

The History and Hymnody of Noank Baptist Church

Mission Church (1826-1842)

Imagine, if you will, the village of Noank in 1826—a mere six months after the July 4th when the lives of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams drew their last breaths. In all likelihood, it was a hamlet of hardtack fishermen and stony-willed descendants of the original colonists. The village had already existed for over a century, taken (some would say, unjustly) as it was in 1712, in a land petition away from the original Pequot inhabitants who watched, as Claude Chester put it, “in bitter silence as they saw their homes and lands divided and given to the white men”¹—this neck of land, the word for which in the Pequot language was “Nawyanque.” A century later, this little outcropping into the sea was inhabited by those with familiar names: Ashbey, Potter, Rathbun, Palmer, Davis, Latham, Burrows, Fitch, Chester, Rogers, Spicer, and, of course, Morgan.

Mr. Chester also wrote that it was the widow Morgan who hosted the first religious services in town, with Father Walworth, a lay preacher from Old Mystic Baptist Church, leading the effort. That may be true, though the church itself began as a mission of the Second Baptist Church of Groton (also known as Fort Hill Baptist Church), where Deacon John Palmer began a weekly Sunday School class in 1826 in the Noank schoolhouse. Five years later, the Associate Pastor of the mother church, Ira Stewart, led services every Sunday afternoon for Noank church members who didn’t want to trek up to the top of Fort Hill.

¹ *Noank: Celebrating a Maritime Heritage*, Noank Historical Society, 2002, pp. 50-51.

By 1841, a small meetinghouse was erected on this site and by early 1843 a “Special Meeting of the Baptist Brethren residing in the Village of Noank and vicinity” occurred, leading to the formal vote on March 11, 1843 to form the Noank Baptist Church in Groton. Quoting from the record,

It was a group of very wonderful people whose Calvinistic theology led them to adopt the motto: “God’s Providence is mine inheritance.” It seemed that God must have “sifted the entire colony to find the grain fit for this planting.” The entire history of sacred service does not furnish a finer example of devotion than that which characterized these plain, simple people, who in faith, laid the foundations of this church.²

Music was not always a part of the worship of early Baptists in America, who viewed singing as merriment worthy only of a tavern. Eventually, they allowed their Christian devotion to be expressed through the poetic lyrics of various hymnwriters whose words were set to the tunes of familiar songs of the day. Such was the case with our next hymn. Issac Watts was a prolific English hymnwriter of the eighteenth century. His hymns were considered classics even among renegade Baptists, often serving to teach sound Christian doctrine as much as for expressing piety and praise to God. Early Baptist hymnbooks contained many of his works, including “O God, Our Help in Ages Past”—Watts’ beloved and enduring paraphrase of Psalm 90.

O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.

Fishermen’s and “Fishers of Men” Church (1843-1860)

In 1843, two-hundred twenty-three members of the Fort Hill Baptist Church were dismissed to form the Noank Baptist Church of Groton.

² Ibid. pg. 55.

Robert Palmer (an Anderson family forebear) became the Superintendent of the Sunday School—a post he would hold for the next 65 years! Brother Bailey from the First Baptist Church of Groton was called as the church’s first pastor. Since the new church was made up of virtually the entire population of Noank, the village was a little barren as a mission field. However, they solved this dilemma by dismissing derelict members who didn’t bother to show up on Sundays or were partaking in unchristian debauchery (e.g., dockside profanity, drunkenness, card-playing, bad-mouthing the leaders of the church, and disturbing worship and meetings). This pretty much emptied the pews and left things ripe, then, for a customary Noank revival! However, it was an onerous task converting Noankers, so pastors typically didn’t last very long: Brother Bailey (5 yrs), Rev. Avery (1 yr), Elder Smith (1 yr), Rev. Phillips (3 yrs), Pastor Haven (<1 yr), Rev. Jones (1856-1859; 1866-1869), and Rev. Knapp (< 1 yr). Basically, it was a pastoral nightmare to exorcise the devil out of village residents, who were averse to exhibiting Calvinist sobriety and the virtuous countenance of God’s Elect!

