

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FIRST
CHURCH IN SUTTON, MASS.
CONTAINED IN A SERMON
PREACHED JAN. 2D, 1842**

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A Brief History of the First Church in Sutton, Mass. Contained in a Sermon preached Jan. 2d, 1842 by H. A. Tracy

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H. A. TRACY

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BRIEF HISTORY
OF
THE FIRST CHURCH
IN
SUTTON, MASS.

CONTAINED IN A SERMON

PREACHED JAN. 2d, 1842,

Hiram
BY H. A. TRACY,
The Present Pastor.

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SERMON.

— ZECHEIAH 1. 5.—*Your fathers where are they ? and the prophets do they live forever ?*

As the water of some mighty stream runs silently along to the ocean, so passes the current of human life. The generations of men follow each other in quick succession, as wave follows wave. All go to one place. The wise and the good, as well as the foolish and wicked are involved in the same common end. Where we stand to day, or within hearing of the voice, other men long since dead worshiped God ; other hearers filled the sanctuary ;—other prophets taught the people. This hill echoed to their voices in prayer and praise. Here stood the gray haired prophet who for sixty years taught the people knowledge ; and here stood the commanding, dignified ambassador of the King of Kings, riveting the attention and touching the heart while he rebuked and exhorted with all long suffering and doctrine. But all are gone. Their bodies like the temples where they worshiped are crumbled into dust. “Your fathers where are they ? and the prophets do they live forever ?”

It was the design of the inspired prophet in asking these questions, to lead Israel to review the past, and gain wisdom from a knowledge of the character and end of their ancestors. There is no people but what may profit by such a review.—By a due consideration of the past men are enabled wisely to improve the present and form plans for the future. Time is an ordeal that like fire tries the character and works of all who have acted a part in the scenes of this life. It reveals both the wisdom and folly of former generations by bringing to maturity the fruits of their planting and watering and by thus perfecting their works enables him who examines with care to determine its character.

There are few more profitable subjects of study ;—for there are connected with the history of every community that has existed for any considerable period, incidents and transactions of an interesting and instructive character. To rescue these from oblivion, is a work eminently calculated to benefit both the present and future generations.

Impressed with the belief that the religious history of this town, as connected with this church and congregation, would profit both pastor and people, it is my design in the following discourse to present this in as clear and full a manner as time and the materials will allow.

Many things of interest are doubtless lost for want of record ; and others the knowledge of which exists will not be brought to view for want of time and opportunity to investigate and present them in proper light. Yet enough has been found and will be presented to lead all who have a heart to praise God, to magnify his name, and hold him in grateful remembrance, for his kindness to our fathers and predecessors.

This town, which originally embraced Grafton, Millbury and parts of Upton, Northbridge and Auburn was purchased of the Indians sometime previous to 1704. A part of this tract of land called Hassanemisco was reserved by the Indians for a settlement—this, with some small additions now forms the town of Grafton. In the year 1704 the Governor, Council and Assembly of the province confirmed the purchase and made a grant of the lands to the proprietors upon certain conditions, among which was this : “ That they settle a town of thirty families and a minister upon said lands within seven years after the end of the present war with the Indians.” It is worthy of special notice that in laying the foundation of the town and giving it existence provision was made for the religious instruction of the people. Our Puritan ancestors well understood the principle, that the knowledge and practice of virtue was the surest and richest source of temporal prosperity.—The war to which reference was had in the grant, was

the war with the French in Queen Anne's reign. In this war the Indians throughout the Country were generally excited by the French to engage. Many of the frontier settlements were entirely broken up and the growth of others greatly retarded. Peace was established in 1713 and the country had rest. In the spring of 1715 measures were taken for the immediate settlement of the town; and in the winter following three families wintered in the place. To promote and expedite the settlement the proprietors made a grant of 4000 acres of land to the first thirty settlers. This grant was made March 18 & 19, 1715, and at the same time the proprietors agreed to be at half the expense of building a meeting house, and supporting a minister for four years. Encouraged by these proposals—there was soon found a sufficient number of families to settle in the town in order to secure to the proprietors the grant by the government.—The first town meeting was held Dec. 2d, 1716 at the dwelling house of Capt. John Stockwell. A prominent object of the meeting was to provide for the establishment of the gospel ministry. At the same time overtures were made by a Committee of the proprietors relating to the "settlement of the worship of God in this town." In March following a meeting was held at which measures were adopted for building a meeting house. This was erected the same season though there is no record of the precise time of its commencement or completion. The fourth town meeting held March 7th, 1720 was convened in the meeting house. Thus in less than one year and a half from the time the inhabitants first met in a civil capacity they had erected a house for the worship of God. Scarcely had they provided rude shelters for their temporal comfort before making provision for their eternal good.

