



### **Preliminary Report – Walton Place, First Congregational Church**

Established in 1635, the history of the First Congregational Church is also a record of the development of Stamford over almost the last four centuries. Although the congregation has moved into new meeting houses to appropriately administer to their membership over the course of their history, the sixth meeting house, located on the corner of Bedford Street and Walton Place, was their most spectacular home.

The First Congregational Church realized that their previous church – built in 1858 – was inadequate. While they began selling off the church furniture, the congregation planned to save the church bell for use in their new building; it is the same bell that has hung in the First Congregational Church’s buildings since 1735. And with that, they turned their attention to the planning of a new church.

Around 1910, the First Congregational ministry found a property on the corner of Bedford Street. Costing \$32,000, the lot was characterized by a granite ledge, surrounding rock wall and was home to Miss Aiken’s School for Girls, a large Second Empire building with mansard roof and full-width porch. The school, established on Henry Street in the South End in 1855, had moved to this property in the 1870s or 1880s and was ready to close its doors at the end of the academic year. Once the pupils left, the First Congregational Church set about its work and moved the building several feet to the east, a space occupied by the current parking lot. The little ledge on which it stood sat empty for another year before a contract was extended to an architect and construction company.

In 1911, an architect - George F. Newton of Boston – was hired. Although he had designed a number of public buildings, hospitals and campuses, most of his commissions were ecclesiastical buildings. Certainly, between 1900 and 1910, he had completed five churches and one seminary. The First Congregational Building Committee had toured Boston and had been awed by Newton’s Newton Highlands Congregational Church built in 1905-1906. They were “impressed with its beauty and symmetry. Every detail of the Church, from the pews, carpets, chancel and pulpit to the kitchen and heating plant was carefully noted, and it was thought that for the size and equipment as well as the cost (\$63,000 complete) it came very nearly up to the ideals of the committee” (First Congregational Building Committee Meeting Minutes April 25, 1911).

After signing contracts, Newton engaged in lengthy correspondence with the First Congregational Church of Stamford Building Committee. By September of that year, Newton had provided preliminary plans for the church and the Building Committee had settled on the Vuono Bros. for general contractors, The Fairbanks Co. for the electrical contract, and John Farquhars for the roofing. First Congregational was ready to begin construction on their new church.

The first step was to remove the granite ledge on the Bedford Street lot. Approximately 3,780 yards of rock was blasted. While the congregation sold the dust and extra rock for \$1,342.10, most of the granite was recut and used for the façade of the new church. Literally made from Stamford’s bedrock, a powerful symbol, the cornerstone of the building was laid on Sunday, June 9, 1912, and in less than six months, the congregation held its first services in its new home.

Few changes have been made to the church since its completion in 1913; in actuality, there are only two worth mentioning, the first of which was the installation of stained-glass windows on the eastern and western elevations. When the original structure was completed, only the three windows on the northern façade were decorated with stained-glass. The rest were leaded, diamond-paned windows which were replaced over the course of the next 20 years. Some of these new stained-glass windows were purchased by the congregation; there are a number commemorating notable people within the congregation's history – early reverends, trustees, and members. In many instances, however, the windows are dedicated to deceased members and were likely purchased and funded by remaining family and descendants. Research is on-going and should help resolve remaining questions. The second major alteration to the 1913 church was the construction of the addition in 1962.

As noted in the 325<sup>th</sup> Anniversary booklet, the congregation had grown since the construction of the church in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The membership had increased from 439 to 750, with an associated increase in the number of children from 154 to 350. With this expanding congregation, the Reverend and members deemed it necessary to add a three-story addition to better serve the church. By the 1960s, the church was interested in providing membership with more meetings, organizations, and activities, all of which necessitated a larger space than what the 1913 church could provide.

The First Congregational Building Committee began the process of planning in the late 1950s. F. Nelson Breed, a Wilton-based architect known for Colonial Revival residences, was hired to design the addition which would feature a new kitchen and dining room, reception room, chapel for 100 attendants, church offices, conference room, library, and four classrooms that could be subdivided into twelve. The new wing was dedicated on April 15, 1962.

Unfortunately, just as membership increased over the first sixty-odd years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it began to decrease during the first quarter of this one. As the congregation shrank, the facilities offered by the Bedford Street location became too large and the cost of maintenance too high. As it had five times previously, First Congregational decided to sell its property and seek a new location that was better suited to the needs of its membership.

Research is on-going. However, the 1913 First Congregational Church of Stamford building is the work of a master ecclesiastical architect. As noted above, George F. Newton was responsible for the design of public and secular buildings, but his most notable and numerous commissions were ecclesiastic. Between 1900 and 1909 alone, Newton designed and saw construction completed on the First Congregational Church of Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts (1901); the Second Congregational Church in Attleboro, Massachusetts (1902); The Congregational Church in Newton Highlands, Massachusetts (1905-1906); the Plymouth Congregational Church in South Providence, Rhode Island (1905); the First Baptist Church in Melrose, Massachusetts; the Hellenic Orthodox Church of the Annunciation in Buffalo, New York (1906-1907); and in 1909 the Buffalo Seminary in New York. Of these structures, four are listed on the National Register of Historic Places and three were featured in *The Architectural Review*. The First Congregational Church of Stamford was a design of which Newton was obviously proud; he used it as the defining picture in his own advertisement in *The Congregationalist* periodical.

The First Congregational Church of Stamford is an example of the work of a master. Its preservation and restoration are extremely important, not only because of its architect, but also because of its place in the history in the development of Stamford's downtown, as well as the city itself. Certainly, since its construction, the church has been a witness to change, not only in its congregation and the social systems that define our local communities, but also the landscape in which it is an active participant. In 1960, as the addition to the church was in the process of being planned, First Congregational Pastor Russell McGowan intuitively wrote: "We shall be constantly studying the role of a downtown Church in our rapidly changing city. I am convinced there is a place for a Church in the heart of a city, surrounded by towering apartments, and we are most strategically located to offer that kind of a

ministry.” His vision has become a reality. The church is surrounded by apartment complexes, although it still maintains a gravitas given by its symbolism and sentimentality, both of which are underlined by the architectural and stylistic differences between it and the surrounding buildings. An important feature in the landscape, every care must be given to its protection with also a regard for its meaning for its former congregation and its present neighbors.

Copperline Partners and Redniss & Mead have sought to preserve the former First Congregational Church. It is important to all parties involved to honor the sentiment and history of the congregation and, consequently, conversations regarding elements the church may like for their new home – the commemorative stained-glass windows (not original to the 1913 structure), the monumental granite sign at the north entrance, stone in the Memorial Garden, and bell – are on-going. Alongside these dialogues, a preservation architect has been contacted to ensure proper cleaning, repointing and other maintenance is completed with utmost care and in accordance with historic standards.



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