

Children's Play for 200th Anniversary of the Building of the Norwich Congregational Church

Narrator: Imagine Norwich in 1761. That was the year that Benning Wentworth, Royal Governor of the Province of New Hampshire, granted a charter to a group of people in Mansfield, Connecticut. At the time, there were no European settlers here: it was just a forest 200 miles away for the charter-holders. The following year, the French and Indian War ended, and the settlers felt that it was safe enough to travel up the Connecticut River. Land was cleared for a river landing, and the center of the settlement grew on the high land above the river.

For years, there was no meeting house or church. Settlers walked and took a ferry boat across the Connecticut River to Hanover. Then a congregation was gathered by Peter Powers in 1770, but they had no minister until August 31, 1775. His name was Reverend Lyman Potter, and first service took place outside, about a mile up Main Street from here. Reverend Potter was a farmer, and an army chaplain as well as a minister. Finally, in 1779, a meeting house was built.

Reverend Potter: (dressed in clerical garb, long flowing coat, 3-cornered hat):

It is good to have the War over. Now we finally are able to build our meeting house, with the last board nailed, the walls plastered, and the 40 pews installed. We are so grateful to God, and I pray that I will serve him well as I serve his children here in the wilderness. Here are some of them now.

1st Child: Is the meeting house finally finished? When do we get to come?

2nd Child: I'm glad we are building the meeting house here. It is so nice to see the hills and river but I don't know if I like having the graveyard near!

3rd Child: Do you think someday we will get a bell? I want to ring the bell sometime. But for a bell we need a steeple and this house has no steeple.

Rev. Potter: Be patient, be patient, my children. We are so fortunate to have a meeting house – the steeple and bell we will have to work for and maybe later they will come. Now sit down and tell me: have you been studying your Scripture lessons?

Children: Yes! Yes!

Rev. Potter: Let's see what you remember. What did you read about the teachings of Jesus?

1st Child: Well, he taught us we should love or care about our neighbor as we do ourselves.

2nd Child: That's why we helped neighbor Hatch build his barn last week.

3rd Child: Yes, and also the Smith family took care of us when we were sick with the fever.

Rev. Potter: Jamie, your class talked about Proverbs last Sunday. What did you learn?

1st Child: A proverb is a wise saying, like "Better a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fatted ox and hatred with it."

2nd Child: The one my father always says is “Spare the rod and spoil the child.”

3rd Child: Yes, he said it after you put a frog down Elizabeth’s dress on Tuesday. You could hear her yell for miles.

Rev. Potter: (laughing) “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast Spirit dries up bones.”
You are doing well, little ones. Keep learning. Goodbye now.

Narrator: The great achievement of the first generation of Norwich settlers was surely the building of that first meeting house. But it soon became overcrowded. The pews were large, but 5 families sometimes had to squeeze into one of them. Within 30 or so years it was declared inadequate. People started talking about building a new church. But there was a problem...

Samuel: Of course, Thomas, of course we have to build a new meeting house and I say it should be in the Center, where it has always been. Our burial grounds are there, and...I am just used to going there!

Thomas: But Samuel, the Village on the Plain is the obvious place to build it. I feel certain that the town will keep growing there. It will be easier for people to get to, more convenient, and more...Besides, I have already started collecting subscriptions for the new building there and bought the timber. I am just going to travel down to Boston to see about buying a new bell from the Revere workshop.

Samuel: Thomas, how could you?! Well, I’ll just see about getting timber for my church!
(stomps off)

Thomas: I have been wishing for years to have a bell that would be heard all over the town. This year it will finally come true!

3 or 4 people enter carrying a replica of the Revere Bell

1st person: This is a fine bell you have bought for us, Mr. Emerson!

2nd person: That it is! Made by Paul Revere! Just think of it – this bell will live longer than any of us. Why, I’ll bet it will be calling our great-grandchildren to worship some day!

3rd person: I’ll bet it weighs 2,000 pounds!

Thomas: Hoist it up, men – easy does it. Now there should be no late comers to church. We’ll ring the Gabriel bell to wake the people of the parish, the sermon bell when it is time for the service, the pardon bell before and after the sermon, and the pudding bell to tell the cook to prepare dinner.

