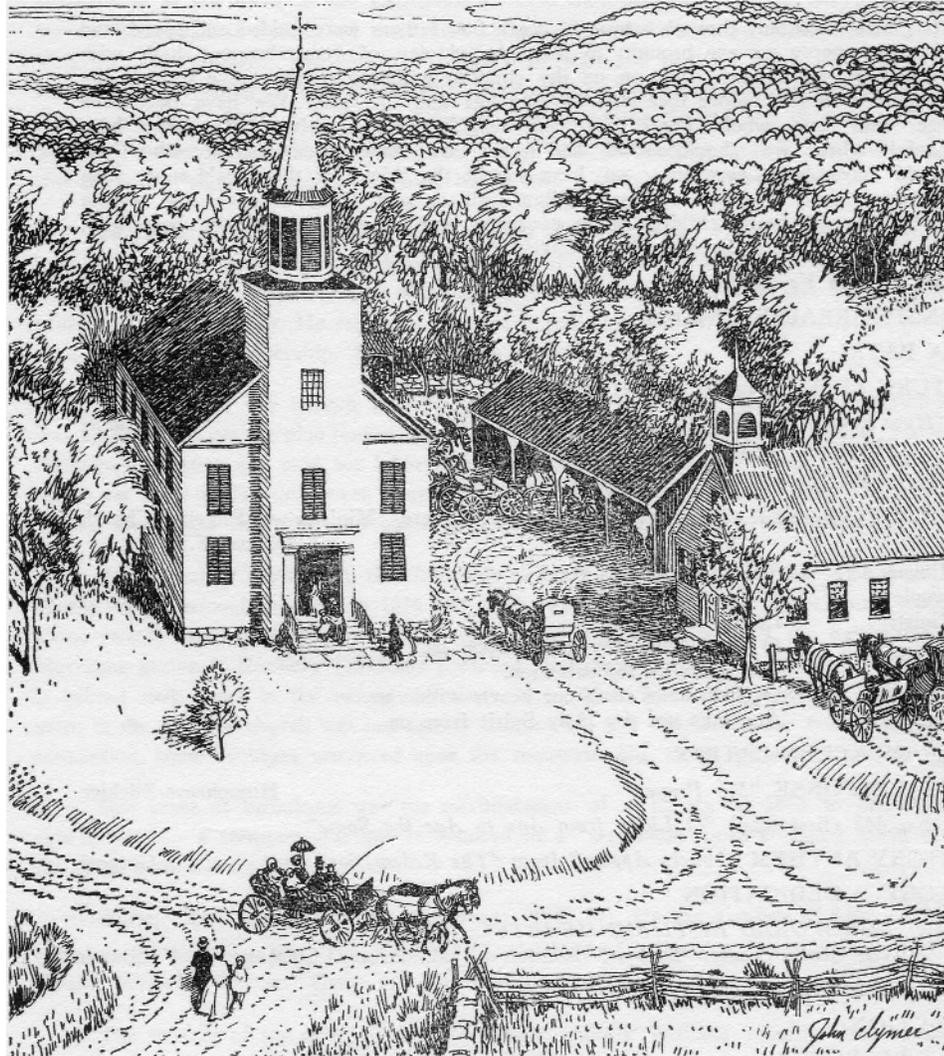


# *Early History*

## *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.

### Earlier history

The established ecclesiastical system was the Congregational Church. The code of 1650 (Connecticut) taxed all persons for its support, provided for the collection of church taxes by civil agents if necessary, and forbade the formation of new churches without the consent of the general court.

Religious affairs formed one of the most important problems in the life of the colony. Throughout most of the 18th century there was constant friction between the establishment and the non-conforming churches; but in 1791 the right of free incorporation was granted to all sects.

## ***Early Dates in our Church History***

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 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 3<sup>rd</sup> symphony

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 Honorable 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

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.

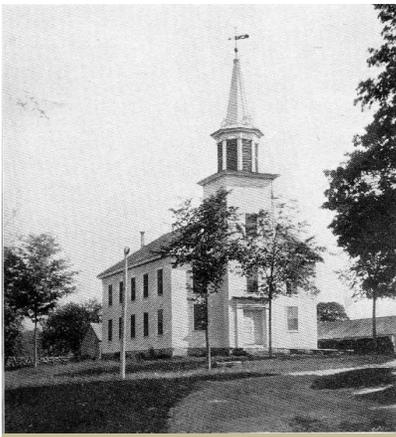
1818, Dec. — After financial recovery, it was voted to hire the Rev. Mr. Harrison —The first vote, 23 being present, was unanimous in favor of hiring him for one year. The second year the vote was in favor of hiring him for another year: Yea 12, Nay 1.

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.*

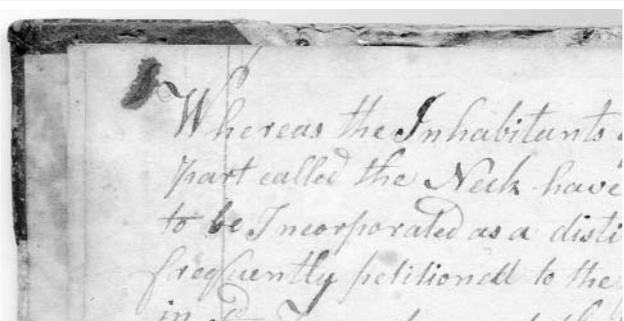
— Dick Jones & Dennis MacDonald



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
ABJAH TREAT	100	DAVID LOCKWOOD	20
RALPH SMITH	100	JEHIEL SUMMERS	15
ELIZUR BOSTWICK	33	SEMUEL 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
ABJAH BEACH	35	JOHN CLARK	20
LIFFE SANFORD	25	ANDRE SANFORD	20
JOB FENN	20	PETER PHIPPENEY	5
ABRAHAM FAIRCHILD	25	HARVEY SPERRY	10
PHINEAS GORHAM	10	AMES WHITE	20
NATHAN BETTS	30	REUBEN WARNER	50
ABJAH 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 MEAD	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 OVIATT	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.

