

Religion in Early West Brookfield

By David Fitzgerald

1. The Puritans

Religion played an important role in the early history of the area which became known as West Brookfield. It was an intensely religious age. The first settlers, who began arriving in Boston, Massachusetts and nearby areas in 1630, were Puritans, dissenters from the established (Anglican) Church of England. They were strong-minded people, with deeply held religious convictions based on their interpretation of the Bible and the teachings of John Calvin. In England they had sought to "purify" the Anglican Church of what they believed were errors and practises inconsistent with the teachings of Christ, and they had been persecuted as a result.

Upon their arrival in Massachusetts, the Puritans found themselves in a new land, free from any effective control from England. England at this time was becoming increasingly embroiled in civil and religious conflict, and was in no position to exercise authority over its colonial subjects 3,000 miles across the ocean. Thus the Puritans were enabled to establish strong governmental control in early Massachusetts, which operated in accordance with their own religious beliefs. The Puritan settlements grew rapidly, and after 30 years had expanded into many parts of Massachusetts under strict Puritan governance.

Therefore, when men from Ipswich sought permission to begin a new settlement in far off Brookfield in 1660, the authorities (General Court) in Boston granted it only on condition that provision be made for public worship in accordance with acceptable Puritan belief.

2. Quaboag Plantation and the First Meeting House

Accordingly, one of the first buildings at what was initially called "Quaboag Plantation" on today's Foster Hill in West Brookfield was a meeting house, built probably about 1665 when the settlement began. The meeting house was dual-purpose, serving as a place for public business as well as for public worship. It was a simple structure, about 20' by 30', with a thatched roof, a single door at the front, and several windows with diamond-shaped panes of glass. It was situated in the center of the small settlement, and its door served as the community bulletin board. The interior was plain, in accordance with Puritan principles, and had no heating or lighting. There were no pews, just rough benches, and the pulpit was a plain desk. It stood until 1675, when it was burned by Indians during King Philip's War.

It was in this meeting house that the public worship portion of the Sabbath was observed. The Sabbath was considered to be Biblically mandated, and was strictly observed in every settlement in early Puritan Massachusetts. No work of any kind was permitted after the Sabbath began on Saturday

afternoon, until it ended on Sunday afternoon. Attendance at public worship was compulsory for all inhabitants, and severe penalties and punishments were imposed on violators.

Accordingly, even in the small, remote Quaboag Plantation (re-named Brookfield in 1673), surrounded by "wilderness", the Sabbath was observed. Work ceased on Saturday afternoon, the children were catechized (taught their religious lessons), and the rest of the day was spent in quiet and contemplation. On Sunday, all inhabitants, young and old, were summoned, probably by the beating of a drum, to worship service, which usually began at 9:00 A.M. It must have been a picturesque sight as the 10 or so families processed up the single street along the crest of the hill to the meeting house. The morning service, with men and women sitting on opposite sides of the small room, consisted of prayers, Bible readings, a lengthy sermon by the minister, and the singing of psalms, and lasted until noon. There was then, after an intermission, another lengthy service in the afternoon which followed a similar format, with the addition of the giving of tithes and offerings. The congregation was then dismissed with a prayer and blessing.

Following its destruction in 1675, the Brookfield settlement on Foster Hill was abandoned, and the area was left deserted for about ten years. The survivors fled to more secure settlements on the Connecticut River or nearer to Boston, and most of them never returned.

3. The Re-settlement and the Second Meeting House

About 1686, re-settlement began, at first in very small numbers because the area was still insecure. The struggle between England and France for control of North America was becoming intense, and during King William's War (1689-1697) the French authorities in Montreal made extensive use of the Indians to attack English frontier settlements such as Brookfield. In 1688, Fort Gilbert was built, near the location of today's (2015) West Brookfield Elementary School. It served as a garrison for soldiers and a place of security for the scattered inhabitants, and became a center for the settlement for the next several years. In 1701, the inhabitants, who had been without public worship since re-settlement began, petitioned the General Court in Boston for help in paying for the services of a "godly, able minister", and services from that time until the building of a new meeting house were probably held at Fort Gilbert.

The Brookfield area remained very insecure, as the struggle between England and France continued in the conflict known as Queen Anne's War (1703-1713). Upon the close of that war, however, the theatre of conflict shifted, and Brookfield was never again seriously threatened with Indian attacks. With security came a rapid increase in population, and by 1716 the settlement had grown to such a size that the decision was made to employ a full-time minister and build a new meeting house.

Accordingly, work began on a new meeting house, which was completed about 1717. This second meeting house was located on the same site as the first one (1665) on Foster Hill, but it was much more ambitious than its modest predecessor. It was considerably larger, 45' by 35', to accommodate the much larger population of the settlement, and the seating arrangements included pews and

provision for a balcony. In addition, horse-sheds were built for the horses and carriages of those who had to travel from distant parts of the settlement to Sunday worship. All inhabitants were required to contribute to the construction, either in labor or a money equivalent. The pews were purchased, and great care was taken, in this still highly class conscious age, to assign them according to wealth and social standing.