Yet, through it all, hymns were sung with gusto. Baptists have always been known for their singing. One favorite from the time still remains so, “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me.” For Noankers surviving on ledgerrock, the steadfastness of a strong foundation in their lives was as real as facing the ocean storms and frigid winters that threatened their existence. The hymn itself was composed by Irishman Augustus Toplady, who

...was in a field in England in 1776 when suddenly a violent storm broke out. He was far from town and shelter, but saw a large rock and...found a crack into which he could fit. ...While waiting out the storm Toplady reflected how Christ, who is called our Rock of Salvation, was broken that we might find in him shelter from the coming judgment. On a playing card he found at his feet [which was a

point of identity with Noankers], he wrote the poem “Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.”³

Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee;
Let the water and the blood, from thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure; save from wrath and make me pure.

Rival & Revival Church (1860-1890)

In 1860, the Civil War broke out. The Baptists of the North had already split from those of the South fifteen years earlier over the matter of slavery, resulting in the Northern Baptist (American Baptist) Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention. However, it would be played out once again in the arrival of Rev. Charles Weaver in 1860. Weaver (ancestor of our own Debbie Bates) was a powerful preacher, netting over 80 new members to the church within his first year. However, he was also a fervent abolitionist with an attitude. I’ll defer to others to tell this delightful story another time. Suffice to say, the church split with 72 members joining Rev. Weaver in forming a new church, the American Union Church, with their own rival meetinghouse less than 100 feet away in the area of the upper parking lot. One can only imagine the competitive atmosphere during summertime services with windows wide open and rival appeals to the unrepentant heathen of Noank! It was a proleptic image of hell! What eventually reunited the two congregations, however, was not moral or philosophical reconciliation rather, the building of a new meetinghouse on this site in 1867. The Weaverites, in their far more spartan facility next door, could not offer prospective members a recessed pulpit, choir loft, and a building heated by two hot air furnaces (there was plenty of hot air, mind

³ Henry Gariepy, *Songs in the Night*, Eerdmans, 1996, pg. 23.

you, but not in furnace form). “Forgiveness” was sought in exchange for more comfort and sensual pleasure—a typical hallmark of Noank piety.

Noank’s rivalries may not have inspired it, but around this time Joseph Scriven wrote one of the most beloved hymns which became a favorite here, i.e., “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit, oh, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.

This period to the end of the 19th century was highlighted by several pastorates and revivals bringing in the sheaves and then the church’s deacons sending most of them back out as chaff. Religious conversions, however, were still the aim and mission of the church, evident in another popular song of this era, i.e., “Just as I Am.”

Just as I am, without one plea,
But that thy blood was shed for me,
And that thou bid’st me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

Village Church (1890-1930)

The final decade of the 19th century was transitional for the church from a time of revivals and membership purges to becoming more established and steadfast as a local institution and pastors with familiar names. Following the tenure of William Swan, Rev. William C. Martin arrived in 1894 and quickly made an impression. In what their Calvinist forebears might have viewed as unmerited amnesty (or cheap grace), excluded and shamed former members were warmly welcomed back into the fold, ushering in a repatriation of over 160 people to the membership

rolls. The loving spirit of the congregation's sudden goodwill transformed the atmosphere of the entire town. As stated in our record:

...the "kindly greetings not only at the church but on the streets as well [were expressed in] the loving welcome and warm handgrasp. Strangers coming into the village could feel something peculiar in the atmosphere, feeling the power of the Holy Spirit, feeling a welcome, and feeling the influence of home ties before even approached by our people. ⁴

The church also expressed their generosity beyond the village by establishing a Mission Society. But perhaps William Martin was best remembered for the hymn he composed, which was published soon after he left Noank in many gospel hymnbooks and one we still refer to as the "Noank hymn", "My Anchor Holds"—a song sung with the gusto of a sea chanty with a lasting message intended for every wayfaring Noanker.

