our first 81 years we were served by two pastors who witnessed tremendous growth in Westbury and in the country. These ministers witnessed the changes in government which led to a new country being formed, and they saw changes in the funding and governance of churches within the country. In 1818 a new state Constitution separated church and state and no church was supported or directed by the State. In this same year the Society motioned to provide a larger Bible and Psalm Book for its use. However, it was noted that the price of the Bible was not to exceed ten dollars.

By 1838 the Westbury Ecclesiastical Society had outgrown the second building and was looking to purchase land to erect a third building.

During a Society meeting on June, 1838, it was voted:

Resolved that the church which is in contemplation to be built by this Society be located on the Dutton lot so called - if the sum necessary or the purchase of same, may be taken from the money which may be raised for that purpose, provided that said lot can be procured for seven hundred \$ to be paid on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October, 1838. (Church meeting minutes)

On September 3, 1838 it was voted to circulate a subscription paper to raise 500\$ in addition to 5500\$ already subscribed for the purpose of building a meetinghouse. (Church meeting minutes)

Many meetings were held concerning land acquisition and discussions as to which land to purchase - the Dutton lot or the Woodward properties. There were so many votes taken and rescinded from April, 1838 to the spring of 1839 that finally three disinterested persons were appointed by the county court to make the decision as to where the church should be located.

Reconciliation was finally reached and the Society hired Stephen Baldwin of New Hartford to erect the new meetinghouse on the Woodward properties at a cost of \$4,475. It was suggested that Mr. Baldwin fashion the new meetinghouse after the church in Plymouth, Connecticut which he also built. A proposal was also passed to build twenty-six sheds for horses at a cost of \$20 per shed. These were rented to members of the parish on a yearly basis.

In June, 1839 the new meetinghouse was raised, and in January, 1840 it was dedicated to God by the new minister, the Rev. Philo Hurd, with ministers from surrounding towns participating in the service.

When the new meetinghouse was dedicated in 1840, the system of pew rents was introduced. It continued until 1919 when all pews were declared free. From that time forward the church has been supported by voluntary pledges.

The old meetinghouse was torn down by Mr. Baldwin and he was given leave to remove the stone belonging to the old meetinghouse and appropriate the same to his own use. (Church meeting minutes) Some of those stones were used to build the steps into our current sanctuary. The bell, cushions and pulpit furniture, as well as the stove and pipe from the old meetinghouse, were used in the new one.

The final cost of the present building was \$4,905.75 with \$592 for extras. Two new box stoves were installed and the invoice was for \$93.98 with a one dollar discount for bankable money.

Our church has supported missionary work since 1842 with a tradition which began with Henry Alfred DeForest serving in Syria.

In 1847, Rev. Hurd proposed that a letter be written to the state legislature in Hartford condemning slavery. We were probably the first congregation to do so. An excerpt from that letter dated January 25, 1847 states:

Whereas it is self-evident to those who believe that God has made of one blood all nations to dwell upon the face of the earth, that involuntary slavery is a heinous sin against God, and injustice to man - therefore resolved:

That in view of our accountability to God, we feel bound each in his own way, and as conscience shall dictate, to do all we can to bring about the earliest extinction of slavery in the United States and throughout the world.

The following year, 1848, slavery was officially abolished in Connecticut.

If you attended this church in 1870 and looked out the windows to the south you would see a small Gothic chapel built in 1869. The chapel was used for 45 years for church school, committee meetings and social events. It was not the first such chapel. There is also a reference to a chapel that had been used across the street next to the second building. All indications are that it was a converted Sabbaday house and was used for the same purposes as the new chapel.

Toward the end of the 1800s the sanctuary was remodeled in the architectural style of the day. Dark mahogany finishes were used. The idea was to go modern and get away from the simple colonial lines of the original building.

It was reported by Henry T. Dayton, clerk of the church on September 26, 1897:

This Church has been closed 21 Sundays for repairs. A large cellar has been built and two (2) large furnaces placed therein. The old seats removed and new circular seats of oak put in their places, new carpets, new chairs, and etc. The whole interior has been decorated anew in lead and oil colors, painted two (2) coats outside and furnished with new blinds, with many other minor changes. Today the dedicatory services have taken place in the church.

