

'Faith of our Fathers

Faith of our fathers we will love
Both friend and foe in all our strife;
And preach Thee, too, as love knows how,
By kindly deeds and virtuous life.
Faith of our fathers, holy faith!
We will be true to Thee till death. (verse 4)



"Co-Exist"

In West Bridgewater's War Memorial Park stands a memorial plaque for Deacon Samuel Edson. It honors him as an original proprietor of Bridgewater but fails to mention his deep roots in First Church. Since it is our Anniversary Sunday, let's fill in those blanks with historical tidbits about his life, virtues and kindly deeds.

Deacon Samuel Edson

Deacon Samuel Edson, a founding father of West Bridgewater, did not come over on the Mayflower as often believed, but rather came over on the 'Fortune', a ship that landed just north of Boston (probably what is now Gloucester) some two years later. He came to the Bridgewaters from Salem around 1628 and was a founder of the first church and first mill in what is now the town Memorial Park.

Samuel Edson was a Puritan who had been given the title of 'Deacon' by the English Church. After coming to New England, he was sent by Church leaders in Boston to minister among disenfranchised Pilgrim settlers in the Bridgewaters' area. Duxbury, with its most desirable seafront property, had been their home until the Governor gave that land to his Puritan friends, sending the Pilgrims inland to "find suitable property as they may seem fit". Deacon John Willis, a Pilgrim from the 'Mayflower' landing, was the first ministering deacon to this uprooted community.

Many of the original proprietors of the Bridgewaters' came from landings after the 'Mayflower'. In 1628, thirty-five men, with their families came from Leyden Holland on the good ship 'Ann'. In 1630, sixty more joined the original 54 settlers, most of whom were Pilgrims. Inland, they excelled in farming, commerce, and invention. For many years they exhibited an extraordinary ability to co-exist with their Indian neighbors.

Deacon Samuel Edson and his extensive family were successful entrepreneurs of their day. Co-workers with Mr. Ames, they invented and mass produced cutting edge metal

tools and developed extensive mill and water management techniques. Through their efforts, the Bridgewater became the 'cutting edge' of progress. (pun intended)

Deacon Edson and his wife Suzanne's large family consisted of Suzanna, Elizabeth, Mary, Sarah, Bethiah, Samuel, Joseph, and Josiah. Most stayed and prospered in the region. The oldest of the Edson daughters, Suzanna, became the wife of the first ordained minister, the Rev. James Keith. A survey of the Bridgewaters held in 1850 showed more than 150 people claiming heritage to an Edson family member. (by Warren Turner: taken from "History of the Early Settlement of Bridgewater in Plymouth County Mass." by Nahum Mitchel circa 1840 and 'The History of Plymouth County' by Hurd, 1906.)

By all accounts, Deacon Edson, a Puritan, should not have emerged as a prominent religious and social leader among the Bridgewater Pilgrims. Oil and water just don't mix. Puritans and Pilgrims did not see eye to eye on matters of church authority, freedom of conscience, and religious practice. Fear and distrust kept them apart. So what brought them together in those early years when they gathered together in the first Meeting House?

Safety and survival come to my mind. I imagine them putting their heads together in order to solve their mutual problems of feeding, clothing, and sheltering their families. I imagine them dealing with the life and death issue of how to live peaceably with the native Indians living around them. I imagine them letting go of old beliefs, finding common ground in shared attitudes and values, and taking a leap of faith to do some CO-EXISTING kinds of life giving things.

Coexist is a verb. It means to exist at the same time or in the same place. In reference to nations or peoples it means to exist in mutual tolerance despite different ideologies or interests. It means to live in peace with one another.

For their safety, our Bridgewater proprietors and forefathers in faith deemed it best not to adopt Captain Church's attitude that the only good Indian was a dead one. They also chose not to adopt his method of protecting settlers. Captain Church and his

militia of 30-35 men out of Plymouth kept the peace by the extermination of native Indians. With countless kills to his credit, the threat of attack was lessened, and the settlers felt safe and secure. Bridgewater folk choose not to take this violent path of preventative killing in order to secure their safety.

For their survival, our Bridgewater proprietors and forefathers in faith, deemed it best to shed notions of independence and arrogance and adopt an attitude of interdependence and need for one another. Peaceable trade and a mutual sharing of resources, ideas, and practices went on between the European settlers themselves, and between the settlers and the native Indians. Of Deacon Edson it was written: 'To him consequences were less to be heeded than what of right ought to be done. Having no interests to subserve but those connected with the common welfare, and possessing an integrity that admitted of no compromise, his councils were heard with attention and respected with the force and effect of authority. It was not, however, from any love of popularity that he desired influence, nor from any motive of ambition that he claimed success, but from the meritorious pride of conserving the well-being of Society'. (from Edson Family History and Geneology).

I am grateful that this small historical window of peaceable coexistence among human beings caught between the rock and hard place of fearful and violent times is part of First Church's legacy of faith and practice. As pilgrims on the same spiritual journey of trying to co-exist with conflicting peoples of different races, religions, cultures, and national identities in our day and age, we have a good Jesus like example in them for peaceably getting along, staying human, and blessing the Lord by treating others with compassion and love.

