

**First Congregational Church of Chatham
United Church of Christ**

A History of Our Church



Foreword

We call it “ours,” all of us do but in a real sense it is not. It does not belong to us. We belong to it. We come uncovered each in our own way to refresh our spirits, renew our courage, regain our strength for today and tomorrow. Not too different from the Chatham tides, sweeping out to join the sea, and flowing back renewed, every day.

And, those around us are the Congregation of “our” Church, sharing daily in all the work that goes on, ever changing, losing some and gaining others, but always bound together. Moving forward for a long time, not in the age of Cape Cod, but long in the life of America. For 300 years, just friendly folks who did much in the life of this Church and Town.

This is the history of the First Congregational Church of Chatham, at this milestone, confirming again that we come into the world with nothing but an inherited past and leave only what we have done with it. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: “As we are, so we do; and as we do, so it is done to us.”

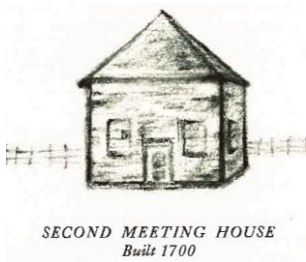
Foreword by Ralph White and Paul E. Doutrich

Church History by Paul E. Doutrich

Church History

The seeds of the First Congregational Church were planted in 1656 when William Nickerson, without the approval of the Plymouth Company, acquired Monomoy Indian land in the area around what would later become Chatham. During the years that followed, he brought his family to the acreage. A handful of Puritan families followed the Nickersons to the area over the next decade. Since the Monomoy settlement was administered by the town meeting in Eastham, Nickerson and his neighbors were expected to attend and support the established church in Eastham. However, because the journey was long and sometimes arduous, Nickerson began regular worship meetings in his home. In 1679, as the settlement continued to grow slowly, Nickerson and his neighbors petitioned to create their own township. A year later the request was granted with several restrictions. Because the settlement was unable to support a minister or to construct a meeting house, residents were expected annually to raise five pounds in order to maintain worship services and, eventually, build a meeting house. Meanwhile, William Nickerson continued to lead weekly services until his death in the early 1690's. By that time, a small meeting house had been built just west of the Great Hill at the intersection of what is today Old Queen Anne Road and George Ryder Road. Little is known about that building aside from its location.

Jonathan Vickery came to Monomoy in 1697. A fisherman and lay preacher with no formal training, he was hired by the village selectmen to lead worship services within the community. Energetic and engaging, Vickery, three years after his arrival, was instrumental in leading an effort to build a new meeting house. Construction began in the spring of 1700. Located north, across the road from the original meeting house, the structure was to be 22 feet square with 13-foot high walls. Work on the building progressed slowly. Men in the community cut framing timbers locally. Finished boards and planks were acquired from a New Hampshire mill. When completed late the following spring, it was a spartan structure. The meeting house had "no shingles nor clapboards upon it and no glass for windows. There was no steeple nor a portico. Inside there were no pews except possibly one for the family of the minister. Long benches were arranged facing the pulpit on each side of a center aisle. The men sat on one side of the aisle, the women on the other side" Upon its completion, the new meeting house immediately became a focal point for the small community. In addition to religious services, it was used for public gatherings including town meetings. Vickery did not enjoy the new meeting house for long. On April 30, 1702 he and several other local men drowned while on a regular fishing trip.



Seven years after Vickery's death, the congregation hired John Latimer, its first formally trained pastor. A recent graduate of Harvard, Latimer stayed for two years before leaving to pursue more lucrative opportunities. Three other pastors followed Latimer but

stayed only briefly before leaving for the same reason as Latimer. By 1711, when Hugh Adams came to Monomoy, some feared that the village might not be able to sustain itself. Fortunately, Adams breathed new life into the community in part by reestablishing regular church activities. A year after his arrival he also led a successful effort to incorporate the village. It was named Chatham in recognition of the port town of Chatham in southeastern England. Despite his successes, Adams generated tensions within the community. After five years these challenges proved too much for both Adams and his congregation and he left the church.

