

First Congregational Church and the 1812 Quissett Revival

by Rev. Dr. Douglas K. Showalter © 2008

The First Congregational Church of Falmouth, Massachusetts of the United Church of Christ is celebrating its 300th anniversary in 2008. This is a good time to relate some aspects of its history which are generally unknown, including events in the early 1800s which have had a significant impact on the church's theological self-understanding even into the modern day.

The Falmouth church was gathered as an independent ecclesiastical body on October 28, 1708. Before that day the people worshipping in Falmouth were considered a "branch church" of the Puritan congregation in Barnstable. That church's roots went back to 1616 in London – four years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth – and it may have been the first church to refer to itself as "Congregational."

It has long been assumed that Samuel Shiverick was the Falmouth community's first minister.

But, that is not correct. Recent research has shown that even before Falmouth became an incorporated town in 1686, the community was served by lay preacher Jonathan Dunham, possibly from 1677 to about 1684. Dunham then moved to Martha's Vineyard where he was ordained in 1694 and served the Edgartown church until his death. The community's

second minister was Samuel Shiverick, another lay preacher. Shiverick served in Falmouth as early as 1687 through 1703. A pond behind today's First Congregational Church still bears his surname. The first ordained minister of the town and church was Harvard graduate Joseph Metcalf, who was ordained when the church was gathered in 1708.

Through much of the 18th century the "Church of Christ in Falmouth," as it likely was then known, seems to have remained close to its New England

Puritan roots. For example, a conversion experience of God's saving grace continued to be a requirement for church membership. And only members could receive the Lord's Supper and have their children baptized. Also, until the eve of the Revolutionary War, the congregation continued to sing Psalms a capella from New England's first published book, the Bay Psalm Book of 1640. However, as the 18th century drew

to a close, the Falmouth church began to change.

Harvard graduate Henry Lincoln of Hingham, Massachusetts was ordained in 1790 to serve the Falmouth church. Months after his ordination the church took the significant step of dropping its requirement that a relation of a saving grace experience



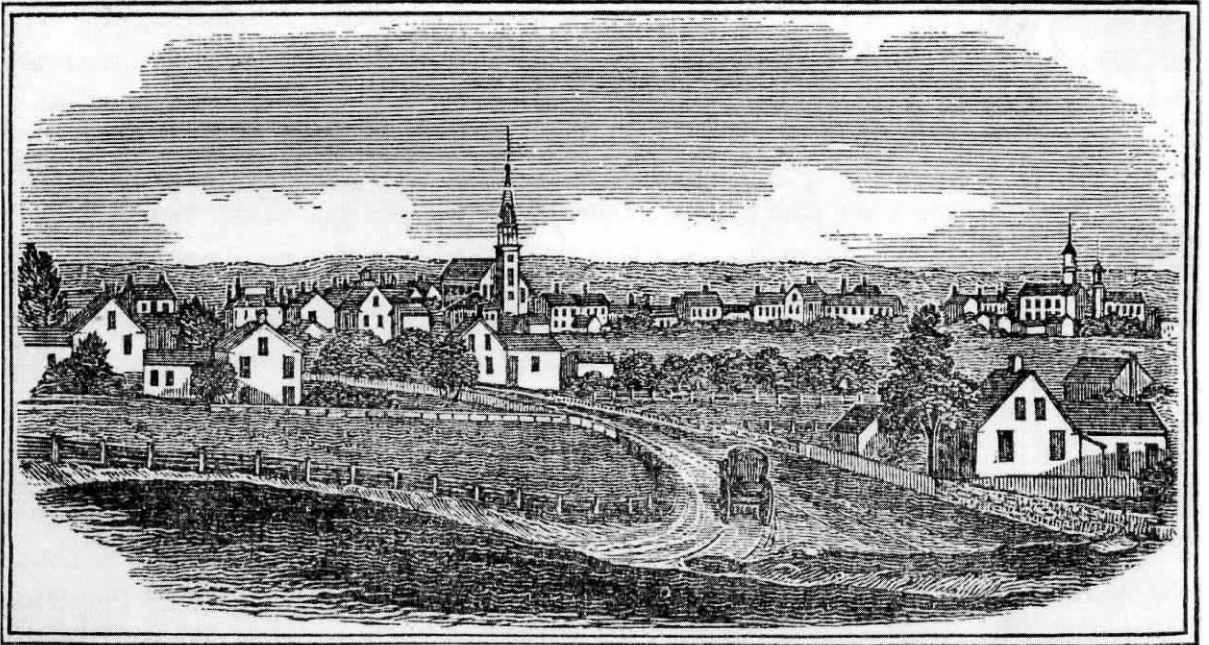
300th Anniversary logo designed by Frances Cerulli featuring the church's old weathervane. Courtesy First Congregational Church of Falmouth.

