Early History

Bridgewater Congregational Church

This illustration, by John Ford Clymer (1907-1989), was created on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the church, John and Doris Clymer were residents and church members at the time. John also provided illustrations for ninety covers of the Saturday Evening Post. The February 4, 1956 cover illustrated young children playing behind the Burnham school.
The book, *History of New Milford and Bridgewater, 1703-1882*, by S. Orcutt, colorfully details our early history. This book along with our church records was used to construct this brief history.

For the flavor of the times, we have tried to use Orcutt's language. You should know that all residents were taxed to support the established church.

1722 — First land survey between the Housatonic and Shepaug rivers, . . . the territory now comprised in the *town of Bridgewater, called more commonly The Neck*.

1772 — Three residents of the Neck described the “many disadvantages they labor under for attending public worship at first Congregational Church in New Milford in the winter,...” It was voted that “said inhabitants may have liberty to hire a Gospel minister to preach amongst them for four months in each year for the term of three years next coming, and in case they have a minister as aforesaid to preach with them, that they shall draw out of said society treasury one third part of their respective rate . . .”.

1785 — First petition to the Ct General Assembly to form a separate Ecclesiastical Society in Neck. (Bridgewater) It was not approved.

1794 — Another petition not approved

1802 — The people in the Neck petitioned again to have preaching in the Neck in proportion to the tax they pay.
1803, April — The Final Petition presented to the General Assembly. (see below)
1803, Oct — The Ct General Assembly granted the request of the petitioners.
1803, Nov — The first meeting of the “Society of Bridgewater” was held.
1804, Feb — Voted to lay a tax of five mills on the dollar for the benefit of the society - to hire a minister and to purchase pine timber for the purpose of building a meetinghouse.
1805, Jan. — Voted that “this society does not accept the pine timber purchased by Mr. Smith and Mead, and therefore there was the beginning of a little trouble.
1805, Dec. — Finding themselves in the midst of difficulties, they voted “that we will petition the Honor able County Court to appoint a committee to pitch a place where on to build a meetinghouse …”
1807, Jan — Voted that “we will build a meetinghouse in this Society, with a steeple, this present year.
1807, Jan — Decided that the dimensions of the building be fifty-two feet long, forty feet wide and that the walls made with twenty-four foot posts. (as it still is today)
1807, summer of — The construction of the meetinghouse was begun.
1807, Oct — Voted to petition the General Assembly for a grant for a lottery to finish the meetinghouse. But the application was delayed for several months
1808, May — Voted Andrew Minor to forward the lottery petition to the Honorable General Assembly.
1809, Jan — Meeting voted a tax to employ a minister. The society had the authority to raise money only for religious and public school purposes.

1810, Jan — Mr. Reuben Taylor ordained. Voted to give Mr. Taylor $500, which has been raised on subscription

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**1803 in World History**

- Thomas Jefferson is President of United States.
- The Louisiana Territory is purchased
- Lewis and Clark begin their search of uninterrupted waterway to Pacific
- In France, Napoleon is in Power
- Beethoven is 33 and working on his 3rd symphony

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1813 — The lottery enterprise was renewed. This was the custom in those days for raising building funds. Mr. Andrew Minor, a benevolent and good man, agreed to manage the lottery. *But it was a failure.*

*And to add to the disaster,* the agent employed to collect much of the money took a returnless journey and carried a large amount of money with him. All of this ended in financial calamity.

1815, Mar — Voted “that we feel ourselves wholly inadequate to support the Rev. Mr. Taylor, and that for the best good of the society he should be dismissed.”

1815, May — Voted to make up the balance of Taylor’s pay.

1816, July — Appointed a committee “to take the minds of the people belonging to this society respecting steady preaching, whether they generally wish to have it continued, and if so, in what way will they support it, and make their report.”

1817, April — While struggling (without a pastor) to recover, in a “beautiful April shower” the meeting-house was *struck by lightning* making splinters but without burning it.

1818, Dec. — After financial recovery, it was voted to hire the Rev. Mr. Harrison —The first vote, 23 being present, was unanimous in favor of hiring him for one year. The second year the vote was in favor of hiring him for another year: Yea 12, Nay 1.

The third year the vote stood, Yea 8, Nay 12.

