

## The Early History of Tolland County Connecticut

*[In the fall 2004 issue, page 56, we began this series based on a publication submitted by Leonard Chapman, CFA Member #184. This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> part and much more follows.]*

### MEETING-HOUSES.

THE first settlers of Tolland exhibited a very strong attachment to religious institutions. Being lineal descendants of that band of pilgrims that left their native land, to seek across the trackless waters an asylum where they could worship the God of their fathers unmolested, according to the dictates of their own consciences, it is not strange that they should regard the social organization as entirely imperfect without a spiritual leader to break to them the bread of life. A minister and a house for public worship were not only regarded by them as essential to their happiness, but as indispensable to their worldly prosperity; and hence all sacrifices necessary to the attainment of these objects were most cheerfully made. The early records of the town furnish conclusive evidence of their intense zeal upon this subject, and their great liberality in a cause so near their hearts. They were authorized by the General Assembly to choose town officers in the year 1717, and the first town-clerk and selectmen were chosen in that year. In the year 1719, when probably there were not over twenty-five families in town, a vote was passed appropriating eighty acres of land for a minister lot, and offering a salary of seventy-five pounds, or two hundred and fifty dollars a year, making an average sum of ten dollars annually to each family. On the 19th day of November, 1719, the proprietors of the town voted to build a meeting-house, thirty feet square, and appointed Noah Grant, William Eaton, and Joseph Benton, a committee "to order the affairs of the meeting-house."

There was, as usual, some difficulty in locating this house; and the records show that several meetings were held on the subject, which served to delay the building of the house for several months. The spot where it was finally erected was agreed upon February 5, 1721-22; which was on the hill a little east of the present residence of Mr. William West. At a previous meeting held on the 31st of January, 1720-1, the town voted to build a meeting-house thirty feet long and twenty-eight feet wide, with eighteen feet posts. They also voted that the frame of the building should be raised by the last day of the month of June next following, and that the sides should be covered, and the floors laid, and windows put in, by the last of the following November. It is not probable that any very serious effort was made to comply with these votes; for I find the record of a town meeting held on the first of May of the same year, at which it was voted that the building should be forty-five feet long, thirty-five feet wide, and twenty feet between joints. As this is the last vote upon the subject of dimensions, it is fair to presume that the house was finally built as last prescribed, and was probably raised in the spring of 1722. It does not appear when this house was dedicated to the worship of God, yet there can be no doubt public worship was held in it early in the year 1723.

October 4, 1725, a tax of four pence on the pound was laid to defray the expenses "arisen and arising about furnishing the meeting-house." February 28, 1726, it was voted to build pews upon that part of the floor that was raised above the rest. December, 1728, it was voted, "to build a house about twenty feet by fourteen, near the meeting-house, to accommodate the inhabitants living remote from the meeting-house with a place to spend the intermission between services without troubling others." December 9, 1730, the town voted that "the selectmen should procure

at the towns cost what is necessary for the pulpit.” December 8, 1731, it was voted “to do something towards repairing and finishing the galleries.” From 1744 to 1749, liberty was given divers persons to “erect pews in the galleries at their own expense and for their own accommodation.”

