

First Parish Church in Plymouth, Massachusetts

by: Donna Petrangelo (June 2011)

The Pilgrim story is, of course, well-known throughout America and the world—how a small group seeking religious tolerance and freedom from persecution risked their lives in 1620 to journey across the Atlantic to the New World.

First Parish in Plymouth, Massachusetts, located at the foot of Burial Hill, directly traces its origins to these courageous settlers, who built their first humble dwellings on what later became known as Leyden Street. Dedicated as the National Memorial Pilgrim Church in 1899, the present First Parish Meetinghouse, the fifth meetinghouse on this site, was consciously designed as a testament to the courage and principles of the Pilgrims.

A plaque to the right of the First Parish's great doors proclaims:

THE CHURCH OF SCROOBY, LEYDEN, AND THE MAYFLOWER,
GATHERED ON THIS HILLSIDE IN 1620,
HAS EVER SINCE PRESERVED UNBROKEN RECORDS
AND MAINTAINED A CONTINUOUS MINISTRY,
ITS FIRST COVENANT BEING STILL THE BASIS OF ITS FELLOWSHIP.
IN REVERENT MEMORY OF ITS PILGRIM FOUNDERS
THIS FIFTH MEETING HOUSE WAS ERECTED A.D. MDCCCXCVII.

Due to the ravages of time, weather, and fire, the first four meetinghouses were razed or destroyed, as was the Pilgrims' "first public building to be erected . . . a large house, twenty-foot square, which was used for storage and public worship; but shortly after its completion, it took fire and was burnt to the ground."¹ Thanks to Isaack de Rasieres, who visited Plymouth in 1627 when employed by the Dutch West India Company, we know that the fort constructed on Burial Hill in 1622 also served as a place of worship. In a letter he describes it as "a large square house, with a flat roof, built of thick sawn planks stayed with oak beams, upon the top of which they have six cannon . . . The lower part they use for their church, where they preach on Sundays and the usual holidays."²

It is not, however, simply the physical link to these early Pilgrim structures that makes the present First Parish Meetinghouse a national treasure. The early settlers (the term Pilgrim only became popular in the late 1700s and was based on William Bradford's words "they knew they were pilgrims"),³ brought to these shores many principles and values that have become the foundation of many of our loftiest goals in America. John Cuckson, minister of First Parish from 1901-1910, concludes that "the translation of the Scriptures into the vernacular, and the slow dissemination of biblical knowledge among the people, had led independent and vigorous minds, to read and think for themselves and to study the Bible without gloss or comment. They brought to this study, an eager thirst for the truth, and an unwarped judgment, which no creed could inspire."⁴

In his foreword to *The Church of the Pilgrim Fathers*, George N. Marshall, who began his First Parish ministry in 1946, argues that "the Pilgrim and the Puritan did not become identical movements. The Puritans became conformists in religious doctrine and manners. The Pilgrims never sacrificed their individual rights. The Puritans rapidly became Calvinistic; the Pilgrims followed the liberal tradition of their first pastor, John Robinson . . . The history of their church

was to emphasize this liberality. The Pilgrims were stern, but also humane and generous. They allowed differences of theological opinion to exist, so long as moral conduct was maintained.”⁵

Perhaps it was the lack of what Bradford viewed as acceptable “moral conduct” that caused him to condemn the Strangers’ public Christmas revels in 1621. In *Mayflower*, Nathaniel Philbrick observes that “it seems never to have occurred to the Pilgrims that this was just the kind of intolerant attitude that had forced them to leave England. For them it was not a question of liberty and freedom . . . but rather a question of right and wrong.”⁶

Marshall feels that “the liberalism of the Pilgrim Pastor, John Robinson, culminated in broad tolerance. The Pilgrims of Plymouth were remarkable for their lack of witch-hunting, for their failure to follow the other New England colonies in their persecution of Quakers, for their willingness to allow a difference of theological opinion to exist among the members of the church and even between the church and its ministers.”⁷