Joseph Lord came to Chatham in 1718 and stayed until his death thirty years later. He immediately began to build upon what Adams had begun. Most importantly, he successfully pursued the organization of a church free from the control of neighboring churches. On June 15, 1720, a church council met in Chatham and formally established the First Congregational Church of Chatham. Lord, who was installed as pastor, then preached an installation sermon. Several ministers from local churches joined the town in celebrating the event. At the time there were only seven male church members but because the church accepted the controversial half-way covenant, there were also about two dozen female members. Since only men were eligible for full membership many churches had begun to accept the covenant which enabled women and children to participate in church activities.

Lord's next major endeavor was the construction of a new meeting house. Though Chatham was still a small community, the existing meeting house barely met the town's needs. Additionally, the existing building needed repairs. In March 1727, a town vote approved the construction of a new meeting house despite some concern about costs. The new building was to be completed by June of the following year. However, construction was delayed because of poor farm and fishing revenues. A second vote was taken in June



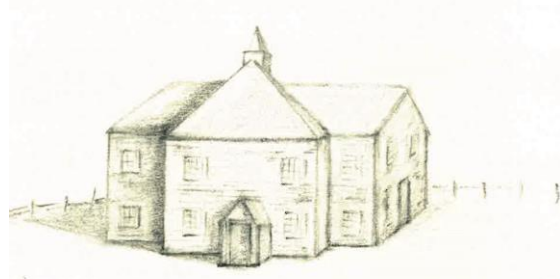
SECOND MEETING HOUSE
Enlarged 1729-1730

1728, at the time when the building was originally expected to be completed. This time it was agreed that the town would raise 500 pounds, half in 1728 and half in 1729, "to pull down ye old meeting house" and build a new one with dimensions similar to those of the South meeting house in Eastham. When completed in 1730 the new building served the needs of the community for 100 years.

By the time of Lord's death in 1748, the congregation had doubled in size. Chatham's population was also slowly growing. Nevertheless, the town remained one of the smaller towns on the Cape. With growth came new town activities and the meeting house remained the town's most important building. Likewise, many of the town dwellings were close to the meeting house further establishing its importance. The church pastor also remained one of the principal figures in Chatham. Reverend Stephen Emery, who succeeded reverend Lord, was the only formally educated person in Chatham just as Lord had been. As a result, the town turned

to him for many duties including serving as the town's physician, sometimes serving as a judge, and as a town administrator.

The revolutionary era proved to be a difficult time for the church and town. After the Seven Years War (the French and Indian War) approximately 50 families, about half of the local population, were lured away from the town to resettle on unoccupied land in



SECOND MEETING HOUSE
After remodeling in 1773. Side sections were added. Demolished in 1830

newly acquired Nova Scotia. A decade later 61 more residents died during a smallpox epidemic. These losses of population challenged the village's viability. Despite the small population, many of Chatham's men, including men from the First Congregational Church, served during the Revolutionary War. With the men gone their families had a difficult time sustaining themselves. Additionally, British privateers devastated the local fishing fleet reducing it from 200 vessels to just 4 by the end of the war. Despite the hardship, pastor Emery, who agreed to have his salary suspended for a couple

of years during the war, was able to expand the meeting house by getting two wings added in 1773, two years before the hostilities with Great Britain began.

Like many other towns throughout the new nation, the post-war years saw expansion within Chatham. The town remained one of farmers and fishermen though several merchants set up shops in an area east of the meeting house. The growth included an expanding congregation as well as new challenges for the First Congregational church. Among the challenges was the establishment of a Methodist society in Chatham in 1811. Five years later the Methodist congregation built its own meeting house. A Universalist congregation was also established in 1822 and Baptists officially formed their own church in 1824. Despite the competition, the Congregational church continued to grow and remained the largest in Chatham. Influenced by revivals in 1817 and 1824 conducted by the Congregational pastor, Stetson Raymond, the congregation grew to more than 110 members.

The year 1824 was a pivotal one for Chatham's Congregational church. Spurred by opposition from the town's other congregations and encouraged by some church members who sought autonomy, the town selectmen, in August, voted to end financial support to the Congregational church. Since the chartering of Chatham, the town had annually provided tax revenues to pay the Congregational church's pastor. In response to the vote, church members agreed to raise the pastor's \$500 salary themselves and in October created the First Congregational Parish of Chatham. No longer were the town and the church formally linked. Instead the Congregational church, in the future, would function independently.

