

The Roots That Hold Us

This year, we celebrate the 325th anniversary of the founding of the First Parish of Sherborn. One of the ways we plan to commemorate this milestone is through a new weekly series called the “Roots That Hold Us.” In case you miss a Sunday, the previous Sunday’s “Roots” installment will be included here.

January 3

Although the people of this area won their 1674 petition to separate from Medfield, the breakout of King Phillip’s war delayed the building of a meeting house and the settling of a minister. Once the Indian danger was passed, they entered into a 4 ½ year controversy over the siting of the meeting house which was finally arbitrated by a committee from the General Court. They signed an agreement with Daniel Gookin for 20 pounds money and 20 pounds country pay in April of 1681 and set about building the first meetinghouse on this hill above Edward’s Plain with lumber from Sawin’s saw mill. Daniel Gookin was ordained here as our first settled minister on March 26, 1685.

Judge Samuel Sewell, later of Salem Witch Trials fame, attended the ordination of Mr. Gookin at this Church of Christ in Shearborne, as the church was then called. Gookin was a good friend and colleague of John Eliot’s and helped him with his mission to Christianize the Indians at the South Natick Church. Mr. Gookin served this parish for 27 years.

In the early years of the town and the church, Massachusetts was a theocracy based on Calvin’s teachings. Only those persons who had publicly confessed their sins and professed to have been selected to receive the grace of God were regenerate and deemed worthy of church and Town membership. They believed in the Trinity and accepted the divinity of Jesus. In these early days, there was a 2-3 hour sermon, a noon break and then another sermon. And, by the way, the meetinghouse was not heated. If you didn’t go to Meeting you were fined and if you didn’t pay the fine you were put in the stocks right out in front of the meetinghouse.

In 1674 there were 16 inhabitants and proprietors and a total of 108 souls (women and children were souls but not inhabitants). By 1721, the town had grown to 400 souls. The problem which had beset the town when it first tried to site its meetinghouse still persisted: the inhabitants were too spread out and it was difficult for some to get to Meeting. In 1700, Framingham was established and 17 Sherborn inhabitants plus their families were annexed to the new town. Some of this land ended up as part of Ashland when it was incorporated in 1846.

In 1723, the burgeoning town had outgrown its first meetinghouse and voted to build a new larger one next to the old one. The second church was 40’ by 32’ and sited just to the north of the present building. It had an gilded acorn weathervane at the top. Since there was no change in the site of the new meetinghouse, in 1724, those inhabitants to the west of Dopping Brook petitioned the general court to be separated from Sherborn and the Town of Holliston was established.

It is interesting that much of our current membership, although from different towns, resides on land that was originally part of Sherborn.

January 17

In the mid-1700s, liberalism started to take hold in the Eastern part of New England. The ministers in the east were primarily Harvard trained and Arminian and the ministers in the Connecticut Valley were primarily Yale trained and orthodox. (Definitions of these terms can be found in your insert.) Samuel Locke, our 4th minister, was ordained in 1759. Locke was highly regarded by the theological liberals. He said “there is no impiety in examining the proofs by which truth is said to be supported”

During his tenure, the town again decided that it needed a larger meetinghouse. The building was sawn in half and 20 feet was added to the middle. The town then voted to color the clapboards on the outside of the meeting house an “oring culler, all to be handsomely done and fashionable and workmanlike.”

Mr. Locke was a good friend of John Adams, having studied with him at Harvard in the 1750s. While a call to ministry was assumed to be a lifelong commitment, much to Sherborn’s dismay, Locke left Sherborn in 1770 when he was offered the Harvard presidency. Unfortunately, in 1773, Locke suffered a fall from grace at Harvard when it was discovered that he fathered a child with his sickly wife’s housekeeper. He resigned and fled back to his farm in Sherborn where he was welcomed back by most but not all of the townspeople.

Like most ministers of the time, Locke was a farmer: the horse chestnut trees he planted still grow at 8 Washington Street. Locke became a town leader and went every evening to the local tavern where his political arguments carried such weight that there was not one Tory in Sherborn. Locke died suddenly in 1778 while bringing in the cattle. President John Adams wrote that he never remembered his old classmate, Locke, “without the most lively emotion of affection and the highest sense of esteem.”

On May 21, 1776, Sherborn voted to support independence. Sherborn formed its own company of minutemen and stored supplies of arms and gunpowder in the Meetinghouse. This caused a great deal of concern to the womenfolk -- we’re not sure how the men felt about it.