First Church (later to become known as First Parish) was guided during its earliest years by elder William Brewster. Then, in 1629, Ralph Smith (having been rejected by Salem due to his liberal views) was accepted as the first “settled minister.”⁸ As the population increased and people began settling farther from the center of Plymouth, thus making it difficult to get to services, permission was granted to form new parishes. Marshall observes that “though Governor Bradford wrote despairingly of ‘this ppore church left like an ancient mother, growne olde, and forsaken of her children . . .’ as members withdrew to establish the distant settlements of Duxbury, Marshfield, and Eastham, the ‘poore mother’ continued and in time renewed herself.”⁹

It is interesting to note that during these early years, Plymouth’s First Church and the town were really one entity. Drawing on Bradford’s writings and on Plymouth’s early town records, Fred A. Jenks concludes that “as freedmen they taxed themselves to pay town charges to build and keep in repair a meetinghouse used for meetings of the townsmen and as a place to worship God.” This purpose was served first by the common house and then the fort “until 1637 when their first meetinghouse was built on common land on the north side of Town Square.”¹⁰

There is some debate, however, concerning the actual date of construction. According to Reverend Cuckson, “In 1648 the first church was built. It was situated behind Bradford’s lot, and facing Leyden St. . . .”¹¹ Built on common land, “the lot was actually carved out of the (Burial) hill.”¹² In the words of Arthur Whitney and George Marshall, it was “a square house of unpretentious lines. It obviously and significantly was a *house* of God, not a temple.”¹³

By the early 1680s this “meeting-house was falling to pieces through neglect and decay, and it was decided to build a new one, larger and handsomer than the last.”¹⁴ Under the leadership of John Cotton, minister from 1669-1697, “the second church was built, in 1683, on land granted by the town, substantially on the present site” at the top of Town Square.¹⁵ It is described by Cuckson as having ‘an unceiled Gothic roof, diamond glass, with a small cupola and bell.’¹⁶

The harsh New England elements again took their toll over the next half century, and by 1744 “the old meeting-house, which had stood for more than sixty years, resisting wind and weather, and a stroke of lightning, was in poor condition, and the society resolved to erect a new structure on the same spot.”¹⁷ According to Whitney and Marshall, “The third meetinghouse, built in 1744, was an attempted copy of a Boston church building. A graceful structure, it was the first real church, architecturally speaking. These churches all marked the plainness and simplicity of the people who built them.”¹⁸ It was at this point in time that the meetinghouse became a separate entity from the town. Having reviewed the town meeting records from July 2, 1744, Jenks concludes: “And now the First Church of Plymouth by grant of new land as well as the

land on which the old meetinghouse stands, is in possession of the land and the church structure as well.”¹⁹ “The separation from the town is complete.”²⁰

For over one hundred years the congregation of First Church had adhered to the early Pilgrim values, including tolerance of differing views. The church still “permitted ministers to vary in the administration of the sacraments, so long as there were clergymen to minister to those of different convictions. They asked ministers to agree to honor the contrary religious practices of members of the congregation.”²¹ However, when political differences of opinion ran high during the period of the American Revolution, Tories avoided services “because they claimed they ‘were treated with contempt’; a church meeting *did* vote ‘almost unanimously’ to bar Tories from Communion. At this time the venerable Plymouth Rock was dragged to Town Square and placed in front of the church.”²²

Dissent of a different nature also developed within the church during this period under the conservative ministry (1760-1799) of Chandler Robbins, who advocated a “Calvinistic Confession of Faith . . . in the shape of a creed, as a test to Christian Fellowship.” This idea caused much debate, since the Pilgrims and their church had never subscribed to any sort of creed.²³ Following the death of Robbins in 1799, “the more liberal views prevailed, and the church . . . invited Mr. James Kendall to become their pastor.”²⁴ Ordained Jan 1, 1800, he served until his death in 1869. Kendall was the “last settled minister of the whole town . . .”²⁵ because in 1801 fifty-three members of First Church petitioned to be allowed to withdraw from the parish in order to form a separate church. Their request was cordially granted by a unanimous vote,²⁶ and they formed what is now called The Church of the Pilgrimage.

