

History of the First Congregational Church of Natick

THE FOUNDING OF NATICK

The First Congregational Church of Natick was established in the year 1651 by the Reverend John Eliot on the banks of the Charles River, in what is now old South Natick. John Eliot was born in Nazing, England in 1603. He came to Boston on the ship “Mary Lion,” arriving on November 2, 1631, and became “teacher of the First Church in Roxbury.”

John Eliot became deeply interested in the challenges facing Native Americans in the vicinity of Boston, and in 1641, he began learning the Algonquin language. In the winter of 1646, Eliot began his work at Nonantum as missionary to the native people, moving further west in 1650.

The location, soon to be known as Natick, “the place of the hills,” was ideal for a new settlement. The woods were filled with game, and many brooks watered the soil and were abundant with fish of all kinds. The Charles River, also abundant with fish, ran through the area.

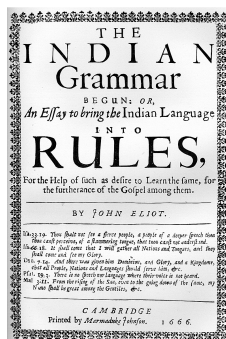
John Eliot petitioned the General Court for the land along the banks of the Charles and it was granted to the “Praying Indians,” perhaps in exchange for their former lands in Deerfield. In the spring of 1651, three streets were laid out – two on the north side of the bridge, and one on the south side, and house lots were apportioned to each native family.



In 1651, Eliot and the native community built their “palisadoed fort” and then the first meetinghouse – a combination church, dwelling and school. It was a two-story building 25 x 30 feet. The first floor was for the church and school room; the second floor was where the native people hung up their skins. There, in a corner, they partitioned off a small area for Eliot’s bedroom.

In August of 1651, Eliot called the community together to form their government, Natick’s first. Thomas Waban was the first town clerk. They drew up their great covenant beginning, “*We give ourselves and our children to God, to be his people.*” In 1660 the First Indian Church in America was organized in Natick. The records of 1670 show between forty and fifty native church members.

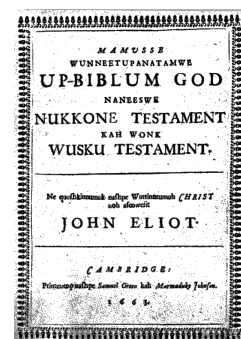
ELIOT BIBLE



Eliot's Indian Grammar

John Eliot’s greatest work was completed in 1661 when his translation of the New Testament into the Algonquin language was completed and printed. The whole Bible was completed in 1663. The Indian language was an unusual language, and Eliot had to discover its principles from the native people. Many of those native words are still in use today such as Massachusetts, meaning “the blue hills,” Connecticut – “the long river,” Cochituate – “long pond.”

Eliot was truly a busy man; he was an active minister of the Roxbury Parish. He had little money to print the Algonquin Bible, but the London Society provided most of the money needed. It was printed in Cambridge in an edition of 1,500 copies. It was the first Bible to be printed in any language in North America.



Title page of the Eliot Bible

KING PHILIP’S WAR, 1875

The settlers, in spite of much help from the Natick “Praying Indians,” were afraid of native uprisings, and passed cruel and needless laws. In 1675, carts arrived in Natick. Two hundred men, women and children were rounded up by the settlers and transported to Deer Island, where they spent a winter with severe weather and little food. At Watertown, where the arsenal stands, Eliot met the Indians. The moment, as he stands and prays

with them, is portrayed by the *Holbrook Mural* in the Natick Post Office. This painted scene shows the elderly Eliot raising his hands in prayer over his beloved friends.



Many of the “Praying Indians” died on Deer Island and very few were able to return to their homes in the town founded for them just twenty-five years before. John Eliot died in Roxbury in 1690, preaching and teaching to the very end. At his death, Daniel Takawampbait assumed leadership and served the church until 1717, followed by two more native preachers. However, the “Praying Indians” were so depleted in numbers that in 1698, the church consisted of only ten members. In 1721, the original meetinghouse was abandoned.

THE “100 ACRES”

In 1719, the town passed an act assigning the twenty proprietors of the town each sixty acres. In the middle of these lots was a large, unnumbered plot, laid out and assigned as the “Ministerial Lot of 100 Acres.”

