

Church History

Information for this historical piece, was taken from the church bulletin notes of the “Sesqui-Centennial Celebration” service, October 4, 1953, “Gathered sketches” prepared by Edmund Steele in approximately 1985, A Centennial History of St. Albans, by Henry K. Adams, in 1989, and other notes and church documents, compiled and submitted here, by Linda D. Smith, and Wade A. Smith, church Co-Historians.

THE STORY OF THE FOUNDING OF “THE FIRST CHURCH OF CHRIST,” LATER CHARTERED AS “THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF ST. ALBANS, VERMONT.”

According to Henry Adams’ *A Centennial History of St. Albans*, in the early beginnings of St. Albans, our town was a part of Iroquoisia, but no evidence has been discovered of the territory known as St. Albans being the abiding place of the Indians for any length of time. When an early settler did locate on Weeks farm, he noted that east of his place, there was a tribe of St. Francis Indians. They were previously called the Abnenaquis – a branch of one of the six nations constituted the Great Confederacy, known as Iroquoisia. These tribes were constantly at war with each other. This tribe continued to live in various parts of the state and county until about 1760, when the black measles so depleted their numbers, they fled to their capital, “The Village of St. Francis,” named after the founder of the Franciscans, missionaries who visited the region.

As early as 1535, Jacques Cartier claimed what comprises our part of the state and Canada for France, whose monarch appointed Jean Francois de la Roque as Viceroy. In 1603, Henry the 4th made Samuel Champlain the Lieutenant-General of the area, from Philadelphia to Montreal. He allied himself with the Hurons and explored the regions around the lake, whose name was then Lake Incroisia, later to be known as Mere des Iroquis, then Petonbonque, then Caniaderi Guarunti “the lake of the country,” and finally, Lake Champlain.

The areas that now constitute St. Albans, Swanton, Highgate and Georgia were formed, as in Canada, into French Seignories, St. Albans being known as LaDouville, which included the western part of Swanton and Georgia. Continuing to quote Mr. Adams, until the English obtained “mastership,” our town was included in what was known as the New Hampshire grants, and was chartered in 1763, by Benning Wentworth, the Royal Governor of New Hampshire, into seventy shares. No one took possession. St. Albans, as a part of New Connecticut, alias, Vermont, declared her independence in 1777. It is said that our state was either named by the Reverend Mr. Peters, the first clergyman who ever visited the Green Mountains, who derived the name, from the two words, “verd” and “mont,” meaning “green” and “mountain,” or that it was named by the Abbe de Vermont, reader to the Queen of France in the 16th Century.

After being claimed by the French and English, and later, by the states of New Hampshire, New York, Connecticut and Massachusetts, Vermont was admitted into the Union in 1791, as her own state entity.

The first known settler was Jesse Welden, a half breed Indian, from Connecticut, to Sunderland, VT and then to Balle Isand, later known as Bald Island, in 1774. Afterwards, he moved to our St. Albans Bay. Two other settlers came that same season. At the beginning of the Revolution, Mr. Weldon moved back to Balle Island where he was captured and held prisoner by the British. Appearing before "the Council of Safety" in Bennington, VT. He acquired permission to hunt in northern Vermont, and later, to return to his home at the Bay.

In 1786, Mr. Welden cleared about seventy acres and built a log house.. In 1787 he moved again, near the home of H. M. Stevens, in whose home, on July 28th, 1788, a meeting was held and the town was organized. Mr. Welden continued to live there holding various town offices until he drowned in 1795, when returning from Plattsburg in a log canoe. His body was found the following spring. He was buried on Isle LaMotte, famous not only as the burial place of our first settler, but as the location of the ancient fort of St. Anne, predating all other settlements in Vermont, by 50 years.