Decorative panels of mahogany were placed on the walls. There was a center aisle and the pews were curved. There were no posts under the galleries which were suspended

by rods from the roof. Thankfully, in 1924 this was all changed back and restored as much as possible to the original architecture.

Throughout the 1920's and 1930's First Congregational Church continued to grow. For several years the church school superintendent used his annual reports to the congregation to ask for more teachers and that more space was needed for classes. In 1933 a second floor was added to the rear building, put up in 1914, to accommodate the Sunday school.

In 1935 the church celebrated Connecticut's tercentenary. Pictures taken at the time indicate that the entire congregation participated in colonial dress.

1939 marked the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Ecclesiastical Society and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the meetinghouse. Celebrations included an historical pageant, special church services, and a tea. The Celebration Service on May 28, 1939 followed the order of a New England church service of 1739.

Forty-four (44) members of this church, men and women, are listed on the Roll of Honor now hanging in Fellowship Hall. These individuals put their civilian lives on hold and enlisted in several branches of the armed forces to serve their country during World War II.

In his annual report for 1948 Rev. John Westbrook wrote eloquently about the church's place in a world struggling to return to peace.

There is great need in our world today for a strong Christian Church. No doubt that there are many people who feel that four years after the recent war the upset areas of the world should be returning to a more normal condition. Conditions are better than they were two years ago, but the responsibility of the Christian peoples of the world is greater today than it was during the war or just after it.

Later he reports on the efforts of the women of the church:

One of the basic teachings of our faith is that we should "love our enemies." It is also one of the hardest things we try to do. The ladies of our Women's Association during the past year helped our church adopt a family in Germany. A few short months ago they were regarded as enemies of this country. Now they are people who are in need of food and clothing, but most of all in need of spiritual rehabilitation and friendship.

The 1950's saw tremendous changes: a new organ was installed, more classrooms were built in the basement of the church hall, and Trumbull House came back into the possession of the church through a house swap with Mrs. Buckingham who was the

owner of Trumbull House at the time. In essence she traded her home and a sum of money, for the church parsonage located on North Street directly behind the church. In the fall of 1956 a church office was established in Trumbull House.

The 1960's also saw changes. The By-Laws were amended in 1961 to add deaconesses to the Diaconate. The minister's annual report for the following year indicated how helpful this had been, not only in rendering certain practical services, but in bringing the women's viewpoint into discussions of policy, and in increasing the effectiveness of church calling.

The Women's Council, also formed in 1961, included all the previous individual women's groups and all of the women of our church, members and non-members. In 1971 the Women's Council was renamed Women's Fellowship.

And in 1961 the members of First Church voted to become part of the United Church of Christ, a decision which resulted from the national merger of the Congregational Christian churches with the Evangelical and Reformed churches.

The present Fellowship Hall was built as part of an advancement program launched in 1963. In 1964 the new Fellowship Hall and classroom space was dedicated and the congregation celebrated the 225<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Society and the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the building of the present sanctuary.

Early in the 1970's someone happened to look up at the steeple one day after church and said, "Is that steeple tilting?" Answer, "Yes!" And so began a yearlong effort titled Mission Possible to raise funds to accomplish major repairs on the steeple, fix critical structural problems on other church properties and to reduce the debt load from previous building programs.

A great number of church members met the challenge by making the necessary sacrifices and extending themselves financially. Mission Possible was a notable full church effort. Also in the 1970's we took part in the country's Bicentennial celebrations and began another campaign to raise money to replace the 1952 Skinner organ with one built by the Holtkamp Company. The dedication of the new organ took place in 1981.

As the twentieth century rolled on, our church continued to grow. A group of retired men known as the Fix-its was formed in 1972. They donate their time and talents completing odd jobs around the church.

Several pledge campaigns have successfully raised money through the years. A memorable one was "The Pony Express."

In 1976, as the nation celebrated its 200<sup>th</sup> birthday, First Congregational Church planned many programs to celebrate. They included a special communion service which ended with the congregation walking to the Old Burial Ground where the service was concluded at the gravesite of the Rev. John Trumbull.

