

First Parish of Sudbury Historical Highlights 2011

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History from Congregational Record for 2011 Ministerial Search

How and when was the congregation founded?

In 1640, the year after Sudbury was chartered, the first formal services of First Parish were led by Rev. Edmund Brown who was an original grantee of the town. The meetinghouse, on the edge of the flood plain of the Sudbury River, served both the Parish and the Town. Due to difficulty crossing the river in winter and spring, and a rising population on the west side of the Sudbury River, the West Precinct was started in 1722 and another building was constructed on the site where First Parish stands today. In 1780 East Sudbury split from the Town of Sudbury and later became Wayland. Our current meetinghouse was built in 1797.

Note the three or four most important events in the congregation's history:

The previous note covers the founding of the congregation and the split between Sudbury and Wayland, which allows our lens of history to focus on the second split of the congregation, the Women's Alliance, the Welcoming Congregation and the Swastika incident.

The Unitarian movement spread to our neighboring communities during the 1830s, but Rev. Rufus Hurlbut, the minister since 1816 clung to the Orthodox Protestant theology. The core church membership supported the more conservative stance, but a majority of the parish (town) was more liberal. At the congregational meeting in early 1837, the clerk improperly recognized many new members in order to elect liberal leaders. The conservatives withdrew from the meeting. Had they stayed and contested the vote, they would have probably recovered the papers, property and name of First Parish. A few months after this meeting, the Reverend Hurlbut took a young cleric with him to the Sunday service. He had not been well and hoped to have a substitute while he recovered. When they arrived at the meetinghouse, the doors were locked and another minister was preaching inside. He knocked and was allowed to enter. He made some remarks, but realized that the parish, the legal entity of the church, had chosen a minister to their own

liking. An eye witness relates "Understanding the situation, he turned and went down the aisle, but saying 'I leave amicably.' A large share of the congregation left also and with their minister went over and worshipped with the Methodists". While Rufus Hurlbut was able to take the bible to found what is now the Congregational church, the courts ruled in favor of the Unitarians for everything else.

The economic downturn of the 1890s caused First Parish to flounder and services became infrequent. Debt was such an issue that no money was allocated for preaching, only for paying down debt. In 1901, the American Unitarian Association was called in and all of the church's investments were put into trust with the AUA the next year. In 1901, the Women's Alliance at First Parish was formed with their priority being to reestablish services and preaching. They started the Harvest Fair, which continues to this day. In 1903, with funds from the Women's Alliance, First Parish called the Reverend Ida Hultin. She was part of the Iowa Sisterhood and an active and well known suffragist as well as a great orator. While First Parish continued to have money issues, it otherwise flourished under Rev. Hultin until she retired in 1916.

Our Welcoming Congregation Committee was formed in 1990 by members straight and gay. We began a four year process of workshops, lay led services, presentations in RE classes and a discussion on homosexuality and homophobia with the Youth Group. There were also three sermons by our settled minister, publication of two brochures (Guidelines for Inclusive Language, and What if someone asks if ours in the gay church?), and a monthly Free Film Series open to the public. As the congregation was educated, it shifted, for the most part, from acceptance to affirmation of our gay and lesbian members. First Parish met the requirements, and in April 1995 voted unanimously to become a Welcoming Congregation, and subsequently received recognition by the UUA. The Welcoming Congregation Committee continues to educate and inspire social action in First Parish and the wider community.

In January 2001, swastikas were drawn over the rainbow flags on the sign in front of First Parish. They were cleaned, and then, the next night, defaced a second time as well as our rainbow flag stolen. This provoked a response of deep conviction by the congregation, the surrounding religious communities, the Town of Sudbury and people from near and far. An interfaith service on the following Sunday evening completely packed the meetinghouse and was followed by a candlelight vigil with over 1000 people in attendance. Three teenagers were eventually convicted of a hate crime. Our Minister and a member of the Board were present at every court date with the goal of fair and compassionate justice being served.

1996 Ministerial Search Committee Packet

In 1640, the townspeople of the new settlement of Sudbury gathered together for formal religious services led by the Reverend Edmund Brown. That was the beginning of the First Parish of Sudbury. Many events in the three hundred and fifty-six years since then have shaped the development and formed the background of the First Parish of Sudbury as it is today.

