

The First Presbyterian Church
of
East Hampton, New York



1648
1998

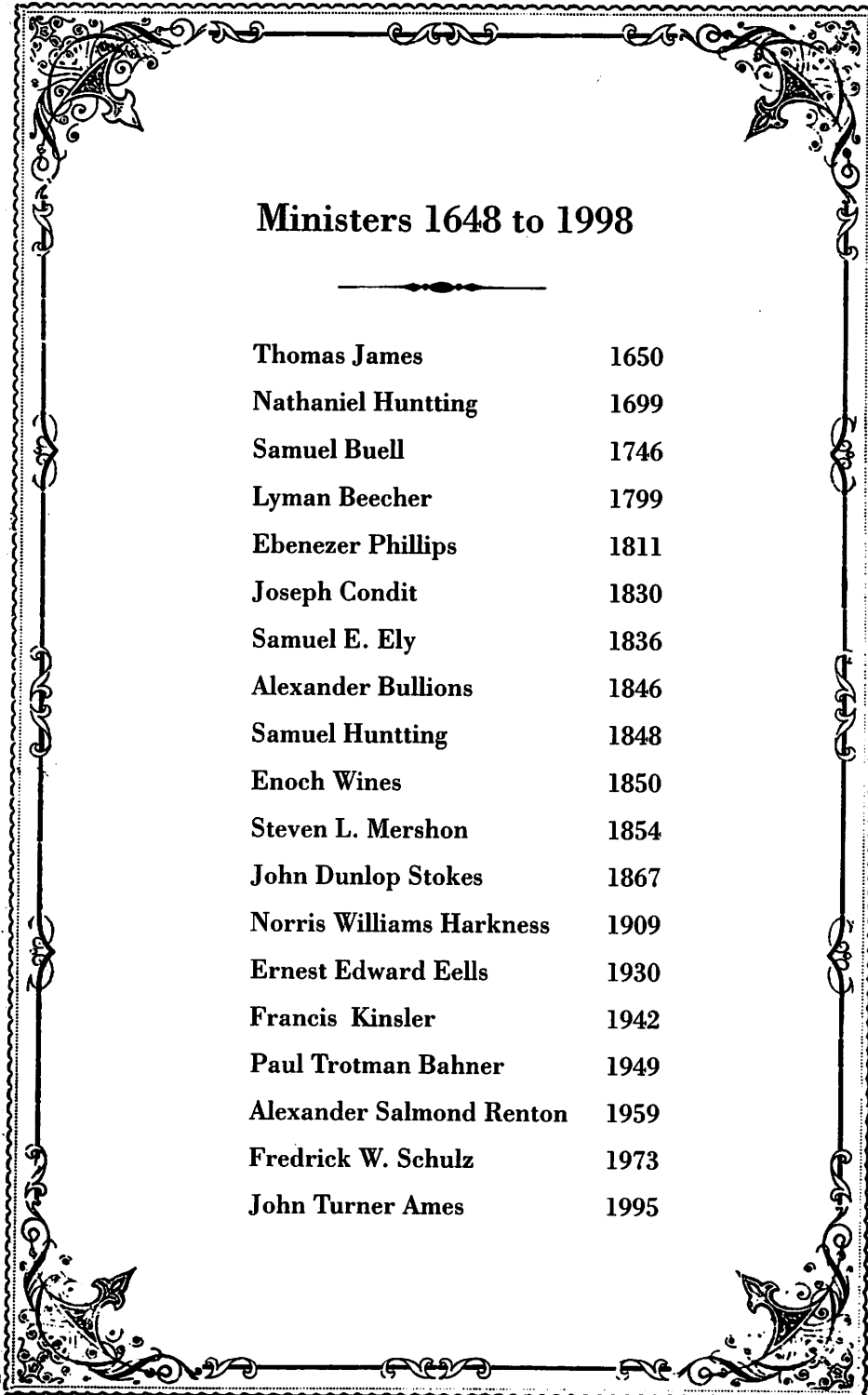
350th Anniversary

lack (a ²⁰servant of Mr. Huntington)
the session not being sufficient
informed on his case agreed
to defer it until the next
ing and also notified he
appear ~~it~~ before the next
Philip and Peter appeared
acknowledged that they had
wrong in absenting them
from the ordinance of
Lord's supper and proffered
penitence for the same
was satisfactory to the
Session adjourned to meet

**A Brief History of
The First Presbyterian Church
of East Hampton
1648-1998**



**Prepared by the 350th Anniversary Committee
Historical essay by Rev. John Turner Ames, Ph.D
Paul Vogel and David L. Filer, editors**



Ministers 1648 to 1998

Thomas James	1650
Nathaniel Hunting	1699
Samuel Buell	1746
Lyman Beecher	1799
Ebenezer Phillips	1811
Joseph Condit	1830
Samuel E. Ely	1836
Alexander Bullions	1846
Samuel Hunting	1848
Enoch Wines	1850
Steven L. Mershon	1854
John Dunlop Stokes	1867
Norris Williams Harkness	1909
Ernest Edward Eells	1930
Francis Kinsler	1942
Paul Trotman Bahner	1949
Alexander Salmond Renton	1959
Fredrick W. Schulz	1973
John Turner Ames	1995

Long Island's Beginnings

Long Island's story began forty thousand years ago when an ice sheet nearly two miles thick was halted in its southern migration by warming air currents from the Atlantic Ocean.

Huge amounts of earth that got caught up in its plowing action were deposited in a line of low hills called the Ronkonkoma Moraine. As the ice continued to melt over the next three thousand years, the Sound was formed and the outline of the island began to emerge.

Several habitats established themselves on this newly formed land. Barrier beaches protected salt meadows and shallow bays which nurtured water fowl and shellfish. Early forests included hemlock, maple, and chestnut trees and were surrounded by fields rich with edible plants such as blueberry, ground nuts, and beach plums. Animal life abounded with deer, turkey, and sea mammals providing the initial attraction for the first humans.

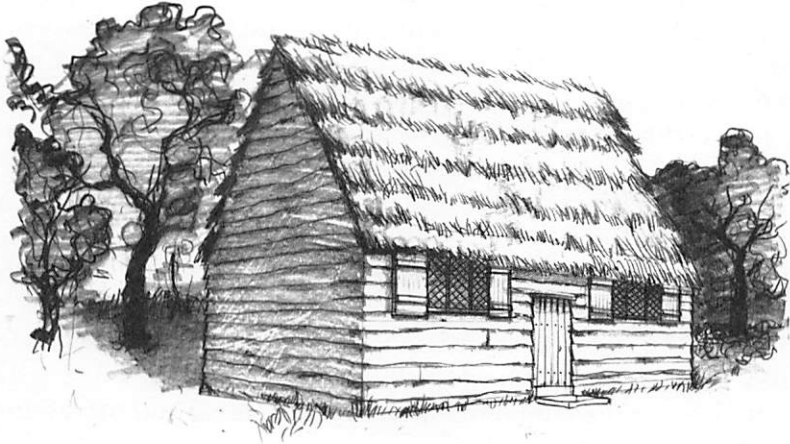
The Paleo-Indians first arrived here over eight thousand years ago as nomadic hunters and settled here in communities of up to fifty people. Their social structure of independent villages linked by kinship to its neighbors was kept intact until the advent of European settlers who needed to deal with a centralized authority to facilitate treaties and land purchases.