We continued our support of the Heifer Project, missionaries Martha and Dave Dunkerton in Kenya, and local outreach projects such as CROP walks. For several years shrimp boils were held to support the Back Bay Mission in Biloxi, Louisiana.

In the area of music, a Zimbelstern was added to the organ in 1992 to enhance musical presentations. Children's choirs took part in musicals such as "Babble at Babel," and concerts were given by the combined senior choirs of our church and Middlebury Congregational Church.

In 1983, the entire church family took part in celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther's birth. Members of the congregation took part in retreats for adults and teens, and The Christmas Travelers Program. The Christmas play, No Room at the Inn with a live crèche on the front steps was presented several times. Potluck suppers and annual church picnics were enjoyed by everyone.

We celebrated our 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1989 with special church services, trips, dinners, and a Homecoming Service followed by lunch and a memorable recreation of an old style annual meeting. The beautiful quilt hand crafted by several women of the church hangs in Fellowship Hall to commemorate the many aspects of our church history.

In 2003 our minister Bill Zito and his wife Jan retired after 33 years of faithful service to our church. Over the years Bill officiated at 760 weddings, baptized 822 babies and officiated at 634 memorial services.

The last decade has seen several changes in ministerial leadership; however, the work of the church has remained the same.

In 2005 volunteers from the church worked for AmeriCares HomeFront. A Prayer Shawl Ministry continuing to this day was started. Over 500 shawls, lap robes, and baby blankets have been knitted or crocheted and donated to cancer patients at the Harold Leever Center, other individuals who are facing illness, grieving members of the church, and happily, to newly baptized babies.

It seems that every few years the church is faced with another steeple repair. So it was in 2006. A major \$20,000 repair was completed which allowed a second cell tower phone system to be installed.

In 2007 we welcomed the Rev. Samuel Dexter as our settled pastor. Rev. Dexter continued his ministry with us into 2013.

We began 2009 with a significant financial challenge. It became necessary to replace the church's aging furnace at a cost of \$80,000. Funds were raised through the Treasures and Talents auction, a donation from the Women's Fellowship, and generous grants from the Woodward Fund, the Thomaston Savings Bank Foundation, and the Watertown Foundation.

In 2014 we celebrated the 275<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the establishment of the Westbury Ecclesiastical Society. A float was constructed for the Memorial Day parade. The theme was "Serving God and Country for 275 years". We have sent men and women to every major war from the American Revolution to our latest involvement in Afghanistan. On September 26, 2014 we opened the doors of the Meetinghouse and Trumbull House to take part in the 9<sup>th</sup> annual Watertown Historical Society Open House Tour.

As we look back on 275 years of history and the resulting church which has lasted, William Cleveland, a former historian of the church said it best.

Our church continues to grow. Little children have been baptized. As they have grown within its fellowship, they have been taught the way, the truth and the life of Jesus Christ. Here they have married and in turn brought their children. Here the sorrowing have found comfort, the burdened - strength, the bewildered - guidance. Here they have experienced the faith that makes the families on earth and in heaven - One.

## Addendum

Rev. John Trumbull

The following story was taken from the reminiscences of Rev. George E. Gilchrist, the twenty-fourth minister of First Congregational Church.

The Rev. John Trumbull was born in Suffield, CT and graduated from Yale in 1735. In 1739 he became the first minister of the Westbury Ecclesiastical Society, as our church was called then. He was fond of horses, and bought and sold them with such success that he was sometimes called "Jockey" Trumbull. He also had a reputation as an athlete and a great wrestler.

It seems that people from Waterbury and Westbury (as Watertown was then called) often met at some halfway place for wrestling matches. The evening was begun by two second-raters. When one was thrown he would call in another from his side to tackle the victor. The one who last remained on his feet was called "the bully of the night".

