

Why is The First Church a “Historic” Church ???

The First Church of West Bridgewater at 29 Howard Street is the fourth physical building of a much older Congregation. The first Church building is thought to have been a log type structure, located on River Street near the Rev. Keith Parsonage, and built about 1661. In 1671, a large building was constructed near what is now Central Square, which served as the House of Worship and the Town Meeting House until a third Church was built in 1739 on the same site. The current First Church was built on Howard Street in 1801 and for many years served as a House of Worship and the place where various civic events were held.

Although the First Church, as we know it, was built in 1801, it was the successor to a much older Congregation. The story started in 1645 when Miles Standish and several others, at the behest of the citizens of Duxbury, purchased a tract of land along the Nunckateset River from the Indian Chief Massasoit, aka Ousamequin, for “7 coats, a yard and a half in a coat; 9 hatchets; 8 hoes; 20 knives; 4 moose skins; and 10 yards and a half of cotton”. There was a formal Deed or Contract between Miles Standish, Samuel Nash and Constant Southworth and Massasoit, or Ousamequin, that was signed at Sachem Rock in East Bridgewater. There were fifty four initial proprietors, each of whom were granted a six acre lot, with two additional proprietors added; Rev. James Keith, the First Minister, and Deacon Samuel Edson for a total of fifty six shares. This was the first inland settlement of the Old Colony and was called “The Duxborough New Plantation”.

In December 1661, the Town voted to build a house for a Minister and the house was completed on May 13, 1664. It is known as the “Rev. James Keith House” and stands on River Street in West Bridgewater and is owned by the Old Bridgewater Historical Society. It is believed to be the oldest existing Parsonage in America.

The first Minister was Benjamin Bunker from Charlestown, who served the colony for one year for 25 pounds and his “diet”. The first permanent “settled” Minister was James Keith from Aberdeen, Scotland, who was ordained on February 18, 1664 and served the Ministry for 55 years, until 1719. “The terms of his settlement were liberal; a double house lot of 12 acres, with a house built thereon and a purchase right, being a 26th part of the original grant; 40 pounds in annual salary with 20 pounds to be paid in Boston in money and the other half at home”.

From 1675 through 1676, the Church and the population of the settlement suffered, as the King Philip’s War affected the entire region. They were afraid of attack and they suffered economically. In 1676, Rev. Keith convinced the colonial authorities to spare the lives of King Philip’s wife and son, who were captured during the war.

A lengthy history of our Church can be found in Hurd’s History of Plymouth County and in the “350 Years, The First Church of West Bridgewater, Massachusetts”, from which this information has been taken.

Why do we need a “Building Restoration Fund” ???

Our beautiful building, built in the style of early New England Churches, is suffering the ravages of time. The needs of the Church should be evident to our Congregation, but we will attempt to explain.

The front of the Building needs significant work. Some of the woodwork is rotting away and needs to be replicated and or replaced.

The three doors across the front need to be reframed and rebuilt, so that they are all working correctly.

We need to place a water barrier between the bottom of the front of the building and the concrete steps to protect the wood from the moisture caused by the concrete.

The decorative blocks on the sides and roof arch need to be replaced in some cases, and repaired in others.

This is just a few short sentences to explain an enormous amount of work that needs to be done to restore the front of the building to its' former beauty.

The Parish Committee is faced with a dilemma. Do we restore the building, or do we remodel the building.

To restore the building would mean that we return the building to as near original condition as is possible.

To remodel the building would mean that we tear the front of the building off, including the vertical placement of the boards, and replace them with clapboards.

Then there is the question of the roof. We believe that in 3 to 4 years, we will be faced with the need to replace the roof.

The ceiling needs work in the Sanctuary, not an inconsequential job.

The Parish Committee is currently working with certified restoration companies to determine what the cost of restoration vs. the cost of remodeling would be, and we plan to report to the Congregation when we know those answers.

The Congregation will then decide the question of Restoration vs. Remodeling. The decision should come from the heart, not based on economic considerations. There are grants available to help us with the costs, and we are already busy building a “Building Restoration Fund” to meet these needs.

Submitted by
The Parish Committee