A new Indian social order evolved that grouped independent villages into a large tribe under the leadership of a sachem. A young Montaukett sachem named Wyandanch became a key figure in the early development of East Hampton.

In 1648, the Puritan settlers would have encountered Shinnecoeks and Montauketts, who are believed to be linked by dialect to the Algonquin of Southern New England.

The stage is now set for the new settlement of East Hampton.

-Paul Vogel



Paul Vogel

Town Records November 17, 1651

“It is offered and agreed upon by us the inhabitants that there shall be a meeting house built 26 foote longe, 20 foote broad and 8 foote stode. And it is ordered that Thomas Baker shall have 18 pence for every Lord’s day that the meeting shall be at his house.”

In the summer of 1648, a small group of men came from Connecticut to the south fork of Long Island and established a camp at what is now the village of East Hampton. No exact list of the original settlers exists, but within three years there were thirty-three men and an unknown number of women and children in East Hampton. Among the names which are still found on the church roll were: Conklin, Davis, Dayton, Hand, Hedges, Miller, Osborn, Osborne, Parsons, and Talmage.

These were Puritans, and it is logical to assume that despite the fact that there was no minister in their group, they would have assembled on the first Sunday after they arrived to read the scriptures, to pray, and to sing the psalms which were the characteristics of Puritan worship. The First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton traces its origins to this lay-led prayer service.

East Hampton remained a Puritan community for fully two hundred years, though there were, of course, many developments and changes in the Puritan movement during that time. That is the most important single thing that one needs to know about these people in order to understand how they lived: how they organized their community and conducted its affairs, how they related to each other and to the indigenous inhabitants who lived here before them, and, of course, how they understood their relationship to their God.

Puritanism was a theology. It was a particular way of understanding the Christian faith. But it was also a political movement and a social movement. It regulated the relationships between persons of various social and economic classes. It determined how political decisions would be made and how the economy of the community would be organized.

But they *were* Puritans, and they immediately established a church.

The church was as integral a part of their community as was any other part: they also started a school, dug a pond, fenced in a sheep fold, established procedures for sharing common grazing land and conducting whale watches, and built wind-mills which were shared communally. The church was a normal and essential part of the community's life.

The first individual in East Hampton to be paid out of communal funds was the minister - Thomas James. He came here in 1651 at a salary of forty five pounds a year, plus a house. This sum was promised by the General Court and paid by an assessment on all freeholders - what would now be called a property tax. The church building was also erected by the General Court and paid for by public funds. This situation lasted in East Hampton until the 1830's - as late as the ministry of Samuel Ely, ministers were called and paid by the Town Trustees.

The church was not conscious of being affiliated with any denomination, and to attribute any denominational label to them would be incorrect. Later, in the 18th century, as America became much more religiously pluralistic, the Puritan movement became denominational. In fact it divided into Presbyterians and Congregationalists, and this church became Presbyterian. It is incorrect, however, to describe this church in its early days as "Congregational." It was simply "the town meeting house."

The community originally worshiped in Thomas Baker's "Ordinary" or tavern (now part of the J. Harper Poor House, on the west side of the town pond). For providing this service, Baker was paid one shilling, six-pence each week. In 1653 the first church building was erected on a site in what is now the South Burying Ground. Lion Gardiner's home was directly across the street, and Thomas James lived next to Gardiner.

The houses in the village were small and modest, and the church was similar. It was built of wood, twenty by twenty six feet in size, and had a thatched roof. It was undoubtedly a perfectly simple rectangular room. There would have been an elevated pulpit, probably along one of the long sides, and benches where the worshippers sat. There were probably two doors, one used by

men, the other used by women and children. The sexes did sit separately in the Puritan churches.

The “spiritual” life of the community was entrusted to the church elders. The entire “social service” function of the community - caring for the poor and supporting those who were dependant (classically the “widows” and “orphans”) - was done under the leadership of the church elders. They were also the guardians of the public morals of the town. It is this function that has caused the Puritans to become regarded as censorious busy-bodies, largely because the definition of public immorality has changed in modern times. Blasphemy and profanity, sabbath breaking, wife-beating, and dishonest business practices - along, of course, with sexual immorality - were among the offenses for which citizens were routinely cited to appear before the Elders for repentance or censure.

In April of 1649, Lion Gardiner, the Proprietor of Gardiner Island, wrote to Governor Winthrop of Connecticut asking him to assist in finding a “suitable minister” for East Hampton.

As concerning the young Man you writ of, this is our determination, not to have above twelve families, and we know that we can pay as much as twenty-four in other places At present we are able to give this man your writ of Twenty Pounds a year, with such diet as I myself eat, till we see what the Lord will do with us; and being he is but a young man, happily he hath not many books, therefore let him know what I have.¹

And Gardiner proceeded to include a list of his small, but select, theological library, some of which are still to be found in the Long Island Collection of the East Hampton Public Library with Thomas James’ notes in the margins. Thus the Proprietor and the Minister were immediately established as soul-mates - supporting, encouraging and befriending each other to the very end.

It was, in fact, not until August 1651 that Thomas James arrived in East Hampton - at a salary more than twice what Gardiner had first offered. In addition to forty-five pounds a year, James was given twelve acres, including enough woodland to provide for his fuel needs, and the first grain to be ground at the mill each Monday.

Thomas James immediately became an indispensable member of the tiny village of East Hampton. It was normal for the minister, as one of the few educated members of the community, to be the teacher, to be everybody's secretary, to witness wills and arbitrate minor disputes. James repeatedly served as a trustee of the town, and often as secretary of the board. He also watched over and defended their political rights. He learned the Algonquin language of the Montauketts, and was frequently called upon to be an interpreter between the settlers and the indigenous inhabitants of this peninsula.