Though the angry surges roll on my tempest-driven soul,
I am peaceful, for I know, wildly though the winds may blow,
I've an anchor safe and sure that can evermore endure.
And it holds, my anchor holds: blow your wildest, then, O gale,
On my bark so small and frail; By His grace I shall not fail,
For my anchor holds, my anchor holds.

After Rev. Martin left for greener pastures, in 1900, the church extended a call to the Rev. Elbert E. Gates. While tending this flock, many improvements were made to the meetinghouse, including a new organ, pastor's study, Sunday School rooms, and a choir room. That was done to accommodate the 150 or so registered for Sunday School. However, there may have been an additional ulterior motive for the young pastor. Eligible Elbert took a liking to Grace Morgan, the church's organist. Before long they were making beautiful harmonies together and were married October 3, 1906. This must have met with the approval of the church, for at the next annual meeting, they raised the pastor's salary from \$200 to \$1300 a year—

⁴ "Growing and Building in Love: A Brief History of Noank Baptist Church 1843-1993", pg. 10.

a whopping “merit” increase of 650%! Such generosity had never been witnessed before in Noank! However, to the relief of the few illiberal congregants, the church only had to pay him half that sum, as the Gateses left town by July. Elbert, eventually, would go on to become the Executive Secretary of the Connecticut Baptist Convention (ABCCONN). With such acclaimed ecclesiastical status, when Dr. Gates retired in 1950, the church welcomed him back as “Pastor Emeritus.” However, there may have also been one additional reason. Elbert and Grace had a son who became a minister at Union Baptist in Mystic—a rather comedic character and music-meister of a sort, commonly known as “Pearly” Gates. Though Noankers would never think of leaving their own church, they always prudently hedged their bets by associating with anything and anyone related to “Pearly Gates.” Making his father “Pastor Emeritus” was a small gesture to assure eternal reward.

Other highlights from this period include the building of the church parsonage (for which I’m grateful) and the launching of Christian Endeavor Society and Baptist Youth Fellowship, while also seeing the work of the Ladies Aid Society, Women’s Missionary Society, and the Young Ladies Guild expand to keep the church afloat. Noank Baptist was no longer a floundering group of local elect and reprobate. It became as steady a presence in this town as the rock upon which the meetinghouse stood.

Favorite hymns sung at this time are many of the “Old Chestnuts” people here love, including what is considered the most popular Christian hymn of all, “The Old Rugged Cross,” composed in 1913 by George Bennard, a member of the Salvation Army and a Methodist evangelist.

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of suffering and shame;
And I love that old cross where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain.
So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it someday for a crown.

Crisis and Community-Building Church (1930-1962)

The beginning of this chapter in the church's history was defined more by what was occurring in the larger world at the time. The Stock Market crash of 1929 ushered in the Great Depression which impacted Noank as much as anywhere. The recovery, however, was extended by the Great Hurricane of 1938 and the call to service after Pearl Harbor. For a number of years, Noank lived through crisis and many hardships.

Through most of the 1930s, Rev. Frank Tobey was the pastor. Notably, it is said how the church came together to take on the costs of repairing the steeple twice, along with refurbishing the parsonage and purchasing the property known as our upper parking lot (which apparently someone forgot to include in the American Union reconciliation in 1868). Not easy to do in lean times.

Hymns of this time were most of the old-time gospel favorites, including one no longer in our hymnbooks, "Let the Lower Lights Be Burning"—composed by Philip Bliss after hearing a story told by evangelist, Dwight L. Moody, about a ship crashing against the shore when it lacked sight of the channel lights guiding it to safety. Noankers, of course, would understand the literal and figurative message of his text.

Brightly beams our Father's mercy, from His lighthouse evermore,
But to us He gives the keeping of the lights along the shore.
Let the lower lights be burning! Send a gleam across the wave!
Some poor struggling, fainting seaman you may rescue, you may save.

When Rev. Tobey left in 1941 to become a military chaplain, the church called Gordon College student William Millar to serve as interim. He came to serve in Rev. Tobey's leave of absence, but eventually was called as the settled minister when Rev. Tobey resigned in 1943. Young Rev. Millar was known for his gregarious and generous spirit, for his outreach to the entire community (including Groton Long Point and West Mystic), and for writing to all the village's service personnel.

