

**Old First Presbyterian Church
350th Anniversary
Sermon by The Rev. Barbara Hosmer
January 13, 2008**

“Seeing that we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with patience the race that is set before us.” Hebrews 12:1

**What a cloud of witnesses!
What a history!
How do we breathe in 350 years?**

Today we begin our year long celebration of the 350th years of mission and ministry in the Town of Huntington. It is indeed a great honor for me to be serving here at this time.

May this year of 2008 be a great blessing to the life of members and friends, our community and the vibrancy of the ministry of Old First Presbyterian Church.

To understand history is to realize the inter-relationship of all that has gone before with where we are today. Like a helix, or string of pearls, events that shape people’s lives are not random and independent but the direct result of what preceded. The history of Old First is the story of nations, trans - Atlantic voyages, native Americans and covenantal relationships between a people and their God, a church and the state, kings, mayors, judges and the population and territory they were to serve.

If there is one word which we can wrap ourselves in over this next year, it is the word “covenant”, a relationship between two people, an agreement, a connection, duties and responses from one to another, a partnership, benefits and requirements.

We are God’s covenant people. Take yourself back to your 4th or 5th grade classroom where you heard of Giovanni da Verrazano landing on Block Island and sailing into New York Harbor in 1524 – meeting upon arrival the Algonquin Indian tribes.

Or how about Adrian Block, the Dutchman, who in 1614 sailed his 49 foot ship called “Onrust” (Unrest) into the harbor of New Haven, Ct. Who was there to greet and meet him but the Algonquin’s again, whose territory in that region covered some 750 square miles. The Quinnipiac band called themselves “We, the surface dwelling people”. Their faith claimed animals, plants, rocks and trees as people too. This was their way of distinguishing themselves from others.

The English arrived in 1638 and treaties (covenants) were quickly begun regarding land and the fighting support for colonists battles. The Ist reservation in the New World was documented in 1658 with a 1200 acre parcel reserved for the Quinnipiacs and Mohegans’ ancestors. Familiar names to us - (now) political polling, enterprises and gambling casinos.

How times change! All was no sweetness and light. The Native Americans succumbed to an epidemic the Europeans brought with them, which wiped many of them out, Many Indians nations were forced into exile after they began the revolt against those Christians who were fervent in their desire to convert. Those who did not convert to Christianity when Rev. Elliott came along, and translated the Bible into Native American vernacular, and hoped they would join his “Praying Indians”, were either forced into hiding – in one rock shelter after another or were banished from the missionary camp to another. Later they split for Stockbridge, Mass and when that wasn’t safe to Oneida, NY and eventually to Wisconsin.

Take yourself back to American and European history. It all plays into our history here. I loved those classes; most of my friends didn’t. John Knox, the great Reformed Theologian, in his book, “The Reformation in Scotland”, outlined the entire process of government by which civil government could rule as long as the covenant between the civil government and the populace was working. Knox’s view was that when a magistrate defects from the covenant, it is the duty of the people to overthrow him.

King Charles I was a case in point. The English tyrant who had long persecuted the English Puritans by having their ears cut off and their noses slit for defying his attempts to force bishops on their churches, was finally defeated when the Puritans or “Roundheads” led a civil war against the king. (The king who had defected from the covenant.) Under the brilliant leadership of Cromwell and his galvanization of the farmers of England – Cromwell understood that successful revolutions were always fought by farmers - 1,000 hand picked Puritans, nicknamed “Ironsides”, the likes of which hadn’t been seen since ancient Israel.

They would recite the Westminster Confession of the Presbyterian Church and march into battle, singing the Psalms of David, striking terror into the hearts of the enemy. Cromwell’s army – they preached, prayed, paid fines for profanity and drunkenness, and charged the enemy singing hymns. Charles was tried for treason and beheaded for he brought in the Irish to fight. Cromwell ruled England for 15 years:

- **large tolerance for rival denominations, even Roman Catholic’s and Quakers.**
- **Ministers might be Presbyterian, Independent or Baptist**
- **He worked for reform of morals and education.**

The Puritan understanding, stemming from John Knox, of when a magistrate breaks covenant, he may be legitimately deposed, became the foundation for American colonial government.

The Pilgrims had a covenantal idea of the nature of civil government written in the Mayflower Compact. What Knox had done in Scotland and the Puritans in England became the foundation of life in the 1600’s when this church was founded in Huntington Long Island, New York.

To the natives Long Island was first called the “Isle of Shells”, or “Land of Shells, Sewan-hacca”. Delaware tongue hacca – land and sewan- shell. The natives fished and shelled the region and used their piles of shells left on the banks as their wampum. Long Island was settled just as New England. The original settlers were principally English, Independents or Presbyterians. Names they were commonly called because of their opposition to Bishops and the liturgy, non conformists because of opposition to liturgy, and Puritans due to their strictness in religion and morals:

- They recognized no other officers than Pastors. Elders, Deacons.
- Scriptural simplicity in worship
- the right of the people not to be taxed without representation.