Under Dr. Kendall’s ministry, the First Church gradually came to embrace Unitarianism, yet “at no point was there a break with one fellowship and the taking on of new associations. There is no vote that can be considered definitive unless it is the vote calling Rev. George Briggs (minister of Fall River’s First Unitarian Society) in 1838” to assist Dr. Kendall.²⁷

Also under Dr. Kendall’s ministry, a new meetinghouse was constructed in 1831 to replace the 1744 meetinghouse that had served the community for almost a century. In the view of Whitney and Marshall, “By the nineteenth century the New Englander was beginning to yearn for more elaborate church structures and he looked toward Europe, and particularly England for his models. They attempted in 1831 to build a church building which would bring beauty to the community and people.”²⁸ Designed by Boston’s George W. Brimmer,²⁹ this “‘Gothic’ wooden frame building”³⁰ served the congregation until November 22, 1892, when, sadly, the night before its scheduled rededication following renovations, the church burned to the ground. As the tower collapsed, the town bell, which had been cast by Paul Revere in 1801, fell to earth and cracked.

According to Cuckson, “There was universal sympathy with the parish . . . throughout New England” for “within its walls the voices of statesmen, poets, preachers, men of letters had been heard, men, who on special occasions, such as forefathers day, had delivered speeches and orations, in commemoration of historic events, of more than local interest. It was, moreover, the shrine of Pilgrim history, to which the faithful of our own land, and sympathetic visitors from abroad, gathered to do reverence to the only existing symbol of a great historic past.”³¹

As plans evolved to build a new meetinghouse, Pilgrim Society President Arthur Lord proclaimed: “The new church to be built in Plymouth upon the old site may well serve not merely the needs of a religious denomination, as a place of worship, but it should also stand as an enduring memorial of what the religious life of its founders has done for this nation, of the freedom which inspired the Pilgrims, of breadth of thought and toleration of expression which

characterized them, and of that right of individual judgment which marks the liberal in every age.”³²

Thanks to the generosity of many who responded to a nation-wide fund-raising campaign, the new meetinghouse was completed in 1897 and dedicated on December 21, 1899. Through its stone and glass, the Pilgrim story is told. Designed by Hartwell, Richardson, and Driver of Boston, Norman architecture was chosen for a variety of reasons, perhaps the most important being that it “was the architecture most familiar to the Pilgrims in England.”³³ In fact, the arched doorway is modeled after St. Helen’s church in Austerfield, England, where William Bradford was baptized.

Inside the entryway to First Parish, a stone tablet proclaims the 1676 covenant of the early congregation. “The occasion for the renewal of the covenant was the recommendation of the General Court in June of that year. The colony was then in the midst of King Philip’s War,” and the Court had recommended ““a day of Humiliation”” in order to strengthen the settlers’ resolve. According to the first volume of the Records, the church ““voted that it should be left upon record as that which they did owne to be the substance of that covenant which their fathers entered into at the first gathering of the church . . .”³⁴

A second tablet identifies the early parishes that grew from First Church in Plymouth: “First Church in Duxbury 1632; First Church in Marshfield 1632; First Church in Eastham 1646; First Church in Plympton 1698; First Church in Kingston 1717; Second Church in Plymouth 1738; Third Church in Plymouth 1801 now the Church of the Pilgrimage.”

On the two remaining tablets, homage is paid to ministers who served First Parish and to Elders William Brewster (1620-1644), Thomas Cushman (1649-1691), and Thomas Faunce (1699-1746). On the right-hand stairs leading to the sanctuary, a bronze plaque replica of the Mayflower Compact is framed.

