**History of the First Congregational Church of Medina**

**Prepare by Mrs. Sarah Eddy for the 90th Anniversary Celebration**

**February 16 – 21, 1909**

We are met this evening to review the ninety years of history which has passed since this, the First Congregational Church of Medina, was organized. We need to remember that this Church, met here this evening, though so different from, is yet the same Church which was organized by the seven individuals who gathered at the house of one Isaac Barnes near the center of Medina township, one Thursday the 18th day of February 1819 for preliminary arrangements and again on the following Sunday, February 21st and entered into covenant with each other and with Almighty God.

We have reached an important epoch in our Church life, - a milestone, at which we pause and look back over the way by which we have come and consider how the Lord has led us.

Ninety years is a long time in the history of a man or an organization in this part of the world in which our lot is cast. It takes us back near to the beginnings. It carries us from the full tide of refinement, convenience and culture, back to the rude pioneer age, with its hardships and its privations. It takes us from this comfortable and well-appointed temple of worship back to the log school house with a stump for a pulpit, and rough boards and flattened logs for pews. It takes us back from this beautiful little town of Medina with its comfortable homes, to the almost unbroken forest, and the rude cabin of the pioneer, which sometimes lacked both floors and windows. It takes us back from this day of easy riding carriages, electric cars, automobiles and ocean greyhounds to the ox cart, the saddle and the canoe.

As we meet here from time to time we can hardly realize how it would seem if there were no carpets or cushions, - no organ nor furnace. Few people remain who can tell us of the thrilling experiences of those early days. It is well for us to turn aside from the rush and whirl of our busy lives and review the experiences of those pioneer days which tested the faith and courage of the people who established and built our Church Home.

On February 21, 1819, exactly ninety years ago next Sunday this Church was organized. The first public religions services held in the Settlement of Medina Township was at the house of Zenas Hamilton, about three quarters of a mile north of Medina Center, March 11, 1817. Think not there was any center there. It was in the woods. The township was not yet organized. Mr. Hamilton had been there with his family nearly two and a half years. For a year and a half, his had been the only family there. Rev. Royce Searl, an Episcopal clergyman from Connecticut, preached at this first service.

The next day, Rev. William Hanford, a Congregational missionary from Connecticut preached in the same place. Both congregations were made up of Episcopalians and Congregationalists. The settlers were from the East and hungered for religious services. It was only necessary to give out word that a Clergyman would preach, to bring to the meeting every settler who could be there.

Later, when Mr. Searl organized St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Mr. Hamilton was one of its original members.

The log houses of the pioneers, often having but one room, were too small and too inconveniently located to accommodate those who wished to attend the meetings. A house of worship was wanted. In less than a month, on the 10th of April, the people gathered with teams and tools, cleared the ground of underbrush, cut and hauled the logs, made the shingles and built a meeting house. These early settlers put up log cabins in very little time. The house was ready by four o’clock in the afternoon and Mr. Searl preached in it. It is said that every person in the settlement who could get there was present. After this, meetings were held regularly on the Sabbath, the Episcopalians occupying the house in the forenoon and the Congregationalists in the afternoon. A better house, also of logs, was built at the center of the Township soon after, and occupied by these denominations until it was burned.

The Congregational Church was organized at the house of Mr. Isaac Barnes in Medina township, by Mr. Handford and Rev. Simeon Woodruff. There were seven members:

 Joseph Northrup

 Charity Northrup

 Isaac Barnes

 Martha Barnes

 Nira B. Northrop

 Giles Barnes

 John Barnes

The Church adopted the articles of faith and the covenant of the Church in Connecticut, from which many of them had come.

Soon after the meeting house at the center was burned, a frame house was built at Bagdad on the Weymouth road. This was called Deacon Northrop’s meeting house. The road from Medina village to Bagdad always seemed long and lonely. It was three miles over the hills and through the forest. Samuel B. Curtiss, father of our own Miss Mary Curtiss, used to drive an ox wagon to and from Bagdad to carry the women and children to the meetings. These were held alternately at Medina village and Bagdad until 1831 when they were all transferred to Medina village and were held in the court room in the old Court House on the corner of Court and Liberty streets.

During the first ten years after the Church was organized there were only two who could be properly called ministers of this Church. Rev. S. B. Sullivan was the first permanent minister, but preached only half of the time for one year. Rev. Horace Smith, sent by the Missionary Society of Massachusetts was with the Church half the time for six months. No incidents regarding the labors of these men are known.