January 24

Elijah Brown became our 5th minister in 1770, beginning a 46 year pastorate - our longest. Brown began his ministry as a Calvinist, but having accepted the concept of human free will for good or evil, he soon drifted towards Arminianism. It was only one small step to the Arian point of view that Jesus was not God, but was chosen for a special mission on earth. Brown was the first true though unnamed Unitarian in our pulpit. We were a bit ahead of the times: the first official Unitarian church in the US was founded in 1794 in Pennsylvania by Joseph Priestly.

Times were changing. During the Revolutionary War, everyone was concerned with the right of the individual to make choices. The authority of the church to govern the entire community was decreasing. Brown’s sermons were described as generally practical rather than doctrinal – he even began to cut his sermons in the cold, unheated meetinghouse to 10 or 15 minutes in the winter! Mr. Brown said, “Christians may differ widely in speculative opinions and yet rejoice in the light of the gospel with equal sincerity and walk by the light with equal uprightness and safety. If Christians would bestow half the pains to find out how far they agree in sentiment that they do to discover

wherein they differ, and walk by the same rule, so far as they are agreed, it would have a strong tendency to increase their happiness, both temporal and external.”

Brown had perhaps an even greater influence on the development of the Unitarian Church than one would anticipate from a country minister. Brown supplemented his income by starting a classical school in Sherborn which won considerable fame. A former student, Henry Ware, was appointed the first Hollis Professor of Theology at Harvard and played a large part in the formation of Harvard Divinity School and its unofficial association with the Unitarian church. Because he was a liberal, his appointment caused quite a stir. The leader of his opposition was Jedidiah Morse from Yale, a Calvinist who took a leading role in founding Andover Theological Seminary for the training of Orthodox ministers. This dispute was one of the significant events that contributed to the split in the Congregationalist denominations, and to the eventual founding of the American Unitarian Association in 1825. His son, Henry Ware, Jr., also a Harvard trained Unitarian minister was a mentor for Ralph Waldo Emerson.

January 31

After the War of 1812, the war between Orthodox Congregationalist and the Arian, Arminians or Socinian Unitarians entered its most violent stage - men split along different lines in religion and politics. The ruling powers of Harvard were both Unitarian and Federalists. Thomas Jefferson, Federalism's arch foe, had Unitarian sentiments. Jefferson said, "I trust that there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian." That Jefferson's prediction did not come true was due in part to the organized opposition of the orthodox churches and to the reluctance of the Unitarians to proselytize.

William Ellery Channing was preaching at Boston's Federal Street Church and serving as the leader of liberal Christianity. The much feared split in the Standing Order of Congregational Church had begun. The conservatives kept a watch on the country churches and quickly supported those church members who were Trinitarians. Channing preached and published his opinions, but he felt that people and churches should be free to make their own decision and did not encourage the organization and recruiting as practiced by the orthodox.

After Elijah Brown died in 1816, First Parish called Shearjashub Townsend to the pulpit. Mr. Townsend served during a tumultuous 13 years where many New England congregations were splitting into Unitarian and Trinitarian factions. By 1820, there were 120 Unitarian churches in eastern Massachusetts. Townsend, although well aware of the conflict between liberal and orthodox, rode the fence and tried to keep his charge together.

By 1828, his failing health (he had tuberculosis) drew him away from his ministerial duties and Amos Clarke, a Sherborn native, temporarily supplied the pulpit. Townsend's repeated selection of Amos Clarke as supply pastor irritated the conservatives in the congregation, for Clarke was an avowed liberal. As his health worsened, Townsend resigned and travelled South in search of a milder climate. The spark of discontent among the congregation continued to be fanned by Amos Clarke's liberalism.

February 7

In February of 1830, the conservatives in the congregation petitioned the court for a warrant to form a Second Religious Congregational Society in Sherburne and started having separate prayer meetings.

The conservatives attended First Parish, where Amos Clarke was temporarily supplying the pulpit, as well as their own prayer meetings while they tried to influence the selection of a permanent orthodox minister for First Parish. They were unsuccessful and in March of 1830 First Parish called Amos Clarke to be installed as the 7th minister. Dissatisfied with Amos Clarke's views, the conservatives withdrew in April and engaged Samuel Lee as their pastor.