It would seem that this house did not answer the purpose for which it was designed; for we find that before it had stood thirty years, to wit, on the 28th of January, 1751, the town, by a vote of nearly two to one, voted “that it was necessary to build a new meeting-house for public worship in said town.” The question of building a new meeting-house at this time, must have been one of unusual interest, for at this meeting we find that no less than twenty-eight persons were admitted inhabitants of the town, and one hundred and ten votes were given upon the question, viz., seventy in the affirmative, and forty in the negative. Three unsuccessful attempts were made to rescind this vote, but the town adhered with increased majorities each time to its first decision. The location of this house was a matter of even more than usual interest. The inhabitants of the north-west and western portions of the town insisted upon a site at the north end of the street, while those of the southern and eastern portions were equally strenuous for its location at the south end of the street. The matter was at first submitted to the town, and a majority of votes decided in favor of the southern location. There was then no road leading into the street from the eastern part of the town, except the one leading from near where the old meeting-house stood, and of course all persons attending meetings from the eastern part of the town. would have to come into the street at the south end, which doubtless had its influence in determining the location of the house. Tradition says that the influence of the Hon. Zebulon West, whose residence was in the south part of the town, had great weight in the final settlement of this question. The minority did not readily submit to the decision of the majority, and they appealed to the General Court and obtained a committee to review the proceedings of the town, but after several public hearings, the location fixed by vote of the town was finally confirmed. On the 24th day of December, 1753, the town voted to build the new meeting-house fifty-six feet long and forty feet wide. This house was raised in the month of May, 1754, and was so far finished as to be used for public worship in the Spring of 1755. The house was erected without a steeple, and it was not until the year 1792, that the town came to the conclusion not to dispense with this appendage any longer. At a town meeting held on the 12th day of January, 1792, they voted “That the town will build a steeple to the meeting-house, Provided, that a bell can be procured and given to the town without burdening the town with any expense for said bell.” The bell was to be procured by voluntary subscription, and such progress was made in this direction, that the town, at an adjourned meeting on the second day of February, 1792, voted “to raise a tax on the last August list two pence and one farthing on the pound to build a steeple to the meeting-house in Tolland.” It is a traditional fact, that the inhabitants of the north-west and western portions of the town were very much opposed to the project of building the steeple, and it is said that two persons, viz., **Gen. Chapman**, and his uncle, **Simon Chapman**, were the only persons from that quarter of the town who voted in the affirmative on this question. It is also said that the old feud growing out of the location of the meeting-house was fully revived and had its effect upon those who voted in the negative. It seems the people were hardly satisfied with the action of the town on this subject, and another town meeting was called as will appear by the following vote copied from the town records under date of April 26, 1792:

“Voted at said meeting that the town consider the first article in the warning for a town meeting at this time first, (viz.) whether they will reconsider the vote passed at a former town

meeting to build a steeple to the meeting-house. Voted, to take that up first. The question was then put whether the town would reconsider their vote passed at a former meeting to build a steeple to the meeting-house. Negatived by the whole.”

The following vote furnishes some evidence that the old difficulty about the location of the house was not entirely forgotten. It is under date of May 4, 1792, and is as follows, to wit:

“Voted to choose an agent to send to Hartford to attend the General Assembly at the present session to oppose the memorial of a number of inhabitants of the town of Tolland, referred to said Assembly, praying for liberty to move the meeting-house in said Tolland to some other place near the centre of said town.”

It is probable that the steeple was built and the bell procured and in use before December 3d, 1792, for on that day a town meeting was held at which the following votes were passed :

Voted, “That a tax of one penny, three farthings on the pound be laid and collected on the last August grand list, to pay up the committee the residue of their bills for building the steeple to the meeting-house; and the overplus, if any, to remain to defray other town expenses. At the same meeting, Voted , That the selectmen of said town procure Mr. Hanks to run over the bell, if he will do it on reasonable terms, and to hang it again in the steeple.”

Mr. Hope Lathrop, an influential citizen, was very active in procuring subscriptions for the bell. It is said he went into the west part of the town to obtain funds for this purpose, and being universally refused, he became a little excited, and declared that those who would not give anything for the bell should not hear it ring.

The collection of the tax for building the steeple was resisted by people in the western part of the town, and the collector, under the direction of the selectmen, distrained an ox, the property of Nathaniel Kingsbury, Jr., to pay his tax. This Nathaniel Kingsbury was an elder brother of Deacon Jabez Kingsbury, whose grand-children still own and live on the farm owned by him during his life time. Mr. Nathaniel Kingsbury brought an action against Daniel Edgerton and others, then selectmen of Tolland, to test the legality of this tax. The writ was dated January 28, 1798; the facts were agreed to by the parties, and the cause was carried to the Supreme Court of Errors. Two questions were made in the case: —1. That the town had no right to tax its inhabitants to build a steeple to its meeting-house; and 2. If it had this right it could only be exercised by a vote of two-thirds of the voters at a legal meeting; and inasmuch as the tax in question was laid by a majority vote only, it was not legally laid. But the court ruled both questions in favor of the town, and the plaintiff had to pay the costs.