By 1830 some in the congregation concluded that after 100 years, the current meeting house no longer served the needs of the congregation or the town. Though controversial, the decision was made to build a new meeting house. Because the town population center was steadily moving toward the harbor area, it was decided that the new building should be built closer to the harbor on land adjacent to cemetery grounds used by the congregation. That land later became known as the Union cemetery.

To pay for the construction pews were sold. When completed the new building was a comfortable, modern church building that included a prominent steeple and the town's first church bell. Some in the congregation complained that the improvements, especially the crooked pew arms and the bell, detracted from worship. However, most considered the building an impressive addition to the community.



*THIRD MEETING HOUSE
Remodeled on present site in 1866*

During the three decades preceding the Civil War the congregation continued to grow. Aided by several revivals, church membership increased to more than 200 by 1850.

To accommodate the expanding membership renovations were undertaken within the meeting house. The central section of the building was enlarged, and twenty new pews were added. The sale of the pews also generated funds to buy a chandelier and lamps that burned whale oil, and carpets for the aisles.

Another addition was a melodeon pump organ, the church's first organ. Prior to 1811 all singing during services was unaccompanied by instruments. That ended in 1811. Over the strong objections from some of the more sanctimonious members of the congregation, a bass violin was used to accompany singing during services. The controversy over music was renewed in 1852 with the purchase of a melodeon organ. While again some in the congregation objected to its use, the melodeon began a musical tradition that still exists within the church.

The formal creation of a church women's organization further enhanced church life. For many years, women church members had been providing various day-to-day voluntary services for the church. In 1853 the Ladies Benevolent Association was organized to provide church women with both social and spiritual activities. Initially the women met for several hours at least bi-weekly in a member's home. Meetings consisted of a period of worship, discussion and a shared meal. Attendance generally numbered a dozen to as many as thirty members and honorary members. The tasks that the Association accomplished were diverse ranging from church housekeeping duties to providing food for the poor in Chatham and organizing annual picnics and church celebrations. Over the decades the church women's organization, in its various forms, became an integral part of the First Congregational Church.

As the Civil War approached, the congregation, reflecting the mood of Chatham, actively supported the Union cause. Among the first local men to volunteer for service in the Union Army was pastor David French. French had come to the church just a year before the outbreak of the war. He served throughout the war as chaplain for 39th Volunteer Regiment of Massachusetts. In the months that followed his departure several other young men from the congregation, including the church janitor, joined French in the 39th Regiment. Meanwhile, back at the First Congregational church, the Ladies Benevolent Society prepared bandages, sewed nightshirts, and raised money to support the troops.

Less than a year after the war ended the church was confronted with its own divisive crisis. Some in the congregation proposed that the meeting house should be moved to a site closer to the evolving center of Chatham. For several decades commerce near the harbor area had been growing and attracting new population. However, many of the



Congregational Church 1866

congregants from the north and western parts of Chatham, where the meeting house was currently located, strongly objected to the move. In March 1866, after much discussion and several votes, proponents of the move narrowly prevailed. It was agreed that the meeting house would be disassembled so that the framing could be used to construct a new building on a hilltop about a mile to the east overlooking the emerging town center.

The project took almost a year to complete and cost significantly more than anticipated. To pay the costs, the congregation resorted

to a fifteen-year mortgage which alarmed some members. Further irritating a portion of the congregation, the administration of the church was also reorganized. The Congregational parish system was abandoned, and the church was reconstituted as the Orthodox Congregational Society. A new charter was written to formalize the administrative changes and the name change. In reaction to the construction and reorganization numerous members left the church. Some became part of the Methodist congregation.

The changes began a challenging period for the congregation. With the steadily declining whaling industry, the growth of industry, and rail transportation linking all parts of the Cape to the rest of the nation, population began leaving the Cape. Between 1870 and 1900 more than 11% of the Cape's population had moved elsewhere. Some predicted that the decline would continue into the foreseeable future. Adding to the concern, those most likely to leave were the young, the skilled and the ambitious. Stresses within the congregation and financial tensions further added to the challenges. By the beginning of the 20th century the First Congregational church membership had fallen to about 50, which was less than half of what it had been before the Civil War.