The hundred acres covered roughly an area in the center of Natick that is now bounded by Pond Street to Palmer Avenue, then a line north to Grove Street, west to Walnut Hill, and south to the center of town. This would be the entire commercial center of the town of Natick and its most valuable land. Our present church building stands on the remnant of this acreage at its southeasterly corner. Most of the hundred acres was sold in the early 1800’s.



Main Street looking toward Walnut Hill

THE SECOND MEETINGHOUSE

The second meetinghouse, still located in South Natick, was built in 1721 on the site of the first one. The Reverend Oliver Peabody was appointed to the church as missionary of the London Society and served until his death in 1752. Noting the absence of church or town records, Peabody decided to keep his own records both of church and of town affairs. They are the only records in Natick from 1721 to 1752. The Congregational Library in Boston now preserves the original documents.

Under Peabody's leadership, the parish began to revive. In 1749 the controversial issue of moving the church to where it now stands first came to town meeting. The proposal to move the church was defeated, but left much friction between the two sections of town. Oliver Peabody died in 1752 and was buried in the Old South Natick center cemetery under a slate stone bearing a long Latin inscription. Peabody baptized 192 native and 422 white persons during his long ministry.

CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH

After Peabody's death, Stephen Badger came to Natick in 1753. The second meetinghouse was declared unsuitable and a third was started in 1754. By this time, however, the pull between the "Center Members" and the "South Natick Members" prevented the completion of the third building until 1767. Many white members wanted the building in the center of town, while the native members wished the church would remain in South Natick. This struggle continued all during Badger's pastorate and eventually caused the end of the South Natick Church.

The life of Stephen Badger must have been made miserable by all this vicious wrangling. Votes were even passed dismissing him; his salary was decreased and often withheld, but he struggled to keep his flock together. Harriet Beecher Stowe, who married Calvin Stowe of South Natick, portrays Badger in her *Old Town Folks* as "Parson Lothrop." His real life was undoubtedly more tumultuous than it is in the book.

In spite of Badger's efforts, the church began to split and in 1798, the town demanded Badger come to the center to preach, or, if not, he would be dismissed. In 1799, he stopped preaching, but he continued to live in South Natick until his death in 1803. It was during his ministry that Natick was incorporated as a town on February 19, 1781.

THE FOURTH MEETING HOUSE

The fourth meetinghouse was built during the years of 1798 – 1799, near the corner of the ministerial lot. The meetinghouse, with its cemetery, occupied the hub of the town. With this move, the parish church became completely dominated by its white citizens.

The new meetinghouse, painted white with a dull red roof, waited until 1806 for its first, full-time minister, the Reverend Freeman Sears. In 1812, the church voted to petition the General Court for "liberty to sell the ministerial lot in order to raise a fund for support of the gospel." The petition was granted and the church appointed trustees to sell the ministerial "100 acres" for about \$5,000.

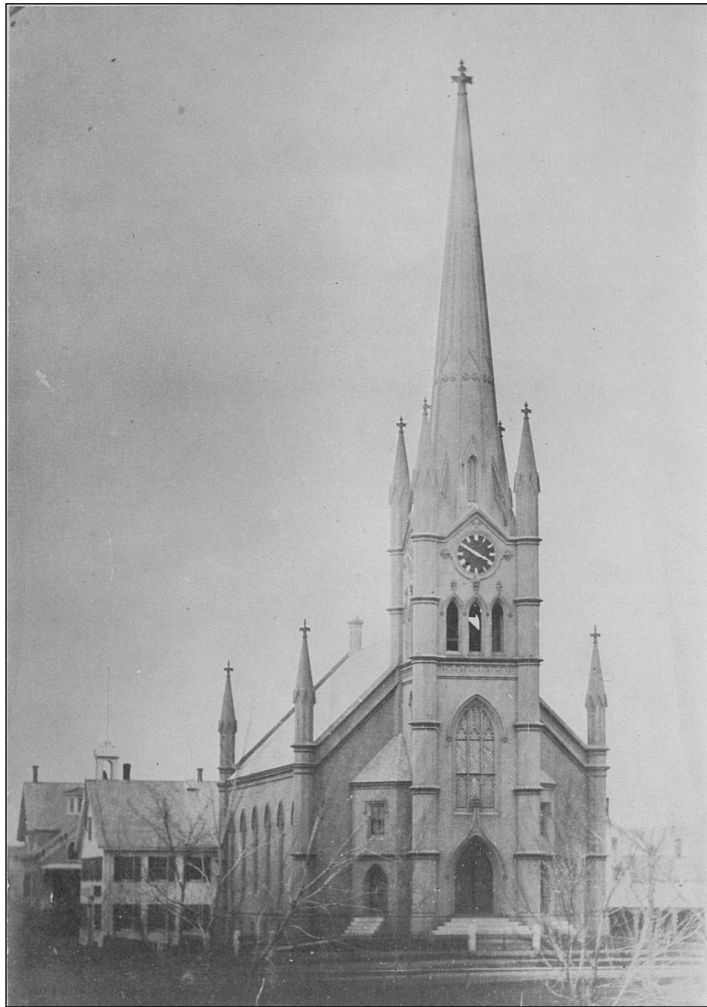
In 1857, a question of ownership of the church cemetery arose. The Town of Natick now claimed this cemetery and the question went to court. The court decided in favor of the town, as it was declared to be a town cemetery. The bodies in the cemetery were then moved to Dell Park Cemetery, and the town proceeded to sell this less than half-acre lot for \$15,000. This half-acre brought, for the town, more than three times the amount the entire 82 acres had brought for the church forty-five years before.