For the first several years the villagers had no sort of written laws, they simply lived together under the tacit and implied common law with which they were familiar. In 1654 however, Thomas James wrote Governor Winthrop and secured a copy of the Connecticut Combination, or Charter; and in October of that year they adopted a version of that document as the charter of the town. It was James who drafted the document and wrote the copy which the thirty male freeholders in East Hampton signed. It is a stereotypic statement of Puritan political theory:

Forasmuch as it hath Pleas'd the Almighty God by the wise dispensation of his providence, so to Order and Dispose of things that we, the Inhabitants of East Hampton are now dwelling together; the word of God requires that to maintain the Peace and Union of such a people ther should be an Orderly and Decent Government established according to God . . . to maintain and preserve the Purity of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, which, according to the Truth of such Gospel, as now practiced among us. As also in

our civil affairs to be guided and Governed by such Laws and Order as shall be made according to God, \and which by vote of the Major Part shall be in force among us.²

It should be noted that there is no reference to the authority of the King. Like the Mayflower Compact, divine authority is given to the people to govern themselves - in this case "the major part" meaning majority.

In 1660 the Puritan experiment in government failed in England, owing to its radical excesses, and the Stuart Charles II was restored to the throne. Governor Winthrop hastened to London to pledge loyalty to the new government and came back with a Charter for the Connecticut Colony - including the "island adjacent" - which among other things guaranteed freedom of worship to protestant dissenters. This was the legal basis on which the East Hampton Church continued to practice its Puritan theology and liturgy, even after it was forcibly incorporated a few years later into the Royal Colony of New York, with its established Anglican Church, when the English expelled the Dutch from New Amsterdam.

The Puritans of the East End strenuously protested against becoming part of New York, but to no avail. There then began constant problems with royal governors and their representatives and streams of petitions and protests over taxes and other matters. An "Address" to the Governor, written October 1, 1685, protests that a representative assembly which had formerly met at Hempstead had been abrogated. The statement, which was written by Thomas James, claimed that such representation was "a fundamental privilege of our English nation." It goes on to express the fear that "by denial of such privilege, our freedom should be turned into bondage and our ancient privileges so infringed yt they will never arrive at our posterity."³

The next year a much more serious incident occurred involving a land dispute. Eleven prominent citizens of East Hampton were arrested on the grounds that a petition they had

presented to the governor was libelous. The next Sunday, October 17, 1686, Thomas James preached a fiery sermon supporting his parishioners. The next morning a warrant for James' arrest was issued, and he was taken to jail where he spent the next three weeks until he petitioned the Governor to release him on the grounds that he was a loyal subject of King James II.

As Henry Hedges wrote in 1849: East Hampton was "happy in their choice of their Pastor." "Minister James understood the Indian language, sometimes instructed the Indians and preached to them, and acted as an interpreter. He was "learned, resolute, just, sincere, fearless, active, a powerful personality." Judge Hedges continues:

For nearly half a century he had been an able and devout minister to his people, intelligent in the understanding of their rights as free-born Englishmen, fearless in their defence. Only with his last breath went out his watchful regard as their minister. In attestation of his conscious discharge of duty, his intrepid soul prompted the desire to be so buried as to rise facing his people on the resurrection morn.⁴

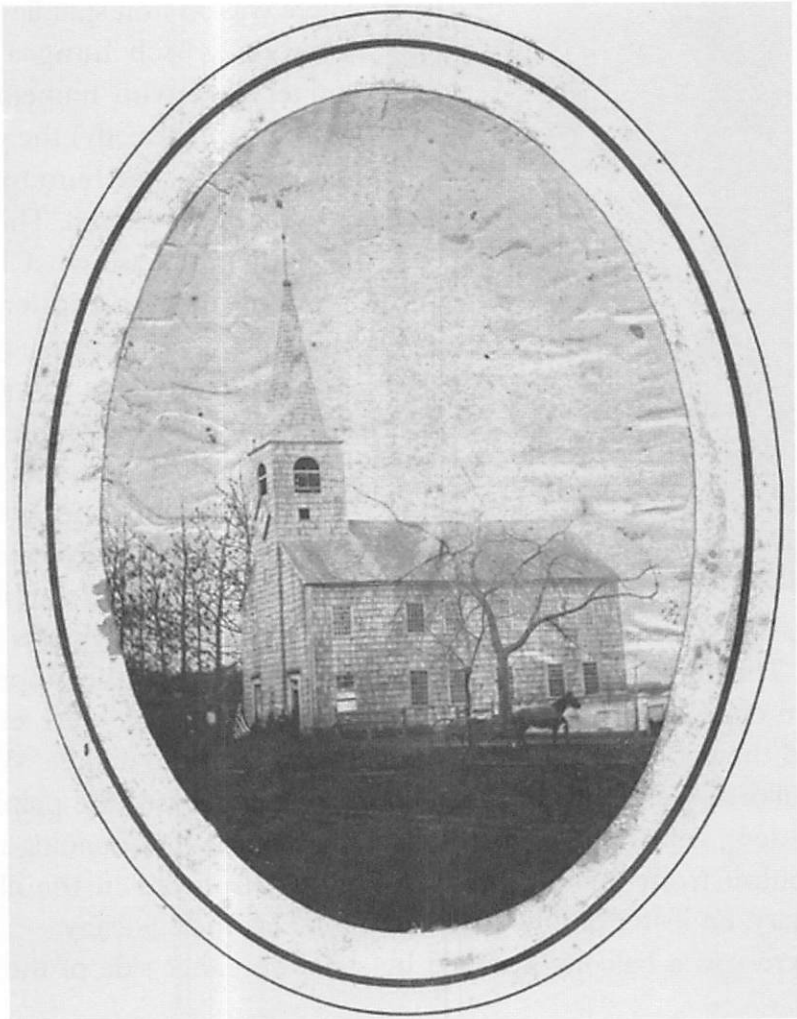
James served until 1699, though in his last years he became increasingly feeble, and Nathanael Hunting,⁵ then a twenty-one year old Harvard graduate, came to East Hampton in 1696 to "assist" Mr. James. When James died three years later, Hunting was ordained and installed as pastor.

Hunting had graduated from Harvard College in 1693 and received an M.A. degree, which was extremely unusual in the 17th century, in 1696. He was secured for East Hampton by the redoubtable Samuel Mulford, called "Fishhook Mulford" in East Hampton folklore, who journeyed to Massachusetts to make the choice and present the call. Hunting came to East Hampton with his bride, Mary, and occupied the house which the Town: "by unanimous vote: Doe freely give and grant unto him . . . and his heirs . . . forever." This house was operated after

his death by the Huntting family as "a common publick house," as it was derisively called, until quite recent times. Huntting's salary was sixty pounds a year, plus firewood.

