



***The Congregational Church
Of Chester, New Hampshire***

1731-2006

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OF CHESTER, NEW HAMPSHIRE
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Two hundred seventy-five years ago, when large chestnut trees covered the land that we now call Chester the King of England awarded a charter that authorized the settlement of “Cheshire” or “Chestnut Country.” This was an area of 125 square miles, which has since become Chester, Auburn, Candia, Raymond, and parts of Hooksett and Manchester. That same charter required that a church be “gathered and settled.”

A committee was formed to “**deliver a ministerial lot,**” on which a meetinghouse could be built. Another committee was formed to provide a parsonage for the first pastor of the new church. Funds were then raised to build a meetinghouse “50 ft. by 35 ft.” in the space where the Civil War Monument now stands, and to furnish it. It was also voted to raise funds for ordaining the first pastor and for paying his salary, (“out of the town treasury annually”). All funds would be raised through parish taxes, because the first settled pastor “had a right through the town”, and at that time every voter had to pay an assessed tax to both the parish and the town.

So it was that **The Congregational Church of Chester was “gathered” in 1731.** Then the church called its first pastor, **Rev. Moses Hale**, who served the church and town for four years. However, in 1735, the pastoral relationship was “dissolved,” apparently due to some very erratic behavior he had displayed. There had been some controversy earlier, requiring an ecclesiastical council to be called, which resulted in apologies given both by Rev. Hale and by The Deacons. Historians now think that Rev. Hale probably suffered from what might today be called a “nervous breakdown”.

Replacement clergy was then hired on a weekly Sunday basis, “at publick charge,” until a new pastor could be called. A Presbyterian Church had been formed in Chester by

this time and the Presbyterians hired a minister of their own. When the Congregational Church was without a pastor, the Presbyterians protested having to pay for the Congregational “supply” pastors on top of having to pay the salary of their own pastor. A large ecclesiastical council was called to hear their appeal, which was denied. Then they took their protest to the Provincial Assembly (Legislature) and to the Governor and Council. The Governor and Council “**read the law in their favor,**” and from then on, two separate votes were taken at every Town Meeting, one to approve the salary for each pastor. But it was still clearly stated that “only such as are conscientious in attending public worship of God according to their own persuasion, they only shall be excused from paying toward the support of the ministry of the town,” and, “all who were not Presbyterian being taxed.” To finally quiet the controversy, it took an Act of the General Assembly of the Province to establish two parishes in the Town of Chester. Both parishes were authorized to choose “**Collectors**” who would have the powers of a constable, and “**Wardens**” who were authorized to serve warrants as selectmen could do.

In 1736, Rev. Ebenezer Flagg was called as pastor, and it was voted that “he shall be minister of the Town.” He served for sixty years, until 1796! The early years of his ministry were influenced by what is referred to as “**The Great Awakening**” when itinerant lay preachers traveled to remote settlements to preach “Fire and Brimstone” sermons. This caused some rural people to seek out the established church in their area, and in 1742 thirty eight residents joined the Congregational Church of Chester, so that Rev. Flagg’s parish included 243 in “**full communion,**” and another 287 “**who owned the covenant.**” Meaghan S. McCormick said in a paper she wrote, that “The Great Awakening” had a wide impact on the whole community, not just on the church. In an example she gave concerning Boston citizens at the time, the wealthy wanted a currency based on silver, and the poorer people favored a currency based on land. The gentry ex-

pected that this “fervent religious revival” would shift the concerns of the more lowly group away from earthly matters like the currency, to concerns of the soul. But instead, the sermons emphasized equality among religions and classes. She says, “The result in New England was that a religious revival, intended to preach salvation, had given rise to political and social unrest that challenged the traditional roles that all had lived with for many years. It was clear that the New Englander believed that any violation of fundamental law by those in authority was tyranny, and that “revolt against such tyranny was not only legal, but a religious duty.”

