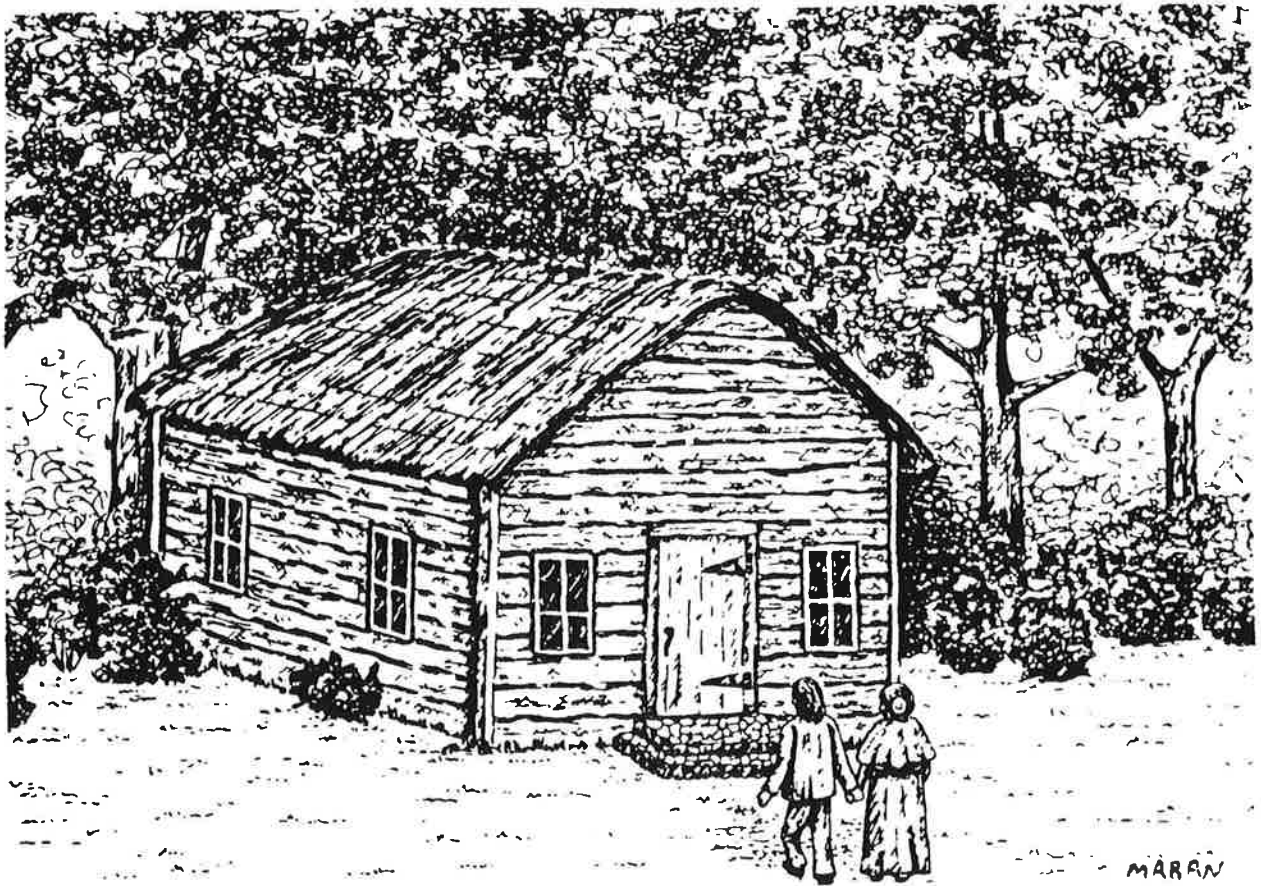


*"At the Feet of Christe
and His Church"*



The first meeting house was erected 1640-41 in Olde Towne. This is an artist's rendition of the way it may have appeared.

An Historical Sketch
of the
First Presbyterian Church in America

by Randall Lee Saxon

“At the Feet of Christe and His Church”

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On the tenth of March in 1640, 20 men in Lynn, Massachusetts signed a document entitled, “Declaration of the Company.” With the strokes of the feather quill pen which in ink sealed that declaration, Southampton Presbyterian Church was conceived. The declaration, in clear and concise English, stated that the church was to be “gathered and constituted accordinge to the minde of Christe,” and that all matters coming before the new colony headed for Long Island should be laid “at the feet of Christe and his Church.”