The town was visited by Jesuit missionaries, who were encouraged to continue their travels. The first to "hold public divine service," according to the notes of the First Congregational Sesqui-Centennial Service Anniversary" bulletin, was Reverend Elijah Hedding, who only remained in town for a few months. Lorenzo Dow also came for a short time. The missionaries and preachers were not well received by the settlers, who were more concerned with their daily tasks of maintaining their existence. In 1792, Reverend Ebenezer Hibbard, a Congregational Minister, came to work among the settlers as parson and school teacher for about two years. In 1795, Reverend A. Ross, "a man of good intentions, but not overstocked with understanding," came to town. According to Henry Adams, when he came to town to hold a service, there more men and boys chasing squirrels around the stumps on the common, than were inside worshipping.

On September 6, 1796, at the town meeting, Jonnathan Hoit, Levi House and David Nicholls were appointed a committee to procure a minister for three months, who, after consulting with the Reverend, Aaron Collins, another meeting was called, when it was voted to raise eight dollars on the grand list. At this meeting a committee was appointed to select a lot for a meeting house, but the town never voted to build a Congregational Meeting House on our grand list. On March 7th, 1799, a town meeting was held, as stated by Edmund Steele, in "Gathered Sketches." It was voted at that meeting, "to support the gospel." A committee was appointed to hire a minister with a view of settling. In May, 1801, it was again voted to hire a minister, and that a tax of two cents on the dollars be raised to pay a minister one year; he was to preach one-third of the time at the Bay and two-thirds in the village. Also, in 1799, Taylor Park and Main Street were surveyed. Taylor Park was a gift to St. Albans from Halloway Taylor. It was deeded to St. Albans for community gatherings. It was then called "The Square," or "The Green." In 1870, it was officially named, "Taylor Park." It originally extended beyond Bank and Fairfield Streets. Main Street was the only public thoroughfare. Surveyors set aside lots one the east side for public buildings, from that acreage. The green was little more than an open square. Horse teams drove across int every direction to tramp it down. Around 1850, it was fenced and the park was planned by Marshall Mason. The "Lady Fountain" was a gift from the Honorable John Gregory Smith, Descendant of the St. Albans pioneer family. He was a banker and the President of the Railroad. He was Vermont's Governor during the Civil War.

The first Streets were Main St., Lake St., and Fairfield St. a third road extended from Fairfield St., on the east side of the "Green." It was called "Church St., because of the 3 church located on it.

In 1802, thirty-five dollars was voted to pay Reverend Dickinson for his year's services. That year, Reverend Joel Foster came to town. The town voted to pay him a salary of \$500.00 a year, and requested that he deed to the town the minister's lot. He, however, was not the first settled minister, and his year was not completed. It was through his influence and energies, that the church became "organized."

The church was organized January 2nd, 1803, being known as "The First Church of Christ," consisting of nine members (six men and three women). Meetings were held, according to Mr. Steele, at irregular intervals, in the homes of Colonal Holoway Taylor, Samuel Smith, Silas Hathaway and others, and then at he new court house on the public square, that became known as Taylor Park. The church depended upon visiting preachers and neighboring ministers, Reverend Benjamin Wooster or Fairfield, and Reverend Publius Virgilius Bogue of Georgia. A list of the church's Ministers and Interim Ministers can be found on this website. This brief history, will make mention of a few.

St. Albans Bay was active as a steamboat site. "Champlain Transportation," with President, Lawrence Brainerd operated a line from St. Albans Bay, to Burlington. The "St. Albans Repertory" newspaper was the new circulation of the time, which was edited and printed by Juduthan Spooner, in his basement.

About two years later, the Reverend Jonathan Nye, then twenty-two years of age, was ordained March 5, 1805. His ordination was opposed by some of the stronger Calvinistic Congregationalist clergymen, who composed the council, but he was eloquent and talented and his unorthodox creed and style was overlooked, and the Congregational Church began with a Unitarian Pastor.

After the comings and goings of several pastors, it became necessary to dedicate energy toward "adopting rules of Christian behavior," and finding a church building in which to worship. With Reverend Worthington Smith of Hadley, Massachusetts, the strength of youth and passion from the pulpit, that plan began. Mr. Steele writes, "Next to the court house, on the public green, was a vacant lot owned by Isaiah Thomas of Worcester, Massachusetts, the famous printer and publisher. On this lot, measuring 70' X 110', was a large, square house, built in 1796 by Dr. Willian Coit, later occupied by Thomas' daughter, Mary Ann and son-in-law, Dr. Levi Simmons. The church bought it and Thomas recorded in his diary, 'August 9, 1825. Sold a small lot of land in St. Albans, Vt. whereon to build a church, for 300 dollars.'