The Church and Town Grow

In 1814, the church elected Martin Moore as minister. In 1818, the first Sunday School began. In 1834, the Boston and Worcester Steam Railroad came through Natick, and the town really began to grow. The congregation increased, and the little meetinghouse became too small during the ministry of Erasmus D. Moore. A new meetinghouse was voted and the small building, now painted yellow, was moved to Summer Street where it eventually became a factory.

The Fifth Meeting House was a white colonial with a high-pillared front and a fine belfry. The building cost \$8,000. In 1839, the congregation called Samuel Hunt as minister. He was to have a great influence on U.S. Vice President Henry Wilson and later became his private secretary. In 1852, The Reverend Elias Nason became minister for what was then the large annual salary of \$900. The town was again growing and the wooden meetinghouse was declared too small. The building was sold to a Universalist Society, and was afterward sold by them to the Roman Catholic Church as their first Natick Church home. When it was sold, it was moved to the south side of East Central Street.

OUR SIXTH MEETING HOUSE



The Sixth Meeting House, a brick church building, was then erected on the same site during the years 1853 – 1854, at a cost of \$28,000. A beautiful edifice for those days, it had a bell and a fine organ. Natick was by now quite a town, growing and most prosperous. Some quite sizable fortunes were starting, and the church prospered.

In 1859, Charles M. Tyler became the minister. He would also serve as chaplain with the Union troops during the Civil War. Prior to the outbreak of war, abolition had found many supporters in town. The town was a stop on the Underground Railroad, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had mobilized much opposition to slavery, had ties to the town through her husband, Calvin Stowe.

One Sunday morning in 1866, following a sermon by a guest preacher, Henry Durant, who would found Wellesley College in 1870, Henry Wilson was in the congregation. Wilson had been a strong champion of abolition. He was then the US Senator from Massachusetts and would become US Vice President under Ulysses S. Grant. At the close of the sermon, Mr. Wilson surprised the entire congregation by standing up in his pew and asking permission to say a few words. Permission was granted and in humble tones Mr. Wilson acknowledged the great honors that had been his through the years, and the wealth that had come his way. Then with a tremor in his voice he

concluded, saying: "But I have never felt so needy in my whole life as I do this morning. I need Jesus Christ and would like to join the church." Perhaps no more heartfelt request for membership was ever recorded in our church's history.

In 1869, Jesse H. Jones became minister until 1871. He was followed by the Reverend Francis N. Peloubet, in 1872. During his ministry, Natick experienced a devastating fire which destroyed much of the downtown area, including the sixth meetinghouse.

THE GREAT FIRE OF 1874

In 1874, on January 13, the great fire occurred. The church building, which had just been enlarged and improved at considerable cost, was destroyed. The congregation accepted a "temporary tabernacle." This latter was a one story, flat-roofed structure, about 64 by 68 feet in floor space, built at a cost of \$1,700. In March of 1874, the Parish voted to buy the "bakehouse lot" to the east, and then voted to erect a new brick church building, seating 750 people, at a cost of nearly \$50,000.



