

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EARLY SETTLEMENT OF THE ELLINGTON PARISH AND THE ELLINGTON CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

There is little known about the early history of the church. No church records prior to the year 1819 are in existence, except perhaps a few scattering memoranda made by the Rev. Mr. Brockway in the early part of his ministry.

Before the white people settled here, the Indians called the place "Weaxskashuck." The settlers called it "The Great Marsh."

The first white settlement in Ellington was made about 1717 by Samuel Pinney who purchased a large tract of approximately 1,000 acres on the west side of the Great Marsh and he was soon followed by Lieutenant John Ellsworth and his sons, Daniel and John, who in 1719-1720 bought a tract of 540 acres on the east side of the Great Marsh.

In 1730 there were but eleven families in the Ellington settlement, at which time the Rev. John McKinstry, of Scotch descent but born in Ireland, purchased, or was granted, some 30 acres or more of land in what is now Ellington Center. He built his house on the north side of Main Street near the west end. Legend has it that it was later moved to Maple Street.



The Rev. John McKinstry's home where it is thought church services were first held. Two of the original horse sheds that stood behind the third and fourth church buildings are now used as the garage.

In 1733 Mr. McKinstry was settled as the first pastor of the church. In October 1735 a committee presented a petition to the General Assembly, signed by thirty-five of the Great Marsh people, as the inhabitants of Ellington were then called, asking, "That we may ordain a good orthodox minister among us." The Legislature granted the prayer of the petitioners, giving them liberty, "To embody into church estate, having first obtained the approbation of the neighboring churches." The church was planned and organized with Legislative sanction in the year 1735 or 1736 although Mr. McKinstry had been the pastor of one existing here by voluntary consent before that time.

On December 20, 1737 the parish voted to build a meeting house and agreed on the site but could not get the requisite approval of the General Assembly until the next year.

The first church was probably built in 1738 or 1739 and stood facing the south street (now Main Street) not far from the front end of the present library grounds. At



that time the north street (now Maple Street) had not been opened through Ellington Center. There was only one main south street, just passing the head of the Great Marsh. It is said that at Mr. McKinstry's ordination there were but 110 souls in the parish and also at the erection of the first church building every man in the parish was present and they numbered twenty-nine, and the day of the raising they all sat down on the east sill of the building. This building was 45 feet long, 35 feet wide, with 20 foot posts. It was clapboarded upon the studs, was unpainted and was devoid of all interior decorations and stood until after the erection of the second church building. It was abandoned by vote of the church June 27, 1806 two days after the dedication of the new meeting house.

The second church building was designed and constructed by Samuel Belcher, a 25-year old contractor-builder, in 1805 and 1806 at a cost of \$5,100. The Rev. Diodate Brockway in his dedication sermon on June 25, 1806 said, "It perhaps exceeds, in point of elegance, any kind in Connecticut." It stood in the Church Park, facing south, in front of the present site. This church had two stories and was fitted with box pews. On April 4, 1817 a Town Meeting voted "to paint and keep the outside of the Meetinghouse in good repair and in consideration therefore the Town would have the privilege of holding the Town Meetings in said house."

Second Meeting House



It originally had a tall steeple which was taken down in 1839 as far as the bell deck because water had leaked in and rotted the wood. A couple of years later the bell deck was enclosed. The building stood until the opening of the third church in 1868 when it was sold and moved to Rockville, CT and originally used there as an opera house. It was destroyed by fire around 1941.



The third church was built in 1867-1868. The cornerstone was laid June 27, 1867 and the church was dedicated on August 26, 1868. Augustus Truesdale of Rockville, CT was the architect and it was constructed by T.D. Johnson of Stafford, CT. It was a large commanding building with a tall white spire, some 165 feet in height. The Town appropriated \$5,000 towards the cost of the building and the brick basement contained the Town Hall and the Selectmen's room. On Sundays the Church had the use of the Town Hall for Sunday School classes. The sanctuary was 29 feet in height, with a level ceiling and had a seating capacity of 500.

Third Meeting House

The main floor was some four feet higher than the new fourth church and the approach to the same was by quite a heavy grade from the street. This slope was largely removed at the erection of the new fourth building. The third church, with the entire contents, was completely destroyed by fire on the night of October 3, 1914.



The morning after the fire, the remains of the church building still smoldered.

The Church did not own a parsonage until 1898 when the Gilbert home on Maple Street, left to the Church in her will by Miss Sarah Gilbert, became the property of the Church.



At the annual meeting of the Church held on December 10, 1914 it was voted to incorporate the church. Papers of incorporation were filed with the Secretary of State on December 17, 1914 under the name: The Ellington Congregational Church.



Work on the present or fourth church building commenced August 19, 1915. Mrs. Harriet E. Delano Fowler of Holyoke, MA, granddaughter of John Hall, founder of the famous Ellington School for boys, gave the services of Clark & Arms of New York as architects in memory of her sister, Miss Ellen Delano. Edward F. Miner Building Co. of Worcester, MA was the contractor at a cost of \$30,000 not including tower clock and bell, pews, furnishings and organ. The cornerstone was laid October 7, 1915. The contents of the box taken from the church that burned were placed in the cornerstone of the new church together with additional material. The new church was dedicated August 17, 1916.

Fourth Meeting House