During Rev. Flagg’s ministry, it became possible to get a marriage license from the Governor, and avoid the publishing of bans” previously required by the minister or Town Clerk. Most clergy opposed this new practice, but Rev. Flagg thought it was acceptable, so he performed marriages with the Governor’s marriage license. In the surrounding towns, these were referred to as “**Flagg Marriages.**” Also during his ministry, in 1770, it was voted to have the church use the **Isaac Watts Psalm and Hymn Book** for congregational singing. Previously, a Deacon had to “line” each line of the hymn, and then the congregation would follow his lead. There was some real resistance to changing to “congregational” singing, but later, in 1806, a bass violin* and clarinet were allowed to accompany the voices.

By 1770, Rockingham County had been established, and the areas of Candia, Raymond, and Derryfield (now Manchester) had been “set out as a town and parish” from Chester. So the town and parish that Rev. Flagg had to minister to, was smaller. Still, there was a need for a larger meetinghouse, so in 1772, the Congregational Parish voted to build a new one, 60 ft. x 45 ft., and to build porches and a steeple onto this. This larger meetinghouse was built on land that Rev. Flagg donated, where our church stands today. The new meetinghouse had a porch on the front and the back, and the front of the building faced up Chester Street. Men and

women were divided for services, and there were male and female pews for slaves. Most pews were purchased by parishioners, but there were a few “open” or “free” pews.

The new building was completed in **May 1774**, and many historic meetings were held here in the years before, during and after the **American Revolution**. It was just as the building was being completed when the first open opposition to the harsh measures imposed on the colonies by King George and the British Government was expressed. So it was in this building that Chester residents first heard the reading of “**The Declaration of Independence**,” and at a Town Meeting on Feb. 2, 1778, the “**Articles of Confederation**” were read and approved. Chester voted to send delegates to a “convention” in Exeter, where, in turn, those elected delegates would be chosen to go to a “general congress” to be held in Philadelphia. Chester voted to pay their share of the costs to send these delegates, and on April 13, 1775, they voted to pay thirty men to be in “Town Service” and “hold themselves in redyness, if called by the town, to go against any enemy.” When the “**Battle of Lexington and Concord**” occurred just days later, twenty-four of these “minute men” marched immediately to those two towns to contribute aid. When the Revolutionary War finally ended in 1784, Chester had furnished 254 men to the Continental Army!

Also in **1784**, the Town purchased the first bell to be hung in our belfry, and it was to ring on Sundays at 8:00 AM and 9:00 AM to announce the Worship Service, and on every workday at 8:00 AM, 12:00 Noon and 9:00 PM. It also was rung before all Town Meetings, and on the day of any funeral it tolled the deceased person’s age three times during the day. At this time not everyone had a clock in their home, and the sound of the bell ringing the hour three times on each workday, was very helpful to many. There were new state and national issues to consider after the Revolutionary War, and in **1788** the new nation had its first national election, and the polls opened in this building for Chester residents to vote for

George Washington! (Then later for Thomas Jefferson, as well!)

In **1793**, **Pastor Flagg** was very old, and he had preached almost 10,000 sermons during his 57 years in Chester. (His home was the original section of what is now **Douglas Hall** of Chester College of New England, what is known as the “L”). He was agreeable to a proposal that the parish hire a co-pastor to help him, and a young, energetic **Rev. Nathan Bradstreet** was called. Rev. Flagg died three years later, and is buried in the **Chester Village Cemetery**. The bell that was hung in the belfry in 1784 cracked when tolling for his funeral.

In **1795** the Congregational and Presbyterian parishes formed a committee to make rules regarding how to assess taxes when people were changing from one parish to the other; both parishes adopted these rules. In **1800**, there lived some Methodists in the area of Poplin (now Fremont), and in 1802, the Congregationalists voted to not tax one man provided he supported the Methodist ministry in Poplin. In 1803, the Congregational parish voted to relinquish a man’s tax because he had produced a receipt showing he had paid in the Candia Parish. In **1809**, the Congregational Society granted permission to Freewill Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists to use the meetinghouse whenever the Congregationalists weren’t using it.

In the early **1800’s**, the Congregationalists began having dissension with Rev. Bradstreet, which lasted for several years. By **1810**, twenty church members had transferred their allegiance to the Presbyterian Church. The male population of the Congregational Church had dropped to only eleven members. The Board of Deacons finally ex-communicated the Pastor! An eight-day reconciliation meeting was held in **1815** with neutral clergy serving as mediators. Both sides pledged to bring about a peaceful resolution to their problems, but this didn’t happen.