About this time Waterbury was way ahead in victories and Mr. Trumbull heard of the defeat of his boys and shared their mortification. So, one night he disguised himself and went down with the crowd unknown except to two or three. The wrestlers were called in as usual till the Waterbury champion had again grounded the last of his rivals. At this point, amid all the cheers on one side and chagrin on the other, a stranger was dragged in from the outer circle to contend for Westbury. Both men began cautiously, but after a while the stranger, who had been watching for his opportunity, suddenly caught his antagonist's foot and threw him right onto the fire. While the Westbury side broke into hilarious shouting, the victor disappeared. It was a great exploit and a mystery in both towns, but the secret finally leaked out.

The story reached the minister of the First Church in Waterbury, Mr. Leavenworth. The next time they met he rebuked Brother Trumbull for his levity and censured him particularly for throwing his rival on the fire, by which his clothes and flesh were scorched. Trumbull agreed that he had been guilty of levity, but as for the scorching he thought it his duty to give Leavenworth's parishioners a foretaste of what they might expect after sitting under his preaching.

1772

Credit for this information is given to Nancy Merriman Holcomb, to The Sarah Whitman Trumbull Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and Joyce Ciarlo, a longtime member of this church. Joyce will be remembered by many as an excellent Girl Scout leader, and it turns out a great writer of history.

In 1772 the second Congregational Church was built on land where the present Town Hall is located. Such heavy timbers were used in its construction that assistance came from five neighboring towns for the raising. The second church had a steeple one hundred feet high. The bell was rung every night at nine o'clock by Benjamin Bryon who lived in a house nearby. Unruly boys used to get into the meetinghouse, ring the bell and be gone before Mr. Bryon could get there. After a time, the doors and windows were locked so that the boys could not get in. One enterprising lad, Uri Judd, the son of a local cabinet maker climbed fifty feet to the belfry, came down, opened the door, let the boys in and left before Mr. Bryon appeared. There is no record of the punishment given to these energetic sons of the Westbury parishioners, but given the discipline of the day, I am sure they were duly reprimanded.

Mrs. Holcomb's description of the inside of the second building is as follows:

Entrance was from the side of the building into a square room under the belfry. As the ground sloped off rather abruptly there was a short flight of steps approaching the entrance from the north and a much longer flight from the south.

Upon entering from the vestibule we walk along a broad aisle facing a door at the opposite side of the building. On the right there is a high pulpit with sounding-board overhead. Approach to the pulpit is by a flight of stairs on the eastern side. The long Deacon's bench is located on the ground floor in front of the pulpit.

On the left as we enter there are the pews; boxed enclosures with a door and seats running around three sides. There is a gallery around three sides which is used by the singers and up one step from that are pews similar to those on the ground floor which were for use of the younger generation. There was no heat in the building and no cushions on the seats.

The church bell was rung every night at nine o'clock except on Saturday to let the folks know that it was time they were all at home. It was not necessary on Saturday for the Sabbath started at sunset and everybody was expected to be in their homes attending to their devotions.

The second church described above was used until 1839 when our present edifice was erected.

### The Sabbath-Day House

Near the meeting house was a one-room building with a huge fireplace. This was the Sabbath Day House, pronounced Sabba-dy House. It was there for people who lived too far off to go home between morning and afternoon services. They could eat their cold bean and cider lunch and visit with each other. If it was winter time, they could warm their chilled bodies and refill their little foot stoves to carry back to the cold meeting house. Meeting houses were unheated and got very cold - many times the water in the baptismal basin froze and the ice had to be chipped away before a baby could be baptized.

Near the Sabbath Day House and the Meeting house were two grim structures: the whipping post and the stocks. People guilty of such crimes as gossiping, stealing, or profaning the Lord's Day by working or playing were punished by being whipped on the bare back or by having to spend a certain time in the stocks in public shame.

## Trumbull House

When the new meetinghouse was being built in 1772, Rev. Trumbull decided it was also time for his family to have a larger home. So he purchased land from the Woodward family, across from the new church, and built a saltbox style home we know today as Trumbull House, but which was known for years as "Woodward House".

After the Rev. Trumbull's death, his family continued to live there until 1794 when it was sold to Capt. Edmund Lockwood. Capt. Lockwood added a ballroom and turned the building into a tavern.