The history of Sudbury and First Parish is interwoven with the colonial and Revolutionary War history of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. A major engagement of King Philip's War in 1676 was fought in Sudbury. The men and boys of the Sudbury Companies of Militia and Minute were at Concord on the 19th of April in 1775. As the alarm was drummed, they were joined by Companies from East Sudbury (now Wayland) and Framingham on the Sudbury Town Common. This gathering of men is reenacted every Patriots' Day with the bell of First Parish of Sudbury ringing the alarm.

After the Revolutionary War, the original Sudbury was partitioned formally into west and east parishes; these now are the towns of Sudbury and Wayland. Sudbury continued to be a rural farming town, essentially unchanged with a population of 2,500 for the next 170 years.

What of First Parish during the last 200 years? We say 200, because the main part of the current church building, which houses the sanctuary and parish hall, was built by the Town of Sudbury in 1796-97 at a cost of \$6,025.93. In those days, the town meeting house and the church building were one and the same. Town taxes provided for the building and the minister; the selectmen, part of the town government structure, were deacons. This was the early New England Town Meeting concept, with all townspeople having a direct vote and the Board of Selectmen as the town leaders. Sudbury still operates with this democratic structure.

As other faiths gathered in Sudbury, church and state finally were separated. First Parish was pivotal in the separation of church and state doctrine as the lawsuit resulting in that policy originated here.

The First Parish of Sudbury was one of the last of the eastern Massachusetts parishes to become Unitarian. The split occurred in 1837 when the Reverend Rufus Hurlburt, his chosen protégé and those of like mind walked down Concord Road and established the orthodox Congregational Church. In the subsequent court case, the Unitarians kept the building and the church records.

They called Reverend Linus Shaw in 1844 as their first Unitarian minister. Following the dismissal of the second minister, Reverend James Sherman, in 1704 for "improper conduct", Reverend Israel Loring was called. He was minister for the next 67 years, preaching his final sermon the week before he died at age 90. Other exceptional ministers include Reverend Ida Hultin, who served from 1904 to 1915, and Reverend Dr. Alexander St. Ivanyi, who kept First Parish hopes alive from 1951-1955. Dr. St. Ivanyi, a former Bishop of the Transylvanian Unitarian Church, was renowned as a leader of the anti-Nazi underground in his native Hungary.

During the pre- and post-World War II period, First Parish was at its lowest ebb, limping along with few members and part-time, shared ministers. In 1945, another church in Sudbury offered to merge with First Parish and take over the building. A few years later, the AUA offered to purchase the property for probable re-sale. The handful of devoted members refused both offers, citing the need for a liberal church in the community. Their perseverance coincided with the technological explosion along Route 128. Sudbury's location made it a desirable upper-middle class suburb of Boston, farming was replaced by subdivisions, and Sudbury's population grew by over 10% per year. The rapid growth in Sudbury's population ultimately resulted in an increase in church membership.

In 1957, the church members called Reverend Carl Scovel, newly graduated from Harvard Divinity School. Although his salary was \$4,000 and the church budget was slightly under \$5,000, they were optimistic as they knew he was the key to their future as a church. With an AUA-trained operating pledge drive in 1959 that raised annual giving by a factor of nearly three, First Parish was once again alive and well. Since Reverend Scovel was called to King's Chapel in 1967, First Parish of Sudbury has had three ministers. Reverend Michael Boardman, 1968-1975; Reverend Jerry Goddard, 1976-1985; Reverend Deborah Pope-Lance, 1986-1996. Currently, Reverend Dr. Doris Hunter is serving as interim minister. With each minister, First Parish has continued growing to our current membership.

As First Parish of Sudbury prepares to celebrate its 200th year, we are proud of our members who kept First Parish alive and called contemporary ministers who have provided us with leadership and inspiration. We also are proud of our current members and friends who share the many jobs of trustee, committee member, teacher, canvasser, event organizer and all the other tasks that ensure we carry on the First Parish and Unitarian traditions.