In 1827, the Rev. S. V. Barnes came to Medina. Up to this time there were only ten or eleven families in the Church, and it was clearly impossible for them to provide a salary for a minister.

A Mr. Champion of Rochester, New York, who owned the township of Montville, offered Mr. Barnes one hundred acres of wild land in Montville and a village lot in Medina if he would come to Medina and preach to the Congregational Church. Mr. Barnes accepted and the people received him gladly. The village lot where Mr. Barnes lived is on the corner south of the High School building, and the land is on the Wadsworth Road, now owned by Mr. Harry Beech. He was the right man for place. He lived as other pioneers lived, in the forest. His parishioners were few in numbers, only sixteen members of the Church. Many of them were battling with the forest, digging for the subsistence of their families among the stumps and roots and clearing additional fields from the primeval forest. They had willing hearts but empty hands. When their own larders were filled there was little left. The wool of their own sheep spun and woven in their own homes clothed them; the skins of their own animals shod them. It is said on good authority that not long before this time, “pork was thirty dollars a barrel, tea a dollar and a half a pound, wheat a dollar and a half a bushel, corn and potatoes a dollar a bushel each, sole leather fifty cents a pound, and eight penny nails twenty-five cents a pound, and salt three dollars a bushel.

Mr. Barnes had a forest to clear away, lands to subdue, buildings to construct, crops to put in, to be cultivated and harvested, hay to be made and fuel to be cut. All the people had to sell was labor, and he was ready to buy it. Who shall say that God had not sent them a pastor suited to their circumstances?

Mr. Barnes remained with this Church about six years, preaching in Medina Village, in the house at Bagdad and in the Weymouth Church, which was organized about that time. His labors were abundant, and as a result there was a general revival. It was during the latter part of his pastorate that the work of building the Old Brick Church was commenced. All this time services were held in the old court house, in the school house, or in a private dwelling. As the court house and school house were public buildings, outsiders felt at liberty to go into these meetings and not only interrupt the services but controvert the sentiments advanced. One man used to go into the prayer meetings and advocate open infidelity. Another man regularly occupied a seat at the Clerk’s table in the court room in from of the speakers, took notes of the sermon and interrupted the discourse by calling for Chapter and verse to prove the statements made. There was pressing need of other places for public worship but the denominations, which numbered three by this time, were small and poor. It was not to be expected that Free Thinkers and their sympathies who refused to permit prayers at funerals and in every conceivable way manifested their hostility to religious culture, would contribute much towards the building of churches. Christian people keenly felt the difference between the spirit of skepticism which was so manifest and the spirit of reverence to which they had been accustomed in their New England homes.

The burning question at every fireside and social gathering during the winter of 1832 was “Can we find means to build a house for God when the little log cabins which shelter our families are so destitute of the comforts we were accustomed to in our Eastern Homes?” God seemed to say: ***“arise and build.”*** The forests were almost unbroken. Everywhere the owners were cutting them down and burning them. The raw material was abundant, provided only the labor to manufacture it could be found. All had strong hands and the Spirit of God soon developed willing hearts. A meeting was called in February 1833 to consider the matter. David King offered a lot for a site on East Washington Street for $50.

Some thought that the securing of a site for so small a price would be a good beginning. Each man present was asked “How much will you give towards building a meeting house on this site?” When Nathan Nettleton, father of Mr. Matthew Nettleton, and Reuben Stickney were reached, the decidedly said: “**NOTHING**” and as a reason urged that the first meeting house of the village should face the public square. So, a committee was appointed to see if a lot bordering on the north or east side of the square could be procured. A young man, David Barnhart, had just build a house on the lot where the Church now stands and would sell the lot for $550; if permitted to remove the buildings would allow $300 for them, but must have $50 [of the $250 balance]…in cash. Who would advance the money?

Nathan Nettleton took a $50-dollar bill from his packet and offered it in advance on his subscription. It was accepted, the bargain was struck and Mr. Nettleton has the honor of paying the first subscription to the Church. Subscriptions for labor and material, if not in large sums, came with commendable liberality from those who seemed to have all they could do to clear up their farms and continue their business. This was encouraging, but the question where shall we get money to buy glass and nails was still unanswered. Mr. Barnes said “I will furnish the glass and nails.” So, the work went on. When the work of building began, the number of church members was eighty. It was desirable to build of brick, and it was thought if a sufficient sum could be obtained to put up the walls and put on the roof, the basement might be finished and used for public worship until money could be raised to finish the upper portion. The bricks were made on land owned by Col. William King, west of Mr. Robert Foskett’s residence. The corner stone was laid in July by Mr. Barnes. Considerable ill feeling was provoked because some claimed that Masonic ceremonies were used.