This was in keeping with the original eight founders, all young men (all were less than 26 years of age save two, one was 28, and the Rev. Abraham Pierson, whom they had chosen as their spiritual leader, was 32), and all of whom in recent months and years had fled the persecution of King Charles I in England. Puritans of the Presbyterian mold had found life increasingly difficult in England, and large numbers seeking religious freedom had been emigrating to America.

One of those emigrants was 41-year-old Lion Gardiner, to whom a land grant from King Charles I was given in 1639. The land given to Gardiner was an island between the two eastern forks of Long Island. Gardiner set aside the Shinnecock Indian name of the island, Manchouake, and renamed it “The Isle of Wight.” Though he moved to what would one day be named East Hampton in 1653, Gardiner’s Island was never to keep the name he gave it, and would ever be called, simply, “Gardiner’s Island.”

He was to have neighbors, other than the peaceful Shinnecock, with whom he would long be friends. These new neighbors were the company organized in Lynn in that spring of 1640.

With Captain Daniel Howe at the helm, the small bark of colonists sailed from Lynn Harbor southward along the coast to Long Island Sound, where they sailed westward to a point which is today called Cow Neck. Having landed there, and having found the land suitable for their new plantation, they ripped from a tree the Dutch emblem of sovereignty and proceeded to build their first homes. The efforts were short-lived, for local Indians reported the staunch English colonist trespassers to the Dutch authorities. The English were arrested and briefly imprisoned, their colonization efforts terminated, and, finally, the order was given that the Englishmen should depart and not return. They did so with haste, sailing in an easterly direction up and around the north fork of the east end of Long Island.

The little bark with its pioneer passengers was ably sailed by Captain Howe through the great bay surrounding the island purchased by Lion Gardiner until, the hand of Providence leading it, a landing was effected in a cove in what is today called “North Sea.” Met there by a band of Shinnecoeks, the settlers were escorted in a southerly direction toward the Atlantic Ocean. A settlement was begun immediately. Historical tradition names the date of this fateful meeting and beginning of the colony as June 12, 1640, the founding day of the new colony.

The pace would be feverish in order to get in crops for harvest that year. Temporary homes would be erected, a meeting house begun, and the new pastor ar-

rive all before the close of the year. Thus was established Southampton, New York, the oldest English settlement in the State of New York. Thus also was established the first permanent Presbyterian church in America.

Edwin Scott Gaustad, a widely-recognized historian and authority on American church history, notes with interest that the first four permanent Presbyterian churches established in this country were all established on Long Island: Southampton - 1640; Newtown - 1642; Hempstead - 1643; and East Hampton - 1648. These were independent, Calvinistic, Puritan Presbyterian strongholds which would eventually unite with the first Presbytery organized in 1706 by Rev. Francis Makemie.

Other Presbyterian churches would spring up across Long Island as the colonies moved toward and then gained their independence as a country. Another very old congregation established on the island was the Presbyterian church begun on October 21, 1640, in Southold. This church, however, was an independent Congregational church (though many of its early ministers were Presbyterian) as late as 1831. In 1832, it formally joined the ranks of the Presbyterian denomination and was in that year first enrolled with the Presbyterian General Assembly. Thus, two of Long Island's Presbyterian churches trace their heritage back to a time just one generation removed from the landing of the Mayflower.

The Southampton congregation of Presbyterians grew during the ministry of Rev. Abraham Pierson, who was the first Christian to preach the Gospel to the Shinnecocks of the Algonkian Indian Nation. Pierson developed a catechism in his work with the Indians and, when later he had moved to Connecticut, he published a catechism at Cambridge which was widely used to bring the news of the Gospel to the native Americans.

The town street was laid out in 1648 when Rev. Robert Fordham was pastor of the church, and every householder was given a home lot of three acres, with more land in outlying areas. What is today known as Toylsome Lane was in those days called "Mr. Fordham's Highway," for it commenced not far from the manse in which he resided. Withing sight of the manse a new church building was begun in 1652 and completed the following year. This was the first church to have a bell, imported from England. During the 55 years in which the church served the community, it was renovated to include a gallery and, later still, a small steeple. The ceiling in the building was eight feet high, and the walls were of cedar shakes. Seating was on crude benches.