*So uncertain is popularity even in the pulpit.*

The church however has enjoyed the long tenure of our last two ministers. Each serving the church for over 15 years each! *Sometimes history doesn’t repeat itself.*

— Dick Jones & Dennis MacDonald

Meetinghouse on a 1905 postcard
The 1803 Petition to become a Distinct Ecclesiastical Society

WHEREAS the inhabitants of New Milford in that part called the Neck have long been contemplating to be incorporated as a distinct Society, and have frequently petitioned to the First Ecclesiastical Society in said town to grant that the said inhabitants might be incorporated with all the privileges of a distinct society, but meeting with a considerable opposition from said society they have also petitioned to said society to grant and appoint a committee to report to said society at their adjourned meeting whether in their opinion the said inhabitants ought to be a distinct society, and to report how far, in their opinion, the said inhabitants ought to extend north of the established military lines in said Neck for a society, which committee viewing the circumstances do report as their opinion that said inhabitants ought to be incorporated as a distinct society, and the said line to extend north so as to include Capt. John Merwin's dwelling house as specified in said report. Also said committee do report as their opinion that said inhabitants ought to raise a fund by subscription or otherwise, equal to $2500 for the support of the ministry and then to be vested and incorporated with all the privileges of a distinct society.

Therefore we the subscribers, impressed with a sense of the importance and necessity of establishing a permanent foundation for the support of a preached gospel among us, and being fully persuaded there can be no surer and better method taken for that purpose than to raise a fund by voluntary subscription, which fund shall be preserved solely for that purpose forever, and to be let out upon interest, which interest shall be carefully applied for the above mentioned purpose.

We do therefore mutually covenant and bind ourselves unto each other that we will pay or secure to be paid such sum or sums as affixed to our respective names, to be paid as aforesaid within one year from the time that the said society privileges shall be granted, to Samuel Lockwood as treasurer for the time being or his successors in office, whose office and duty it shall be to receive and preserve the said moneys as a bank or fund, and to put out the same upon interest to the best advantage, taking good security for the same in lands or such other security as the proprietors of said bank shall hereafter direct, which interest shall be paid annually, and carefully applied to the support of an able and discreet minister of the gospel in said proposed society and for no other purpose. And said principal to remain unalienable forever, and the said treasurer shall become bound with a security to the faithful discharge of his office in the penal sum of six hundred and sixty six dollars and sixty seven cents more than the sum or sums put into his hands; said bonds to be drawn to Eli Smith, Ralph Smith and Andrew Minor, as our committee, to receive and take care of the sum until a special committee can be legally chosen and appointed by the said proposed society to do the business. Dated this 18th day of April, 1803, witness thereof we have hereunto set our hands:

Ezra Botsford $50 Phineas Beers 10
Truman Minor 100 Elisha Hamlin 20
Andrew Minor 220 Richard Randall 30
Abijah Treat 100 David Lockwood 20
Ralph Smith 100 Jehiel Summers 15
Elizur Bostwick 33 Samuel Jennings 10
George Welton 90 Jonas Sanford 20
Samuel Lockwood 120 Oliver Summers 10
John H. Treat 70 Ebenezer Trowbridge 10
Gideon Treat 150 Timothy Randall 20
John Canfield 50 James Jessup 20
Nehemiah Sanford 35 Jeremiah Platt, Jr. 10
Abijah Beach 35 John Clark 20
Liffie Sanford 25 Andre Sanford 20
Job Fenn 20 Peter Hippeney 5
Abraham Fairchild 25 Harvey Sperry 10
Phineas Gorham 10 Ames White 20
Nathan Betts 30 Reuben Warner 50
Abijah Terrill 20 Timothy Beardsley 50
Nathan Bradley 10 Lemuel Beardsley 10
John Treat 40 Daniel Booth 25
Eli Smith 80 Daniel Booth, Jr. 15
Nehemiah Sanford 20 Hermon Fairchild 5
Joel Sanford 20 William Nichols 5
Sam & Dan Canfield 20 Samuel Dunning 15
Nathaniel Porter 10 Samuel Summers 5
Justus Weller 10 Benjamin Brad 50
Walter Sperry 10 Jeremiah Platt 10
Jeremiah Canfield 30 Jonathan Downs 4
Caleb Beach 40 Truman Bennitt 20
Jeremiah Randall 50 Stephen Trowbridge 10
Charles Randall 25 John Ovitt 20
Philo Porter 5 Ammon Sperry 10
Benjamin Hamlin 20 Isaac Hawley 90
John Burr 0 Samuel H. Wakelee 10
Amos Morris 40 TOTAL $2626

Note: The Bridgewater Historical Society feels this is one of the most significant documents in Bridgewater. It is the first document advocating a break from New Milford.