In 1810 the building and ten acres of land were sold to Garret Smith, and by 1812 the land and house were once again owned by the Woodward family. David Woodward's daughters lived there until 1895 when Mrs. Henry Davis inherited the property. Mrs. Davis and her husband removed the ballroom and sold the homestead to John W. Curtiss, who gave it to his daughter as a wedding gift when she married Charles Buckingham.

The Buckinghams made many alterations and did much to preserve the building. Mrs. Buckingham sold the property to First Congregational Church in 1953. The second floor was then converted into a living area for the minister and the first floor was turned into offices. The parlor is still used today for church meetings, and the second floor is used by Sunday school classes and activities of the Women's Fellowship of the church.

## Death

When recording deaths of members of the congregation, the clerk of the church always listed the reason for the death as well as the date.

In the 1790s the citizens of Watertown were still fighting small pox. In January of 1794 children from the Egleston, Merriman, Guernsey, Burges, and Hubbert families succumbed to small pox.

Some other causes for deaths were yellow fever, consumption, worms, dropsy, whooping cough, typhus fever, scarlet fever, measles, bilious fever, and sadly, for many young families, death in child birth.

Listed on May 8, 1796, is Mrs. Susanna Gridley, wife of the Rev. Uriel Gridley, aged 33. There is no reason given for her early death, but she was clearly missed. The Brothers of Federal Lodge #17 in Watertown placed a stone in her memory in the Old Cemetery with the following inscription:

In memory of Mrs. Susannah Gridley, the amiable consort of the Rev. Uriel Gridley, who departed this life on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1796, in the 33<sup>rd</sup> year of her age. While yet alive she strikingly exemplified the endearing virtues of an agreeable and lovely companion to her husband, the tender-hearted esteem of an affectionate mother to her children, the serious and social friend to her acquaintance, and an ornament of piety to the world. Now sacred shades receive this long farewell, Sleep, sleep in peace, then rise with God to dwell.

On April 5, 1807 the clerk listed a rather specific cause of death for Mr. Dailey, age 36, "by a pitch fork which was run into his side."

One last and curious entry for a lady:

She lived with her husband ten weeks. He has buried two wives in ten months, a Providence which never took place in Watertown before and probably there are few instances in the Christian world. The ways of the Lord are past finding out.

## Music

### When in Our Music God is Glorified

The first mention of music was in 1741, when a drum was used to call the faithful to church each Sunday. By 1772, a bell had been installed in the second church building. The bell was rung each night at nine, except on Saturdays, and it was rung on Sunday mornings. Early singing of hymns by the congregation was conducted by the Tenor who would sing one line that would be repeated by the congregation. Few people could read music scores. In the early 1800's an attempt was made to establish singing schools, and

in 1805, the members of our church appropriated \$25 to support and encourage singing. Today, we have all-volunteer choirs for adults and children.

In 1873 an addition to the present building was constructed to house the organ. The pipes and casework you see today are original and were refurbished in 1981.

In annual church meeting minutes little was written about music except for the paying of organists and directors on a monthly basis. A classroom piano was purchased in 1924, and in the early 1930's, a committee was formed to explore the purchase of a new organ. The cost of the project forced its postponement for another twenty years. By 1951 the organ was 75 years old and a committee was formed to find a replacement instrument. The old organ was found to be "wholly inadequate as to tonal resources and standard day equipment." Ernest M. Skinner, Inc. was contracted to build and install a three manual organ of 24 stops at a cost of \$16,875. A service of dedication was held on November 9, 1952 with George Morgan as organist.

English hand bells were purchased in 1971, and throughout the 70's additional bells were purchased with many concerts given by the youth and adult bell choirs.

By 1976 the Skinner organ was breaking down and needed repair. Repairs were made to the bellows in 1978, but clearly the Skinner organ's days were numbered.

In 1979, a contract was signed with the Holtkamp Organ Co. for \$110,800 to construct and install a "tracker action" organ. A service of dedication was held on Sunday, May 17, 1981, with Rev. Laura Opsahl as organist. An Inaugural Organ Recital by Jean Langlais was given on Tuesday, September 29, 1981, and several prominent organists have given recitals through the years.