On this lot was built a modest brick church having a spire and a fish weathervane. It was built in 1826, and the following year the church voted ‘to provide seats in the meeting house for the poor members of the church who are not able to purchase or rent pews.’ Rev. Worthington rejected offers from UVM for the Presidency, but finally accepted in 1849, and left St. Albans.”

In 1840, planning began for a railroad. In October of 1850, the first train arrived.

The church built a second building, located northeast of the Baptist Church on Congress Street, for “Sabbath School,” social gatherings, and meetings of the Bible Society.

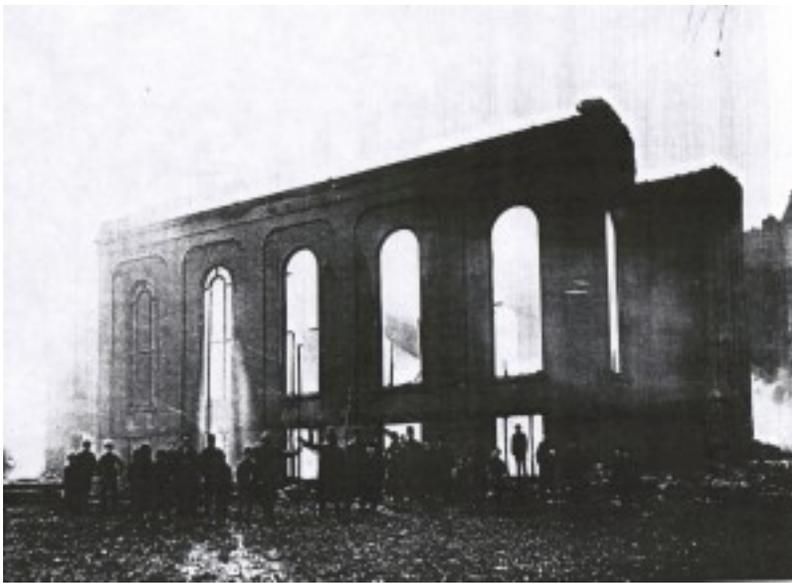
With increased membership, it became evident that a larger place to worship was needed.



The church, according to Mr. Steele, “extended its land north to Bank Street by purchasing the adjoining lot and moving the house that was on it, up Bank Street to where the current parsonage stands. The new church building, of ‘more modern architecture,’ was constructed in the Civil War years 1862-63 at a cost of \$26,000. Frank Greene’s 1891 history says, ‘The ladies of the congregation contributed to its interior furnishings, and many recall today the hopes and prayers for the safety of loved ones at the war front, which were ever present in their work, and the tears which retarded the progress of the needle.’” During the tenure of Reverend Jeremiah E. Rankin, the church became involved in the “Underground Railroad,” with the assistance of Ezra Byington, the Hoit family, the Honorable Senator Lawrence Brainerd and his family, including his daughter Ann Eliza Brainerd Smith and her husband, Governor John Gregory Smith, to assist those who were fleeing slavery.

The church continued to prosper and grow. Money was raised and donations received to build a choir loft, pastor’s study, organ loft and classroom. A significant donation was received from the Honorable Judge J. Gregory Smith, which enabled this work to be done. As historian, Alfred Dutcher wrote, “Through the unmistakable hand of Providence, the Reverend D. Sage MacKay was brought to the pulpit of this church.” Not yet ordained, and just off the boat from Glasgow, he was “full of youthful enthusiasm and fairly captivated the people.” He was installed and church attendance boasted approximately 450 people Sunday morning and 375 to 400 each Sunday evening.

On November 26, 1891, tragedy struck the church building, when, on that windy night flying, burning embers from a disastrous fire on Main Street, settled on the church roof, igniting the building, reducing it to ashes.



