

“The Ancient Landmark”

June 27, 2010

II Chronicles 6:41-42. Proverbs 22:28. Colossians 3:12-17  
The Rev. Stoddon G.N. King, Orange Congregational Church, UCC.  
Meetinghouse Bicentennial Celebration Sunday, 1810 - 2010

200 years ago on this date the cornerstone of our meetinghouse was set, June 27, 1810. It was framed in four days, but required some months to complete and was not dedicated until April 17, 1811. We were not the Orange Congregational Church at that time. Instead, we were called The First Church of Christ in North Milford. The title “Congregational” came much later.

My sermon this morning is a departure from the norm. I want to tell you something about our meetinghouse and its times, and conclude with the congregation, the covenant family of faith over the centuries and today, us, the ones who continue the journey.

Did you know that we are one of the oldest church buildings in the New Haven area? There are **congregations** much older than ours. First Church of Christ in New Haven, better known as Center Church on the Green, and First Church in Milford were both gathered in 1639 though their present buildings weren’t built until after ours. Christ Church (Episcopal) in Bethany does predate our meetinghouse by one year; May 1809.

As J. Frederick Kelly writes in his two volume history Early CT Meetinghouses, “The high standard of architectural excellence displayed by the (fourth-type) structures built after 1800 was furthered by the work and influence of two skilled designers...David Hoadley and Ithiel Town. David Hoadley was the architect of our meetinghouse and Christ Church (Episcopal) in Bethany, and he and Town are the only designers of early 19<sup>th</sup> century CT church buildings who are qualified to receive the title “architect.”

Hoadley was born in Waterbury in 1774 and died there in 1839 at the age of 65. It was said of him that his designs are always well conceived. His sense of scale was extremely sensitive, and his feeling for proportion remarkably just. In the use of ornament, which he employed sparingly, he was guided, as in other matters, **by unailing good taste**. He was a most highly regarded architect in his day.

If you were sitting in this place on June 27, 1811, what would you see? You would not see the chancel and choir area. Instead the back wall of the building would be here where the steps are now. In the center and high up on this north wall was the pulpit putting the minister, the Rev. Erastus Scranton, at about eye level with the balcony. Behind the pulpit was the Palladian window that you see from the parking lot. In front of the pulpit on the main floor was the Communion table, and out where you are sitting were box pews.

If you were to look up, you would see a vaulted ceiling. If you turned around you would see open staircases to the galleries, as the balcony was called, and **probably receive a rap on the head** from the tithing man for your inattentiveness to the preaching! You would also see a fifth set of windows on the sides at the back, and lower windows on the front wall facing the Green; all to let in more light.

Around 1831 two wood burning stoves were added with pipes running beneath both galleries (balconies) their whole length. A former minister added these words about the pipes "...and from which sometimes when the wind was contrary, smoke issued which brought tears to eyes which sermons failed to moisten." Take a look at the model of the meetinghouse in the dining room at the fellowship time. Our thanks to Bruce Cavanaugh, Bill Dietz and Marty Hummel for that model.

The church bell was enormously important not only for calling the faithful to worship, but to warn of peril and other public attention. It announced as well the death of our citizens, its tolling dirge, borne by the wind, wafting over the town. Nine strikes of the bell for a man, 7 for a woman, 5 for a boy and 3 for a girl, which was repeated, and then the age was solemnly tolled off. The epitaph on the headstone of Samuel Prudden in the Orange Center Cemetery, who died in 1819, bears out the importance of the bell.

"Oft as the bell with solemn toll, Speaks the departure of a soul, Let each one ask himself, Am I...Prepared should I be called to die?"

Our early forebears in New England, as well as here in Orange, did not call this building the church. The meetinghouse, sometimes spelled as one word and sometimes as two, was literally the place where the community met...not only for worship, but for government and court. They were very particular to refer to the congregation, the people of faith gathered in covenant, as the church. The meetinghouse was the building. This old meetinghouse wasn't even owned by the church. It was owned by the Ecclesiastical Society, established by the General Assembly of CT (our legislature today) as essentially a board of trustees.

The church was religious and dealt with spiritual matters. The Society was business and dealt with temporal matters. Typically, but not always in later years, the members of the society were also members of the church. This two part arrangement continued in Orange until January 1922 when the Ecclesiastical Society officially and legally turned over the meetinghouse to the church, the congregation!

When our meetinghouse was built, it was funded by both taxes and member contributions, whose contributions might be money as well as material. I believe approximately half the cost of our meetinghouse was paid for by tax money! There is a telling sentence in one of the histories of early CT meetinghouses which we would do well to hear and take to heart because we are the recipients of the hard labor and sacrifice of our stalwart forebears.

That sentence reads, "By whatever means the meetinghouse was built, the observation is inescapable that its construction was made possible only by a **spirit of self-denial and individual effort**. The early town and society records, with their repeated votes to levy taxes...often heavy...show plainly the difficult financial burdens that were **willingly assumed** in order to build it." (Kelly, Early Connecticut Meetinghouses, Vol. 2, p. 26).

This lays before us the question, are **we** as willing today to meet the financial necessities of our meetinghouse and church, this ancient landmark, and bequeath to our heirs this gem, maintained and improved, that we have inherited?

In those days disestablishment of the Established Order, which meant the Congregational Church, didn't end in CT until 1818. Times have changed! When you gathered for worship on Sunday morning, it wasn't a one hour service, but typically several hours in the morning, a break for lunch, and then a shorter service, perhaps an hour of preaching, in the afternoon. Anyone wish to return to yesteryear! No sports on Sunday morning! In fact, you would be fined for working or playing on the Sabbath!

In many ways our meetinghouse is a parable. These past two centuries it has changed to meet new times and needs. The true spirit of this place is not the house of brick and wood, but the house of flesh and spirit, the congregation, the covenant family of faith that gathers here and strives to walk the way of Jesus Christ week after week, year after year, generation after generation, century after century. Congregation and meetinghouse have changed together and will continue to do so.

When the Rev. Bezaleel Pinneo of Milford chose the verses from II Chronicles 6, one of our Old Testament verses this morning, to preach his dedicatory sermon for our meetinghouse on April 17, 1811, he chose this prayer of Solomon that was used at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem in the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C. But it was a prayer of dedication for those who worshiped as well as the place wherein they worshiped.

When the disciples with Jesus in 1<sup>st</sup> century Jerusalem marveled at the temple, Jesus reminded them that as impressive as it was, and important, the heart of the matter wasn't the building of stone and mortar, but the faith of the people who worshipped there.

In his letter to the Colossians, the early Christian church in Colossae, today western Turkey, the Apostle Paul defined the true Christian life. A family of Christian faith, striving to live as Jesus Christ would have us live, should clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the **word** of Christ **dwell** in you richly..."

As our meetinghouse has changed over the generations, so we have changed over the generations. As our meetinghouse remains, a visible and viable house of worship, so we remain a visible and viable body of faith, the body of the Lord, his flesh and blood in this place and far beyond its walls and doors.

In New England, the words "remove not the ancient landmark that your fathers have set" have palpable meaning to us. We have lots of ancient landmarks lying about. By European or Asian standards, we are pretty new, but here in New England we are among those who set an ancient landmark. In the end, it isn't the past we inhabit; it's the continuing journey into the future we are always called to trek. Come, follow me, said our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ....said to the early church in Colossae, this covenant family of faith in 1805, to us today in 2010, and to each succeeding generation of this church. What will this congregation say of us a century from now in 2105 or 2110 at our tercentenary?