On **April 22, 1816**, the congregation voted to lay off

the pastor for a month, and if that didn't bring peace they would excommunicate him again. At the end of the month, seven of the eleven members were still not satisfied with Rev. Bradstreet, but three supported him, and they joined with him when he proceeded to counter-excommunicate the congregation! The Haverhill Association** then ordered the church and pastor to follow its command to find a way to "divorce" each other. The parish was the first to back down and rescinded its excommunication, and then the pastor rescinded his and formally requested a dismissal from his duties. He had come to a church with no known conflicts and a membership of about eighty. He left the church in complete disorder, with a membership reduced by 90%. Following this experience, contracts for future ministers were written so that either the pastor or the parish could ask for a dismissal just by giving a six-month notice. There would be no more life time contracts such as was the case with Rev.(s) Hale, Flagg and Bradstreet.

In **1812**, during the years when our church was in such turmoil with Rev. Bradstreet, the Baptist Church was gathered in Chester. Later, on **June 30, 1819**, the group was formally incorporated as *The First Baptist Church of Chester*. This was a very good time for them to gather, because the Presbyterians had moved their meetinghouse to West Chester (now Auburn), which made them less accessible, and people didn't want to come to our church while we were in the middle of a long, bitter fight with our pastor. So many people were ready to attend a different church.

In **1819**, The Congregationalists also decided to renew their covenant with The Lord, and twenty-nine males and 52 females did this on December 15. The covenant is handwritten in one of our church's record books, followed by the names of the parishioners who did renew their covenant. During this period, the minutes of one meeting recorded that "The meeting opened, and the moderator addressed the throne of divine grace." Then, it was recorded that the meeting ended with "the scribe addressing the throne of grace." The minutes

were recorded in a new record book, purchased in **1819**, because, “whereas the last pastor was dismissed and having carried hence the records of this church, we deem it expedient to purchase a new book for the use of the church scribe.” Also in **1819**, State Government took a very significant action when **Governor Samuel Bell** (of Chester) signed the **Toleration Act**, which ended involuntary taxation to support churches. Only bona fide, consenting church members could still be taxed.

Apparently, on **Feb. 29, 1820**, after four years of “supply preachers”, there was some rebound in membership, because an old record book lists the membership (maybe of the whole parish), as being 332. In **1820**, the church called a new pastor, **Rev. Joel Arnold**. In **1821**, a stove was installed in the church. They had only hand-warmers and foot-warmers before this. In the ten years that Rev. Arnold served the church, he spoke out forcefully against alcohol, and also against dancing. The church even issued a statement saying it “decidedly disapproved” of dancing. During this period, the Deacons were kept busy addressing the sins of those who had trouble with alcohol. In one instance, they “suspended” a man from the church for six months, but said his relationship would be restored if he abstained from alcohol for the six months and publicly confessed his sin. If he did not meet these conditions, he would cut himself off from the church, which meant he would be excommunicated. He did not follow the conditions and was excommunicated.

In **1830**, the church called **Rev. Jonathan Clement** to be their pastor. That year they also passed a resolution requiring all members to sign a covenant pledging to pay a parish tax (as long as it didn’t exceed eighty-four cents per person). During this time, the church considered taking legal action against two men who refused to pay their parish tax, even though they had freely signed the covenant. However, before it went to court the two men did pay. In **1832**, The Ladies Sewing Circle was formed, which was later known as **The**

Ladies Social Circle. In 1837 the **Rockingham County Association of Congregational and Presbyterian Churches**^{***} was founded in Chester. Their Annual Meetings lasted three days at that time!