The stone and its contents were stolen the next night. The stone was concealed in a brush heap about forty rods away and discovered the next day. It was returned but not replaced and the contents were never found. The walls were up before winter, but the frame for the roof was not ready and they were left strengthened only by props. This delay was due to the fact that the sawmills of that day were water mills and could be run only in high water. A violent wind on Sabbath in February or March blew down the side walls to within three or four feet of the basement. This caused much discouragement and there were many murmurs and repinings. Some complained because God did not take care of his own house. Some claimed that it was a proof that there is no God who regards the affairs of men. Others thought it was a judgment because the corner stone had been laid with Masonic ceremonies, as they claimed.

But time is a healer of many ills. When spring came, the brave hearts took courage and determined to make the best of it. More funds were raised and the walls were rebuilt. Experience is a good teacher. Strong timbers sixty feet long were inserted in the walls to strengthen them, so that they were better than the first walls had been. The frame of the roof was self-supporting and massive. It required forty days to raise it. It was not ready for occupancy till the summer of 1835 and then they began to use it before it was plastered. All this had not been done without debt. $600 had been borrowed in Cleveland and there were outstanding bills to be paid. There was no bell and all were anxious to have one, as there was none in the county. The village people were mainly instrumental in receiving money for this. When Sherman Bronson went to New York to purchase his fall stock of goods, he was commissioned to buy one. It has already been received when he returned in October. He came home sick and died in November. The bell had not yet been hung, but it was raised on temporary supports and tolled for his funeral.

In the spring of 1836 in order to liquidate the debts and provide funds to complete the edifice, three men, Nathan Nettleton, N. B. Northrup and Daniel Nettleton, borrowed $1,200 in Connecticut, giving their joint notes for the money.

About this time Churches in Weymouth, York and Lafayette were organized by persons dismissed from the Medina Church for that purpose and their unpaid subscriptions and also that of Pastor Barnes, also withdrawn, were cancelled. There was very little money in the community. Debt stared everyone in the face and what would seem a small burden now was almost intolerable then. It was not till 1844 that members of the congregation and Society made provision for the payment of the loan, by giving their individual notes. The house was completed in the spring of 1837 and dedicated in April of that year. The total cost in round numbers was $6,600. Dr. L. P. Hickox of Wester Reserve College preached the dedicatory sermon: “How Beauteous are their Feet.” Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabbath and Before Jehovah’s Awful Throne were the hymns sung.

In speaking of this church, we should remember that our organization is double, the First Congregational Society and the First Congregational Church. The Church gives its attention to religious matters; the building up of itself; the care of its needy members. The Society looks after the temporal matters of the organization; provides its funds for building, repairs and salaries. It seeks to interest business men who are not members of the church, and to secure their cooperation in the management of its business. The Society was authorized by an Act of the General Assembly dated March 9, 1831 and a Constitution was prepared and adopted. Reuben Stickney, who was one of the most efficient in the selection of a site and on the building committee, was a member of the Society, not of the Church. This was also the case in regards to numbers of others, till almost the present.

Rev. Simeon Woodruff succeeded Mr. Barnes [briefly] and after him came Rev. Samuel Lee in 1835. During Mr. Lee’s ministry there were two extensive revivals. Following the dedication of the Church in April a protracted meeting was held which resulted in an addition to the Church of 22 by letter and 41 on confession – 63 in all – the largest number at any period in the history of the church. Only two of them remain till the present. During the progress of this protracted meeting, the clapper of the bell was stolen.

A temporary one was substituted but in some way, it cracked the bell. The stolen clapper was brought back and left in the public square and though it was replaced, the discordant tones of the bell grated on the ears of those who were sensitive to musical sounds. Later the bell was sent to the manufactures and recast. It hangs in the tower of our church now and will continue to do us good service for many years we hope.

I have dwelt thus at length on this early history of the Church because so many of us know so little of the hardships and discouragements of those pioneer days. During the forty-seven years after its organization, there were fourteen settled ministers with periods varying from one to six years. At that time, we were passing through periods of formation. It was natural that people who came from widely separated districts with opinions often very diverse, should disagree on may subjects. Many heated discussions were held on the vital topics of the day. There were troublous times which perhaps are best not recounted now. Out of it all came a church whose influence for good has been far reaching and whose aim has always been onward and upward.