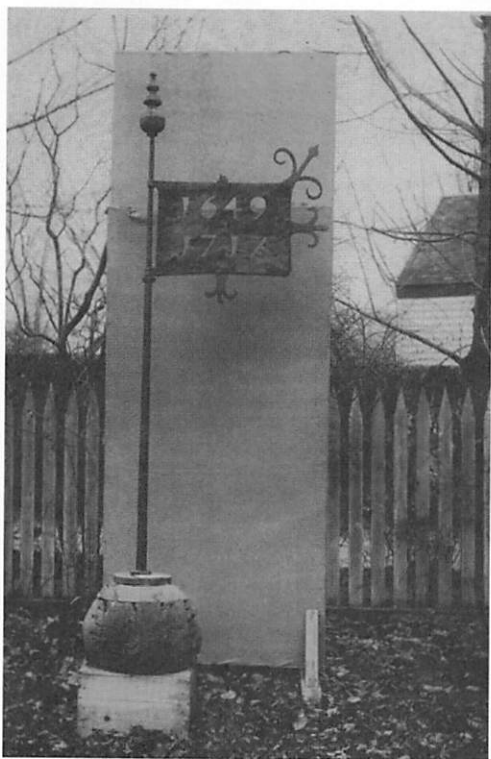
Huntting's habit of keeping meticulous and very legible records puts us forever in his debt. The greatest treasure of our church's archives is Huntting's record book. It contains a complete list of the baptisms, marriages, deaths, and church members from 1699 to 1746.

By the second decade of the 18th century, the village was large enough and wealthy enough to make the construction of a larger and more beautiful church building feasible. In 1717, the Trustees voted to construct a new building, which was located



on the south-east side of Main Street - approximately where Guild Hall now stands. It was described by the Long Island historians Thompson and Prime as "the largest and most costly church edifice on Long Island."

It was a rectangle, 45 by 80 feet, covered by clapboards and then three foot cedar shingles fastened with handwrought nails. There was a tower at the west end which projected slightly beyond the line of the main building. There was a belfry in the tower whose floor was



covered with lead. Above this square tower rose a sexagonal steeple. Above that, there was a long red cedar shaft or spire. There was an iron spindle on the spire on which hung a large copper vane with numerals cut denoting (incorrectly) the year of the town's settlement and erection of the church. This vane is in the museum in Clinton Academy, and a replica of it adorns the church steeple now.

Originally, there was one door on the middle of one of the long sides of the church. In an 1822 renovation, the entrance was moved to the steeple end of the church. The church was built

of massive white oak beams, 10 x 10 and the sills and posts much larger. The timber came from Gardiner's Island, a gift of the proprietor.

The church contained benches at first, later pews were erected around the perimeter of the room and benches in the middle. Women and children were seated at the east, men at the west. The pulpit was on the long wall, opposite the door. Over it hung the sounding board. The pulpit from the 1717 church is now displayed in the church sanctuary, on loan from the East Hampton Historical Society.

There was a balcony, reached by stairs on either side of the door.

Later, galleries were erected at each end of the building. These were all removed at the renovation of 1822, and the door on the long side was closed when new doors were built beside the tower.

At that renovation, a vestibule was created at the west end. There was an arched entrance to the church, looking to the pulpit which was then moved to the east end of the room. The vestibule was divided in half, and one section was reserved for the seating of black members of the church. Incidentally, though there were slaves in East Hampton - 25 in 1687 and 35 other persons who were described in the records as "servants," there was not segregated seating in the church until the 1822 renovation.

Four tall round pillars supported the pulpit, which was very high, reached by curved stairs on either side. In front of the pulpit, at floor level, was the deacons' seat; and in front of that the communion table, a simple leaf of cherry wood; turned up on hinges when used, and folded down when not in use. That table is also now on display in the church sanctuary, courtesy of the East Hampton Historical Society.

Controversy with the royal governors continued and increased, during Hunting's ministry, and though the right of dissenters to worship legally was no longer contested, East Hampton residents objected vociferously to the requirement that they pay taxes to support the established Anglican Church. In fact, in the long series of controversies between Samuel Mulford, whom East Hampton regularly elected to the General Assembly of the colony, and Lord Cornbury, the fanatically High Church royal governor, the payment of church taxes was routinely included among the villager's protests against "encroachments of our Liberties." In 1728 the East Hampton Trustees voted that "right or wrong, the town money shall go to ye payment of Mr. Hunting's taxes," meaning his support, though whether this protest was successful is not recorded.

Toward the end of Hunting's active career in East Hampton, the malaise which had affected religion in this country and

caused the decline of the vigor of Puritanism, came to a more or less sudden end with what is called the "Great Awakening." It began as early as 1734 when a revival of religion occurred under the preaching of Jonathan Edwards in Northampton, Massachusetts. The revival itself, however, should be neither surprising nor accidental. Puritanism was itself, by expressed intent, a religious reform movement which carried the seeds of its own reform within it.

Led by a remarkable series of ministers, the revival spread quickly throughout western Massachusetts and Connecticut. Yale College, founded in 1701, became a center of revival influence; while Harvard, which opposed it, gradually drifted into liberal Unitarianism. It is interesting to note in passing that evangelicalism and Unitarianism are the twin children of Puritanism - equal heirs.

The revival occurred simultaneously throughout the English colonies, from Georgia to New Hampshire. Among the revivalists was John Davenport, a young Yale graduate who had become minister of Southold in 1738. Davenport was a disciple of the great George Whitefield, but lacked the restraint and respect for decorum which characterized other evangelical leaders. In the fall of 1740, he came to East Hampton. According to the historian, "everywhere he aroused resentment and opposition by his fanatical harangues and his arrogant attacks on 'unconverted' ministers."⁶

The local historians simply record that there was a great religious revival in the winter of 1740-41, and mention that owing to Hunting's advanced age and infirmity, "the controversial Mr. Davenport" was the preacher. While some in the church, including Mr. Hunting, wished to prevent the unseemly excesses which had accompanied Davenport's preaching elsewhere, it is apparent that others liked the radicalism of the itinerant revivalist, and began to attend services conducted by Davenport rather than those led by the pastor.

The records of both church and town are silent as to how

this irregular situation was dealt with, but it must certainly have caused grief for the elderly and somewhat old fashioned minister. One of Hunting's successors, Ernest Eels, quotes Davenport as calling Hunting "a carnal old Pharisee," "a blind guide" and saying that the venerable old man, who had been a faithful pastor here for forty-four years was "unconverted." This kind of thing, especially as it was apparently supported by at least some of the congregation, must have torn the church apart. After leaving East Hampton in 1741, Davenport became more and more flamboyant - disturbed and disturbing. After several arrests, He was declared by a Massachusetts court to be *non compos mentis* and was eventually forced out of the ministry.

