



One can hardly detect the tiny bridge connecting the two modern day towns of Hamilton and Ipswich, Massachusetts on what, in 1714, was called the Bay Road but is currently called 1A. The swollen spring rains that made the river impassable and separated the two towns, was sound reason for requesting that a new church be created in order for the people of the ‘Hamlet’ to worship without interruption. Thus, the First Congregational Church of Hamilton began over 300 years ago. Three hundred years ago: Merely 94 years after the Mayflower landed at Plymouth, 63 years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the same year as the crowning of King George I and the birth of George Whitefield, and the year the typewriter was invented. A rich history, indeed!

The church of the ‘Hamlet’ was a country parish church, the 3rd parish church of Ipswich to be precise. In pre-colonial times, this meant that the parish meetinghouse stood at the very center of the little farming village in every way: physically, in its civic and societal life, as well as spiritually. Although no longer a parish church in a political sense, it continues to seek to serve the life of the community of Hamilton and the towns surrounding it in terms of service and faithful witness.

The church is noted especially for its first two ministers, ministers who served the church for 106 years combined. Both were extraordinary men given the rural setting of the parish church. The first was Samuel Wigglesworth, son of the famous early Puritan poet, Michael Wigglesworth, who wrote Day of Doom. Educated first as a doctor at Harvard, as minister of this church, this slight, non-assuming man set a course of orthodoxy for 54 years that continues to this day.

The second minister was even more remarkable in the expansiveness of his influences and giftedness. Dr. Manasseh Cutler wore many hats as he ministered in the little parish. Educated in law at Yale, before he became the second parish minister, he entered into a variety of business ventures. He then received training and became minister of the church, which didn’t keep him from also becoming one of the foremost early botanists and students of astronomy in America, a soldier-chaplain and the aide de camp to General Lafayette during the Revolutionary War, for a time a medical doctor, an educator—starting a school for boys on the third floor of his house—, and finally, a two term representative of the Federalist Party in Congress.

Cutler knew and was friends with many luminaries of the day, including John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, James Monroe, Benjamin Franklin, and George Washington. Of his many interests and diversions in life—not the least his time in Congress—it was attributed to him,



*Manasseh Cutler*

*“That the doctor did not neglect the spiritual wants of his people during his absence at Washington, letters still preserved make abundantly clear.”*

Perhaps the most long-lasting accomplishment of this remarkable man was that he was central to conceiving of and ushering through Congress the Northwest Ordinance that opened up Ohio and the regions beyond, including Michigan, Indiana, and Wisconsin. “Westward Ho!” The first wagon trains leaving west literally left from the doorsteps of the Hamilton church! Cutler was especially instrumental in developing the educational and anti-slavery priorities of this vast region. In the midst of these accomplishments, Wigglesworth and Cutler set a course for orthodoxy and personal piety in the church that remains to this day. Both men were deeply committed to the cause of the Great Awakening that was guided and directed by such men as George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and Gilbert Tennent. George Whitefield, the great 18th century evangelist, in fact, preached twice in the church. Later, after the Revolutionary War and in the face of significant pressure to do otherwise, the church remained solidly Trinitarian in its theology against the onslaught of a growing Unitarian movement that encompassed the region.

This solid theological footing remains to this day. The church has had its ups and downs throughout its 300 years. Most notably, there was a low point in the second half of the 20th century when the church struggled to keep its doors open. At that critical moment, God began to do a mighty work in the church and it regained its footing and began to flourish. Thanks be to God, the First Congregational Church of Hamilton has become a wonderful example of a renewed church that has found new life in Christ. May it be so today and on to the future.