Also, as had been decided, a settled, full-time minister was hired. The agreement with Rev. Thomas Cheney was that if he would serve for a period of at least three years, he would receive an annual salary of 52 pounds, house, barn, dug well, 25 cords of wood yearly, pasture, woodlot and several other parcels of land. Thus, on October 16, 1717, at a special service, the "Church was organized, and Mr. Cheney was constituted its pastor". The sermon was entitled "The Duty of Gospel Ministers to Preserve a People from Corruption". Rev. Cheney was formally ordained, and the Congregational Church of Brookfield was begun.

4. The Great Awakening

Ironically, even as this Church was starting, the western world was experiencing a marked decline in religious belief. In Europe, the Age of Faith was being replaced by the Age of Reason. A succession of scientific discoveries, such as Isaac Newton's law of gravitation, and many others, was revealing a universe which operated according to immutable natural laws, casting doubt on the validity of Biblical authority. Philosophical thinkers, such as Descartes, Locke, Kant and others, were attempting to explain human life and its meaning in terms of reason instead of Christian faith. Voltaire's writings were subjecting the tenets and practises of the Catholic Church to merciless ridicule. In America, Puritan theology was losing its force, as Calvinist doctrine was increasingly being seen as untenable.

For a few people, Deism, proclaiming an all-powerful divinity which ruled the universe with unchanging natural law, was taking the place of an out-dated Puritanism. But Deism was too impersonal and remote for most people, and a reaction set in. The reaction to Deism, as well as to religious indifference, in America was known as the "Great Awakening", and one of its most famous proponents was the Methodist preacher, George Whitefield. In 1740, Rev. Whitefield came to Brookfield, and, standing on a large rock (today's "Whitefield Rock" on Foster Hill), preached to a large gathering in an open field. Puritan ministers, Rev. Cheney included, were initially skeptical of the "enthusiasm" and emotionalism engendered in mass revivalist meetings such as this, but later came to accept them as contributing to religious faith.

The second meeting house stood on Foster Hill from 1717 to 1755. Like its predecessor, it was a dual-purpose structure, serving as a place of government as well as for religious purposes. In 1718, in answer to their petition, the General Court in Boston granted the inhabitants of Brookfield the right to become a township, and the first town meeting was held at this meeting house on December 5, 1718.

The period was one of rapid population growth and increasing economic prosperity. The meeting house stood on the busy Boston Post Road, then the main route between Boston and New

York. People were becoming increasingly engrossed in economic and worldly matters, and in spite of the effect of the "Great Awakening", there was an erosion of Puritan influence during this time and the adoption of more liberal religious attitudes. The once strict membership requirements were of necessity relaxed by many Puritan churches. Nevertheless, this second meeting house remained a very important place, as it served the political, social and religious needs of the fast growing township.

5. The Division of the Parish

But a problem had arisen. It had become difficult for some Brookfield inhabitants to travel from far-flung parts of the township to the meeting house. Not long after Rev. Cheney's death in 1747, the inhabitants of the northeast section (today's North Brookfield) were, upon petition, granted the right to become a second precinct and build their own meeting house. Thereupon, in 1754, the inhabitants of the south section (today's Brookfield) were granted the right to become a third precinct and build a meeting house. And finally, the inhabitants of the west section (today's West Brookfield), still called the first precinct, made the decision to build their own meeting house, which was completed in 1755 near the site of today's (2015) Congregational Church. The meeting house on Foster Hill was subsequently abandoned and dismantled, and the minister who had succeeded Rev. Cheney, Rev. Elisha Harding, resigned in order to avoid controversy between the three new parishes.

6. Legacies of Puritanism

Before moving on to the period of the third meeting house (West Brookfield), it is appropriate to say something about lasting legacies which Puritanism has left, two of which are the following:

The first is separation of Church and State. Most of the earliest Puritan settlers in Massachusetts, especially the ministers, had experienced at first hand persecution by the state-controlled Church of England, as we have seen. As a result, they took great care to keep Church and State separate in the new world they were attempting to create. That is not to say that Puritanism did not strongly influence the State. Church membership, and all that went with it, was a requirement for voting and holding public office. As a result, State purposes almost always ran in harmony with Puritan purposes. This "partnership" resulted in strong and effective government during the Puritan era, and has been called a theocracy by some. But the principle of separation of Church and State was scrupulously observed, and would eventually bear fruit when the Constitution of the United States was written.