Chimney and ruins of First Congregational Church after the fire.



Destruction of downtown Natick after the fire

THE BURNING OF THE STEEPLE

A description of the great Natick fire of 1874, as reported in the Natick Bulletin of January 17, said: *"The burning of the spire of the fine Congregational Church was a magnificent spectacle, though a sad one. The body of the edifice had been consumed and fallen in, leaving the spire standing like a flame-sheeted specter. As the covering became burned, it left the flame exposed to view, presenting a complete network of glowing fire with here and there little jets of variegated smoke puffing out. Just before the bell fell from its position, it gave three mournful strokes, as if in solemn farewell."*

THE BUILDING OF TODAY



Current church building in the early 1900's

In May of 1875, the cornerstone of the current church building was laid, enclosing the usual sealed metal box containing contemporary and historic church documents. It took two years to finish the Gothic-style structure. While the auditorium was being completed, services were held in the main vestry until 1881.

In 1876, Leonard Morse donated the steeple bell, weighing 2,531 pounds. Nathaniel Clark gave the clock for the spire. In 1884 the Reverend F. E. Sturgis came as minister. In 1891 the church purchased one half of the wall of the Woodbury building on the south side and voted to enlarge the church by an addition in that direction.



In 1903, Dr. Morris Turk was chosen as minister with a salary of \$2000 and the free use of the parsonage on Winnemay Street. In 1912 Arthur Ackerman was called as minister. The Reverend Alvin C. Bacon came as minister following the retirement of Dr. Ackerman. He was a direct descendant of Jeremiah Bacon who had left South Natick in the early 1700's. During his ministry, a new parsonage on Florence Street was purchased.

Following Bacon's long ministry, Reverend Frederick Alden was called in 1939. Mr. Alden installed an office in the church building and it soon became a busy place. World War II required new outreach. Mr. Alden started a newsletter for members who served in the armed forces and carried on a steady stream of correspondence with many of them.



Sanctuary interior, 1890's



Fire Department in front of the church

THE BACON STREET PROPERTY

The Reverend Paul D. Tiller served as minister from 1947 until 1966. In 1957 the congregation voted to purchase five-acres of land on Bacon Street as a future home for the church. The cornerstone for the Christian Education Building was laid in 1962. The building housed a chapel of brick construction with classroom space for the church school, offices, a large meeting hall, ample parking and a space for a vacation Bible school program. For several years there was also a community garden plot for any members who wished to grow a small garden and did not have the available land at their residence.

Unfortunately, the plan to relocate the church caused a significant conflict. Eventually, the property was sold to the YMCA in 1980. In 1999, funds from the sale of the Bacon Street property became the seed money for an addition and extensive renovation, which made our current building handicapped accessible.

The Reverend Robert B. Dennett served as our minister for twenty-one years, from 1967 until his death in 1988. It was during his pastorate that the ecumenical work of the United Parish of Natick (UPON) was formed and our weekday Nursery School began.

PEACE POLE

In 1981, Olin Hayes and Myke Farricker began a Saturday noontime Peace Vigil in support of a nuclear freeze. The vigil continued for 400 consecutive weeks. The Peace Pole in front of the church celebrates the witness of those many volunteers. In subsequent years, the Peace Pole has been a rallying point for many in our church and in our town community to witness to their opposition to military actions that they believed to be unjust.

The Peace Pole became one of the stops for a march of a delegation representing many different traditions protesting US involvement in Iraq. To mark the tenth anniversary of September 11th, a new pole proclaiming "May peace prevail on earth" in 9 languages, including Braille, was dedicated in memory of Olin Hayes and in honor of the anniversary of 911.



THE UNITED PARISH OF NATICK

The year 1969 brought the birth of “The United Parish of Natick” – combining the ministries of First Congregational Church, Christ Lutheran Church and St. Paul’s Episcopal Church. In 1982, the First Baptist Church in Natick joined the United Parish. In the 1990’s, combined programming and shared office space became impractical. Though United Parish dissolved, cooperation among the faith communities in Natick continued, resulting in initiatives that are an important part of the social fabric of our town through organizations and programs such as the Community MLK Service, Natick Service Council, the Natick Community Food Pantry, Open Door and Family Promise MetroWest.