Tradition informs us that the first public use to which the first bell was put, was tolling for the death of Capt. Hope Lathrop, who was so active in procuring it, and that it was cracked on that occasion. He died November 8, 1792, and the meeting, to have Mr. Hanks recast the bell, was held December 3, 1792; a fact that corroborates the traditional evidence.

NOTE. The steeple built by the town of Tolland in 1792, was just one hundred feet high, and was the first or nearly the first ever built in the county. It, of course, attracted great attention, and was scrutinized by people from other towns. One Oliver Arnold, happening in Tolland, and

knowing somewhat of the difficulties respecting the building of the steeple, stood gazing upon it, when a sort of inspiration came upon him, and he gave vent to his reflections in the following doggerel :

"Poor Tolland; grand people!  
Old meeting house, and new steeple!"

This doggerel distich has more meaning than at first sight is apparent. It not only exhibits the envious feelings of the speaker towards the people of Tolland, but contains a sarcastic criticism upon their conduct. The term "poor Tolland," was intended to describe the pecuniary condition of the town, as exhibited in its barren hills and broken land. The term "grand people," was used to express the contempt which the speaker felt for the distinguishing characteristics of the town as the county metropolis. The people had just built a court-house, jail, and a tall steeple. The other line is a biting criticism on the taste and judgment of the people in having an old building to meet in with a new steeple for ornament.

Another incident will illustrate this feeling more fully. It was formerly the practice of the profession to attend the Superior Court on its circuit, and remain until the court adjourned. Many leading members of the bar, in Windham and New London counties, were in the habit of attending the courts in Tolland, and were often engaged in the more important trials. On one occasion, after a session of some interest, a gentleman from Norwich took occasion publicly to congratulate the people of Tolland on their recent improvements, and the brilliant prospects before them; and continuing his remarks with more of irony than truth, said he entertained no doubt Tolland would yet be a port of entry, and vessels would be seen unloading their cargoes upon the banks of the Skungamug. A resident of Tolland, standing by, and not much relishing the sarcasm of the speaker, interrupted him by saying that the event of which he was speaking was, in his judgment, much nearer at hand than he, the speaker, anticipated; for, said he, the *small* craft from the city of Norwich have already found their way amongst us, and their larger vessels will doubtless follow in their wake.

Although this meeting-house was so far finished as to be used for public worship in 1755, it was not entirely completed until several years afterwards, for I find a record of a vote, passed on the 3d day of March, 1760, raising a tax for finishing the meeting-house, which was made payable the first day of November then next following. The interior of this house was fitted up with square pews, having seats usually on three sides, so that a large portion of the audience had to sit with their sides or backs to the minister. These pews furnished very indifferent accommodations for worshippers who indulged in the somniferous habits of some of the present generation. The training of our ancestors, and their sense of propriety, seemed to incline them to think less of their bodily ease and comfort, during public worship, than of the manner and spirit with which it was conducted. In their day it was no particular hardship for females to walk two and three miles every sabbath to meeting, if the weather would permit; and very few were ever found in any congregation so overcome with bodily fatigue as to be unable or unwilling to stand erect during the entire devotional part of the exercises. It would doubtless have been a matter of surprise and astonishment could they have foreseen that their posterity, within half a century, would become so effeminate as to be unable to walk half a mile to attend public worship, or to stand during the singing of a short hymn.

The meeting-house, of which I have been speaking, was taken down in the summer of 1838, being eighty-four years after its erection. The meeting-house now used by the Congregational society was then built, and was publicly dedicated to religious services on the 25th day of October, 1838.

The house which belongs to the Methodist society was erected by voluntary contributions in the year 1794. Its interior was at first very rude and the seats uncomfortable. It underwent a most thorough repair in the year 1832, and by subsequent repairs and alterations has been somewhat improved. There has never been any money expended upon it from the town treasury, the whole expense having been borne by individuals. The house belonging to the Baptist denomination was built by subscription in the year 1832, and has been thoroughly repaired. Before the building of this house, this congregation held their meetings in the old court-house, when that edifice was standing, and afterwards in the old school-house of the Center district.

Coming next will be "Ministers" followed later by "Military."