Amos Clarke was Sherborn born – his ancestral home at 90 Maple Street is still owned by his descendents. He prepared for Harvard under the tutelage of Elijah Brown and held several teaching posts before returning to Sherborn as supply pastor. When he was ordained in March of 1830, he was nearly 50 years old, had a large family and was very definitely a Unitarian.

Reverend Clarke attempted reconciliation with the conservatives but to no avail. The Second Parish raised a new church in July of 1830 and, perhaps in the spirit of competition, First Parish followed suit by raising this new Meeting House on August 16th and 17th of 1830. This building is an exact copy of the church then in the town of Sutton, which later burned. It had a huge advantage over the previous two Meeting Houses: it was heated.

Here is how they ran a church capital campaign in 1830: church records show it was voted that “two pews be reserved in the new Meeting House for the use of the present ministers as long as they remain connected with this parish in their pastoral office; and that one pew be reserved for the use of death people, and seven pews for the other persons who may not wish to purchase pews; and that the whole expense of building and furnishing the new Meeting House be levied on the other sixty-eight pews on the lower floor of said House.” Substantial amounts of about \$100 were paid for the pews and, as you can see on your order of service, many old family names such as Leland, Dowse, Sanger, Holbrook, Ware, Goulding, Nason Hill and Leonard Morse are listed as purchasers.

February 14

Amos Clarke served for 12 years until 1842 when he resigned claiming ill health.

First Parish next called Richard Stone to the pulpit. Mr. Stone was a self-taught farmer from Rhode Island. He was initially popular and invigorated the Sunday School. But, to quote the writings of Martha D. Leland, “Mr. Stone's zeal for the cause of temperance involved him in controversy....He was untiring in his efforts to put an end to the selling of liquor at the local tavern, and this at a time when public sentiment had not quite caught up with him.”

Those who were against Rev Stone, mostly young men, and those who supported the tavern keeper were called the “rum party”. The more staid members of the congregation valued loyalty to their minister even though they didn't agree with all his views. In addition to his unpopular temperance campaign, some people were angered when he wrote in opposition to the Transcendental writers. And, still others were upset with him because he favored abolition. It all finally degenerated into a contest to see

which party could muster the greater number of votes. The church voted to dismiss him but only by a very small margin. Immediately, another meeting was held and 42 families decided to withdraw from First Parish and form a new organization with Rev. Stone. They quickly raised a new "Independent Congregational" chapel in the Methodist tradition. The new church stood near 5 Washington Street and was later moved to Zion's Lane where it was eventually destroyed by fire.

Twice in just 18 years, the congregation had divided in half over its differences! Stone stayed in Sherborn 3 years after causing all this uproar and then moved on to a Wesleyan church in Boston. Eventually, he left New England for the Midwest, but members of his family continued to have Sherborn friends. He would often ask visitors from New England, "Well, the Unitarians have about died out, haven't they?"

The Reverend John Fleming succeeded Stone preaching at the Methodist chapel. As the chapel congregation dwindled in 1850, they voted to reunite with First Parish. Fleming served the reunited congregation from 1850-1853. He stayed in Sherborn and he and four brothers established a willowworking business that succeeded for 50 years. His family built houses at numbers 5, 16, 18, 37 and 58 Maple Street. In fact, the Curtis' live in one of those houses, today.

February 21

As we approach the 1860s on our historic timeline, we might wonder about the history of slavery among the First Parishioners and the prevailing sentiments about abolition.

Daniel Gookin was strongly against slavery, influenced by the fact that some of the Indians with whom he worked in Natick were sold into slavery.

Our second minister, Daniel Baker, owned at least two slaves who he set free. Some townspeople were opposed to giving slaves freedom because they feared they might be reduced to want and become public charges.

Three adult people of color were baptized in the church between 1737 and 1742. One slave, named Duty, was freed by his master, Capt. Joseph Ware, when he became such a proficient miller that his mill could grind more grain than the others.

Fifteen or twenty "people of color" were "Rec'd to Full Communion" and three marriages were recorded in the 1840s as "people of color". The last entry in the church record books where color is noted was made in 1848.

As the Civil War approached, the town was divided on the issue of slavery. Some of the shoe shops in town produced brogans specifically for the Southern market and they were anxious that a war would upset their business. There were many heated arguments over the right of an individual to own slaves.