was needed for membership. To become a member, one now only needed to fulfill the other requirements of being a baptized Christian and agree to the church's covenant, which still contained an affirmation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Thus, joining the church became considerably easier.

In 1801 the church began using a new hymnal compiled by Boston Congregationalist Rev. Jeremy Belknap. That hymnal was unusual because it sought to appeal to Congregationalists who now rejected the Trinity, as well as Congregationalists who continued to affirm that doctrine. Many Massachusetts Congregational churches in this period which used that hymnal later described themselves as Unitarian. In fact, it's been said that Belknap's hymnal was "*the principal Unitarian hymnal for nearly forty years.*"

As the 19th century began, the Falmouth church was moving away from the Puritans' traditional Calvinistic belief in the total depravity of humans, their complete dependence on God's grace for salvation, and God's pre-ordained election of only some people to eternal salvation. Instead, the Falmouth church was beginning to entertain what was then called "Arminianism," namely, belief in the free will of all humans; their ability to do good or evil; and their opportunity, with God's help, to overcome their sin in order to attain salvation.

In this period, a number of Massachusetts Congregational churches, particularly in Boston and eastern Massachusetts, were moving in that same Arminian direction. Many of those churches eventually rejected the Trinity and considered themselves to be Unitarian. The Falmouth church might well



Sketch of Falmouth and the First Congregational Church when it was on the Village Green from John Warner's 1839 book, *Historical Collections, History and Antiquities of Every Town in Massachusetts with Geographical Descriptions, Illustrated by 200 Engravings*, published in Worcester by Dorr, Howland. Courtesy First Congregational Church of Falmouth.