The most significant challenge involved financial matters. With a shrinking congregation there was less revenue available to carry out essential church activities. Fewer members meant that fewer pews were rented and fewer contributions. In response, the church took several actions including reducing the pastor's salary. By 1902 the pastor's annual salary, which had been \$800 in 1870, had been incrementally cut to just \$300, most of which was paid by the Congregational Home Missionary Society. To generate additional revenue, the congregation in 1877 voted to begin collecting weekly contributions. Nevertheless, two years later the parsonage property was mortgaged in order to pay church bills.



Periodically, the church also experienced internal schisms. The most threatening occurred in 1879 when Reverend Peter Shiere, after two years of service, was asked to resign. Shiere, who had attracted a loyal group of supporters, refused to leave. In reaction, the church's Executive Committee voted to close the church until he left and for five months no services were held. When Shiere finally did resign he took with him almost half of the congregation.

Despite the financial hurdles, the church continued to grow in various ways. In part because of the money problems, the Ladies Benevolent Society assumed an increasingly vital role in the life of the church. Formed in 1853, the Society met regularly serving as an "intellectual, social, and moral improvement and aid" organization of church women. Over the years the Society regu-

larly contributed money and organized various fund-raisers including an array of fairs and festivals. Additionally, the women shouldered many of the housekeeping, refurbishing and maintenance responsibilities for the church and the parsonage.

Church musical capabilities were also enhanced during this period. In 1867 a new pump organ was purchased from the Mason and Hamlin Company in Boston. To pay for the organ, children from the Sunday school collected \$100 and the congregation chipped in the remaining \$25. Five years later a church member, Alpheus Hardy, gave the church a fine cabinet organ. Another organ was purchased in 1890. It was replaced ten years later by the church's first pipe organ which was purchased from the Middle Street Christian Church in New Bedford. The pipe organ significantly enhanced worship services. So too did the church vocal performances. In 1870 a singing master was hired to operate a Singing School. Over the years the church that had once reluctantly included music as part of the worship services was developing a reputation for the music in its services.

Following World War I, Chatham experienced new growth. Since the late 19th century the town had become a popular summer vacation site. The addition of paved roads as

well as the development of affordable automobiles provided visitors with ever-improving access to the Cape. Among the beneficiaries of this growth was the First Congrega-

tional Church. Though money remained tight, and church membership did not grow rapidly, the summer visitors (or “aliens” as locals often referred to them) helped stabilize budgets. New revenues enabled the church in 1920, for the first time in more than 20 years, to function without assis-



tance from the Congregational Home Missionary Service. Likewise, various improvements ranging from purchasing new carpets to repairing the steeple and installing electricity in parts of the church were completed. The pastor’s annual salary also was increased making the church more appealing to candidates. Nevertheless, between 1929 and 1935, nine ministers filled the church’s pulpit. The reason for the turnover, however, was not the annual salary but rather opportunities to serve larger congregations.

In 1932 the church acquired a degree of national notoriety. Muralist Alice Stallknecht Wright, whose family had moved to Chatham several years earlier, painted a three-panel mural, *Christ Preaching to the Multitude*, designed for the church vestibule. The central panel, which depicts Christ blessing the town, was placed so that it could be seen whenever the church doors were opened. During the following 13 years Stallknecht completed two more multiple-panel murals which were hung at the rear of the church. The second mural, *The Circle Supper*, represents the congregation’s weekly communal supper with Christ giving the blessing. Collectively the murals portray a cross section of American society using portraits of Chatham residents and First Congregational church members as subjects set within various sites in Chatham. The murals were generally acclaimed as examples of great regional American art from the period. So that visitors could view the work, the church often kept its doors unlocked and assigned personnel to accommodate the guests. Over 11,000 came to see the murals during the first 3 months that they were available. The number of visitors eventually grew beyond the church’s capability to accommodate them and maintain church facilities, including carpets and woodwork. In 1943 the Atwood House Museum agreed to put the murals on permanent display in what became known as the mural barn. (The murals remain prominently displayed at the Atwood House.)