After the Civil War began in 1861, the church worked to support the soldiers with garments and supplies for the Sanitary Commission, the forerunner of the American Red Cross. Earlier doubts about abolition were forgotten and there were Underground Railroad stops in town, most notably at the Clewes house at the corner of Lake and Farm.

At 83, the retired Rev. Amos Clarke wrote an inspirational address to the Sherborn Volunteers as they went off to fight in the Civil War. This is an excerpt.

"Friends, though absent in person, I am present with you in heart and soul, and have a word to say to you. I rejoice that you responded so promptly to the call of your Country

in her distress, to protect her against the murderous assaults of the most causeless and wicked rebellion that ever occurred on earth; the object of which is to overthrow the best government in the world, to the protection and care of which the rebels are indebted for their wealth and prosperity, -- a government established by our fathers at a great expense of blood and treasure.....

Go, resolved to lay down your lives, if need require it: the sacrifice will be a brilliant gem in your crown of glory. But, go not in the spirit of revenge. Remember your foes are *human beings*, although under the delusion to which they have been subjected, they act like *demons*.....

Show kindness to the wounded captive. Revenge belongs to the age of barbarism, not to that of civilization. Remember, barbarism is the natural fruit of slavery; and it may be the misfortune more than the crime of many who are guilty of it, considering the influences under which they have been brought up. We have been educated in a different school: our religion forbids the infliction of unnecessary pain or suffering on a captive or wounded foe.”

February 28

The period following the Civil War saw an end to First Parish’s relative prosperity. Young men returning from war moved west looking for land and gold. Population decreased in both the town and the church. The railroads had been built and Sherborn had only a spur line. Sherborn’s small shoe industry suffered and gave way to the towns served by the railroad, namely Natick and Framingham. It was hard to support a vigorous church. Over the years, it was necessary to take out mortgages on the building to cover essential expenses. Many times, the church was “bailed out” through a special gift.

The women of First Parish were very active in fundraising and acted as a steady force for the church. The earliest record of the Young Ladies Benevolent Society is a letter dated 1837. There is written evidence that the Alliance held its 50th annual Church Fair in 1901. The Women’s Alliance is probably one of the oldest Unitarian women’s groups in existence. In 1854, the women raised enough money to buy the first organ for the church.

Our 13th minister, Eugene De Normandie, served from 1876-1890. Complaints from the previous two ministers about lack of housing, made it necessary for the First Congregational Church, as it was then called, to provide a parish house. The property roughly where the playground is now was owned by the church and leased to Palemon Bickford who built a straw factory on it. After the factory closed, the building was converted to tenements. The church recovered the property and offered the building to DeNormandie as a parsonage.

Mr. and Mrs. DeNormandie were very active and invigorated the church. There was a thriving Sunday School with 10 teachers and 70 students. There were several groups including The Ladies Benevolent Society, the Busy Bee Society, the young woman’s Octagon Club, the Sabbath School Association and the Floral Mission. The Busy Bees, a children’s group, raised the money for and donated our chandelier in 1890. At the time, there were two matching lamps on the organ and two on the pulpit. The chandelier, originally kerosene, was restored and wired in 1952 when electricity was installed in the church.

March 7

In the early 1890s, First Parish could no longer afford to pay a minister so it joined with the Eliot Church in South Natick to call Reverend Leverett R. Daniels. This was the first time since Daniel Gookin's tenure that we had shared a pastor with South Natick, but it would not be the last. It was a hardship to travel each Sunday over unpaved roads by horse and buggy to South Natick, so we agreed to pay Mr. Daniels \$10 more per Sunday.

Rev. Daniels came to Massachusetts from Michigan where he had already organized and built two liberal churches. With an experienced and able minister on board, even part-time, things were looking up. First Parish repaired and redecorated the meeting house and had a grand re-opening ceremony on October 21st, 1894. The picture on your order of service is most likely of that time period.

Now let's shift slightly northeast and discuss what was happening in Natick, because the Natick Unity Church's history became part of First Parish in Sherborn's history, in 1977, when the two churches merged. In 1897, Sarah Allen Cooney (yes, of Cooney room fame) founded the Natick Unitarian Association, meeting initially in her home. She died a year later and soon after, the small group voted to build a church in her memory. They changed the name to the Unity Church and, in 1903, they dedicated their beautiful new building. Edward Everett Hale, Unitarian Minister and United States Senate Chaplain, delivered the dedicatory address.