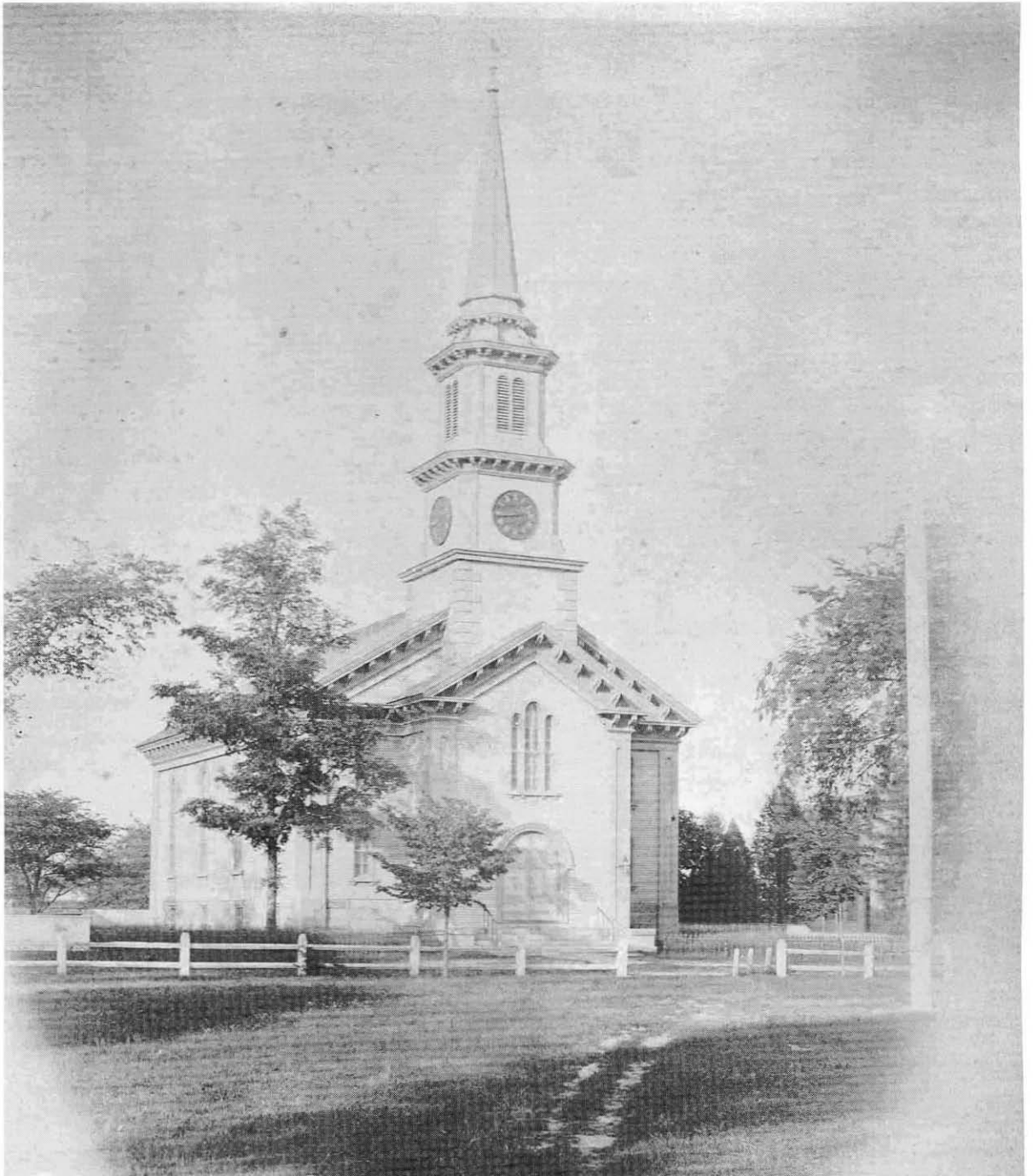
Congregational Church on its present site across from the Falmouth Village Green, 1890. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

have done the same thing eventually, except that the religious movement in America known as the “Second Great Awakening” was beginning to make itself felt on Cape Cod and in Falmouth itself. That Awakening affected many American communities from the 1790s through the 1820s. It was characterized by revival services and stressed the importance of personal piety, conversion experiences, and doing good works to benefit others without regard to the cost to one’s self.

The period from 1808 to 1812 was a particularly difficult one in Falmouth and on the Cape. People were very anxious about the possibility of another war with Great Britain. Also, in response to British and French violations of the rights of the United States at sea, the U.S. in December of 1807 put an embargo

on its own shipping which lasted 15 months. That embargo kept many Cape men at home instead of earning their livelihood on the sea. Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Cape historian Frederick Freeman said that Falmouth’s extensive Southern shipping trade was so disrupted by the effects of that embargo, that “the commercial interests of the town perhaps never entirely recovered.” Unable to resolve their difficulties peacefully, the U.S. Congress finally declared war on Great Britain on June 18, 1812. That was the War of 1812; it continued to be fought until 1815.

In 1808, near the beginning of this difficult period, a Baptist minister named Barnabas Bates from Hyannis began holding revival meetings in Falmouth. Those meetings apparently emphasized



First Congregational Church of Falmouth, ca. 1870-1880. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