During the fifteen years when Rev. Jonathan Clement was pastor, the parish undertook two big building efforts. In **May 1834**, the church signed a contract to lease, for ten cents a year, a piece of land owned by Gov. John Bell, on which they planned to build a **Vestry**. There were conditions on the agreement that were: **The Vestry** must be built within six months, must be kept in good repair, and must be limited to church and respectable public uses, or the land owner would reclaim the property. In **1837**, **1838**, and **1839**, there was a great effort to have the parish vote to “alter or repair” the 65 year old meetinghouse. This was voted down in the first two years but finally passed in **1839**. A committee was then appointed to appraise the old pews and set a tax rate that would yield **\$450.00** to pay for the remodeling. Retired Senator Samuel Bell stood and said, “I protest against any man appraising my property. You have no more right to touch my pew than you have my house.” He submitted his dismissal papers from the parish at that time, as did a Capt. Moore. A **“Pew Owners” Record Book** shows the committee’s report of the individual pew appraisals in a list with the following headings:

Number of Pews

Appraisal

Tax

Supposed to be owned as follows:

The values of the pews ranged from \$7.50 to \$42.50, and the related taxes had a wide range as well, but would yield the \$450.00 needed. The remodeling changed the building drastically. First, the steeple was removed so that oxen could turn the building a full 90 degrees, making it face toward Derry instead of Chester St. Then the back porch was removed and the front porch became what is now our vesti-

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bule. The old pulpit that was 20 feet off the floor was removed and a platform built instead to hold the pulpit, piano, and choir loft.

After these two successful building projects, Rev. Clement asked to be relieved of his duties. There had been long days and evenings over several years, when he had tried to keep the peace between angry conservatives who wanted to keep the old meetinghouse un-changed, and the angry progressives who wanted to remodel. This must have taken a toll on him, for in his resignation letter, he wrote, “it had been in my heart to live and die with this parish, but differences have arisen in the way of my duties.” During his fifteen years he had brought 207 new members into the church.

Even in years before the outbreak of the Civil War, the issue of slavery was in the forefront of many sermons in many churches. In Chester the issue had its greatest impact on the West Chester (Auburn) Presbyterian Church, where many left the church to protest the Presbyterian Church’s National Office for its support of slavery. Next their Pastor, Rev. Benjamin Sargent left, and was replaced by Rev. Samuel Ordway. Despite their having a new pastor, the Chester Presbyterian Church members voted to close and dissolve the 108-year-old church rather than stay with the National Presbyterian Assembly. Rev. Samuel Ordway stayed on as the pastor of the **Second Congregational Church of Chester** in Longmeadow. When Auburn was set apart from Chester in 1845, the church then became “**The First Congregational Church of Auburn,**” now known as “**The Longmeadow Congregational Church.**”

Our church called **Rev. Lauren Armsby** to be their new pastor in 1845, and he stayed eleven years, and then **Rev. Harrison Howland** was called in 1857. In **1859** three of the Tenney brothers were ordained at the same time! There was also a crisis regarding music in that year. Rev. Harrison did away with the old Watt’s Psalm and Hymn Books and brought in modern hymnals. One parishioner complained that

the Pastor was going to spend \$75 to hire a music teacher “and he will probably sing his money’s worth and then take French leave.” Harmony must have returned at some point, for in **1893** a poem was written and published by Mrs. Emily Sanborn Hill on the joy the church’s music ministry had brought to the town.

In **1868**, a former resident of Chester, Tappan Robie, said he would give \$5000.00 to the Congregational Church and Parish of Chester provided that friends and members of the church raised a like sum to create a “**Ministerial Trust Fund.**” In response, at their Annual Meeting, a resolution of thanks was voted to go to Mr. Robie, and it was voted to create a separate corporation to “raise, hold, and manage” the funds. This would be called “**The Trustees of the Ministerial Trust Fund of The Congregational Parish of Chester, N. H.**” Articles of Agreement were sent and recorded in the Secretary of State’s Office. In the years to come, the Trustees of this separate corporation carefully made and managed fund investments, some of which included railroad and telephone stock, residential property, bank notes and school bonds. To fulfill their obligation to use the earnings to support a “settled Congregational minister,” they took on as their responsibility, all of the improvement and repair needs of the Parsonage, and if funds permitted, they helped pay for needed work on the church building. During the Depression, they saw banks fail, received pieces of property to pay off loans, tried to work out new agreements with families to help them pay mortgages held by the fund, and even had to foreclose on some. When repairs or maintenance was needed on the parsonage, they often paid for the materials only and provided the labor themselves after their normal daily work. They met with new pastors and their families to see what they needed to have done, and drew up plans to do the work. Over a period of 116 years, until the corporation was dissolved, thirty-four people had served as Trustees.