The summer of 1866 will always be marked as the beginning of better things in the history of this Church. Rev. Chauncey N. Pond became our pastor. The presence of the Holy Spirit was manifest and many young people were received into the Church. While he was here, extensive repairs were made on the Church, amounting to $3,000. In 1870, Mr. Pond left us for another field of labor and Rev. E. J. Alden came to be our pastor for a few years.

After he left us, Rev. Arthur T. Reed came. His labors were greatly blessed. Through his influence the Sabbath Evening prayer meeting was commenced, and the responsive reading was introduced in our morning service. While he was here the parsonage was purchased on East Washington Street, one thousand dollars having been left to the Church by Mrs. Barnes, wife of the early pastor, on condition that the Church raise another thousand, which was done.

After a pastorate of nearly six years, Mr. Reed left us in 1880. Then Charles J. Ryder came to us, and remained five years. We have such a way of taking our pastors into our hearts that when they leave us it is as though we had had a spell of sickness. The only thought that consoled us in the least when Mr. Ryder went away, was the knowledge that he went, not to another pastorate, but to the work of the A.M.A. [American Missionary Association]. Then W. S. Ament, a newly returned missionary from China, became our pastor. He did good service for the church and community for three years, but his heart was in China and we bade him goodbye and God speed to return to his labors there.

Then came Mr. Plass, who stayed with us three years, then resigned on account of his health. This brings us down almost to our present time. It hardly seems necessary to more than refer to the pastorate of J. R. Nichols, B. G. Matson and Jesse Hill. Their faithful, loving service among us, is so fresh in our minds that we can scarcely feel it to be as yet in the past.

We are now enjoying the services of Dr. Edward Kirbye, the last but not the least in faithful work to build up the church and establish a good moral and religious sentiment in the community.

In the spring of 1880, during the pastorate of C. J. Ryder, the question was agitated as it has been before with regard to building a new church to take the place of the Old Brick Church which had done valiant service for forty-seven years. Various reasons were assigned for this. The church was too small. Then it came to be considered unsafe, because of the cracking of the walls due to the neglect of the contractors in not making them vertical and in perfect line when they were rebuilt. After due consideration and consultation, a new church was decided upon and committees were appointed and work began. On the fourth of May 1882, two years after the talk began about building, the new church was dedicated. Prof Judson Smith of Oberlin Seminary preaching the sermon. The cost of the new church was $14,000 and it was dedicated free from debt. In 1889 while Mr. Plass was with us, we celebrated our 70th Anniversary. And in 1894 while Mr. Nichols was our pastor, we celebrated our 75th Anniversary. Both were occasions of much interest.

While Mr. Hill was with us, we sold the old parsonage on East Washington St. and build a new and more modern one on ground owned by the church just east of the church building. The cost was $3,400 and was paid in two years.

At this time too, we enlarge our church building by an addition on the East side, this making it much more convenient and comfortable.

Thus, we have reviewed the 90 year which have passed since our church began. There have been 25 pastors. The membership began with seven. It is now 647 with a total enrollment of 1,585. Of these 676 united with the church by letter and 909 on the confession of their faith, time forbids me to tell of the various branches of the church which have all done their part towards making its usefulness greater. The S.S. has been the nursery of the church. It had its beginning as far back as 1836, certainly. The first Supt. of who we are sure was Jefferson Barnes, son of the pastor. It was held in the School house. The school was all in one class, and sat on a long bench which continued around three sides of the room, with shorter benches in the center of the room, on which the little children sat. The Supt. asked questions of each one in turn, from the Union question book and the children recited verses. This would seem very meager to us, as we think of our SS. But it was attended with eager interest in those day, and many from its ranks united with the church.

The women’s benevolence society has been always very helpful. Now one seems to know how long ago it began. It used to meet from house to house and the women used to ride to the place of meeting in the lumber wagons.

*[A list of the then current members of the Women’s benevolence society was then recited.]*

The church has always been ready to contribute to the general cause of Missions and to other public benevolences. It has always been ready to reach out a helping hand to those in need. It has striven to be cordial, fraternal and evangelistic. It has been composed of an intelligent membership served by an educated ministry. Many of its young people have sought the advantages of a higher education to fit them for the responsible duties of life. It has stood for the best type of New England Christianity.

As we draw near to the hundredth-year mark in our church life, let us rejoice in the thought that “Hither to hath the Lord helped us” and let us be confident that He will continue to help us if we love, honor and obey Him, so that our church may be as a City set upon a hill, which cannot be hid.

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