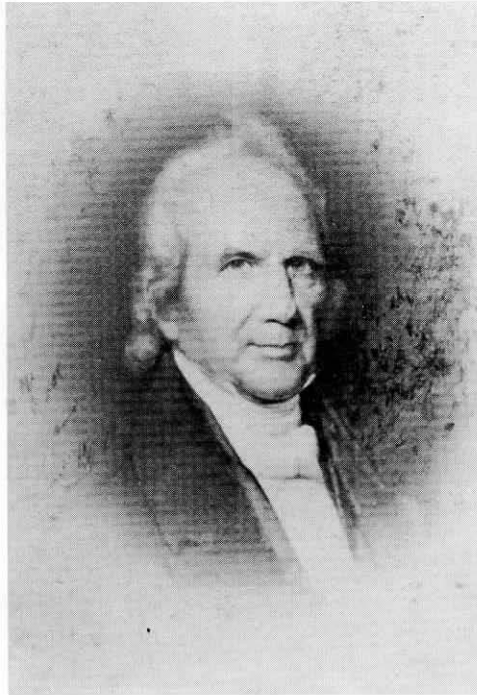
the importance of experiencing “the new birth” in a conversion experience of God’s saving grace. It was said that prior to those meetings, Rev. Lincoln, the Falmouth church’s minister, had never been exposed to such “experimental religion,” as it was then called. It was also said that when Rev. Barnabas came to town, “Mr. Lincoln got scared – too much for him + went to Boston.”

In the following year, 1809, revival meetings were held in Sandwich and then spread into Falmouth and Barnstable. Such meetings were responsible, at least in part, for the Falmouth church receiving 114 new members that year. That likely was far more new members than the Falmouth church has ever received in any other year in its long history, thus far!

As it turned out, the Falmouth church soon excommunicated one of those new members – Samuel Madan Dewey – by unanimous vote. Church records indicate that shortly after Dewey joined the church he left it to join a Baptist church. In addition to speaking disrespectfully of the Falmouth church and its minister, Dewey essentially told Falmouth church members at a public meeting, that if they had not had a personal conversion experience, they should humble themselves before him, revivalist Rev. Bates, and others outside the Falmouth church. At this time, some Falmouth church members had had a conversion experience and others had not. Yet, apart from

Dewey, Falmouth church members were apparently not willing to discredit the church or try to divide it because of that difference.

In 1810 the Falmouth church began using a new hymnal which contained translations of the Psalms by Isaac Watts, an English Independent. It’s likely significant that the church chose that hymnal, because hymnals with Watts’ Psalms were commonly used by Trinitarian Congregational churches in New England in this period.



Rev. Henry Lincoln. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

In 1811 [or possibly 1810], Rev. James Davis, then a Congregational evangelist, and Rev. Barnabas Bates conducted revival services in Falmouth. Some of those services were even held in the Falmouth church’s meeting house, then located on the town’s Village Green. A fellow revivalist preacher later gave this account of those meetings:

Rev. Mr. Lincoln, who was pastor of the Congregational church in Falmouth at this time, was an unconverted man...some members of Mr. L’s church said to Mr. Lincoln, “Why did you not tell us when you took us into your church, that we must

be born again?”

There was another interesting fact connected with these meetings. There was a military training or muster in the place, and one of the companies, if not more, was so much concerned for their souls, that the members of it proposed to march

into the meeting house, and ask Christians to pray for them, which they actually did do.

Mr. Lincoln professed to experience a change of heart soon after this, and also many others. Some became Baptists, and joined the Baptist church in Hyannis, others became Methodists, but the largest number connected themselves with the Congregational church in the place.

Another incident occurred at these meetings of which I was informed, and in which we can see strikingly illustrated the saying that, "man purposes, but God disposes," it was this: — The principle physician in the town, coming home from visiting some of his patients, found that his wife and daughter had gone to an evening meeting; and being very much opposed to the meetings, he declared that he would go and take them home. He entered the meeting house, and got only a short distance up the broad aisle, when to his surprise, his wife and daughter, with others, had just stepped out of the pews into the broad aisle, where inquirers were requested to come, who desired to be conversed with and prayed for.



Deacon Thomas Fish and his wife Susanna Crowell Fish. Courtesy WHHC.

It had such an effect upon the doctor's mind, that instead of taking his wife and daughter home with him, as he at first intended, he fell upon his knees, and desired the people of God to pray for him. Thus frequently, is "the loftiness of man humbled, and the Lord alone exalted."