In **1871**, the church called **Rev. Charles Tenney** as

Pastor. He donated the home he was living in at the time to the church to be the Parsonage, and it is the same building that is the present parsonage.

The Clock - In 1804 the Town of Chester created a “subscription” drive and money was collected to install a “Town Clock” in the steeple of the Church. The Town paid \$22.14 for the dial of the clock, and \$4.38 for installation. The clock never worked right, and another clock was tried in the **mid 1800’s**, but it, too, failed, so the Town went many years without a clock. In the **1870’s** another subscription drive raised more money for another clock. Not enough money was raised, so the money remained in a bank account for years. In **1882**, banker **John W. Noyes** used the account to buy a new clock dial and hands. “Tongues were set a-wagging” soon thereafter when a large crate was delivered to the door of the church, and inside was the works for a tower clock from the **Howard Clock Company of Boston**, all of which was donated by **Mrs. Abigail Sleeper Knowles**. A Howard Company workman then installed the clock, which began to tick on November 14, 1882. One year later, the Town Clerk climbed the tower at noon to stop the clock for exactly 15 minutes, 45 seconds, to put it on **Standard Time**. Before that, clocks were set to agree with whenever the sun rose and set in each area on a specific day of the year. Winding this new clock required someone to climb 108 stairs every week, and then turn a large crank 150 times to lift the field-stone weights from the ground floor to the balcony level to power the clock. Robert Hazelton did this, without pay, for the first sixty years until his death, when his son took over. When it became more and more difficult for the town to find someone to do this, it was voted at town meeting to automate it. There is still a position of “**Consulting Engineer and Maintenance Supervisor of the Town Chronometer,**” currently held by Darrell Quinn.

In **1879**, choir seats were added by the pulpit, and in **1884**, the “sheep’s pen” pews were replaced by the “slip

pews” we have now. In **1886**, adding fourteen feet to the front to serve as a kitchen and “social library” enlarged the Vestry. In **1888**, The Ladies Circle bought a new “odorless toilet” for the church. In **1889**, the Youth Union took on a long-term project to get a full-sized organ for the church. (Until then there had been a very small one). They had many fund-raisers and finally raised \$1050.00 to purchase a **Woodberry & Harris Tracker Action organ**. It has four racks of pipes, two reeds, and two full keyboards. **Miss Lucy Leonard**, the first organist, played on this organ for the first time at worship on **June 8, 1890**, and this same organ has been in service since that time, although no longer pumped by hand after 1953.

The **1900’s** began with “**The Derry News**” reporting that repairs of the church would be left to the Ladies Social Circle because “they would assuredly have their say in the end anyway.” Actually, **The Ladies Social Circle** took on the funding of all repairs and improvements needed for the **Vestry**, and they did this faithfully until they disbanded in the **1980’s**. For over 150 years they were a vital and important group in the life of the church. To raise money, The Circle organized events such as an annual “Christmas Fair,” the annual summer “Lawn Party and Chicken Barbeque,” later on a “Strawberry Festival” each year in June, and they did smaller projects through the year. They had monthly meetings, and always a “May Luncheon” to which they invited Ladies Groups from other churches.

In **1919**, water was run into the parsonage and a bathroom was installed, (which must have greatly pleased **Rev. Silas Adams!**) In **1923**, the Trustees provided funds (not to exceed \$239.00) for an “**Illuminating Engineer**” from Amesbury to install electric lights in the church vestibule, choir loft, pulpit, organ blower room and furnace area. We were entering the modern era! We had electric power in addition to The Power of The Holy Spirit! In **1927**, there was certainly an air of celebration when the first “**formal**” wedding,

of **Warren F. Noyes and Evelyn V. Lane**, was held in the remodeled sanctuary. It's very likely that our church bell rang for this wedding. Even though our first bell had cracked, as did the next two, a fourth one hung in 1828, continues to ring today. (After the fourth one was hung, a man named Manly Lane agreed to ring it daily for \$9.00 a year!).

