

THE 200th ANNIVERSARY OF THE WACC MEETINGHOUSE

November 18, 2018

When our church was founded in 1751, most of the population lived on the east side of the river, in the area of Waterville Road. It was logical that they built their church near their homes. But as the years passed and more people moved to this area, farms were developed west of the river, along what we know as West Avon Road, Lovely Street, and Huckleberry Hill Road. And a commercial center developed along the Albany Turnpike (now Route 44).

When the little meetinghouse near the river needed to be replaced, there was disagreement about where to build. The debate raged for over 10 years: should the church go here in West Avon, which was the geographical center of the parish, or should it go in East Avon, closer to what was becoming a population center.

In 1817 the old church burned to the ground under mysterious circumstances. Now the church members had to come to some agreement. The final vote in March of 1818 was to build here in West Avon. But the vote was close: 44 yeas to 37 nays, a difference of just 7 votes.

In October of that year, the State of Connecticut passed a new constitution which disestablished the Congregational Church as the official church of Connecticut and opened opportunities for new churches to form. Three weeks later, while this meetinghouse was still being built, those 37 nays, plus 10 others, resigned to form their own church. This became the Avon Congregational Church.

Our church records don't tell us much about the construction of our meetinghouse. We know that it was built on the other side of the cemetery from here. We know that Thaddeus Thompson, Jeannie Parker's great, great grandfather, donated lumber for the building. We surmise that church members donated their labor to put up the building, much like a barn-raising. The first mention of the new meetinghouse being used was on January 2, 1819.

So, let's imagine it is January two hundred years ago. Connecticut is in the midst of the coldest decade in recorded history, a time known as The Little Ice Age. It is cold outside, and probably snowy. And today is the first time you have been to the new church. As you approach the church it looks much the same as it does today. You might be walking if you live nearby, but if you come from Lovely Street you likely ride in a horse-drawn wagon or a sleigh. During the service, the horses rest in the horse shed that stands behind the church.

You enter through one of the three main front doors into the foyer. In front of you, leading into the sanctuary, is the same large door that you see today. On either side of the foyer is a stairway that lead to the balcony.

This room would look very different. For one thing, it was 16 feet shorter in 1818. The front wall would be just beyond the first windows, about where the fire alarm is located. Rather than

on bench pews, seating was in box pews, each one assigned to a specific family; the pastor's family and other important people would be sitting near the front. If a box pew was empty, it was probably pretty easy to figure out who hadn't come to church that day. Another big difference is that there would be additional seating in the gallery or balcony which ran around three sides of the room.

The room was austere. The plaster walls and the woodwork were unpainted. There was no carpet on the floor. There was no cross or other decoration. The north wall had two lancet windows, and there is evidence that there was a raised pulpit with double staircases.

The building was unheated, so you sat, wrapped in a quilt or sleigh robe, with a footwarmer by your feet to provide some warmth. That is, if you had remembered to bring the coals from home to put in the footwarmer. Even so, by the end of the two or three hour worship service, you would probably be pretty cold.

Our Boards of Trustees and Stewardship will understand that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The church minutes of January 1824 tell us that there was a vote *"to repair the hatchway at the steeple so as to keep water from the house."*

From the church minutes of November 1825: *"Voted that Corriel Woodford be Keeper of the Keys to the meetinghouse."*

From the church minutes of November 1826: *"Voted to repair the windows and doors"*

Finally, when the building was 10 years old, a committee was appointed *"to procure a stove, provided ample funds can be raised."*

Apparently they were successful in their fundraising as in November 1828 the minutes tell us that Alonson Woodruff was voted to *"keep the keys and make a fire in the stove."* Now there would be heat in the church, at least for those folks sitting near the stove, but it would probably have been smoky, as a chimney was not installed until nearly 30 years later.