Rev. Lincoln had a conversion experience himself in 1811. In fact, he was one of six Congregational clergy serving churches on Cape Cod who had such an

experience in this period. If Arminianism was the new incoming tide among Congregationalists on the Cape, the Second Great Awakening was to a significant extent now causing that tide to turn, though not without causing some problems.

Rev. Jonathan Burr, the Congregational minister in Sand-

wich since 1787, was another one of those six clergy who were converted. Because of that experience, Burr changed both his theology and his preaching style. Those changes caused considerable disruption and bitterness in his community. On July 28, 1811, the Sandwich parish finally forced Burr out of its church's pulpit, then ultimately dismissed him. He and the majority of his church members and congregation then left that church and eventually built their own Trinitarian Congregational church down the street. A law suit brought by Rev. Burr against the Sandwich

parish was even heard by the Supreme Judicial Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, though that court decided against Burr.

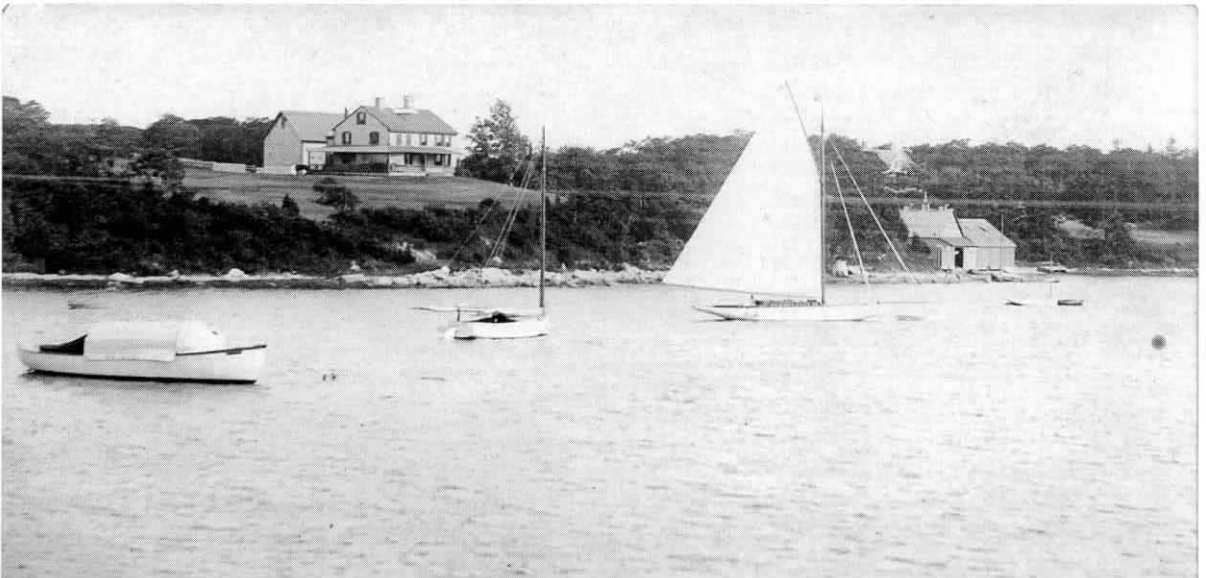
In contrast, there is no sign that Rev. Lincoln's conversion created any such division and discord in the Falmouth church or community. It later was reported of those six Cape ministers, that, with the exception of Burr, "the change in the minister was followed by a corresponding change in the people; so that a schism was avoided." The Sandwich church which Burr left soon came to consider itself Unitarian.

On May 12, 1812 there was another revival – long known locally as the "Great Revival" – which had such an impact on the Falmouth church that in 1880 an account of it was carefully inscribed in the church's official records. At that time some participants in that revival were still alive. That 1812 revival took place in the home of Thomas and Susanna Fish who had joined the Falmouth church in 1804, when a conversion experience was not required for membership.

Later it was said that when Rev. Lincoln originally urged the Fishes to join the church, Susanna replied, saying, "I am not good enough." To that Rev. Lincoln answered, "If you are not good enough, who is?"