In **1929**, an old church record shows that Congregational churches in Rockingham County were assessed thirteen cents per enrolled member to belong to the "Association", which included all the Congregational churches in the County. Chester paid \$19.71 for the year. The lowest assessment was \$1.49 and the highest was \$106.38.

During the **1930's** the church held its first **Vacation Bible School**. Also during the 1930's, **The First Baptist Church of Chester** began to struggle with a declining membership. It had celebrated its centennial anniversary in 1919, but by 1937 the Baptists voted to have the electric power shut off in their church. The Congregationalists invited the Baptists to attend their Annual Meeting in 1937, and it was recorded that "The meeting was marked by the feeling of good fellowship between the two societies." The Baptists had worshipped with the Congregationalists, so it came to pass that in 1942, both churches, "to carry on their work more effectively and covenant to worship together under one pastor", adopted "Articles of Agreement." The Baptists would be Associate Members of the Congregational Church, but would have their own officers and Annual Meeting, support their own denominational missions, and the two would alternate denominations in calling pastors.

The Baptists had to dispose of their property, and they put the money from that into a fund so the earnings from the fund could be contributed to the combined budget of the churches. They sold the piano to the Congregationalists for \$1.00, carried their pulpit over to the Congregational Church, and sold their building on April 20, 1945, for a woman to use the materials to build a house. Just before that final sale, on

April 15, 1945 **John West** rang the Baptist bell for the last time to celebrate V.E. Day. Our two churches have now been together for sixty-four years!

Chester, like all communities, had been deeply affected by WW II. Within our church, **our Pastor, Rev. Dietrich Rasetski** resigned in 1942 to enlist as a Chaplain in the US Army, and had been killed while with the Army in France.

Before the Baptists and Congregationalists joined together, the Congregational Church was formally incorporated on **March 7, 1940**. Also, at that time, a meeting of the church parish was held and a committee of three members of the parish was appointed. These three were Edith Nichols, Farish Lewis and Carolyn Lane. They were appointed to convey all parish property and assets to the Congregational Church, for a payment of \$1.00. This included the **Ministerial Fund of the Parish**, which was managed by the Trustees, although the Trustees themselves continued their same responsibilities. Then the Congregational Parish itself was dissolved. In addition to the members of the Congregational Church, The Congregational Parish had consisted of all the residents of Chester who had not been affiliated with any other church. It was appropriate that the Parish be dissolved at this time, because a long time had passed since The Congregational Church had been the “official church for the town.” The parish concept has continued in a way, because, over the past sixty-six years since the parish dissolved, many, many Chester residents have thought of The Congregational Church of Chester as “their church” for their most deeply meaningful life transitions such as marriages and funerals. Indeed, the church’s understanding of itself has included this element of “being there” for those in the community who have no official connection with any other church. Perhaps none of us wants that old bond between this particular church and this particular community to end, even if it is not official” anymore.

In **1952**, because the Longmeadow church didn't have a pastor at the time, and because of a budget deficit they had, they approached us about our joining together to call a pastor to serve both churches. Our Chester church saw that this would also help it financially. So the two churches signed a **"yoking agreement"** which spelled out each church's financial responsibilities, which were that Chester would pay for two thirds of the pastor's salary and provide the parsonage, and the Longmeadow church would pay one third of the pastor's salary. The two worship services and Sunday School hours were scheduled to accommodate this. The two congregations also always shared Christmas Eve, Maundy Thursday and Easter Dawn services, alternating between the two locations for these. An interchurch council was formed that consisted of four members from each church and the Pastor, and this was the group that tried to keep things working smoothly for both churches. We were truly blessed that for the twenty-eight years that we were yoked, the relationship really seemed to work well, and the Deacons and Choir Members especially enjoyed planning and holding the special services together. But we all understood that it had to be a strain on the pastors who accepted this call, because they always had to balance the needs of two congregations. So, in 1980, when Longmeadow arrived at the point where they knew they could carry 100% of the cost of a pastor, our yoking agreement came to a friendly end.

In **1954**, our church boxed in the organ in order to create a more simple, early colonial appearance of white paint and maroon velvet for the sanctuary. In **1957**, the town contributed funds for the repair of the steeple. In the late 1950's and early 1960's, a new evening branch of the **Ladies Social Circle** was formed to help women attend who could not come during the day.