1897

The inside of our present Meetinghouse has seen several changes since it was dedicated in 1841. From a rededication program we read:

September 26, 1897- This church has been closed for 21 Sundays for repairs. A large cellar has been built and two large furnaces placed therein. The old seats removed and new circular seats of oak put in their places, new carpets, new chairs, and etc. The whole interior has been decorated anew in lead and oil colors, painted two coats outside and furnished with new blinds, with many other minor changes. Today the re-dedicatory services have taken place in the church.

Attest,

Henry T. Dayton, clerk

When Mr. Dayton described the new seating arrangement as circular he meant arched. There was a center aisle and two new side aisles. The balconies remained the same. While the work was being completed in the sanctuary, services were held in the small chapel next door.

In the 1920s the sanctuary was restored to its original arrangement which is how the church is today. Some alterations have been made over the years such as the addition of two doors from the balconies into the Fellowship Hall building and the enlarging of the

choir area for the building of the Holtkamp organ. While the organ was being constructed, services were held in Fellowship Hall.

Our ancestors may have been concerned with the physical building of the First Congregational Church, but clearly they were well aware of their responsibilities to the missions supported by the church and the need of continued outreach programs. While the members of the church were concerned with these 1897 building repairs, they were also supporting a number of benevolences such as the Welcome Hall Mission in New York, the Fresh Air Fund in Boston, Massachusetts; Berea College in Berea, Kentucky; Tuskegee College in Tuskegee, Alabama; the Connecticut Missionary Society; the Connecticut Bible Society; and many others.

One Hundred Years Ago - 1914

175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of First Congregational Church

Members of the First Congregational Church saw many changes in 1914. The old chapel between the church and Trumbull House was taken down, 14 of the horse sheds were removed, and a new chapel (Fellowship Hall) was dedicated on Easter Sunday, April 12, 1914. The following description is taken from the Waterbury American, Monday Evening, April 13, 1914:

The new chapel adjoins the west end of the church and is attractive, commodious and will be a strong factor in the development of the religious and social work of the parish. Its dimensions are 70 x 30 and it has a seating capacity of over 250. At the north end is the kitchen equipped with gas stove, running water and other conveniences needed at church suppers. The main room of the chapel can be divided into two rooms by the use of the latest and best model in folding doors and the whole building is planned that it can be readily used as a place of worship, Sunday school work or social gatherings. All of the services are being held in it at present as a new hardwood floor is being laid in the church. The chapel has two direct entrances from the church and two outside entrances.

To celebrate the 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the church a service was held Sunday, September 20, 1914 at 10:30 A.M. The service was led by Rev. Herbert Barber Howe and three former pastors participated: Rev. William Trumbull Holmes, President of Tugaloo University in Mississippi; Rev. George Pelton from New Haven; and Rev. Charles Croft from Simsbury.

At an afternoon service on the same day, a tablet was unveiled on the site of the first place of public worship in Watertown by the Trumbull Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. The inscription reads:

ON THIS SPOT WAS ERECTED IN 1741 THE FIRST WATERTOWN MEETING HOUSE THE PARISH ORIGINALLY INCLUDED IN WATERBURY WAS SET APART BY THE GENERAL COURT IN 1738 AS WESTBURY SOCIETY AND IN 1739 WAS "EMBODIED IN CHURCH ESTATE" THE FIRST MINISTER WAS THE REVEREND JOHN TRUMBULL WHOSE GRAVE IS IN THIS BURYING GROUND

All churches in town were invited to participate in a union service that evening at 7:30 P.M. An address on "Watertown's First Church" was given by Dr. Joseph Anderson.

## Post World War II

By the end of the 1950's Watertown was experiencing tremendous growth. New houses were being constructed, the schools were full during the week and the churches were full on Sundays. In 1957, a planning committee was formed to explore ways of expanding the Church House where Sunday school classes were being held.

At a special meeting on March 8, 1962, First Congregational Church voted to appoint a Building Committee empowered "to formulate a program for fulfilling our needs, select an architect and present preliminary plans to the church at the earliest practicable date."