It is the Meetinghouse’s stained glass windows, however, that capture the Pilgrim epic most vividly, especially those windows depicting mere mortals engaged in historic actions that have become an essential part of the mythic fabric of America. The sanctuary center chancel window entitled *Signing of the Compact* was a gift from the New York Society of Mayflower Descendants. Designed by Edward Peck Sperry and executed by Tiffany Studios, the window depicts the signing of what would become one of the most significant documents in American history.³⁵

George Marshall argues that “the Pilgrim tradition is the basis of our democratic culture in America. The *Mayflower Compact* was the original American instrument of democratic government. The town-meeting concept was established by the Pilgrim Fathers, as was the annual election of officers. They sought to establish religious freedom and safeguard it with civil liberty . . . If the Pilgrim colony at Plymouth had not become the core of the New England settlements . . . it is entirely probable that the colonization of America, and the type of settlements evolving, might have been organized in an undemocratic fashion, and hence shaped our heritage in a far different way.”³⁶

In “The Pilgrims and Early Plymouth,” Henry W. Royal argues that at this time “in no part of the world did there exist a government of just and equal laws . . . (The Pilgrims) promised obedience to the laws, for they realized that the consent of the governed is one of the essentials of a just government. This was to be proclaimed more than a hundred and fifty years later in the Declaration of Independence, as a self-evident truth, that all governments must derive ‘their just powers from the consent of the governed.’”³⁷

Boston Congregational minister George A. Gordon reinforced our indebtedness to these early Plymouth settlers, claiming: ““The Massachusetts Puritan . . . wanted everybody to think and worship as he did. So we do not get our principle of toleration from the Puritans, we do not get our witness for moral freedom from that source . . . But the Pilgrims are a different set of men . . . They started with a different idea—the idea of individualism . . . It is the Pilgrim, the Plymouth Pilgrim, who stands upon these shores in the midst of poverty and hardships of every kind as the majestic witness for the rights of the individual over against the might of the institution . . . his distinctive, original and immortal contribution to modern life, civic and religious, is as to the right of the individual man.””³⁸

Beneath the great hand-carved hammer-beams of the sanctuary, one is further reminded of Pilgrim history by the Meetinghouse pulpit, presented at the dedication by the John Howland Society. A plaque upon it reads: “In Loving Memory of John Howland and Elizabeth Tilley Howland his wife of the Mayflower. This pulpit is placed in the First Church in Plymouth by their descendents A.D. 1899.” To the left of the pulpit stands an elaborately carved baptismal pedestal, donated in 1918 by the New Jersey State Mayflower Society, and embedded in the Meetinghouse floor is a tile from the church in Delfshaven from which the Pilgrims departed, a gift from Senator George F. Hoar in 1896. An extract from the letter accompanying his donation reads: ““The stone sill or threshold of the church at Delft-Haven, where Robinson prayed with his flock just before they embarked and which was undoubtedly pressed by his feet and theirs, and was I suppose the last object now remaining which their feet touched before they went on board . . . ””³⁹

As stewards of the National Memorial Pilgrim Church, the First Parish congregation has embarked on a very challenging endeavor: the restoration of the present First Parish Meetinghouse. A recently completed structural survey, partially funded by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has identified restoration of the stone façade and the Tiffany stained glass windows as being essential to maintaining the historical and structural integrity of the building. The cost of this first phase is estimated to be one and a half million dollars.

Currently this building is maintained solely by members of First Parish, who number fewer than ninety families. While the Restoration Committee is pursuing grants and offering tours of the Meetinghouse in order to raise the necessary funds, we are also reaching out nation-wide for help in this huge endeavor, the estimated total cost of which is over three million dollars. Those individuals who wish to help First Parish continue to preserve this jewel in our nation’s heritage will find more information on our website at www.restorefirstparishplymouth.org.