History from 1986 Ministerial Search Packet.

"What's past is prologue." William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

In 1640, the towns people of the new settlement of Sudbury gathered together for formal religious services led by the Reverend Edmund Brown. That was the beginning of the First Parish of Sudbury.

Many events have occurred in the three hundred and forty-six years since then -- events which have shaped the development and formed the background of the First Parish of Sudbury of today.

Of course, the history of First Parish is interwoven with the colonial and Revolutionary War history of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in which Sudbury residents played a large part. A major engagement of King Philip's War in 1676 was fought in Sudbury, and the men and boys of the Sudbury Companies of Militia and Minute were at Concord on the 19th of April in 1775. After the Revolutionary War, the original Sudbury was partitioned into west and east parishes, which are now the towns of Sudbury and Wayland.

Sudbury continued to be a west-of-Boston rural farming town, essentially unchanged with a population of 3500, for the next 170 years. The official town map of the 1830s carried the family names, many of them direct descendants of town founders. Some of those names still appear on town records, although the family homesteads and lands have been sold for house sites.

The technological revolution in Massachusetts of post-World War II had a profound impact on Sudbury. Situated midway between Routes 128 (I95) and I495, in just 35 years the town became a "most desirable upper-middle-class-suburb" of Boston. Farming was replaced by subdivisions. Land values shot up 100 times. Typical new house prices rose twenty-fold. The town population multiplied by a factor of six, to 15,000, and in the process absorbed the initial influx of mobile younger marrieds with school and preschool age children, 'producing today's more age-balanced population. Sane light industry and commercial building also took place, but Sudbury today is basically a "bedroom" community.

What of First Parish during the last 190 years? We say 190, because the main part of the church building, which houses the sanctuary and parish hall, was built by the Town of Sudbury in 1796-97 at a cost of \$6,025.93. In those days the Town Meeting House and the church building were one and the same. Town taxes provided for the building and the minister, and the Selectmen were deacons. As other faiths gathered, church and state in Sudbury were finally separated in 1836.

During the pre- and post-world war II period, First Parish was at its lowest ebb, limping along with few members and part-time, shared ministers. The communion table (circa 1640) was sold for \$1,000. In 1945 another church in town offered to merge with First Parish and take over the building, and a few years later the AUA offered to purchase the property for probable re-sale. The handful of devoted members refused both offers, citing the need for a liberal church in the community. Their perseverance coincided with the Route 128 economic explosion, and the rapid growth in town population ultimately resulted in an increase in church membership.

In 1957, with a budget of under \$5,000, the church members called Carl Scovel, newly graduated from Harvard Divinity School, as their full-time minister. They were concerned, for his salary was \$4,000, but optimistic. They knew he was the key to their future as a church. Membership grew, a Sunday school program for children was started, and an AUA-trained operating pledge drive in 1959 raised annual giving by a factor of nearly three. First Parish was once again alive and well.

When Carl was called to King's Chapel in 1967, the members themselves ran the church for the better part of a year. The successor they were searching for proved to be Michael Boardman, a young Starr King graduate from California, who remained until 1975, when he moved to the UU church in Brookline. Once again the members maintained the church until Jerry Goddard was called, later that same year. After ten years in our pulpit, Jerry left First Parish for a church in Springfield. Since September, 1985, Wayne Shuttee of New Haven, Connecticut, has been serving as interim minister.

The resurgence of First Parish in the last thirty years has been marked by:

- contemporary ministers who provide leadership and inspiration;
- major church building repairs and renovations, and loving care and maintenance of the beautiful church in Sudbury Center;
- the construction of the Atkinson Religious Education Building;
- the employment of part-time professional staff: Religious Education Director, Music Director, Office Secretary, and Custodian;
- The amendment of the church by-laws to reflect changes in the UUA and the church needs;
- the institutionalizing of the coffee hour;
- The members' sharing of the jobs of trustee, summer preacher, committee member, canvasser, schoolteacher, choir member, caller, playwright, cake-baker, handyman, and all the others that "make it happen."

In their own relaxed but confident style, today's members of First Parish of Sudbury, following the tradition of their forebears continue to build a loving and supportive church family.