The Fishes lived in a house overlooking Quisset Harbor where Thomas was an agent for a shipbuilding firm. Though expanded since that time, that house still exists today and is known as Hurricane Hall. It was said that after Susanna Fish joined the Falmouth church, "there came to her a great desire for a deeper religious experience. For a long time she sought to receive it." In fact, Susanna was the "mother in Israel" who was referred to in the following 1880 account of the "Great Revival" which appears in the church's records.

On the 12th of May 1812 occurred one of the most remarkable revivals of religion ever known in this region. A mother in Israel, shrewd and intelligent, who had been a member of the church for eight years, did not have a satisfactory



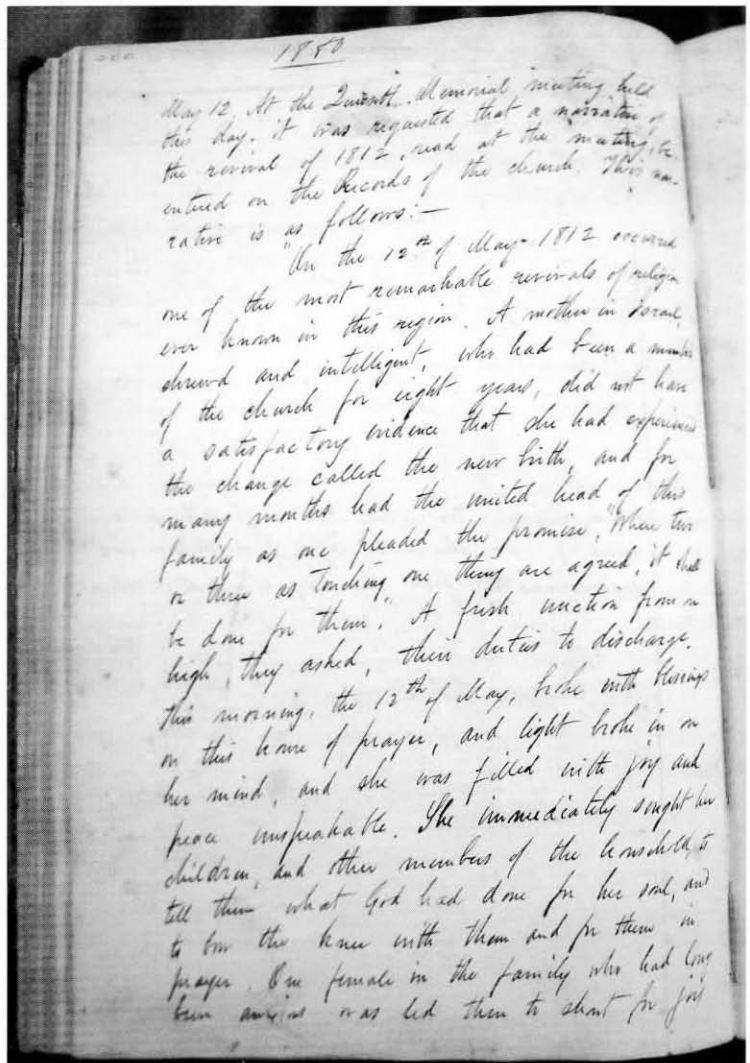
Hurricane Hall, site of the 1812 Quisset Revival, overlooking Quisset Harbor, ca. 1900. Courtesy WHHC.

evidence that she had experienced the change called the new birth, and for many months had the united head of this family as one pleaded the promise, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I will be there and will with them and for them in prayer. One female in the family who had long been anxious was led then to shout for joy in hope of pardoned sin."

A fresh unction from on high they asked, their duties to discharge. This morning, the 12th of May, broke with blessings on this house of prayer, and light broke in on her mind, and she was filled with joy and peace unspeakable. She immediately sought her children, and other members of the household, to tell them what God had done for her soul, and to bow the knee with them and for them in prayer. One female in the family who had long been anxious was led then to shout for joy in hope of pardoned sin.