The church minutes of November 1828 may give us an indication of how some people entertained themselves during the long services: *"All persons who shall be guilty of cutting the pews, or writing on the walls, and in other ways unnecessarily disfiguring the meetinghouse shall be fined ten dollars."*

From the church minutes of February 18, 1830: *"Voted that a committee of 3 be appointed to take into consideration the expediency of altering the south gallery into seats to accommodate the singers, after they have ascertained the expense. The committee is authorized to proceed and to make the alterations, provided they can raise a sufficient sum."*

From the church minutes of November 1832: *"Voted to repair the lightening rod and the windows."*

From the church minutes of November 1841: *“Voted that Alonson Woodruff keep the keys, make the fire, **and** ring the bell.”*

Jean: Our church bell is inscribed 1837, but this is the only indication in the old minutes that a bell had been installed in the belfry and would be rung on Sunday mornings. Up to this point, the worshipper of 200 years ago would recognize this meetinghouse. But in 1868, when the meetinghouse was 50 years old, major changes were being considered.

From the minutes of September, 1868 we learn that:

*“It was voted that the proposed alterations to the steeple support; alterations about the stairways and choir; stripping, lathing and plastering the room above; closing up the two north windows; procuring new sash for 8 windows and new blinds for 10 windows; painting the church outside with 2 coats and also the old blinds; and heating the room by an apparatus in the lower room be immediately undertaken and completed as soon as possible, **provided the money can be raised.**”*

The estimated cost for all this work was \$1548.00. Again, their fundraising must have been successful as two months later there was a vote to:

“Raise \$500 additional for the purpose of frescoing the walls, carpeting the aisles, providing new cushions, graining and varnishing the pews, etc.”

This was perhaps the biggest renovation for this building as it meant taking out the galleries and putting in a floor that divided the space into upper and lower rooms. The sanctuary was then re-located to the upper level. The lower level, where you sit now, was used for church school, for meetings, and for social events. And this is how it remained for nearly 100 years.

With this renovation the orientation of the sanctuary was also changed. The pulpit was situated at the south end of the room in front of the choir and all of the pews faced in the opposite direction that they do now. Some of you here today will remember that the main access to the sanctuary was up the two stairways from the foyer. When you were late to church you entered facing all the seated worshippers.

For the next 30 years, the church minutes mention major and minor maintenance issues:

Reroofing the whole of the roof with the best pine shingles,

Repairing the church walls,

Repairing the roof so as to prevent snow damaging the ceiling during heavy snow storms.

Then in 1898 there was a vote to **allow** the Ladies Aid Society to redecorate *“the lower room of the church, according to their own plan and specifications, **but not to lay a debt upon the society.**”*

The early years of the 20th century saw a dwindling membership. The Ladies Aid Society put on fairs and suppers and food sales to raise money to help keep the church in good repair. The Missionary Society of Connecticut gave an annual contribution to help pay our ministers. In

1924, with no funds to pay a pastor, the church was closed. On Sundays, members met in private homes for worship. Five years later, church members gathered again and voted \$350 to clean and repair the church so it could be reopened, and to solicit donations to paint the outside of the building. For many years after this, the work of the church continued with the leadership of seminary students, part-time ministers, and a very active laity.

In 1931 the modern era was ushered in when the horse sheds were sold at auction for \$25. Electric lights were installed in 1934. In 1943 a stairway was built on the back of the church as a fire escape. And in 1947 an oil burning furnace was installed. The women of the church must have been delighted when, in 1949, the Treasurer was authorized to pay the expense of piping water into the small kitchen. It was only cold water, but it still must have made their lives easier as the farmers no longer needed to lug milk cans filled with water to the church.

The post-war years saw a surge in the population of Avon. A growing membership put strains on the aging building, and in 1959 local officials gave notice of violations of safety regulations. One of the major drawbacks to the old building, which was reported repeatedly in the annual report of the Board of Trustees, was the "rustic bathroom facilities." The condition of the nearly 150 year old building was a grave concern. In 1965, engineers inspected the building and concluded that the structural problems were too expensive to correct. The meetinghouse was closed and committees were formed to consider the alternatives.

The rest of the story is for another time. But there is one further fact to note. During the research going on around the time the building was closed in 1965, one committee member discovered that West Avon Congregational Church had the distinction of being the second-to-last church in the State of Connecticut to still be using an outhouse.