In 1924, the Town of Sherborn celebrated its 250th Anniversary with a 3-day celebration – both the Unitarian and Congregational churches took part. The bronze tablet commemorating our former ministers that hangs in the rear of this sanctuary was dedicated in honor of that milestone.

March 14

Although these were lean years, from 1903-1919, we were able to support our own minister. In 1919, First Congregational Parish, Unitarian, as we were then called, again shared a minister with The Eliot Church. William Daniel Wilkie, a Canadian of Scottish descent, was an excellent preacher but, by 1927, diabetes had made it impossible for him to continue serving two churches. Wilkie stayed on at South Natick and we decided to call a part-time minister, Reverend Cicero Adolphus Henderson, who was also a Babson professor and lived in Wellesley. Although brilliant, he was ambivalent about the ministry and served only 3 years. The next part-time minister, Marshall Jones, was even less successful as he was a religious conservative and lived in Boston. For four years, the church declined due to lack of attention. In the midst of the Great Depression, in 1932 we again united with South Natick to call William Billingham. This began another period of 14 years of sharing with South Natick.

In 1935, the First Parish Unitarian in Sherborn put on an extensive celebration of the 250th Gathering of the Church and the Ordination and Installation of the First Minister of Sherborn. The celebration included a pageant which is described in the newspaper clipping on your OOS. Guest speakers at the special service included:

- Mr. Robert H. Barber, descendent of the original founders
- Reverend Louis C. Cornish, President American Unitarian Association
- Professor Edward C. Moore, Harvard University

- And, The Honorable Leverett Saltonstall, then Speaker of the State House of Representatives, who would become Governor of Massachusetts in 1939.

325th Anniversary Celebration Introduction, March 21

Today we celebrate 325 years of history and the people that have come before us on this hill above Edward's Plain. During this service, we will celebrate five milestones in our church's long journey that helped to shape today's Unitarian Universalist Area Church at First Parish, a vibrant liberal faith community serving seven or more towns, where everyone is welcome and whose members reach beyond these four walls to help those who are less fortunate.

The following invocation was written by the Reverend Carl Seaburg for our 300th Anniversary celebration. Carl Seaburg was a minister, scholar, writer, poet, editor and long-time member of the staff of the Unitarian Universalist Association. He died in 1998.

The March winds of other springs have blown upon this congregation for three hundred years -- and the people were made stronger for such weathering.

The heat of summers gone have tried and tested the people who worshipped here and they came through strengthened and sustained.

The beauty of autumns past have been lavished on this church and it prompted in them deep feelings of blessing and grace.

The snows of winters forgotten have not discouraged nor dismayed the members of this society for their faith was kept warm within.

May we talk today in the same spirit of quest and questioning as did they.

May we today have the same perception of the needs of those who will follow us that we can leave them a heritage enlarged and enriched by our doings and strivings.

May we today, in our turn under the seasons and weathers of this New England, be worthy heirs of these three hundred years gone.

Youth Service – March 28

Today's Roots that Hold Us brings us to the 1930s when we continued to share a minister with South Natick.

Rev. Howard G. Matson served this church and the Eliot Church from 1936-1938. He started a very active Young Peoples Religious Union or YPRU at his churches. Howard Matson and his wife were lifelong social activists. After he left Sherborn, he marched on Selma, worked in Haight-Asbury and was a minister to the migrant farm workers of California.

In honor of the youth service today, here's a little history of the Young Peoples Religious Union. Organized in 1896, it was essentially a missionary organization chartered to "call out the young, and train them to independent thinking and speaking on religious topics." It was seen as a potential breeding ground for future homegrown Unitarian ministers. Around the same time a similar Universalist youth organization was founded and these two youth organizations merged in 1953 to become the Liberal Religious Youth or LRY. The successful merger of these two youth organizations paved the way for the eventual merger of the Unitarian and Universalist churches eight years later. Some of you may remember the LRY from the 60s and 70s. It was deeply involved with the beginning of the anti-war movement in the 1960s and was notorious for its radical approach to social justice. As the UUA became more conservative, the radical counterculture activities of the LRY became too controversial and the organization was disbanded in 1982.

Michael Tino of the UUA said this about the history of UU youth organizations, "It is a fascinating story, not only of our youth movement but also of the leadership that youth have provided our faith over time. This demonstrates the importance of investing in partnerships between youth and adults. It also illustrates that youth provide a vibrant, cutting edge and prophetic voice that keeps Unitarian Universalism vital and alive."