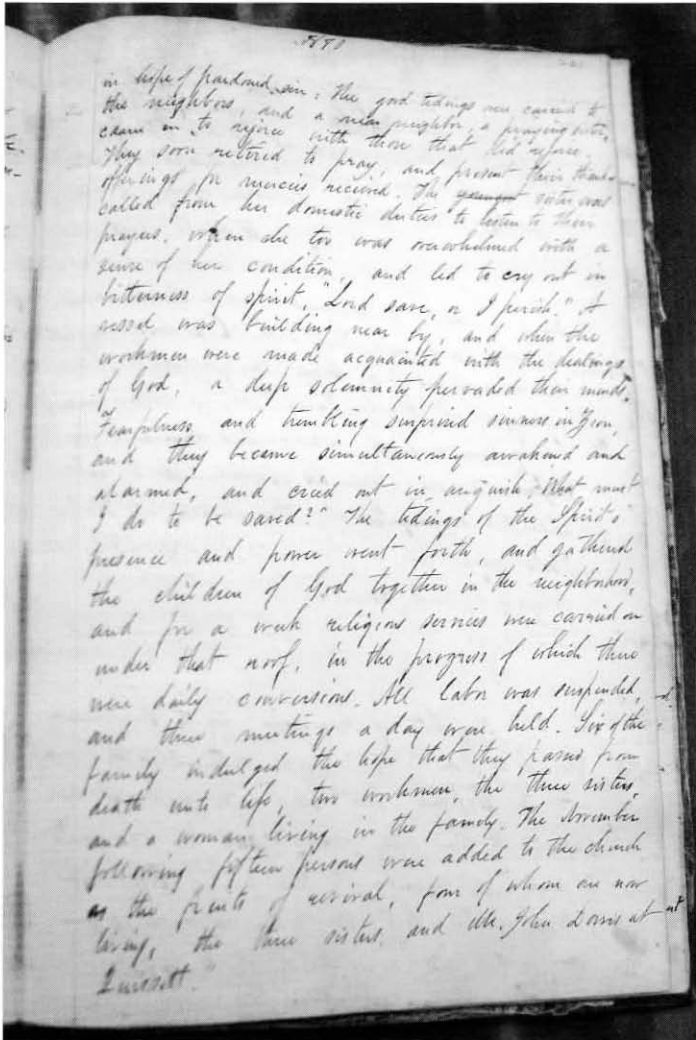
The good tidings were carried to the neighbors, and a near neighbor, a praying sister, came in to rejoice with them that did rejoice. They soon retired to pray, and present their thank offerings for mercies received. The sister was called from her domestic duties to listen to their prayers when she too was overwhelmed with a sense of her condition, and led to cry out in bitterness of spirit, "Lord save, or I perish."

A vessel was building near by, and when the workmen were made acquainted with the dealings of God, a deep solemnity persuaded



First page of 1880 account of the "Great Revival" as it appears in the ledger of the church's records. Courtesy First Congregational Church of Falmouth.

their minds. Fearfulness and trembling surprised sinners in Zion and they became simultaneously awakened and alarmed, and cried out in anguish, "What must I do to be saved?"



Second page of 1880 account of the "Great Revival" as it appears in the ledger of the church's records. Courtesy First Congregational Church of Falmouth.

The tidings of the Spirit's presence and power went forth, and gathered the children of God together in the neighborhood, and for a week religious services were carried on under that roof, in the progress of which there were daily conversions. All labor was suspended, and three meetings a day were held. Six of the family indulged

the hope that they passed from death unto life, two workmen, the three sisters, and a woman living in the family. The November following fifteen persons were added to the church as the fruits of revival, four of whom are now living, the three sisters, and Mr. John Davis at Quissett.

Each year on the anniversary date of that 1812 Quissett Revival, for 84 years or more, a special Twelfth of May service was held at that home or at another location presumably nearby. Falmouth church members and Quissett residents and their relatives attended that annual service to worship God and commemorate that 1812 event. As Rev. Charles Washburn, the Falmouth church's minister from 1890-1898, wrote in 1908:

One of the most precious memories of my own pastorate over this church is that of going up to Quissett each year upon the 12th of May to help celebrate the wonderful blessing of God. We can never forget the singing as Thomas and Joseph Fish sang the old tunes of Mear and Northfield.