The first church in this town was formed in the Autumn of 1720, and originally consisted of ten members—all males. The records of this church for the first eight years are not known to exist, having been carried away by the first minister upon his dismission; consequently we are unable to ascer-

tain the basis upon which the church was formed, except by subsequent transactions.

In Sept. 1728 the members "renewed their solemn covenant with God and one with another." The second declaration in the Covenant is as follows :

"We declare our serious belief of the christian religion as contained in the sacred scriptures and *with such a view thereof as the confession of faith in our churches has exhibited,*—heartily resolving to conform our lives unto the rules of this holy religion as long as we live in the world." The remainder of the Covenant is the same with some slight variations as that now in use.

This act evidently shows that the church originally adopted as the basis of their discipline and faith, the platform, so called, which was drawn up by the Synod assembled at Cambridge, in 1648, and confirmed by the government of the province in the same year. This Synod instead of framing a confession of faith for themselves "wholly agreed with that which had then lately been set forth by the assembly of divines at Westminster." The platform of discipline they drew says Gov. Winthrop "according to the general practice of the churches." It appears evident from this that the basis of this church was strictly puritan in its faith and discipline. The church from its foundation has adhered strictly to congregational principles. Tradition says it was attachment to these which occasioned the difficulty with the first pastor and led to his dismissal. And this tradition receives support from the fact that when they called their second pastor it was upon condition that he would be settled according to congregational usage.

The Confession of Faith adopted by the church, embraced the doctrines set forth in the Westminster Catechism. An abridgement of which was long taught in the schools of the Province, and afterwards of the Commonwealth.—The present Confession of Faith, which for substance is the same,

being merely an epitome of that contained in the Cambridge Platform, was not adopted and used in the admission of members until April 1811. There has been no important deviation from the original basis. The church in this respect has maintained its integrity.

*“ On the 9th day of Nov. 1720, the Reverend Mr. John McKinstry was ordained Pastor over them as a Congregational Church, they calling him thereto and calling in the help of sister churches.

The Rev. Mr Swift of Framingham gave him the charge and the Rev. Mr. Thatcher gave him the Right Hand of fellowship. The Rev. Mr. Baxter, Pastor of Medfield—the Rev. Mr. Breck, Pastor of Marlborough—the Rev. Mr. Prentice, Pastor of Lancaster, and the Rev. Mr. Dor, Pastor of Mendon, assistants sent to on the occasion mentioned.”

It is not known that during Mr. McKinstry's ministry there was any *special religious interest*; though it is evident there must have been some attention to the subject of religion, as in the eight years of his labors there was an addition of forty-four members. Some more than twenty of these were by profession. Soon after his settlement, difficulties arose between the minister and people, probably in relation to the government and discipline of the church. Mr. McKinstry was a presbyterian from Scotland, and the church strictly and firmly congregational. This prepared the way for differences of opinion: and as both were unyielding, the result was alienation of affection.

Oct. 12th, 1726, a Council of seven churches, represented by their pastors and delegates was called by the town “to judge of matter of difference between the minister and the people.” The result of this Council is not known.

This is the only council ever called to adjust difficulties between this people and their pastor. The matter of difference not being settled to the satisfaction of both parties,

* Ch. Record Vol. 1.

Mr. McKinstry was dismissed Sept. 2d, 1729. The transaction of the town in relation to this event is thus recorded.

*“ Pursuant to an agreement with Mr. John McKinstry to be dismissed from preaching in Sutton—at a town meeting legally named and held at the meeting house in Sutton, put to vote to see whether the town would dismiss Mr. John McKinstry from preaching here in Sutton; and it passed in the affirmative and there was not any vote in the negative.”

Mr. McKinstry was born in Scotland and educated at the University of Edinburgh. He continued in the ministry among this people nearly eight years. He was a man of considerable brilliancy and popular talent. After his dismission he removed to Ellington, Conn., and was settled as pastor of the church in that place, where he probably died.

The Nov. following the dismission of Mr. McKinstry, Mr. David Hall was invited to preach.—He continued to supply the pulpit during the winter, and on the 7th of March, 1729 the church invited him to become their pastor; a Committee was appointed to lay the proceedings of the church before the Town and request their concurrence. The Town meeting was held March 26th when the inhabitants “voted to choose Mr. David Hall for their minister and teacher to settle in the work of the ministry among them.”

Mr. Hall accepted the invitation and was ordained Oct. 15th 1729. †“ The Rev. Mr. Throop of Woodstock began with prayer. The Rev. Mr. Williams of Weston preached a sermon from 1st Thess. 5: 12—13. The Rev. Mr. Swift of Framingham gave the solemn charge. The Rev. Mr. Campbell of Oxford, gave the right hand of fellowship.”

The ministry of Mr. afterwards Dr. Hall was continued for a long period and unusually blessed among this people. When he settled, the church consisted of forty-nine members,

* Town Record Vol. I.

† Ch. Record Vol. 1st.