The second Puritan legacy is education. The Puritans did not believe in blind faith, and were expected at the very least to be able to read the Bible. The early Puritan ministers were educated at Harvard College, where they received the best education then available, including history, literature, philosophy, and the Greek and Roman Classics, in addition to theological subjects. And the Puritan congregation was expected to be able to understand and appreciate long and learned sermons, which could last three hours or more. Thus the Puritans, even in remote settlements such as Brookfield in the mid-1700s, were the first to institute and support public education.

7. Congregationalism

Also before moving on to the period of the third meeting house, it is appropriate to mention Congregationalism. All the early Puritan churches of Massachusetts, including those in Brookfield, were Congregational in their form of organization, that is, each individual church was independent and self-governing. This type of organization has its roots in late 16th and early 17th century England. During the Reformation, England had declared its independence from Papal authority, and the English monarch, who claimed to rule by "divine right", had become head of the English (Anglican) Church, with complete power to control its affairs. Dissatisfaction with this secular control of the Church and with the continued use of many of the rites and ceremonies of the Roman Church produced an opposition movement. The opposition group, Puritans, wanted to have the English Church "purified" of secular and Roman influence, as noted earlier.

At the same time, however, a more extreme group known as Separatists developed, which went a step further, believing that the whole idea of a state church was contrary to Biblical teaching. The Separatists believed that they must be, like the early Christians, independent of all authority other than that of God as revealed in the Bible and through the Holy Spirit. It is from these Separatists that the Congregational form of organization developed, in which each individual church is self-governing.

These early Separatists in England were, like the Puritans, persecuted by the Anglican authorities, and a small group of them sought refuge in Holland. After about ten years there, this group, known today as the Pilgrims, made the courageous decision to cross the Atlantic in a small ship, the Mayflower. Enduring incredible hardship and suffering, they settled at Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620, thereby becoming the first Congregationalists in America.

Eventually, the Puritan churches of Massachusetts Bay, far from the authority of the Anglican Church and forced to solve their own problems and manage their own affairs, became Congregationalist also. Although independent, no individual church was allowed to go its own way theologically, however. As anyone familiar with early Massachusetts history knows, strenuous efforts were made to ensure adherence to acceptable Calvinist belief, and any dissenting individuals or groups were vigorously "corrected" or expelled.

8. The Third Meeting House and the American Revolution

Following the abandonment of the second meeting house (Foster Hill), the Town of Brookfield was, as we have seen, divided into three political entities called precincts, one for each of the three new meeting houses. This was necessary because in those days the Congregational Church was supported by town taxes. The Town now had three Congregational Churches, hence the need to create a political entity for each of them. The taxes paid by the residents of each precinct paid for the meeting house and the minister, as well as for other parish functions such as public education and support of the poor within that precinct. These precincts, first, second and third, eventually became, with a few minor

boundary changes, the towns of West Brookfield, North Brookfield and Brookfield, respectively.

The new (third) meeting house was built in 1755, as said earlier, and located close to the site of the present (2015) West Brookfield Congregational Church. The building was 35' by 45'. Probably a fairly good idea of what it looked like can be had by viewing the recently renovated Congregational Meeting House, originally built in 1751, which still stands on Rte. 9 a short distance west of the town of Ware. This third meeting house (West Brookfield) stood until 1794, at which time it was moved to another location and used for other purposes. It was replaced by a fourth meeting house, which was built in 1795 at about the same site.

It was of course during the period of the third meeting house that the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783) took place. But the stage was being set for that conflict much earlier. A huge ideological change had taken place since the first Puritan settlers arrived in eastern Massachusetts. Initially colonial subjects of an absolute English King, imbued with the values of a society rigidly stratified according to class, the early settlers found themselves in a new land far from England and English ways. Unlike in England, land was available in abundance in America, and those willing to work hard could acquire it. There was economic opportunity for all, regardless of one's background, and a chance to improve one's lot in life. Conditions in the New World brought out a spirit of self-reliance and independence. People out of necessity had become accustomed to governing themselves and solving their own problems.

We have seen how the Puritan Congregational Churches of Massachusetts, independent and self-governing, were in harmony with this new American spirit. They in fact embodied the ideals of self-government, and it is no accident that the town meeting form of local government developed in the early Puritan meeting houses. For a long period these meeting houses served as the social and political, as well as religious, center of the community. The sermons delivered in them went a long way toward developing the character of the people and shaping the values we now consider as American - the duty of government to represent all its people equally and fairly, the duty of society to help the poor and disadvantaged, the promotion of education and learning, and the ideal of the brotherhood of mankind.

The period following the American Revolution saw a diminishing of the social and political importance of the Puritan Congregational Church. Church membership was no longer a requirement for voting or holding political office. The Bill of Rights of the new United States Constitution mandated the separation of Church and State, and therefore the Church could no longer be supported by public taxation. Also, the new Constitution guaranteed freedom of religion to all, and there were by now many other religious denominations in America. But the Puritan Congregational Church had played a major role in shaping the character of the American people and its values and institutions.