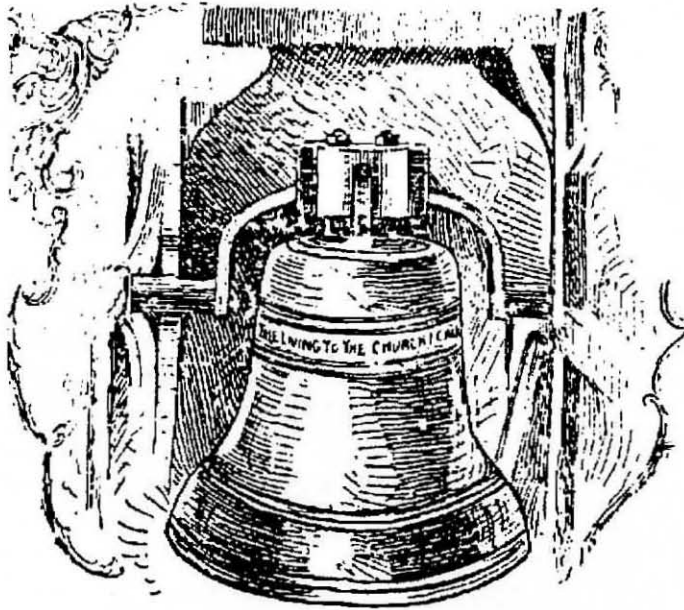
These events from 1808 to 1812 had a significant impact on the Falmouth church. In the wake of those revival meetings and conversion experiences and once the War of 1812 was concluded, the Falmouth church in 1816 adopted a new Confession of Faith.

From that point on, every person joining the church was expected to give assent to that Confession statement. That statement affirmed belief in the Trinity. It also stated that the church shouldn't receive a person into its fellowship, until the church was "satisfied, in a judgment of charity that he has been born again."

As a demonstration of tolerance however, the church adopted that Confession with the understanding that present members of the church who could not fully assent to this new Confession would not have their relationship to the church disturbed. This stipulation recognized that for the previous quarter century, the relation of a conversion experience had not been required of those joining the Falmouth church. But now, in 1816, that had changed. A conversion experience was again required. Thus, the Falmouth church largely returned to the theological understandings long embodied in its pre-1790 Puritan roots.

Today's First Congregational Church of Falmouth is basically mainline Protestant in orientation.

It does not require a conversion experience or "new birth" for membership in the church. It does not restrict its sacraments of the Lord's Supper and Baptism to only its own members. Also, it's likely that most of the church's parishioners today would question the Puritans' denial of human free will and find their doctrine of God's pre-ordained election of only some people to salvation, both unfair and quite foreign to their thinking.



Sketch of the Falmouth Congregational Church's Paul Revere bell used at the bell's Bicentennial celebration in 1996. Courtesy First Congregational Church of Falmouth.

The theology of today's First Congregational Church in Falmouth has evolved with the church's entry into the modern age. Nonetheless, the events of 1808-1812 continue to be very significant for the church for the following reasons. Those events returned the Falmouth church to the mainstream of Ameri-

ca's Congregational churches, a position in which the Falmouth church has remained ever since. Those events also led the Falmouth church to continue espousing its historic Puritan belief in Trinitarianism.

Of the eleven Congregational churches in Boston in the early 1800's, ten of them became Unitarian. In part due to the influence of the Second Great Awakening, twelve of the fifteen Congregational churches

on Cape Cod in 1800, ultimately continued their walk in the Trinitarian Congregational Way.

Rev. Dr. Doug Showalter is the Senior Minister of the First Congregational Church of Falmouth, Massachusetts, of the United Church of Christ which he has served since 1987. He is a graduate of Bowdoin College, Yale Divinity School, and Chicago Theological Seminary. He has lectured and written on numerous aspects of American Congregational history. Full scholarly endnotes to this article will be included in his book on the history of the First Congregational Church which is scheduled to be available in 2009. He welcomes contacts at dougshow@cape.com.