The **1960's** started out with the major construction effort putting the church on jacks to dig out a basement and create a stone foundation. This was done in order to create more

space for the Sunday School, and the men of the church, donated all of the really hard labor with our Baptist Deacon, John West, leading the effort. This job was completed in **1963**, with a church office also being created and dedicated to John in recognition of all he had done. In **1963**, Gladys and Bob Nicoll donated our corner sign with a glass front in memory of their son, Douglas, and placed a small garden in front of it. Also, the Church By-Laws were revised and printed to include the Articles of Agreement between the Baptists and Congregationalists and the Yoking Agreement between the Congregational Churches of Chester and Auburn.

In **1969**, our church called **Rev. Herbert Moore** as our Pastor. While he was with us, he picketed an X-rated movie at a theatre on Broadway in Derry. Also during the 1960's, Marion Jenkins funded the placement of a curb beside our front yard along Chester St. in memory of her late husband, Howard Jenkins. This allowed space for a small front lawn for the first time.

In **1973**, **Rev. Hubert Topliff** was called to be our Pastor, and in 1973, the present cushions were purchased and placed in the pews and the first public address system was installed. In **1975**, women began to serve on The Deaconate as Deaconesses alongside the male Deacons. In **1977** carpeting was placed in the vestibule and sanctuary. During Rev. Topliff's time with us, a strong Auburn-Chester Youth Group also formed. When our "yoking agreement" with Longmeadow ended in 1980, Rev. Topliff remained with Longmeadow, and later retired from full-time ministry there.

During the **1970's**, **Roman Catholics** living in Chester asked us if they might be able to rent our sanctuary to celebrate Mass every Saturday evening. At a special church meeting, a majority voted in favor of this. We recall that only one family left our church because of this. The Catholic group was to be called **St. Jerome's Mission Community**, and their supporting church was in Auburn. We felt they were long-time Chester friends and neighbors, and enjoyed having them

with us. We even shared some joint services with their priest and our pastor sharing the worship duties. Real sadness was felt on both sides when their sponsoring church could no longer provide a priest for their Saturday Mass, and they had to leave us in 2004. We had been together for thirty years!

A more difficult situation also developed between the years of **1973** and **1980**, in that several people who were attending worship services with us, began to ask for a much more “traditional” service. They seemed to indicate that they wanted more “fire and brimstone” sermons, and more literal reading of the Bible. They pressed Rev. Topliff to change our worship services, and were critical of him and of those of us who did not want our worship services to dramatically change. In time, they formed a small group that began to hold their own worship services in **Stevens Memorial Hall**. At the time, this seemed to be the best solution, and it turned out to be the best course in the long run as well, because that group has now grown exponentially to become The Fellowship Bible Church. It was painful at the time, but many members of each church have remained or become, very good friends in the years since.

In **1980**, our church called **Rev. Marnette O’Brien**, who was a Baptist, to be our Pastor, and she was with us for four years. She became concerned about the Trustees being a separate corporation and not a part of the church. She sent letters of inquiry to the Secretary of State to learn more about their status, and found they were officially incorporated as a separate entity. She strongly advocated for the Trustees to become a church committee, and in **1984** our church records show that the Trustees wrote to the Secretary of State’s office requesting that The Trustees of The Ministerial Trust Fund of The Chester Congregational Parish be dissolved as an organization. Actually, the fund itself had become an asset of the church in 1940 when the parish had turned its assets over to the church and been dissolved. Now the Trustees became a church committee.

In **1984**, the church called **Rev. Janet MacGray**, also a Baptist, to be our Pastor. While she was with us, Jack Baker built the beautiful cabinet with glass doors to hold our communion sets, and in **1986**, the church building was listed on the **National Register of Historic Places**, as a result of the research done by Joan Watts and Marianne Kelley. In **1989**, long-needed permanent partitions were built in the basement to create real Sunday School classrooms and a second church office, and a ramp was built to the front entrance. While Rev. MacGray was with us, the organ was restored and uncovered so the pipes are clearly visible now. During this period, the church created a new staff position of “**church secretary**,” a new source of help to everyone! The newsletter, previously created by volunteers in their homes, could now be created in the church office. Rev. Mac Gray had a special love for ministry in small churches, and her ministry with us was marked by a sense of “family” that our church seemed to develop while she was with us. She retired from full-time ministry in **1993**.