The need for additional space was great. The Church House (Fellowship Hall) consisting of one large room was built in 1914 to replace the Gothic Chapel which was torn down the same year. In 1933 a second floor was added to accommodate a growing Sunday school.

By 1962, Sunday school classes were being held in all upstairs rooms in Trumbull House, in the Church House basement, on the stage of the second floor room, and in the Sanctuary.

After 25 meetings, a final report was presented at the annual meeting of January 18, 1963 and the largest single fund raising campaign, up to that point in our history, was begun.

The architectural firm of Damuck and Painchaud of New Haven was hired to design the building and the public relations firm of Marts and Lundy was hired to organize the Advancement Program to campaign for funds.

Committees were formed, letters were mailed, an all-member canvas was organized with home visitations, dinners were planned and served, memorials were designated, up-dates were included in letters and newsletters, and as the goal of \$117, 000 was reached, each member who pledged to support the building was recorded in the Book of Remembrance.

Ground was broken August 28, 1963 and the building plan for the future was underway. At the dedication ceremony, September 27, 1964 Rev. George Gilchrist and the members of the church dedicated the new Church House:

To the glory of God the Father:

For the study of the Bible, for the nurture of Christian character in our children, in our youth, and in our adults,

For the deepening of fellowship through recreation and projects of Christian service, for the enrichment of Christian home and family,

For the development of individual and group responsibility,

For the advancement of Our Christian World Mission,

For the growth of Christian citizenship, and

For the furtherance of justice, peace and Christian brotherhood.

The next time you enter Fellowship Hall to help at a rummage sale, attend a monthly church committee meeting, take your child to Sunday school, walk through on your way to a service or choir rehearsal, help set up for a coffee hour or reception, pause a moment and give thanks for the past members who had the foresight to plan for the future.

## SETTLED PASTORS OF FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

Rev. John Trumbull	1739 - 1785
Rev. Uriel Gridley	1785 - 1820
Rev. Horace Hooker	1821 - 1824
Rev. Darius Griswold	1825 - 1834
Rev. William DeForest	1835 - 1837
Rev. Philo Hurd	1840 - 1849
Rev. Chauncey Goodrich	1849 - 1856
Rev. George Peter Pruden	1856 - 1861
Rev. Samuel M. Freeland	1862 - 1864
Rev. Benjamin Parsons	1866 - 1867
Rev. Stephen Fenn	1868 - 1872
Rev. George Parsons Gilman	1872 - 1876
Rev. Franklin Tuxbury	1877 - 1879
Rev. Charles Pitman Croft	1880 - 1881
Rev. Benjamin Drake Conklin	1881 - 1884
Rev. George Austin Pelton	1886 - 1889
Rev. Robert Pegrum	1889 - 1900
Rev. William Trumbull Holmes	1901 - 1913
Rev. Herbert Barber Howe	1913 - 1916
Rev. Clarence Elmore Wells	1916 - 1939
Rev. John Maurice Deyo	1939 - 1945
Rev. John Hardy Westbrook	1946 - 1959
Rev. George Edward Gilchrist	1960 - 1965

Rev. John Nichols Cross	1966 - 1969
Rev. Dr. William John Zito	1970 - 2003
Rev. Laura Petrie Opsah (Associate)	1977 - 1986
Rev. M. John Aherns	2006 - 2007
Rev. Samuel Dexter	2007 - 2013

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“I can no other answer make but thanks, and thanks, and ever thanks.”

Twelfth Night, Act III, Scene 3

Grateful acknowledgment to the following who made writing the History of First Congregational Church a memorable experience:

Past ministers including Rev. George Gilchrist, Rev. Philo Hurd, and Rev. John Westbrook

Past historians including William Cleveland and Helene Agnew

Past clerks who kept accurate and detailed records including Henry T. Dayton

Former members of the congregation Nancy Merriman Holcomb, Joyce Ciarlo,  
and Paula D'Arcy

My editor and sounding board, Jim Maxwell

The Sarah Whitman Trumbull Chapter of the Daughters of the American  
Revolution

The Waterbury American newspaper

Betsy Maxwell

October, 2014