

1805 - 1980

SOME HISTORICAL NOTES FOR THE ONE HUNDRED
AND SEVENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
FOUNDING OF THE WINDHAM CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH

It could have been religious motives that prompted a few families to leave the established community of Londonderry in 1793 and settle in the wilderness area that was soon to become Windham town. They were a tightly knit group, bound together by a Godly zeal which within a few years manifested itself in the construction of one of Vermont's classic church buildings and the signing of a rigid church covenant and confession of faith. It is the adoption of this document that we are celebrating today .

Looking back at Windham's first few years we see the group of settlers, led by the Aiken family, moving over Glebe Mountain into the easternmost section of Londonderry town, when Vermont had been a state of the Union for only two years. The pioneers must have come with their plans laid, for they immediately petitioned the Vermont Legislature to partition Londonderry and to enable the town of Windham to be formed from this eastern section of Londonderry and a small gore named Mack's Leg. With amazing speed the request was granted and the town of Windham was officially established on October 22, 1795.

John Aiken, who had built the first log house in the town, generously lent his barn for church and civic affairs. Sketchy legends relate that there were occasional church services in the Aiken barn even before the first town meeting was held in the same place in March 1796. Town records show that one of the first town officers elected at that meeting was a tithingman whose duty was to see that each family paid regularly for religious services.

A year later the record shows that the town voted to tax the citizens for "preaching" and ordered the selectmen to search out a suitable minister. The association of town and church was declared illegal in Vermont by 1805, but in the late eighteenth century the Vermont laws required that the Sabbath be observed and that the churches and ministers be supported. A town could vote which church to support, and this Windham group were dedicated Congregationalists, descendants of New England Puritans or Presbyterians. Back in Londonderry there were many Baptists, Methodists and other "dissenters", a factor that may have led to the exodus of these Congregationalists. Here in the new town there was no one to challenge the building of a splendid Congregational Church paid for by the town and by twenty-five of the local citizens who were called "proprietors."

In 1799 the church building plans were moving along. There was no hired architect, but tradition says that the planning was masterminded by Deacon Thomas Burnap. The plan called for a building 54 feet by 42 feet with 22 posts of 25 foot height. The posts were all contributed, each one hand hewn from a single tree. Each beam was a full grown tree, and there were two sets of rafters, intricately braced for snow, for this house of God was built to last.

The foundation work was begun in 1801, and on July 8, 1802, the prepared frame was raised by five teams of twenty men each from Andover, Weston, Peru, Londonderry and Windham. Col. David Cobb saved the structure by some quick acrobatics when the rafters began to slide. There was a sermon said to be given by the Rev. William Hall of Grafton, and later there was a keg of rum and sugar for the townspeople and the helpful horde of out of town guests.

Although the building was only a shell, services were held there from the start; yet it is likely that Deacon Aiken's barn was used again during the winter when even foot warmers and heavy clothes could not combat the lack of heat.

Work continued as slowly as it does on most cathedrals where the quality of the workmanship and not the speed counts. By 1825 the building, clapboarded and glazed, was declared "complete", but a year later there was still progress when the church was painted at a cost of \$228. In 1849 a belfry was added to accommodate the new 1200 pound bell, cast in Troy, New York. The church was altered in 1850, putting the gallery level into the sanctuary and turning the lower floor into a meeting house, and in 1860 the spire was added. By this time the church had long had a cast iron stove for heating, and it looked and felt essentially as it does today.

But a church is much more than a building. THE FIRST BOOK OF RECKORD OF THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN WINDHAM ORGANIZED SEPTEMBER 1805 (*sic*) begins with the Church Covenant. The Windham Church was beholden to no outside direction, although it held friendly ties with other Congregational churches and approved the articles of the Windham (county) Consociation. The members must have spent years of soul searching and debate to solidify their beliefs into eight declarations of faith and practice. This church was a closed community whose members promised to love God and watch over each other, to bring their children up in the church, and to observe the Sabbath; to pray, give, and partake in the Lord's Supper.

The Covenant included a Confession of Faith which spelled out belief in the omnipotence of God, the divinity of Christ, and the Bible as the word of God. It admitted to the moral depravity of mankind, stern judgment, everlasting punishment of the wicked and certainty of heaven for the righteous.

The Covenant was signed on October 11, 1805, by Margaret Aiken, John Woodburn, Betsy Aiken, James Aiken, Edward Aiken, Thomas Burnap, Nathaniel Aiken, Peter Aiken, John Burnap, Jonothan Brintnall, John Aiken, Anne Aiken and Nabby Burnap. The fact that four women signed the document for the founding of the church was noteworthy.

This single record book, which runs from 1805 to 1872, is a religious and genealogical treasure, now in safekeeping at the Wilbur Room of the Bailey Library at the University of Vermont. A copy of it is kept on file by the church secretary. This document, among other church papers, was lost for many years until it was turned up by a volunteer worker during the annual church cleaning day in 1979.

In it are listed vital statistics—births, deaths, marriages, baptisms, transfers, and excommunications. It was not easy to become a member of the Windham Congregational Church: one was admitted by baptism or authorized transfer. An adult new member had also to be examined and to subscribe to the Covenant. If a member did not abide by the church laws that person was excommunicated, if still unrepentant after being given an opportunity to improve.

Most miscreants reformed, and letters of remorse form part of the church record. However, a few who were charged with backsliding, unchristian conduct, or other sins did not repent. One woman, charged with joining the Spiritualists, wrote defiantly that she did not wish to continue as a member of the Congregational Church. There was a rash of rebellions about 1850 which may account for the adoption of a more liberal covenant in 1860. The social and moral effect of the church on the community was immeasurable.

Today the Windham Congregational Church, listed in the Vermont Historic Sites Register, stands at the highest altitude of any church in the state, with its spire and traditions dominating the town as its founders intended.

Cora Cheney Partridge