

# The 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Quilt of the N.F. Congregational Church

by Eleanor Bronson-Hodge

An art book and odd circumstances inspired the 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Quilt of the North Falmouth Congregational Church.

In the winter of 2006 I was on holiday in the Bahamas where my daughter owns a small resort, Turtle Hill on Elbow Key. Another guest and I discovered a mutual interest in art, especially liturgical art, and one afternoon we had a deckside conversation on that topic.

Vacations come to an end, as do most deckside encounters. Not this one, however, for a month later an unexpected package arrived at my door. A glorious art book on church embroideries from around the world, it was a treasure trove of creativity, a gift from my deckside chance acquaintance.

Thus did *Patchwork Pilgrimage* by Jill Liddell come into my life, and into my heart and soul as well. I devoured its contents.

One page in particular captivated me, an illustration of an appliqué wall-hanging of sizable proportions. The center panel showed a Colonial New England church, "First Church in Pembroke 1712," silhouetted against a deep blue sky. An elaborate border of colorful squares depicting religious symbols surrounded the central panel.

To my eyes, the total effect was stunning. It brought to mind my own little white church, North Falmouth Congregational on Old Main Road. I found myself dreaming of a similar quilt for NFCC. In 2007 we would celebrate our 175<sup>th</sup> Year. A commemorative

quilt would be a wonderful tribute. What's more, we had a Master Quilter among our members!

But how to go about it? I am not a seamstress at all. In fact, when early in marriage my husband gave me a sewing machine, all I managed to produce were playroom curtains and a laundry bag, red and white paisley, still in use. Handwork, however, has always interested me. Now, with quilt-making on my mind, I began ruminating....

I had heard that the Woods Hole Library had embarked on a quilt project for a Library Benefit. Since I knew the two prime movers, Terry McKee and Salley Mavor, I intended to seek their counsel.

By yet another "odd circumstance," we three women found ourselves standing together under a giant tent at a summertime fund-raiser on Penzance Point. It was the opportune moment to share my hopes, and my perplexities, with the experts. They promised help. True to her word, Terry would later provide useful guidelines for community quilting.

Heartened by this encounter, I set about enlisting church interest. There proved to be numerous enthusiastic sewers in our congregation, eager to participate. Many had been sewing all their lives, starting off in early childhood, others became interested as adults. Twenty or so volunteered their time and skills, the future Nimble Thimbles of the North Falmouth Congregational Church.

The absolute #1 prerequisite for success, however, would be the leadership of Linda Thomas, our

church's Master Quilter. Linda is passionate about quilting. Although she has a family and full-time job, sings in the choir and serves as Church Treasurer, she nevertheless creates quilt after quilt, each one imaginative and unique.

Early on, I had discussed the proposal with her and she liked the idea. Now, with other quilters wanting to take part, she really caught fire, even agreeing to head up the project, if so desired. With her commitment, we could embark with confidence on this intriguing but challenging undertaking. Her leadership was definitely "so desired."

By November of 2006 the Anniversary Quilt was underway. Linda was Designer and Fabricator. I would serve as the Coordinator and, as needed, Encourager!

To adapt the format of the Pembroke quilt to the special individuality of our church, Linda began at the focal point, the center panel. There she portrayed in appliqué the white façade, flanked by fanciful shrubbery and graced by the spire of the "new" steeple which replaced the original domed clock tower toppled by the Hurricane of 1938.

Kits for the border squares were made ready for the Nimble Thimbles. Thanks to Linda's expertise, they provided everything possibly needed: patterns, fabrics, instructions, even needles and spools of thread. No thimbles! As to distribution, it was "first come, first served," swapping allowed and no deadlines, a non-system which worked just fine.

As best I could, I kept track of the squares, who had which and at what stage. Some were returned speedily; others, more leisurely. Would all of them finally show up? Time was passing and much yet remained to be done. Could the quilt really be finished by November 4th?

The Nimble Thimbles rose to the occasion, producing fourteen colorful emblematic squares to frame Linda's handsome center panel.

The four corners, a patchwork pattern named "Perpetual Motion," were created by Betty Galbraith and Jan Winslow. Fellow quilters provided ten other nine-inch squares, portraying familiar Christian symbols in bold design.



North Falmouth Congregational Church quilters. From left to right: Denise Sullivan, Barbara Rountree, Betty Galbraith, Sally Eldridge, Designer Linda Thomas, Judy Crossman, Martha Rosewell, and Joyce Bock. Photo by Barbara Rountree.

Reading from top left, a Crown of Gold comes first, a sign of Royal Authority and sewn by Joyce Bock. Next, the Chi Rho, Christ's monogram in Greek, stitched by Jan Finton. The Alpha and Omega, the Greek alphanumerals' first and last letters, signify God and were sewn by Pam Polloni. Barbara Rountree made the Chalice denoting Holy Communion. Connie Millan did the White Dove of the Holy Spirit and Martha Rosewell, the Four Candles for Advent.

The Cross in a Circle suggests Christ in the Circle of Love and was sewn by Sandy Checklick. For the Call to Worship, Pat Anderson stitched the Bell. The Greek word for "fish," ICHTHYS, is also the acronym for "Jesus Christ God's Son Savior," thus the Fish by Pam Fernsebner. Judy Crossman created the Ship under Sail, a traditional symbol for The Church.

With the appliqué squares now completed, Linda carried on, assembling the quilt components, the outer borders, the layering and the backing. Other Nimble Thimbles, Mary Jane Thomas, Sally Eldridge, Pam Polloni and Denise Sullivan, the "finishers," helped with the final hand-quilting.

November Fourth of the Year 2007, the 175th Anniversary of the North Falmouth Congregational Church, arrived right on schedule. The Church was ready, the Congregation was ready, and so was the Commemorative Quilt. The challenge of completing it within the span of a single year had been successfully met.

The weather that November Sunday was miserable. The night before, a violent storm brought widespread havoc to the Cape. As elsewhere, North Falmouth was without power; the church had neither heat nor lights. Inside the sanctuary, however, there on

the chancel wall hung the quilt, concealed behind a sheet, prudently installed the previous day!

Undaunted, the Anniversary Celebrations duly took place...by candlelight, an affecting reminder of bygone times. Preceding the Worship Service, the "tapestry quilt" was unveiled to the "ohs" and "ahs" and applause of the congregation, an exhilarating moment for the Nimble Thimbles.

In retrospect, how do the quilters assess their joint endeavor? Unlike the women of old North Falmouth, neighbors stitching in good company, most Nimble Thimbles lived at a distance and thus worked independently. If they missed the companionship of fellow quilters, they nevertheless found participation rewarding, as attested by their comments;

"It was a wonderful way to meet people with a shared interest."

"I wanted to be a part of our church's history."

"I just knew I had to do it!

More soberly, "In this present world of the 'quick and easy,' the quilt stands for 175 years of steadfastness, permanence, strength and generational importance.

The Designer's response? "It was my personal gift, one that I could share." Was it a good experience? "Yes, when it finally all came together!"

And mine, the Encourager? "A jubilant AMEN!"

Eleanor Bronson-Hodge has a long association with Falmouth, first as a summer resident in Woods Hole and now as a permanent resident. Author of three books: *Sojourner, People and Places I have Loved*, (1997), *Thither and Yon, Travels with a Sketchbook*, (2002) and *Postscript, Stories and Pictures from the Heart*, (2007), she is a member of the *Spritsail* board.