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Newport

Newport is a city rich in Congregational history, and this church at the corner of Spring and Pelham streets has played an important part in that history.

Congregationalism on Aquidneck Island began in 1638 when Anne Hutchinson, banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for "troubling the churches" with her different beliefs, settled with about 70 others the town of Pocasset (now Portsmouth) on the northern tip of the island. It was they who chose the English name "Rhode Island." In 1639, this group divided, with a portion moving south to establish the town of Newport.

A sign on our church states: "gathered in 1695." It was in that year that the Congregationalists in Massachusetts, concerned about the well-being of the Rhode Islanders, sent to Newport a missionary, Mr. Nathaniel Clap, a recent Harvard graduate, to set about "Evangelizing the Paganizing and Perishing Plantations" to the south of Massachusetts. ([Back to Top](#))

The Reverend Mr. Clap

The Reverend Mr. Clap preached in Newport for 50 years, until his death in 1745. His small congregation built a church edifice on Tanner Street, now Dr. Marcus F. Wheatland Boulevard (formerly West Broadway), near Tilden Avenue. Unfortunately, Mr. Clap's ministry was not without its problems. In 1724, he surprised everyone by refusing to administer the Lord's Supper to the congregation, apparently because in his judgment, the church members were not Christian enough to engage in so holy an act. As a consequence, about half the congregation withdrew to form the Second Congregational Church.

Those remaining with Mr. Clap eventually built, in 1729, the First Congregational Church on Mill Street, a plain rectangular building with arched windows, a steeple and belfry, and a gallery around the inside. During the American Revolution, when the British occupied Newport, a British regiment was quartered there. During the pastorate of its famous minister, the Reverend Samuel Hopkins (1770-1803), one of the most historic votes in the history of American Congregationalism took place - not to tolerate slavery. This was the first individual congregation in the nation to vote that one could not own a slave and be a church member.

In 1735, the group, which seceded from Clap's original congregation, built the Second Congregational Church on Clarke Street. In style it was similar to that of the First Church. Across the street at No. 14 lived one of its famous ministers, Dr. Ezra Stiles, who officiated at the Second Church from 1755 until the congregation was forced to flee during the British occupation in

December 1776. Stiles was a noted astronomer, philosopher, linguist and diarist who became president of Yale University. ([Back to Top](#))

The American Revolution

During the Revolution, both churches, the First and the Second, were used either by the British or by the French as barracks or hospitals, and the ministers of both churches were forced to leave Newport. It was a woman, Sarah Haggar Wheaton Osborn, who kept the Congregational spirit alive during that difficult period. Sarah Haggar was born in 1714 in London and moved with her family to New England in 1722. At age 18, she married a sailor, Samuel Wheaton, who died at sea two years later. In Newport, at this time, as in other parts of the country, there was the beginning of revival of religious feeling which continued through the middle of the 18th century and became known as the "Great Awakening." Under this influence, Sarah was asked by a "number of young women" to form a female society. So it was that in 1741 the female society of the First Congregational Church was born. She also established a school which she operated for over forty years. Her first mentor was, of course, Nathaniel Clap; her second was Samuel Hopkins, who was installed in the First Church in 1770. Sarah ran her school and held meetings in her house on Osborn Court, off Church Street. Her residence was "spared destruction" and "in that home was held weekly prayer meetings of the Congregational body" of Newport.

The Revolution left Newport depressed economically and the two churches were not immune to this situation. They finally decided to unite in 1833, forming the "United Congregational Church of Newport," and in 1834 at Spring and Pelham, dedicated the new church, a wooden structure in "somewhat the lines of a Grecian temple, with a row of pillars in front." The congregation prospered and grew until it was decided that a "larger church accommodation" would be desirable. The old meeting house was removed to the southwest corner of Corne and Mill Streets, and on December 5, 1855, the corner-stone of a new building was laid. This present house of worship was dedicated on January 15, 1857. Its architect was Joseph Wells of New York. Constructed of Connecticut sandstone, in a style which is a cross between Romanesque and Byzantine, the church has 154 pews and can seat more than 1,000 people. It cost about \$30,000.00 to build. The pipe organ is an 1866 Hook & Hastings. ([Back to Top](#))

Reverend Henry van Dyke & John La Farge

During the pastorate of Henry van Dyke (1879-1882), the entire interior of the church was decorated by the famous artist, John La Farge. In painting the interior, he paid "great attention to a local feeling which opposed ecclesiastical adornments, so that the artistic problem there carried out was that of giving a church effect without recalling any traditional motives or symbolism." The first to use opalescent glass to construct stained-glass windows of an artistic kind, La Farge furnished all of the church windows, some of which were severely damaged during a violent hailstorm on July 14, 1894. They were repaired by the Providence Metallic Setting Company. The church has the distinction of being the only surviving church with a comprehensive interior decorative scheme by John La Farge. ([Back to Top](#))

Congregationalism in Newport (1893-1896)

The major part of the foregoing history has been taken from an account of Congregationalism in Newport by the Reverend Mr. R. W. Wallace, a series of sermons which he gave in October 1895, to celebrate the 200th anniversary of this denomination in this city. At the time of his pastorate (1893-1896), the church roll contained 312 names, the Sunday School had 24 classes with a total of 226 members, there was a Women's Foreign Missionary Society, a Ladies' Benevolent Society, a Senior Christian Endeavor Society, and a Junior Christian Endeavor Society.