About the same time that the murals were moved to the Atwood House, the church government was thoroughly revised. As with many other Congregational churches at that

time, the one in Chatham took exception to the growing church authority outside the local church. In 1947, after operating as the Orthodox Congregational Society since 1868, the congregation agreed to maintain its autonomy by reforming the church government. A new church constitution and revised by-laws were written transferring legal authority to the newly formed First Congregational Church of Chatham, Massachusetts. Ten years later the Evangelical Church, the Reformed Church and the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches merged to form the United Christian Church (U.C.C). In May 1961, after reviewing the U.C.C. Constitution and By-Laws and its Statement of Faith the First Congregational Church of Chatham joined the great majority of congregational churches throughout the nation and became part of the U.C.C.



After becoming part of the U.C.C. the church experienced a steady growth in terms of both membership and church activities. Among the most significant addition was the acquisition of a new pipe organ. After investigating various companies, the church purchased a Casavant organ that included more than 1000 pipes. Dedicated in March 1973, the organ brought a new level of music to the church and has become a central element in weekly church services. A decade later the church purchased three octaves of hand bells and organized a hand bell choir which further enhanced worship services. The congregation was also instrumental in the creation of the Chatham Chorale. Established in 1971, the chorale initially brought together singers from area churches for performances throughout the year. Since then the Chorale has evolved into a non-denominational Chatham tradition. Another notable musical addition to the church was a “Coronation” carillon. The carillon consists of 25 miniature bell units that, when struck, can be heard both inside the church alone or throughout the community. These additions, as well as exceptional choral performances, further established the First Congregational Church’s reputation for musical presentations within its services.

By the turn of the 21st century the church had grown to over 500 active members. Though membership during the past 20 years has declined, the church remains as involved and vibrant as ever. Youth education has been one of the recent priorities. Concerned about a drop in the number of children in the congregation, the church has successfully rejuvenated church school activities. Various other youth-oriented endeavors have been created to serve Chatham and the surrounding community as well as enhance the spiritual life of the children. Just as the youth programs have grown, so too have the scope and breadth of church outreach activities within Chatham and the surrounding community. These include several events that contribute to the local food pantry and other charitable organizations. The church also now operates a Stephen Ministry to provide confidential care to members of the community who are experiencing difficult

times. Nationally and internationally the church annually participates in several U.C.C. efforts as well as other charitable undertakings.

As the First Congregational Church embarks on its fourth century, extensive renovations are being made to much of the church building. Labeled “Vision 2020,” the project is the product of two years of planning and a major capital campaign. The improvements include new administrative spaces, creation of a four-stop elevator, stabilization of the steeple, improved handicap access and an expanded chancel which will provide additional room for the pipe organ. Reconstruction of the pipe organ is a second project that is being done concurrently with the Vision 2020 project. After 50 years of usage the organ is being completely rebuilt by its Canadian manufacturer. The new organ will include 500 additional pipes, a third manual and expanded keyboards. Unfortunately, work on both projects has been slowed due to the coronavirus pandemic that has suspended almost all daily activities throughout the nation. Church services, which had been moved to the Masonic Lodge a block away on Old Harbor Road, have been suspended since mid-March with hopes that they will resume sometime during the early summer of 2020. Despite the pandemic, building construction, which was also briefly suspended, and work on the organ have been able to move forward though at a slower pace than originally planned. At this point, both projects are scheduled for completion during the autumn of 2020. Likewise, several tercentenary activities, which were to begin on June 14, 2020, have been rescheduled for the autumn.

As we now chart our course into the future, we are guided by the heritage of faith and



fellowship that our church has established during its long, eminent past. We will continue to build upon the foundation of spirituality, service and compassion which embody the mission of the First Congregational Church of Chatham. The church will remain a spiritual anchor for Chatham and the surrounding community. It will continue to act with integrity, demonstrating respect for all and nurturing individual growth. The First Congregational Church of Chatham will remain more than simply the site where church members meet. Rather, it will continue to be an ever-growing collection of people, reaching from William Nickerson to contemporary populations, who have worshipped with, served with and been served by each other. As we resume our journey, the church will continue to reflect more than three centuries of a belief in the goodness of all whom it touches.