As we approach the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrims’ landing, the words of former First Parish minister George N. Marshall still apply: “The church of the Pilgrim Fathers has continued from the earliest settlement to the present time, and flourishes still . . . It stands today, a mighty witness to the power of faith and to the Pilgrim spirit. On the slope of the hill where the Pilgrims first worshipped in that bleak December of 1620, in its fifth meeting house, its records unbroken, and its services continuous, the Plymouth Church stands, having spanned the turbulence of over three and a quarter centuries of social growth and upheaval . . . It is, today, the oldest organization of any kind in America.”⁴⁰

¹ John Cuckson, *A Brief History of the First Church in Plymouth, from 1606 to 1901* (Boston: George H. Ellis, Co., 1902), 30.

² James Deetz and Patricia Scott Deetz, *The Times of Their Lives* (New York: W. H. Freeman and Co., 2000), 72-3.

³ Deetz and Deetz, *The Times of Their Lives*, 10.

⁴ Cuckson, *A Brief History*, x.

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- ⁵ George N. Marshall, foreword to *The Church of the Pilgrim Fathers*, ed. George N. Marshall (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950), xix.
- ⁶ Philbrick, *Mayflower* (New York: Viking, 2006), 128-9.
- ⁷ Marshall, "The Historical Pilgrim Church and the Modern Witness," in *The Church of the Pilgrim Fathers*, ed. George N. Marshall (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950), 71.
- ⁸ Cuckson, *A Brief History*, 37.
- ⁹ Marshall, *The Church of the Pilgrim Fathers*, xx.
- ¹⁰ Fred A. Jenks, "Some Historical Notes on the First Church," in *The Church of the Pilgrim Fathers*, ed. George N. Marshall (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950), 113.
- ¹¹ Cuckson, *A Brief History*, 49.
- ¹² Arthur B. Whitney and George N. Marshall, "The National Memorial Pilgrim Church," in *The Church of the Pilgrim Fathers*, ed. George N. Marshall (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950), 90.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 86.
- ¹⁴ Cuckson, *A Brief History*, 59-60.
- ¹⁵ Arthur Lord, "The Pilgrims' Church in Plymouth," in *The Church of the Pilgrim Fathers*, ed. George N. Marshall (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950), 62.
- ¹⁶ Cuckson, *A Brief History*, 60.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.
- ¹⁸ Whitney and Marshall, "The National Memorial Pilgrim Church," 86.
- ¹⁹ Jenks, "Some Historical Notes," 123.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.
- ²¹ Marshall, *The Church of the Pilgrim Fathers*, xix.
- ²² Marshall, "The Historical Pilgrim Church," 70.
- ²³ Cuckson, *A Brief History*, 75.
- ²⁴ Lord, "The Pilgrims' Church," 63-4.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.
- ²⁶ Marshall, "The Historical Pilgrim Church," 73.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ²⁸ Whitney and Marshall, "The National Memorial Pilgrim Church," 86.
- ²⁹ Lord, "The Pilgrims' Church," 65.
- ³⁰ Whitney and Marshall, "The National Memorial Pilgrim Church," 87.
- ³¹ Cuckson, *A Brief History*, 101.
- ³² Whitney and Marshall, "The National Memorial Pilgrim Church," 89.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 91.
- ³⁴ Lord, "The Pilgrims' Church," 56.
- ³⁵ Whitney and Marshall, "The National Memorial Pilgrim Church," 96.
- ³⁶ Marshall, *The Church of the Pilgrim Fathers*, xvii.
- ³⁷ Henry W. Royal, "The Pilgrims and Early Plymouth," in *The Church of the Pilgrim Fathers*, ed. George N. Marshall (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950), 38.
- ³⁸ Marshall, "The Historical Pilgrim Church," 80-1.
- ³⁹ Whitney and Marshall, "The National Memorial Pilgrim Church," 95.
- ⁴⁰ Marshall, *The Church of the Pilgrim Fathers*, xx.