Their ideas and ideals helped found a government “of the people, by the people and for the people.” To these refugees from the tyranny of the established Church of England:

- finding repugnance in arbitrary rule
- respected for their intelligence, education, morality and property.
- clear comprehension of the rights of men and of conscience.
- filled with energy and courage, necessary to vindicate those rights.

... came one Rev. William Leverich, a native of England, having taken a degree at Cambridge in 1625. Perhaps he was born in 1605, and was a parish priest in the Church of England, an able and worthy man, who in 1642 was present in Plymouth, Mass, one of many priests (Puritan M.....) who fled England – so hunted from one diocese to another and at last chose this wilderness as their retreat. “The learned and Reverend William Leveridge - “his descendents need wish for no better ancestry.”

“He was an uncommonly intelligent, learned and useful man, well versed in public business and remarkable for his energy and perseverance” (good character description for our PNC) . Whether Mr. Leverichs was silenced in England or he voluntarily left his parish in England, his sympathies were with the Puritans.

In 1623 a Mr. Land was made archbishop or premier in England and Leverich turned his face to the New World, despairing of better times in England. Mr Leverich pastored in Dover, N.H. for one and a half years, but left there for a better pay, then on to Sandwich, Mass., to a newly founded church, ...finding a number of native Americas in the vicinity, he devoted much time to instructing them.

Two years later in 1653 Mr. Leverich came to Long Island to be a missionary to the natives - five years – receiving a small sum of money for his services. Thirteen tribes on Long Island all spoke dialects of the Delaware language and were subordinate to Wyandanch, the Grand Sachem of Montauk.

The tribe in this area – from Flushing to Huntington were the Matinecocs. He turned his attention to their living conditions. He visited and explored with a company of about a dozen people, who had been parishioners in Sandwich. He explored the regions of Oyster Bay and Huntington. Mr. Leverich was captivated by the area and he himself bought large

tracts of land with a view to form a new settlement. He was to be transferred to the East End to continue ministry within the tribes but decided to stay put here. Shifting from missionary endeavors to pastor. In 1658 he consented to become a minister in Huntington. He was paid by the town for his services, as was the protocol – not dollars but wheat, corn, bacon or cattle.

They gave to him and the church all the meadow about Cow Harbor (Northport to Huntington) so long as he should continue as minister. Ministers were sometimes paid in land, adding a little more to their holding each year, 100 acres, 200 acres. He erected a Grist Mill in Huntington, the first mill of the kind, on the stream that runs through the town in 1658, which indicates he was a man of some means. In 1666 he was listed as one of eight people who had purchased the land of Huntington. Huntington was now a recognized town.

Early records of the church are absent until written records in 1725 when Mr. Prime wrote accounts - the organization of a church, the settlement of a pastor. They go hand in hand. This would give the year 1658 as the start of this church. For seven years there was no church building. There was a school house and most probably the congregation met there, as did the town for meetings. The congregation was Congregational.

The First church was erected in 1665 – most probably small as Hempstead's – the 2Nd church was built in 1677, was 40 feet by 26 feet and 12 feet high. Congregations were small and the buildings accommodated.

The original building in Huntington lasted for fifty years until 1715 – when a new church was erected on the present site and was furnished with a bell, the wonder of its day. This lasted for 67 years until 1782 when it was demolished by the British. After the Revolution the present building came to be.

Mr. Leverichs was 53 when he began at the church and stayed for eleven years.

One last point. The origin of the name Huntington is shrouded in uncertainty:

- Perhaps, because it was country, deer abounded and there was much hunting.
- Or maybe because the early settlers were from England and they duplicated the names of the towns there
- Or as Huntington is the birthplace and residence in England of Cromwell, Lord Protector of England who died in 1658, they named it to recall his great acts of religious tolerance and military might against the leaders, who oppressed many for their beliefs. And broke the covenant between the people and magistrate.

Huntington and Oyster Bay were settled by the same company of which Mr. Leverich was the head.

For Huntington six square miles - Northport to Cold Spring Harbor – consented to be sold by the native Americans for 6 coats, 6 bottles, 6 hatchets, 6 shovels, 10 knives, 6 fathoms of wampum, 30 set-spears, 30 needles.

Hebrews 12:1 – We will continue the next strands on the beliefs and history of this church next month.

Source for Old First Church history:

**“Historical Discourse on the Be-centennial Commemoration”, Rev. Robert Davidson D.D.
11/19/1865**