When Rev. John Harriman arrived in Southampton to serve as pastor, in 1674, the village had grown and new settlements were increasing in size in nearby Sagaponack and Mecox. The Treaty of Westminster that year ended the war between the English and the Dutch, so trade flourished for all the settlements of the English among the Atlantic seaboard. The Shinnecock Indians taught the English settlers to master offshore whaling, and a new industry was born that would benefit the region for more than two centuries to come.

Southampton continued to grow, as did the church, through the pastorates of Rev. Joseph Taylor and Rev. Joseph Whiting. Though Taylor's time of service was brief (1679-1682), Whiting had one of the longer, more distinguished pastorates of the church (1683-1723 - 40 years!). During Whiting's ministry, the congrega-

tion sold land in what had come to be known as Bridgehampton for the purpose of building “a Presbyterian church, and no other.” In 1695, that new congregation installed Rev. Ebenezer White as their first pastor.

In 1707, numbers of emigrants from the Rhineland Palatinate passed through England to America’s shores and settled along the Hudson and Mohawk Valleys of New York. Emigrants from many nations were coming to New England and Long Island as trade and settlement continued to grow. And in that same year, because of growth of the congregation and need for a newer building, the Presbyterians in Southampton built their third church.

This building was erected on the corner of the Town Street (Main Street today) and Meeting House Lane, and was not unlike the dozens of other churches being raised throughout Long Island and in New England. There were two doors of entry, one for women and one for men. The sexes were segregated in the sanctuary, men on one side, women on the other. Girls sat with their mothers, boys sat in front of the sanctuary under the watchful eye of the pastor and the church elders seated there.

The church, erected in 1707, saw many historical events within its walls. This congregation joined the remote Philadelphia Presbytery, first in the nation, in 1716, and became the first church in the province of New York to do so. That same year, the first Presbyterian minister ordained in a church in New York was ordained in the Southampton Church. This was Rev. Samuel Gelston, who followed the pastorate of Rev. Whiting, and who served in the Southampton church until 1728.

Gelston’s ministry was followed by one which lasted 55 years. From 1727 until 1782, Rev. Sylvanus White pastored the congregation through times of war and peace. Theological debates which rent many nearby churches had little effect in Southampton, thanks to the steady, learned leadership of White. Throughout the American Revolution, White led his flock of faithful Presbyterians with vigor and conviction. When the two cannons owned by the Town of Southampton were subject to seizure by the British during their occupation of the town, the cannons were dismantled and the barrels hung like large weights in the high tower of the church. No British or Tory sympathizers ever found them!

On April 17, 1717, the Presbytery of Long Island — an organization of many Presbyterian churches on the Island — was founded and constituted in this church. On April 8th, 30 years later, the Presbytery met in this church and signed a declaration claiming adherence to the Westminster Confession, the Larger and Shorter Catechism, and agreed “to make the Directory of the Church of Scotland on congregational and classical Assemblies” their guide. The reformed, Presbyterian spirit of this congregation has continued throughout the pastorates of its many ministers.

Following the long pastorate of Rev. White here, three other pastors served the church before the turn of the century: Revs. Joshua Williams, Herman Dagget, and David Bogart. Dagget, Presbytery records note, “never smiled.” They go on to say, “He is just the man to preach to ministers!” Dagget and Bogart both served the Presbytery in a number of ways.

The 19th century brought many challenges to the church as it faced a chang-

ing society. Ardent spirits, wine, tobacco — all were banned and total abstinence was called for by an Anti-Tobacco Society formed in the church and the Presbytery.

Throughout the early and middle years of the 1800's, members of the church were admonished, even brought to trial before the Elders and excommunicated, for such offenses as: riding horseback to another village on Sunday, gambling, engaging in turkey shoots, extended absence from services of worship, adultery, swearing, and gossiping about others. While these charges were leveled against members while Rev. Daniel Beers pastored the church (1829-35), they reached their peak under the pastorates of Rev. Hugh Wilson (1835-52 and again in 1864-67) and Revs. John J. Morgan (1852-55) and William Neal Cleveland (1859-63).