The property of the church consisted of the church building and the chapel beside it, the parsonage on Bull Street and three houses known as the Osborn property. ([Back to Top](#))

The Next 50 Years

The next fifty years of the church's history are covered by sermons preached by the Reverend Mr. Carl Brenton Bare in October, 1945. Mr. Bare served the church until 1959. As he recorded, when the new century dawned, the church was lit with gas, the organ was operated by an "ancient water motor," there was no parish house (only the small chapel at the rear, "heated by hot air,") and when church business was transacted, only men could vote.

During the Reverend Mr. T. Calvin McClelland's pastorate (1897-1905), which followed Wallace, there were many changes. The La Farge frescoes were restored in 1903, steam heat was put into the chapel, the parsonage on Bull Street was sold for \$8,200. Furthermore, a plaque in the sanctuary of the church informs us that "The apparatus for lighting the church with electricity was installed in loving memory of John Bigley Newton, January 1902." In addition to the electricity, John Bigley Newton's sister, Miss Caroline Newton, the donor, at the same time donated the beautiful "pendant" Tiffany lantern over the pulpit, also in honor of her brother. (There is evidence that electricity was already in partial use before 1902. A note in the church minutes of March 3, 1897 advises that "*a proposition to put in the electric wires, switches and lights in the vestry, at an expense of Thirty-five dollars shall be accepted and that a light be carried to the pulpit as the pastor shall direct, at an extra charge.*")([Back to Top](#))

The Parish House

The most memorable event of the next pastorate was the erection of the Parish House in 1908, having a common wall with the sanctuary, at a cost of \$14,422. Two other striking changes occurred not long afterwards: "*The ancient and undemocratic system of rented pews was abolished*" and at an annual meeting in 1917, it was voted that at least three of the nine deacons should be women.

In 1921, the Hook & Hastings organ, built in 1866, was thoroughly overhauled, a new console installed, and the old water-motor replaced by an electric motor. According to Mr. Bare, however, during the '20s and '30s, the church seemed to be always in debt, so that by June, 1940, there was some question about its continuing to operate. Nevertheless, heroic efforts were made to pay off debts, repairs were made on the church building (which had suffered damage during the 1938 hurricane losing the spires on the towers), and by the 250th anniversary in 1945, church services, which for a time had been taking place in the Parish House to save fuel, were again being held in the sanctuary. ([Back to Top](#))

1959-1972

Two pastors, the Reverend Mr. Theodore M. Atkinson and the Reverend Mr. John W. Dorney, occupied the pulpit from 1959-1972. In 1970, Mr. Dorney wrote another short history of the church, starting where Mr. Bare left off in 1945 and bringing it up to date. He concluded his account with a list of situations and events in 1970, "our 275th year", among which he mentioned: the war in Viet Nam, racial unrest, riots in the colleges by radical groups, a Republican president (Nixon) with a Democratic Congress, upheavals in the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches. Mr. Dorney's interest in history also led to the vote taken on May 15, 1964 to adopt the motto: "Church of the Patriots". ([Back to Top](#))

1975: Buildings are sold

Mr. Dorney may or may not have been aware of an impending "upheaval" in his own church, but such was the case. Sentiment had been gathering in the congregation for a move out of the city, motivated principally by the difficulty of maintaining the large and expensive church building. In 1975, this sentiment reached a climax when a vote was taken to sell the building at Spring and Pelham Streets and move the congregation to Middletown, where a new edifice was built on Valley Road. The vote, however, was not unanimous, with a small group of people electing to stay in Newport. This group managed to keep the "stone church" functioning, not missing a single Sunday. For a long time, the congregation was under the leadership of the Reverend Mr. J. Wesley Prince, who commuted every Sunday from Providence. ([Back to Top](#))

Buildings Repurchased

In 1979, an important step in the on-going restoration of church functions was taken when the sanctuary was bought back from its owner. In 1987, the Reverend Mr. John Wilson, was called as Pastor and finally in 1992, the congregation re-acquired the Parish House. Following Mr. Wilson's departure in March 1993, the Reverend Terry Fitzgerald served as Interim Minister. It was during this time that the church, harking back to its anti-slavery heritage, voted to declare itself "Open and Affirming," which means that the church welcomes everyone regardless of sexual orientation.

In due course, the Reverend Ms. Lark d'Helen was called and installed as Pastor on January 21, 1995, in a colorful ceremony, marking the beginning of our 300th year. Participating in the ceremony were the United Congregational Church of Middletown and numerous clergy and friends of the congregation.

In addition to restoring relations with the United Congregational Church, our church, under the guidance of Rev. d'Helen, identified itself as "an inclusive, life-loving congregation." The symbol of the multicolored flame represents the congregation's determination to allow the grace of the Holy Spirit to direct its paths as it searches for justice, truth, acceptance and love in today's world.

Following the departure of Ms. d'Helen, the Reverend Nan L Baker and the Reverend MaryBeth Hayes are called as Interim Ministers in March of 2001. Rev. Hayes is the executive director of the Interfaith Healthcare Ministries. Rev. Baker is a clinical psychologist in pastoral counseling. Both believe in the education of pastors of all faiths.

It should be mentioned, too, that a foundation, The La Farge Restoration Fund at Newport Congregational Church, was established in 1996 for the restoration of the La Farge artwork. The foundation is separate from the congregation and has already begun the tasks of raising funds and determining restoration priorities. Please view the La Farge page for more details.

[A Short History of Newport Congregational Church has been adapted, in part, from A Brief Walking Tour of Congregational History in Newport by Rev. John W. Wilson, and with grateful acknowledgment to Forward through the Ages, in Unbroken Line: 300 Years of Congregationalism on Aquidneck Island, 1695-1995 by Florence Archambault.] ([Back to Top](#))