Only a few items could be restored in the ashes, such as the existing marble baptismal font, the black oak table currently in the Narthex, and a charred key to the main door. Religious services were then held in various places in the town. Some church members thought that the membership would decline, but, in fact, the opposite resulted. The congregation, united in setting its goal to build a bigger and better church building, free from debt, and this was accomplished. The church edifice cost 47,000.00. The ladies of the church supplied the furnishings for the interior, totally 13,000.00. The total cost was \$60,000, including the organ and the furnishings. The architect was R. H. Robertson of New York. The contract was let to E.M. Prouty of Swanton, August 13, 1892 and work began about the middle of the following September. The mason work was done by George Sweeny, the frescoing by C.J. Shumaker & Sons of Boston. R.D. Ireland of Boston supplied the gas and electrical fixtures, S.C. Greene the plumbing and heating apparatus, the Manitowoc Seating Company the pews, and the bell came from the Kneely foundry at Troy, New York.

The building is brick, elaborately trimmed with terra cotta. Similarities in the “Eclectic Romanesque” style of this church building, the Webb family mansion in Shelburne, and various railroad buildings such as the Central Vermont headquarters building on Lake Street in St. Albans are more than coincidental. According to tradition, the angel heads adorning the beams in the Sanctuary were carved by a resident of St. Albans who was a railway employee.

It is also interesting that the building, when erected in 1894, had both electric and gas lamps, showing that St. Albans was right up with the times, but that electricity was not yet dependable enough to be the only source of power.

The Tiffany windows on the south side were memorials to Governor John Gregory Smith and his wife, Ann Eliza Brainerd Smith, given by the family. The Lamb Studio windows on the north

and east sides were also memorials. Details on these windows can be found on this website. The building became a place for many to place their marks. The railroad man, skilled in carving, carved the angels into the ceiling beams, Margaretta Overbrook, from the Lamb Studio in New Hampshire used her fingertips to embellish the choir loft window, gifts were made, such as the hand carved altar table, and the Last Supper sculpture that came from Italy, and so the building stands, a product of many hands in work and love.

The Clock became the community clock, tolling the hour, being hand wound every 7 days. The Neely Bell provided notice to the town of not only the hours, but of deaths in the community. A toll of 3X3 indicated a male, 2X3 indicated a female, and a toll of 2X2 indicated a death of a child. A window was opened in the tower, to indicate the direction of the mourning family: north, south, east, or west.

The renovations and additions through the years have taken place, always adhering to the historic character of the original architecture. The Sanctuary was renovated in 1921 with the present center aisle, replacing two radiating side aisles to accommodate a wedding, for a Governor Smith daughter. The beautiful center aisle arrangement plus a subsequent enlargement and brightening of the chancel area in 1962 has made the church a favorite spot for weddings.

The church building is listed on both the State of Vermont and the Federal historic registries.



In the 1950s, work was begun, adding a Sunday School wing and refurbishing the church kitchen.



During the construction, it was discovered that the old Manse house was in serious structural deterioration. It was determined that the house should be demolished. The contractor/builder of the Sunday School project gave the Trustees a reasonable cost estimate for a new Manse and so, the two projects were completed.



In 1990, work was done on the drainage area around the church and the foundation, and a handicap, covered entrance was designed and built at the south west corner of the building. Architect and project manager was Wade Smith, church member.

That building, “The First Congregational Church of St. Albans,” located at 27 Church Street in St. Albans, Vermont, erected in 1892, still stands and is active today, with a membership of over 100 people. Much work has been done by many hands. The tower clock has been repaired and restored. A grand piano has been purchased by donations from almost every church member. The building itself has benefitted from working hands and hearts.

The church services are recorded for airing over public access television, for the community’s involvement. The church has been the place for art, music, fellowship and prayer. All are welcome through the doors to visit, or to remain, as a part of a church family of over 200 years. It is the site for numerous community gatherings: community Action, Boy Scouts, various Community meetings, self help organizations, concerts, parenting and family groups. it is hoped that this church will continue to be a servant of the total community for another century or longer.

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