In 1745, with the congregation seriously divided, some in East Hampton began to look around for another minister to assist Mr. Hunting and to succeed him after his death. An invitation was extended to the Rev. David Brainard, a very famous missionary to the Indians in Massachusetts and Long Island. There was opposition in the congregation to this invitation, however, and Brainard declined it.

Just at that time, as the Town Council was lamenting the cost of searching for another minister, Samuel Buell appeared in East Hampton with a letter of introduction from the Rev. Aaron Burr, Sr. a well-known Presbyterian minister in Newark, New Jersey.

Dear Sir, These come by Mr. Buell whom we have prevailed with to make you a visit. It seems a very kind Providence yt sent him into these parts at this time.

He appears to me to be the most likely person to unite your people. He is a pious, judicious, and ingenuous young man, and an excellent preacher.

You will be pleased with him, and find occasion to bless God yt he is sent among you. Mr. Tennent joins

with me in recommending him to you, in ye fullness of ye blessings of the Gospel of Peace. We should not have stopped his designed journey to Virginia for any other place . . . ⁸

All the available local records indicate that Mr. Huntting retired voluntarily, owing to his advanced age and infirmity. But it is at least possible that the venerable old gentleman was perhaps eased into retirement by the controversy in the church stirred up by John Davenport and by the availability of a much younger and more dynamic successor. In any case, Huntting did retire in 1746, at the age of seventy one, after serving as the minister in East Hampton for forty nine years. He lived in retirement for seven years and died in 1753.

Samuel Buell was, in fact, an excellent choice as the third minister in East Hampton, a worthy advocate of the revival who exhibited none of the excessive emotionalism which had characterized the extremists such as Davenport. During Buell's early ministry there were several periods of revival in the church, in which large numbers of new members were received, but the controversy seems to have dissipated. Buell published several accounts of these revivals,⁹ and it is evident that the church did experience a significant renewal and revitalization in his early ministry.

Buell was ordained in East Hampton on September 19, 1746. His ordination sermon was preached by the greatest and most renowned minister in America, Jonathan Edwards. Edwards, like Buell, is typical of the best of the revival ministers. They were fervent, effective, and scholarly evangelical ministers who were always dignified and sober in demeanor. Edward's ordination sermon, "The Church's Marriage to her Sons and to her God," amply demonstrates this. It is a scholarly work of thirty seven octavo pages, with carefully crafted arguments and skilled use of language.

At about the same time as Buell became its minister, the East Hampton Church became Presbyterian. Buell was, in fact, one of the charter members of Suffolk Presbytery which was

organized in April, 1747 in Southampton. Seven ministers were present: Buell, and the pastors from Southampton, Bridgehampton, Brookhaven, Mattituck, Cutchogue, and Huntington.

Suffolk Presbytery affiliated itself with the Synod of New York which was the "New Side" branch of the Presbyterian Church - the church having divided in 1745 over the revival. The New Side, which was pro-revival, was attractive to the Puritan churches in New York and New Jersey. They brought a dimension of theological and liturgical freedom into a Presbyterian denomination, then largely Scottish and Scots-Irish and mostly confined to the Middle Colonies. Suffolk Presbytery, which became Long Island Presbytery a few years later, was only very loosely Presbyterian in the early days. The local congregations continued to order their affairs much as they always had. When the two branches of the Presbyterian Church reunited in 1757, this Puritan influence became a permanent feature of American Presbyterianism - causing it to be significantly different, in some ways, from the established church in Scotland. ¹⁰

Like both his predecessors, Buell was actively involved in the public affairs of this community. In May of 1756, he preached to a large contingent of Suffolk County men assembled in East Hampton before leaving for Lake George to fight in the French and Indian war. His sermon is a classic exposition of the "just war" theory which was first articulated by St. Augustine in the 5th century. Making the point that a defensive war is frequently necessary as well as lawful and an offensive war sometimes so, he then asserted that

'tis so notorious a cause that we wage in war at this time, none need scruple the lawfulness of it - 'tis in defence of our own people, and the cities of our God - 'tis for a land that is ours by the first discovery and priority of possession, which is allow'd to give title among civilized nations . . . 'tis . . . for the good of prosperity as well as our own that we now wage in war.

We learn by experience 'tis impossible to live by such blood thirsty neighbors as the French and their allies in America. They have broken the most solemn treaties, made most unjust encroachments and committed the most horrid barbarities in a time of professed peace. By their line of forts, surrounding our frontiers by land, they design we shall have but a garden spot in America - and as soon as possibly strong enough, to drive us all into sea - or, subject us to popish tyranny and superstition worse than death . . . while villainy secures all - our lives, our liberties, our religion.¹¹

The growing controversy with the Royal Governors, and resentment against British colonial policies affected East Hampton, of course, as they did all of British North America. When war broke out, hundreds of supporters of the revolutionary cause - including scores from East Hampton - fled eastern Long Island for Connecticut in the fall of 1776, after the British victory at the Battle of Long Island. Most of the residents remained here, however, and acquiesced to the British occupation of the area as best they could.

During the war and the British occupation of Long Island, Buell conducted a regular correspondence with leaders of both sides, especially the Patriot Governor Trumbull of Connecticut, and the Royal Governor, Lord Tryon, who for at least part of the war maintained his headquarters in Southampton. He complained to each about the other, especially the depredations which the armies of both sides wrought on the livestock of East Hampton. Though he protested to each his loyalty to their cause, he also fearlessly condemned soldiers of both sides who came here to steal cattle - as evidently both sides did.

Throughout the war - with General William Erskine headquartered in the Brown House on Main Street (now the Ladies' Village Improvement Society) and British warships often anchored in Gardiner Bay - Buell, along with the townspeople

who had not fled to Connecticut, maintained cordial relations with their military occupiers. He, along with all of the male residents who remained in East Hampton, took the oath of allegiance to George the Third which Colonial Abraham Gardiner required. Buell as a minister was perhaps better able than others to maintain a relationship with both sides in the war, to the benefit of the people of the town.

There is no doubt that under a military occupation, Buell, as a faithful pastor, did the best he could to preserve as much of normal life as was possible under extremely difficult circumstances. There is also no doubt that no matter who won the war, the minister would have been on the winning side.

In 1783, with the ratification of the Treaty of Paris, the British evacuated New York City and Long Island, and the people of East Hampton proceeded to elect representatives to the New York State Assembly. Almost immediately Buell turned his attention to the establishment of a school in East Hampton, and on December 28, 1784 the "East Hampton Academy" was incorporated. Five days later the school opened in the Presbyterian Church, where it met until the building now known as Clinton Academy was constructed at a cost of \$5,000. Buell died on July 19, 1798.