RECENT HISTORY

The Reverend Richard Z. Giragosian served as pastor from 1989 to 1997. During his pastorate, our church became a Stephen’s Ministry Church and initiated West Virginia Workcamp, which every June sends youth, young adults and adults to Lincoln/Cabell County, West Virginia for a week of rebuilding the houses and lives of the people of Appalachia. In 1998 during the interim period, a needs assessment was completed, resulting in a capital campaign to make the building handicapped accessible and to add classroom and church office space.

CAPITAL CAMPAIGN AND RENOVATION

In the spring of 1999, the church called the Reverend Victoria Alford Guest as pastor and launched a capital campaign. That fall, the congregation adopted this mission statement:

Our mission is to express the love and welcome of Christ through word and action in our community and in the wider world.

With the completion of renovations in 2001, the congregation received the Kristen Antonucci Award from the town of Natick for its accomplishments in achieving access for persons with disabilities.



GROWTH IN PROGRAMS

With the new space, the Nursery School program, begun in 1969, expanded to become the Preschool of the First Congregational Church of Natick and serve more families with a broader program. There have been only three directors since the opening: Anne Rollins (1969-1993), Sally Scammon (1993-2001), and Teresa Iodice (2001 to the present). The Preschool of the First Congregational Church now serves over 100 children, continues to offer an excellent preschool experience for children, and is a vital outreach of our church.

In 1998, the church resumed its participation with area seminaries serving as a Teaching Parish and regularly welcomes student ministers during the academic year. In recent years, number of members of the congregation have also attended seminary in preparation for ordination – Joshua Gray, Matt Carriker, Lisa Rizoli, Georgeanne Bennett, and Audra Teague.

In 2000, the Reverend John Lilly joined Reverend Guest in ministry and in 2003, the congregation called him as part-time Minister of Congregational Care. In January of 2008, the congregation voted to call one of our members, the Reverend Dr. John Weagraff as Outreach Minister to work in mental health chaplaincy and with clinical pastoral education students. In 2013, the Reverend Georgeanne Bennett was also called as Outreach Minister to partner with our congregation in her street ministry through Worcester Fellowship. In 2010, the congregation voted to call The Reverend Summer Finnell Shaud as Associate Pastor.

OPEN AND AFFIRMING VOTE

On October 26, 2003, First Congregational Church of Natick voted to be an “open and affirming” congregation and adopted the following covenant:



The First Congregational Church of Natick affirms the dignity and worth of every person. We are called to express the love and welcome of Christ. We celebrate the diversity of God's creation, and the gifts, talents and resources of all who strive to build a church that is faithful to God.

We, therefore, covenant to become an open and affirming congregation. We embrace and support those who experience rejection and find themselves to be in exile from spiritual community. We welcome people of every ability, race, culture, gender, economic circumstance, gender identity and sexual orientation.

In 2014, the words "gender expression" were added to "gender identity" in our ONA covenant. The first same-sex marriage in our sanctuary was celebrated on June 11, 2004.

INTERFAITH HOSPITALITY NETWORK

In 2005, the Coordinating Committee voted to become a participating congregation in the Interfaith Hospitality Network (Family Promise MetroWest), which offers shelter and fellowship to homeless families in the church building for several weeks each year. The congregation began hosting families in the fall of 2008.

CLOSING NOTES

The First Church began as a meetinghouse that was a combination church, dwelling and school. It continues to be an active meeting house for many activities: Natick Day, Open Studios, the Holiday Outreach Fair and Living Creche, benefit concerts by the Community Holiday Band, AA groups, support groups, singing groups, Girl Scouts, music and art events, Marathon Day, homeless outreach through Family Promise MetroWest, Mardi Gras celebrations, Community Earth Day and environmental action, "Coffeehouse on the Common," community forums and many more.



**High
Call** **Deep
Roots**

***The church is not just a building, but a living community
where God works with us and through us.***

We here record our deep appreciation for the rich heritage, which is ours in the Church, and for the noble witness which the Church has born throughout the centuries to the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray that we, and those who are to come after us, may be sincerely devoted to the building of the Kingdom of God in the lives of men and women the world over.

~ The Reverend Paul D. Tiller

(Adapted from The 300th Anniversary of the First Congregational Church compiled by Frank Bishop with updates by John Oakes and The Reverend Victoria Alford Guest.)