When the Civil War erupted in the spring of 1861, sons of the church enlisted amid the hoopla, anticipating a brief conflict and victorious return. The conflict was, however, long and bloody, and there were some who fell on the field of battle, never to return. Meetings were held in the basement of the fourth church (erected in 1843 and dedicated in December of that year) to solicit both volunteers and money for the Union cause. When the war ended in April of 1865, the old bell in the church tower was rung loudly and long to mark the joyous occasion. In fact, the bells which have hung in the various church belltowers for more than 300 years have always been rung to mark the end of the wars (including Vietnam in 1973), as well as for marking days of national significance, marriages, funerals, and so forth. When the American hostages were freed in Iran on January 20, 1981, the current 800-pound bell was rung 53 times, one ring for each hostage released.

By 1895, the Sunday School had grown so large that an annex was added to the southern side of the sanctuary for a large classroom. Other structural changes were to follow. In 1897, stained glass windows were installed, replacing the frosted-white glass of 1843. In time, the coal-oil lamps in the sanctuary were replaced with electrified chandeliers. During World War II, in 1944, a stained glass window was installed to replace another on the north side of the sanctary. By 1957, the Sunday School had grown so much that, again, more space was needed. A three-story annex was added to the south end of the 1895 addition. Today, the church facilities meet the needs of a large variety of programs for both the church and the community at large. Thus has the church continued to serve the community for more than 340 years.

Pastors who served the church during the years of expansion were: Revs. Frederick Shearer (1867-70), Andrew Shiland (1871-83), Walter Condict (1887-88), Robert Hallock (1889-92), Richard Campbell (1894-1908), George Russell (1909-17), George Rexford (1918-25), David G. Smith (1926-37), James N. Armstrong (1938-51), John L. Felmeth (1951-76), and Rev. Randall L. Saxon (1978-86). The current pastor, Rev. William M. Johnson, began his ministry with this church in January of 1988.

The story needs to be told of another Presbyterian congregation in Southampton which merged with this congregation in December of 1965. The Bethel Presbyterian Church of Southampton was organized on August 12, 1916. It was the first Black congregation of Presbyterians on Long Island, the first in the

Presbytery. Though the church provided a good and fruitful ministry for persons of all races in our community, it was unable to sustain itself in inflationary and sociologically turbulent times. Many of the members of the Bethel congregation merged with First Presbyterian's congregation when Bethel finally closed its doors in the cold winter of 1965. These men and women have proven to be hard-working, faithful members and we are blessed to be one large Church Family together.

This congregation had four sons who served in the Congress of the United States:

Dr. Silas Halsey, who served from 1805 to 1807.

Jehiel Howell Halsey, who served from 1829 to 1831.

Nicoll Halsey, who served from 1833 to 1835.

Henry A. Reeves, who served from 1869 to 1871.

During the American Revolution, four physicians from the congregation ministered to colonial troops here on Long Island and in New England:

Dr. Silas Halsey (who was also an Elder in this church)

Dr. Henry White (who was also an Elder in this church)

Dr. William Bennett and Dr. Shadrak Hildreth

Descendants of all four physicians continue to be active, faithful members of this church today.

The Rev. Dr. Jesse Halsey, a son of this church, served the denomination as Vice-Moderator of the General Assembly in 1939. Many men and women have gone on from this church to serve as missionaries and ministers of the Gospel in this and foreign lands.

During the big, boom years of the whaling industry (1825-60), a number of sons of this church were captains of whaling vessels which traversed the globe in search of the behemoth of the depths. Names of Captains White, Halsey, Sayre, Rogers, and others fill family diaries and whaling logs of that bygone era. The bell in the church tower(s) was run by boys and young men to signal a whale off the beach, or the return of a whaling ship from its journey. Work ceased, and villagers rushed to the beach for the event.

It is a rich and varied history which the First Presbyterian Church of Southampton calls its own. The aura of a proud history surrounds all who unite in ministry with her in commitment to the larger work of the Church of Jesus Christ. When gathered for a special service of Holy Communion, the congregation is reminded by the handcrafted silversmith's mugs of 1729 and 1739 that its roots run deep, and that its Lord is the Lord of generation after generation.

It is altogether fitting and proper that in the original "Declaration of the Company," dated March 10, 1640, is the desire to lay all direction and commitment "at the ffete of Christe and his church." May we who carry on the tradition of faithfulness to our Lord ver declare ourselves thus.

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