For the third time in a row, East Hampton called a very young minister, straight from the university, to succeed it's elderly, venerable, but perhaps tired and feeble pastor. This time they may well have gotten more than they bargained for, for although the people of East Hampton must by now have become tolerant of ministerial eccentricities, peculiarities and outspoken involvement in public affairs, they were probably not prepared for Lyman Beecher. One writer comments that Beecher's five feet, seven inch statue "in no way indicated his strength when he battled for the Lord, and even less betrayed the formidable character of the resistance he could offer to the minions of hell." ¹²

The stories about Beecher's eccentricities, and the controversies with the Trustees over his salary are well known

and well documented. He did, after all, write an autobiography, and there are numerous books and articles by and about the man who was without doubt the most famous minister in America in the 1830's and '40's. Beecher, called "the father of half the brains in America"¹³ had eleven children who survived infancy. The first five were born in East Hampton - including Catherine, an educator, feminist, and author of eighteen books. Harriet and Henry Ward, the most renowned of the children, were born in Litchfield.

Beecher graduated from Yale where he studied theology under Timothy Dwight - the great defender of orthodoxy against the depredations of deism and French rationalism. He tells in his autobiography of reading the obituary for Samuel Buell and of discussing with a friend the possibility that he might be called to succeed to what was quite a prestigious pulpit. His friend, Tudor Davis, came to East Hampton, where he apparently had connections, and returned to New Haven to report that the orthodox faction of the church were looking for a minister who could "stand his ground in argument and break the heads of the infidels."¹⁴

Beecher found here a church that was to some degree at least, divided by the "Age of Enlightenment" and influenced by deism. He blamed two faculty members at Clinton Academy for introducing "infidelity and French rationalism" into East Hampton. Beecher immediately became controversial. He was nick-named the "snow bird" - not because he went to Florida in the winter, but because neither storm nor season stopped his ceaseless movement.

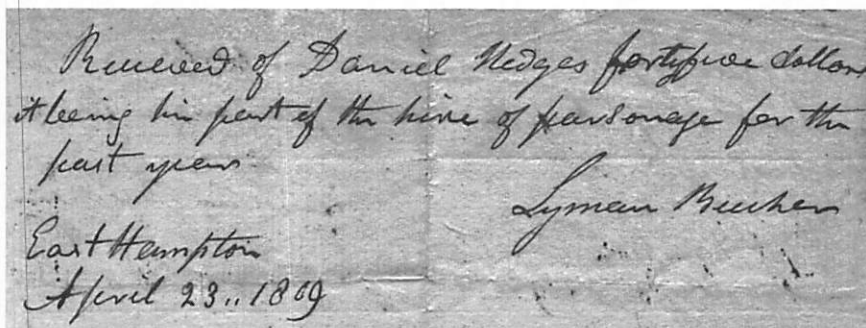
It is obvious that Beecher appealed to at least some of the younger, more zealous members of the congregation. Equally obvious, he was an embarrassment to the older, more established, perhaps more dignified parishioners. The famous controversy with the town authorities over his salary, therefore, conceals a larger controversy over the style of his ministry.

Beecher was one of the first persons to interest himself in East Hampton history. On New Year's Day, 1806, he delivered a

sermon on the history of the church and town. Acknowledging the outstanding collection of records of which East Hampton is justly proud, Beecher said about the early settlers:

They would have abhorred the infidel maxim, that religion and politics have no connection They considered that the precepts of their religion as extending to the regulation of their civil as well as to the regulation of their moral conduct¹⁵

The seeds for Beecher's national reputation - which centered around his controversy with the Unitarians in Boston, with the fundamentalists in Cincinnati, and over abolition everywhere - may have been laid in East Hampton by a sermon he preached here in 1804. Two of the most famous statesmen in America - Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr - met in a duel that was fatal to both. Hamilton lost his life, and Burr his reputation. Shocked over the death of Hamilton, the nation was scandalized by the behavior of Burr, who, under indictment for murder, appeared as Vice President to preside over the United States Senate.



Received of Daniel Wedges fortyfive dollars
it being his part of the hire of parsonage for the
past year
East Hampton
April 23.. 1809
Lyman Beecher

Receipt handwritten by Lyman Beecher, 1809

In the midst of this intense national uproar, Beecher preached a sermon which, because of its wide circulation, became sensational.¹⁶ Blaming “infidelity,” which many took to be a thinly veiled reference to Jeffersonian deism, Beecher said:

“There is no way to deal with these men . . . but to

take the punishment of their crimes into our own hands. Our conscience must be the judge, and we must ourselves convict, and fine, and disgrace them at the polls.”

The anti-dueling movement became a national crusade, with Beecher as one of its main leaders; and a few years later, in Henry Clay’s presidential campaign against Andrew Jackson, an alleged duelist, it was said that 40,000 copies of Beecher’s sermon were distributed around the country by the Whigs.

Beecher’s career after leaving East Hampton may be briefly summarized. Ordained in Connecticut as a Congregationalist, he became a Presbyterian in East Hampton. He then served Congregational Churches in Litchfield, Connecticut and Boston, where he became nationally known as the main opponent of the Unitarians. In 1832, he became a Presbyterian again when he accepted the Presidency of Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio. Immediately he became embroiled in the national controversy over abolition, and at the same time, he

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COMMUNICANTS				BAPTIZED		Whole Number of Families in the Congregation
<i>Added on examination</i>	<i>Added on Certificate</i>	<i>Coloured Communicants</i>	<i>Total Communicants</i>	<i>Adults</i>	<i>Infants</i>	
106		10	397	69	14	319

became the victim of attacks by Presbyterian fundamentalists - a breed he had never met in Long Island or New England. In 1835, in a sensational and nationally famous trial, he was narrowly acquitted of heresy charges by the Presbytery of Cincinnati. Beecher, seven of whose sons became ministers, returned to East Hampton in 1843 with two of them - William and Edward - and all three preached here the same day.

By the nineteenth century East Hampton was a quiet farming and fishing village. The Presbyterian Church continued to be a center of the village life, but with the establishment of St. Luke's Episcopal Church in the 1840's, it was no longer the only congregation in town. The church was served by Ebenezer Phillips (1811-1830), Joseph D. Condit (1830-1835), Samuel Ely (1836-1846). Alexander Bullions (1846-1848), Samuel Huntting (1848-1849), and Enoch Wines (1850-54). The Sunday School was begun in 1824, meeting just across the street from the church at Clinton Academy. For many years, the Sunday School teacher was also a teacher at the Academy, and was paid a small stipend by the church to

Church of **EAST HAMPTON** to the
to January 1st 1851.

120

FUNDS COLLECTED

<i>Domestic Missions</i>	<i>Foreign Missions</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Publication</i>	<i>Congregation</i>	<i>Presbyterial</i>	<i>Miscellaneous</i>
\$66.67	76.11	28.81	13.09	589.50		117.50

be "Sunday School Superintendent."

