

Early Dates for the Colebrook Congregational Church

Here are the bare-bones facts concerning early dates concerning matters of religion as practiced in Colebrook, Connecticut. We do not have to define what denomination we are talking about here, as the founding fathers were all descendants of the Puritans, and their philosophy has descended in a straight line culminating with the denominational nomenclature of "Congregational". In the words of the Windsor Proprietors, written in 1760, land must be set aside for several purposes; a lot for the support of schools, a plot for a parade ground, a plot for the personal use in perpetuity for the first Orthodox Minister (these underlined words were written 2 ½ times larger than all the rest of the text in the document) to be installed in the town.

The first record of holding religious services in Colebrook was at the adjourned second town meeting on April 10, 1780, at Capt. Samuel Rockwell's house, at which the captain was moderator. At this meeting a committee was appointed to "hier" preaching for the ensuing year. It was voted that the committee hire not exceeding 20 Sabbaths preaching in Colebrook the present year and all the just cost of preaching, boarding, etc., to be charged by them to the town.

The records show that a vote was taken the next winter (1781) providing for the payment to the Rev. Samuel John Mills, known as Father Mills, for preaching in 1778. He had been pastor at Tarringford since 1769. Colebrook people had been attending church services at Norfolk, six miles away, this church being the nearest. Reverend Ammi Ruhamah Robbins, a Chaplin in the Revolutionary War, had been pastor at Norfolk since 1761. It was also voted that Capt. Rockwell be an agent for the town to apply to the General Assembly in October 1781 in order to keep off a state tax if possible. This shows they were acting cautiously in the matter of expense and did not want a burden on their hands in holding religious services, as they had to provide for a meeting house as well as a minister.

At this same time period (1780), the first of many attempts was made to establish a location for the meetinghouse; this was to span a period of some 16 years.

While the controversy was ongoing, affairs in the church and community had not stood still, for at the meeting in August 1782, a tax of one pence on the pound was voted to procure a singing master in the fall or winter "in order to instruct the inhabitants of the town in the art of singing". A committee was formed "to collect and account for the penny tax and to manage the prudentials of the singing school."

At the same meeting a committee was chosen to apply to Rev. Roswell Cook to preach in Colebrook the next summer, "with a view to settle with us as a gospel minister if we can agree". Rev. Cook was a 1777 graduate of Yale College. He may have preached in Colebrook in the summer of 1783, but he did not settle here, but chose Montville, near New London in 1784.

At a meeting held on December 1, 1783, Eleazer Bidwell was empowered to draw three pounds out of the treasury to be paid out of Capt. Pinney's rate bill and to be laid out for the encouragement of singing this winter." Six Sabbaths preaching was authorized that winter and fifteen Sabbaths for the summer of 1784.

The first application for a preacher that summer was made to Abraham Fowler. There were 48 families in Colebrook at this time, and a logical question arises as to just where these worshipers met during this time period. It is true that several families went

to services in Norfolk, but the persistence with which committees sought to encourage a preacher to settle in town indicates they were meeting somewhere. There were two or three fairly large houses along what we today call Smith Hill, but in Colebrook Center there was only one residence; Samuel Rockwell's house at 561 Colebrook Road. Only the central portion would have been usable, as the larger section nearest the road wasn't built until 1796. We know that several of the first town meetings were held at this house, so it is not unreasonable to suppose that religious services (and singing) could have been conducted there as well.

To sum up, the town voted to pay Rev. Samuel John Mills for preaching in Colebrook in 1778, one year before Colebrook was organized into an official township. From that date onward there is evidence of religious activity, for example the singing master and the hiring of Rev. Roswell Cook in 1784.

This 1778 date is the earliest that we have documented proof of religious services that were provided by an ordained minister to the residents of Colebrook.

Respectfully submitted, Robert Grigg, Colebrook Town Historian, Nov. 6, 2006.