In **1994**, the church called our current Pastor, **Rev. Beverly Lindsey**. Soon after she arrived, she saw a need for us to significantly revise our church By-Laws. At that time, we had so many offices and committees that we had sixty-one positions to be filled for the Congregational Church alone, not counting the officers and committee members needed for the Baptist Church. So Rev. Lindsey persuaded the By-Laws Committee, that we should create a **single church organizational structure**, since we already functioned pretty much as one church anyway. So we wrote new by-laws for our combined churches, cutting to one group of officers and four boards to serve both churches together, and planned for just one Annual Meeting, instead of two. The new concept and By-Laws were accepted by the membership of both churches, so we now have forty-one positions to fill for both churches together. Rev. Lindsey and our Moderator, Walt St. Clair, also provided the leadership that enabled the Congregational

members to reconsider and approve our becoming **full members of the United Church of Christ**, whereas we had been partially participating members before. Rev. Lindsey has offered a “**Blessing of the Pets**” each spring, and for a few years she did a “**Blessing of the Bikes.**” She urged us to start an activity of bringing **Welcome Bags** to Chester newcomers. A long-sought goal was met in **1998** when we closed on the purchase of the land on which the Vestry sits and on the field behind the church and Vestry.

Rev. Lindsey’s husband, Charles, has helped us to become more active in local missions, such as in the **Sonshine Soup Kitchen in Derry, NH, and the CROP Walk**. As custodian, he has quickly reported any maintenance needs of our three buildings, and was of invaluable assistance in the major renovation projects of all three buildings in 1998 and 1999. Charles also has a marvelous trained singing voice and is an experienced performer. He and Rev. Lindsey have brought great variety and richness to our music ministry, and have inspired us to put on evening entertainment “fun-raisers” as well!

Now, in **2006**, we have conducted a successful Capital Drive that allowed us to have our steeple spire repaired and painted, have begun a church-wide safety improvement effort, and our Church Cabinet is trying to look more toward church-wide planning. We are carrying the ministry of our 275 year old church into new areas with a wonderful **Prayer Shawl Ministry**, our new partnership with a sister church in **Zimbabwe**, a new Supt. of Sunday School with a passion for helping children learn how God works in their lives, sales of Fair Trade items to help us learn to shop in ways that support Hope and Justice for some of the world’s poorest people, and we have begun a course of church development to strengthen our spiritual gifts and lives.

We start our 275th year with deeply thankful hearts for the way God has provided for all those who began and continued the ministry of this church in Chester for the past

275 years, and we pray that **He will bless this church and all of us, with new life and love for Him and for our neighbors in the time to come.**

Joanne Millsaps, compiled this history of the Chester Congregational Church in October 2006, especially for the 275th Anniversary. Information was gathered from the following sources:

1. "The History of the Congregational Church of Chester" by Evelyn Lane Noyes, 1981
2. "Chester Revisited" by Richard Holmes, 1998
3. "The History of Old Chester 1719-1869" by Benjamin Chase
4. "The History of Chester" as collected by Charles Bell, and originally published for the N. H. Historical Society
5. "The Great Awakening and Its Effect on the Society and Religion of the Connecticut River Valley" by Meaghan S. McCormick
6. Provincial Records stored by The Chester Congregational Church
7. And, for more recent years, personal recollections

*Bass Violins (Viols) were created in Chester, NH by Moses Tewksbury circa 1840.

**Haverhill Association - Within the structure of Congregationalism, Churches and Clergy covenant together in associations, setting standards for behavior and codes of ethic for the clergy, and oversee the standing of the clergy. During this period of 1810, since New Hampshire was still part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, that governing association was the Haverhill Association, Haverhill, in Massachusetts. Today, we belong to the Rockingham Association.

*** See Haverhill Association



The Congregational Church of Chester, New Hampshire, 1731-2006

Published for its 275th Anniversary Celebration
Compliments of the Chester Historical Society, Chester, NH

Cover art courtesy of Walter St. Clair
Chester, NH