In 1848, the congregation elected Trustees, and the Town's ownership of property and financial involvement in the church's affairs came to an end. The following year, in a divided and controversial vote, the town trustees voted to give the manse to the church's trustees. This is very late for the local government to be involved financially with a church. The First Amendment to the Constitution prohibited the national government from either "establishing" or prohibiting the free exercise of any form of religion, but state and local governments had no such strictures until the adoption of the 14th Amendment following the Civil War. Nevertheless all state governments, including New York, disestablished churches in the Jeffersonian period; and support of churches by local governments, which persisted longest in New England, had come to an end almost everywhere by the early 1830's. It lasted in East Hampton until 1848.

In 1854 the church called Stephen Mershon as pastor. He was a dynamic and strong-minded minister who dominated the lay leadership of the church, rather than being dominated by them as his recent predecessors had been. Descended from an old Huguenot family,¹⁷ he graduated from Princeton University and Princeton Theological Seminary in 1854 and was called immediately to the pastorate of the East Hampton Church. He writes:

The young student hesitated. He had not yet worn the armor of one who must lead in the conflict against the enemies of God; and to stand in the pulpit of a Buel (sic), of a Lyman Beecher, . . . he felt to be no light thing. It was with fear and trembling an affirmative reply was written. On the 7th of January (1854) I came among you and sat writing till the midnight hour to complete my second sermon that I might preach to you the next day. After much persuasion, I consented to remain for three Sabbaths. The result was, at a large parish meeting, you

unanimously chose me as your pastor, adding fifty dollars to the amount which you had given my predecessor. This compliment gave the youthful candidate more assurance than anything else that was done at that meeting.¹⁸

Mershon and his wife, Mary Talmage, moved into what he described as a "large and commodious" manse, located about where St. Luke's Episcopal Church now stands. The church grew rapidly in the early years of Mershon's ministry, and in 1858 the Session House was built. It was originally located on Main Street, approximately where White's Pharmacy now stands. Mershon wrote many years later:

I have a vivid recollection of many things when I first came among you as pastor. Among them are the Prayer Meetings and lectures in the old town house.... How all the light that was there came from the tallow candles which one and another brought with them from their homes. How the people sat, some on little children's benches.... From this class it was the funds were raised and work was done which built for you yonder Session Room, which has been owned of God and made a rich, rich blessing to many immortal souls. I rejoice that it was built by you during my ministry among you....¹⁹

It was also during Mershon's ministry that the tragic wreck of the "John Milton" occurred on February 20, 1858 off Montauk Point, killing all 22 sailors aboard. Despite criticism from some in Long Island Presbytery that it was improper to bury anonymous persons whose church relationship was unknown, Mershon conducted funerals for all the victims in the church and their bodies were buried in the South Burying Ground. The grateful village gave the ship's bell, the only relic surviving the hurricane, to the church where it hung in the Session House to summon children to Sunday School for many years.



In 1861, the 1717 Church was replaced by the present sanctuary. The acre lot was purchased by James Madison Huntting, the great-great grandson of Rev. Nathanael Huntting, from his first cousin Deacon David Huntting for \$1500 and then given to the church. At that time the immense sum of \$9300 was already in hand for the construction of the church. Additional funds were raised, largely through the efforts of James Madison Huntting, who was President of the church's Board of Trustees, and the church was built without debt. The old building was sold by the church trustees to Jeremiah Dayton for \$250, and the lumber used to construct a house on Newtown Lane.

At the same time, about a hundred members of the church petitioned the session and the Presbytery of Long Island to organize them into the Amagansett Presbyterian Church. This was done with great affection and no bitterness, and Mershon preached the first sermon in the Amagansett Church in November, 1860.

During the Civil War, Mershon was an outspoken patriot. In

1863, following the Battle of Antietam, he and his wife, along with her brother the Rev. T. DeWitt Talmage, went to Virginia as medical volunteers. They first went to the make-shift battle hospitals, then to an army hospital at Fort Monroe, Virginia where they remained for several months caring for the wounded soldiers.

Mershon resigned as minister of East Hampton in 1866 and served a Congregational Church in Birmingham, Connecticut and then a Dutch Reformed Church in Middlebush, New Jersey. While there, he returned to East Hampton where he built a large summer "cottage" called "Seaside" on what is now Lily Pond Lane. Mary Mershon's brother, DeWitt Talmage, who was minister of the very large and prestigious Brooklyn Tabernacle Congregational Church, built a "cottage" next door. These two distinguish ministers, along with others, were among the first of the "summer colony" in East Hampton. The area in which they built was called "Divinity Hill."

By the last third of the nineteenth century, the history of First Presbyterian takes a somewhat different turn. The church grew rapidly as the community increased in size. East Hampton began to be transformed from a remote farming and fishing village to a sophisticated beach resort with much closer ties to New York City. Artists and writers with sometimes bohemian and unconventional lifestyles found a welcome here, as did wealthy persons "from away" who very often had little interest in religion or religious institutions. The church continued to provide a vital ministry of worship, education and community involvement; but the records turn to programmatic and institutional concerns that are interesting and important, but scarcely lend themselves to objective historical scrutiny. The archives contain much material which describes the work of women's organizations, the "Men's Club" - which sponsored a gala "New England Dinner" annually for many years, musical and dramatic presentations, missionary speakers, and a whole host of other activities which depict a busy and involved congregation. In 1880, the Springs Chapel was built by First

Presbyterian on land donated to the church by the Miller family.

Stephen Mershon was succeeded in 1867 by John Dunlop Stokes, who served as pastor until 1909 and pastor emeritus until his death in 1921. Norris Williams Harkness (1909-1930), Ernest Edward Eels (1930-1942) Francis Kinsler (1942-1949), Paul T. Bahner (1949-1959) Alexander Renton (1959-1972), Fredrick W. Schulz (1973-1993), and John Turner Ames (1995-present) are the twentieth century pastors of the church.

Judge Henry Hedges concluded his 1848 historical address on the 200th anniversary of the founding of East Hampton with these words which describe the early founders of the Town and the church:

We have heard of "illiberality" "hypocrisy" "narrow minded bigotry" "blue laws" "witchhunts" and a thousand other flings and sneers at the honest old Puritans of this country, until by the constant repetition of some faults which the Puritans shared in common with their opponents of that day, and by the imputation of many which they never had, many a weak minded man has been ashamed of those worthy ancestors who founded the institutions which secure us our political and religious freedom.