Narrator: Now we had a church a steeple, and a bell. It was located across the street on the Green, looking down Elm Street. Meanwhile, the women of the church were busy. First, in 1843, they formed the Norwich Female Abolition Society and, with the encouragement of the local church deacon and Rev. Alanson St. Clair, met and sewed together for seven years. By the

mid-1840s they were able to connect with the network of black abolitionists who had developed a system for aiding fugitives.

Especially moved by the “suffering of our own sex who are deprived of personal liberty,” they forwarded boxes of goods to Hiram Wilson, a black minister at the mission in Dawn Mills; to Henry H. Garnet, who harbored fugitives in Troy, New York; and eventually to the American Missionary Association, dedicated to abolition, black education, and civil rights.

Next, the women turned to our church meeting house itself. At a meeting of the Ladies Sewing Circle:

Jenny: Oh, Sister Sarah, isn't our meeting house beautiful? Those three doors with the graceful portico and 4 slender Ionic columns carrying a pediment. And the Palladian window with its segmental lunette.

Sarah: Yes, well that's fine, but did you hear the cadets ringing the bell the other night? It was so loud at 2 am that it woke me from a sound sleep! I guess they tie a string to the bell and take it to their rooms. In the middle of the night they ring the bell and then toss the string out the window!

Jenny: So they never catch the culprits! Those clever young men!

Sarah: There's only one solution! Move the church across the street! Let's start raising money!

(Out on the street in front of the church)

Daniel: I predict that if we try to move this church the steeple will surely fall!

Heziah: Mr. Converse, do you really think we can move the church?

Mr Converse: Oh, of course we can. I shall supervise it, and if there is any damage, I'll pay for it myself. Let's get those oxen in place.

(The church is moved)

Daniel: There! We did it and not even a crack in the plaster!

Mr Converse: Now is a perfect time to lengthen the church, we'll add another 10 feet and another window.

Heziah: Well, let's hope the Ladies Sewing Circle is happy.

Narrator: The people of the church kept making changes to their worship space. In 1908, the pulpit was remodeled and the stained glass window replaced the clear window. It has symbols of the Holy Spirit, Everlasting Life, and a verse from the prophet Micah: Do justly, Love Mercy, and Walk Humbly with thy God. In that year, the pulpit ends of the balconies were shortened and the organ was moved from the back of the balcony to where it is today.

Speaking of the organ, around the year 1902, some children were here for Children's Sunday and had a special conversation:

Fred: Abbie, have you memorized your piece from Children's Sunday?

Abbie: Of course I have...I've been practicing all week.

Fred: Well, let's hear it, then.

Abbie: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." How about your Beatitudes, Fred?

Fred: Yes, I know them. But wait, listen to the organ! Isn't it beautiful? You know what, Abbie? Someday I am going to play that organ here in the church.

Narrator: Fred kept that promise and was our organist for 58 years, starting in 1920. In 1939, the horse sheds behind the church were taken down, and in 1949 the parish hall was added to the back of the sanctuary. The chimes on the wall were given by Mrs. MacAuley in 1962, and the current chandelier was given by Mrs. Avery in 1967. And Abbie Metcalf – remember Abbie? – made the bronze cross that sits on the pulpit and gave it to us on Easter 1965. A major renovation in 2006-2007 gave us beautiful, accessible space in the parish hall and sanctuary. Just last year, we had solar panels added to the roof. So many changes, so many gifts: it is hard to list them all, and hard to list all the people who built this church into what it is today. 200th years after this meeting house was built, and a new Revere & Sons bell was placed in our steeple, people are still be called here to learn and sing and try to be God's servants in the world. Hear the words spoken here in 1817 by the Reverend James W Woodward:

"The changes of the past should teach us the instability of the future and awaken us to an ardent desire to find a rest in heaven. Then, when the earthly temples of our worship shall be dissolved by time, and our names are forgotten among the generations of men, we may have the assurance that we shall be held in everlasting remembrance in the kingdom of God. 'Behold, bless ye the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord, lift up your hands in the sanctuary and bless the Lord. The Lord that made heaven and earth bless thee out of Zion.'"

(All the children raise their hands and say "Bless the Lord!")

The End.