Rev. Millar was hard to follow, but when he left in 1951 it was ably done by Rev. Art Knauer, who was instrumental in expanding the facilities of the meetinghouse for Sunday School and gatherings. The church expanded its programs and organizations and was, in many ways, the center of village life.

Art Knauer was loved, as was his successor, Earl Abel, whose time was marked by greater involvement in the American Baptist Convention, Camp Wightman, and Baptist Youth Fellowship gatherings. However, as much as the sense of community inside and outside the church was palpable, this era ended with another crisis, i.e., when the meetinghouse was destroyed by a devastating fire on Christmas Eve in 1959. The loss of the steeple twenty years earlier was nothing like this catastrophe! For endless months turning into years the congregation met with the Methodists on Sylvan St. for services until our present meetinghouse was completed in 1962. It was an era defined by crisis and the community-building response, with the broader commitment of a shared ministry in

ecumenical spirit, expressed in the lyrics of another hymn of the time, “In Christ, There is No East or West.”

In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north,
But one community of love throughout the whole wide earth.

A Generous and Generative Church (1963-2000)

It almost goes without saying that this chapter in Noank’s history could be called, “the Jim Pratt era,” as he served his entire career in ministry here in this church. Although Jim was a visionary and an instigator of many things, this period is more about how the church responded and came to gain its reputation for community ministry and social justice—identifying needs that could be met with extraordinary commitment and generosity.

When Jim and Nancy arrived in 1963, I doubt church members knew what they were getting into or about to experience over the next four decades. A quick summary is this: Corner Closet, Mystic River Homes, Noank Baptist Group Home, Mystic River Homes Congregate, Mystic Area Ecumenical Choir Festival, refugee resettlement, Memorial Garden, Peace Committee, Church Street House AIDS Ministry, among the myriad things that marked this era. Very few churches anywhere have a legacy like this. Suffice to say, it is a time that largely defined for many in Noank what the Christian church was, is, and is meant to be. Forty years of generative ministry allows for that kind of legacy.

Jim, as a Harvard and Yale graduate, brought to Noank erudition and the interests of the larger world and concerns of humankind. Perhaps, a fitting hymn for this historical chapter is the beloved hymn composed by

the first minister of the Riverside Church in Manhattan, Henry Emerson Fosdick, who envisioned the Christian church as an institutional and intellectual force for the betterment of society and humankind, perhaps inspired by his Baptist colleague, Walter Rauschenbusch, who articulated well the Social Gospel.

God of grace and God of glory, on thy people pour thy power;
Crown thine ancient church's story; bring its bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour,
For the facing of this hour.

The Twenty-First Century Church (2000-present)

This present era is marked more by the challenges of the post 9-11 world (endless war, gun violence, climate change, economic disparity) and an American population leaving the traditional religious institutions of society. But it's also one where people yearn for spiritual grounding in the face of so many cultural, social, and political changes.

Since 2000, Noank Baptist has had only two settled pastors, Susan Lockwood and myself, but the church has undergone various changes in how we go about ministry in these times when volunteers are harder to find and the economics of doing ministry have greater cost. However, we have managed to carry on reasonably well, even while we are challenged by the stresses of maintaining property, trying to engage our very busy children and youth, and inspiring the congregation to live faithfully in Christ in a world that increasingly discounts the value and place of traditional religion. We will continue to be confronted with new developments in technology

and ways to reach people with the essential meaning of the Gospel for our times.

Our final hymn reflects the ever-changing, flowing and flexible nature of faithful living, inspired by God’s creative and empowering Spirit.

“Restless Weaver” is a song for these times—our current chapter of Noank’s history that is yet to be fully written or known.

Restless Weaver, ever spinning threads of justice and shalom;
Dreaming patterns of creation where all creatures find a home;
Gathering up life’s varied fibers—every texture, every hue:
Grant us your creative vision. With us weave your world anew.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
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