

How the Harvard Historical Society moved into the Baptist Church of Still River

By Denis Wagner, member of the board. January 2022.

There is some question about the Harvard Historical Society's responsibility to keep items from the Still Baptist Church.

I have pieced together some history and documentation from letters attached to the deed dated in September and November 1966 and information contained in two newspaper articles from November 1966.

The Historical Society had been using the Hapgood room of the old library (and presumably also the attic) and was asked by the library trustees to vacate the Hapgood room so in 1965 they asked the Baptists if they might share space in Still River. That request was denied but in 1966 when the Still River Baptists decided to sell the church they approached the historical society. The Baptist community must have been struggling for several years because there is mention that in 1964 all church records and the church library were placed in the care of the historical society.

"Acting on the recommendation of its Board of Directors, the Harvard Historical Society met September 16, 1966 and voted to make a token offer of \$1000 to the Baptist Church of Still River for all of their real estate (land and buildings) the Sanctuary to be preserved as it now is, the Church to have use of it, the Sanctuary, at any time not conflicting with the Historical Society interests. Also, if the property should ever be offered for sale, your Church would have first opportunity to purchase." from the Corresponding Secretary, Mary Doyle, (Mrs. J. Edwin)

November 14, 1966 in a letter formalizing the agreement:

"The membership of the Still River Baptists..... and Deacons.....voted on October 24, 1966 to accept the token offer of the Harvard Historical Society..... building and land....(contains the church and basically the small portion of land around the church and south to the present day horse fence)....with the stipulation that the Sanctuary.... be preserved.....and the SR Baptist Church be allowed use..... We would like to add the stipulation that the present pipe organ, the memorial cross to Mrs. Bakun, the pulpit Bible given by Mr. Charles Haskell, the curved settees in the choir loft, the pulpit and chairs, remain as part of the sanctuary. Other items of historic value such as the communion set, flags, etc. will also be given the Society on "permanent loan.""

"Another stipulation which is being appended to the deed is that the existing right of way to the Scott property behind the church which belongs to Richard Watt be continued." This of course became a non-issue when the Society purchased the Cottage and shop garage/camp, now the "Curators Quarters" in 1992 for their own purposes. Interestingly, the original thought of purchasing the cottage was to use it for museum display.

Two other interesting points from the news articles:

"Aaron Burbank was pastor for a time, and his son, Luther Burbank was baptized here."

"The first troubles came to the Baptist Community in 1781, when Mother Ann Lee, founder of the Shaker religion, stopped in Still River village on her way from Watervliet, NY and drew away a number of members to the newly formed Shaker settlement at the other end of the town."

So, you can read into this whatever you like but I believe it makes a strong argument for keeping the pews and perhaps a slightly less strong argument for keeping the hymnals.

Another consideration regarding the pews is our responsibility to maintain our status on the National Register of Historic Places. Without looking up documents and agreements I might just say that we must maintain historic integrity, of use and visual character or ensure a return to original.