

History of Center Church  
October 19, 2014  
285<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

In 1637 a band of Englishmen set sail for the new world with the idea of establishing a “Bible State” in New England. They arrived in Massachusetts and were prepared to settle somewhere in the territory of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. After the Pequot Wars were over, good reports were reaching Massachusetts about an area called Quinnipiac. The accounts told of good land and easy access. Also – somebody should get to the area before it was taken by an “ill neighbor” – meaning the Dutch in New Amsterdam.

In August 1637, the men went to look the Quinnipiac site over. They reported back that they had found the promised land. In March 1638, a band of families sailed to Quinnipiac and by April, the new settlement was begun.

The Indians were friendly and good relations were established that would last for many years.

By 1639 a church and a government was established in the new colony called New Haven. This new government was granted land to the north of the settlement and families were encouraged to go out and settle and develop the farm land upon the solemn promise to live in the same sort of godly community as New Haven did.

By 1670 the highlands to the east of the Quinnipiac River were settled. Because many of these settlers were from Wallingford, England, they named their settlement Wallingford. The land of the northern part of Wallingford was not under the jurisdiction of New Haven or Wallingford. The General Court of Connecticut at Hartford had that jurisdiction. When England threatened to take away all the charters of the colonies, the court gave the land of North Wallingford to Wethersfield, Middletown, and Farmington and gave orders to create a village therein.

In the meantime, people were arriving in the North Farms area of Wallingford. Jonathan Gilbert from Hartford was the first white man to own land within the present limits of Meriden. His farm was off the present day Chamberlain Highway. His son-in-law, Edward Higby, bought the land between Gilbert’s farm and Pilgrim Harbor Brook. He was charged by the New Haven Colony to maintain a way over the brook that is passable to man and beast. North Colony Road is one of the oldest in the state.

Other families moved north from Wallingford. These first farms were along Curtis Street, Broad Street, and Pomeroy Avenue. In 1700 land in the western part of the territory was purchased and developed by John Merriam.

These first families were required to travel to Wallingford to attend town meetings and, more importantly, to attend church. The roads between these farms and Wallingford were little more than pathways and travel in winter was difficult. The farm families began holding church services in the home of Daniel Hall. In 1724 the men petitioned the church in Wallingford to be permitted to organize their own church and community. The petition was turned down. Two years later another petition was also turned down with one concession – the farmers could officially hold services in Meriden. If they were to obtain a pastor for these services, they would have to bear the cost of his services themselves.

That solution worked and Theophilus Hall began serving as pastor to this community. As the congregation grew, it became apparent that a meeting house was needed. There was lively and heated debate over where this meeting house should be built. Farmers in each part of Meriden wanted the meeting house closer to their farms. The decision was made to build the meeting house on the west side of the hill along Ann Street. There is a boulder with a plaque on the corner of Ann Street and Dryden Drive to mark the location. You may have heard this area referred to as Meeting House Hill.

This small building served the community for twenty-five years. In 1729, the petition to have an independent and separate church in Meriden was granted and so the Congregational Church of Meriden was established. The center of the community continued to develop along Curtis and Broad Streets. Land along Broad Street was communally owned and the grazing of sheep and cattle and the practice for the militia took place as in just about every other New England Community.

The meeting house was beginning to show wear and tear and there were many people to be jammed inside. A new meeting house was needed. Reverend Hall, the pastor, gave the land for the new building. The new meeting house was south of our present building, facing east on Broad Street. It was begun in 1752 and dedicated in 1755. The building was sixty feet long and fifty feet wide and did not have a steeple. The building had two stories and small paned windows. People sat in box-like enclosures. The boxes were so high that only the heads of the adults could be seen. No heat was provided in the winter months.

Having two worship sessions was still practiced. The first started at nine A.M. and stopped at noon for the lunch break. There were a number of houses in the area where people could go to get warm and have their lunch. The beating of a drum or the sounding of a horn called the parishioners back to church for the afternoon session. Sermons lasted one hour! A steeple was finally added to the church in 1803, and a bell hung to do the summoning to church.

The second meeting house served the congregation for seventy-five years. But, again the wear and tear (and wood rot of major carrying beams and in the steeple) caused the congregation to decide to build its third meeting house. The original structure was seventy-eight feet long and fifty feet wide. Today it is longer because in 1878 twenty feet were added to the length. And here we are in that third meeting house on the southwest corner of East Main and Broad Street with two chimneys!!

Today we are well aware that there are two Congregational Churches in Meriden. And several of you have asked questions about what happened to cause this situation. So a quick look at Meriden in the early 1800's is necessary. Books with church history treat the situation most delicately and the records do not contain much real information.

What was happening ----

One – the Industrial Revolution was charging ahead. Inventions for all sorts of processes were being created. Many machine shops in Meriden began making all kinds of machinery. Also the steam railroad engine was making all kinds of places accessible. When the railroad came through Meriden in the 1830's, it was built in the valley. It was natural for the manufacturers to want to be close to the method of shipping their products. The center of the town shifted down the hill from Broad Street to Colony, Hanover, State and Pratt Streets. Many of the new and wealthy manufacturers built their homes along the hill overlooking the new center of town.

A second reason for the division is more subtle. Some of those industrialists made machinery that made the harvesting of cotton and the making of cotton textiles easier and faster. For them, another source of wealth. So the way of life in the south – the plantation system with its slaves – was OK. But, here in Meriden, there was a very strong group who favored the abolition of slavery. There even was a riot in front of the church in 1837 by people who opposed the abolitionists who happened to be meeting inside the church. In the years to follow, our church became a station on the Underground Railroad as were a few other private homes in Meriden.

The tensions among members of the congregation grew. The congregation was also outgrowing the capacity of this meeting house. So in 1848, a meeting was held to divide the assets of the church. More than half the members left and built a new meeting house on the corner of Church and Colony Streets, later building the present First Congregational Church further up Colony Street. At that same meeting, those voting to stay with this church decided we would be called Center Congregational Church. Our congregation's roots are 285 years old; our name, only 166 years old.

In the years since 1848, this church has continued to serve the greater Meriden community and has contributed very generously to the worldwide mission of helping those in need. Men and women from our church have served in many causes – the Civil War, World Wars I and II, the Korean Conflict, Vietnam, and Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of our members give time to community projects and service. May we continue to grow and be strong and a vibrant part of our community.