But those same queer old men and women in their antique apparel built America. They cleared her forests; exterminated her wild beasts; founded schools and colleges; fought the Revolution; established the Republic; framed the best Government under Heaven for a free people; and transmitted those immunities and institutions unsullied and unimpaired to their descendants.²⁰

We might add that they established a church in which the gospel of Jesus Christ has been faithfully proclaimed for eighteen thousand, two hundred Sundays - in which thousands

and thousands of babies have been received into the covenant, thousands of lives dedicated to each other in love, thousands sent home to their God with the prayers of the community. They preached the gospel with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love - to quote the modern ordination vow. We should be, and are, proud to follow in their train.

-Rev. John Turner Ames, Ph.D

1 Letters of Lion Gardiner, p. 34

2 Town Records, vol 1, p. 12,

3 Town Records, vol. II, p.169.

4 James left this instruction in his will which was filed for probate in Suffolk County Court. Henry P. Hedges, *A History of the Town of East Hampton, NY*, (Sag Harbor: J. H. Hunt, Printer, 1897), p. 55.

5 Hunting himself always spelled his first name "Nathanael" though most of the modern historians of East Hampton have not done so. I shall follow his example.

6 *Ibid.*, 285

7 Uncited quotation in: Ernest Eels, "The Pastorate and Preaching of the Rev. Nathanael Hunting, 1696-1746," *The Presbyterian*, February 21, 1935.

8 Letter from Aaron Burr, Sr., November 2, 1745; Long Island Collection.

9 Samuel Buell, "A Faithful Narrative of the Remarkable Revival of Religion in the Congregation of East Hampton . . .," (Glasgow: John Bryce, 1768); "The Surprising Work of God's Grace, Begun at East Hampton, March, 1764," (Sag Harbor: Alden Spooner, 1808); "An Account of the Late Success of the Gospel in the Province of New York," (Coventry: T Luckman, 1765).

10 Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: A Re-Examination of Colonial Presbyterianism*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949).

11 Samuel Buell, "A Sermon Studied and Preached to the Soldiers the Day Before They Set Out for Lake George and Crown Point," May 6, 1756; Long Island Collection.

12 Lyman Beecher *Stowe, Saints, Sinners and Beechers*, (Indianapolis, 1934), p. 17.

13 Oral comment to the writer by Stuart C. Henry, about 1970.

14 Charles Beecher, ed., *Autobiography, Correspondence, Etc., of Lyman Beecher, DD*, 2 vols. (New York: 1865), I, 18.

15 Lyman Beecher, Sermon, January 1, 1806, Long Island Collection.

16 Lyman Beecher, "The Remedy for Dueling: A Sermon Delivered before the Presbytery of Long Island . . ." (New York: privately printed, 1806).

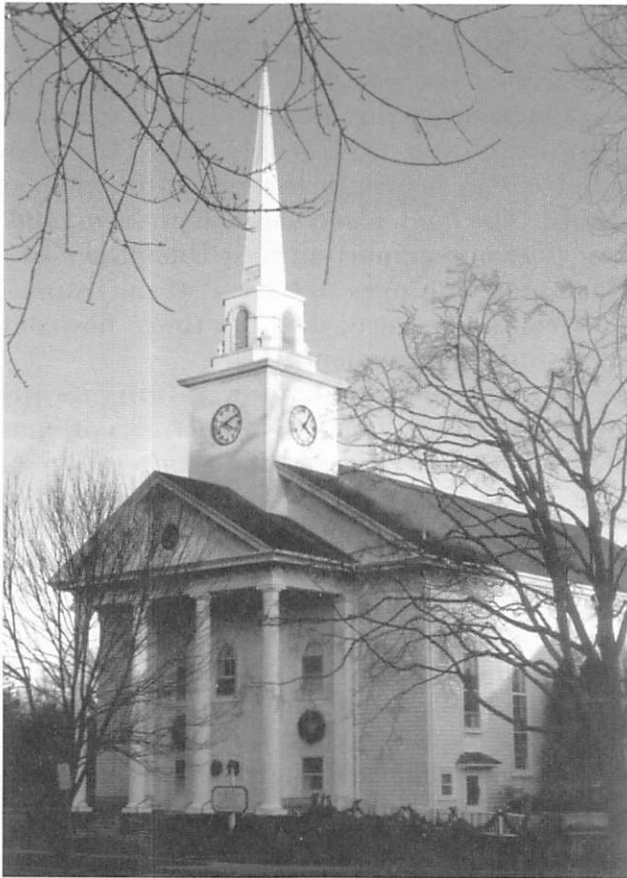
17 Stephen L. Mershon, Jr., *Reverend Stephen L. Mershon and Mary Talmage Mershon*, (Montclair, NJ, privately printed, no date).

18 Mershon, pp. 23-24.

19 Mershon, p. 38.

20 Hedges, pp. 38-39.

John Turner Ames is the nineteenth minister of the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton. He is a native of Mississippi, a graduate of the University of Mississippi (BA), Union Theological Seminary in Virginia (BD) and Duke University (PhD). He served as pastor of Presbyterian congregations in Maryland, New Jersey and Kentucky before coming to East Hampton in 1995.



The Church's Future

Our seventeenth century forebearers would little recognize late twentieth century East Hampton. Far from an isolated community almost untouched by the outside world, East Hampton is now considered a world-class resort - lumped into that famous destination known as "The Hamptons." East Hampton, the second home to so many prominent business and celebrity personalities, is often in the media spotlight, for better and for worse. There are many more "sides" to East Hampton now; it is a community under transition, and a community that struggles to maintain its identity while its landscape becomes increasingly developed and its natural resources are increasingly threatened. Its old career mainstays - farming and fishing - are nearly extinct, and while we celebrate those who maintain the tradition, they seem like anachronisms. The land is too valuable to farm, and working on the water does not support an East Hampton cost of living. But East Hampton continues to have a strong draw - both for those whose roots are here, and for those newcomers who discover its beauty and uniqueness.

The Presbyterian Church maintains its prominent position on Main Street, but it too must accept change. No longer the "established" church, the congregation now exists in a secular, pluralistic society. But the East Hampton Presbyterian Church has always endured change. In some ways so traditional, but in others always flexible, our church has survived the cycles of American history as well as the rise and fall of the church's role in society. Our congregation receives new members regularly: young families, single people, new retirees who move to the area, and part-time residents who are such an important part of our community. The church is a foundation and tradition in the community, while it embraces both diversity and change.

-David L. Filer

... and sworn to
that they have called on him
conversed with him agreeable
the resolution of the Session
their last meeting and that
he confessed that the ^{report} ~~of~~
taking the p^{er} was true
but denied the other
The Committee appointed
on Peter a servant of Deacon
Bandy and Philip report
Peter stated as the reason why
absented himself from the
of the Lord's supper that
the brethren had walked
early and declared that he d