

## **“A Look at a Small Part of First Parish History”**

A Review of Events That Led Up to First Parish Unitarian Universalist

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When First Parish members show the Meeting House to friends or guests, they will often mention that the first minister, Nehemiah Hobart, was a grandson of Peter Hobart. Peter Hobart was, of course, the first minister of First Parish in Hingham. It's certainly an interesting fact; it adds a bit of the human element to the story. Truth is, however, in 1721 when Nehemiah was being ordained in the old building that was a few rods south of the present one, the family tie would not have seemed at all remarkable.

In the first place, everyone attending the ceremony was a grandchild of an original founding family of Hingham. In addition, everyone would have known that Nehemiah [1604-1679] and his twin brother Edmund [1604-1686] had fathered 25 children between them. They would have known that Edmund and Nehemiah had two brothers Thomas [1606-1689] and Joshua [1614-1682], who also fathered 25 children. Their sister Nazareth gave birth to 10 children. So there certainly was no shortage of Hobart grandchildren in the second precinct of Hingham in 1721.

There were about 42 families that settled in the area known as Bare Cove between 1635 and 1638. In 1635 the General Court in Boston granted them rights to over 20,000 acres between the Weymouth Back River and the Colony Line at Scituate. They were also permitted to change the name of the town to Hingham after their former village in England. Eighty-six years later, at Nehemiah's ordination, those first families with names like Jacob, Lincoln, Hobart, Cushing, Tower, Bates, Nichols, Beal, James and others were still the only ones living here. Why?

The “Great Migration” of Puritans from England to the Massachusetts Bay Colony lasted from 1629 to 1642. In just a bit over a decade it's estimated that at least 20,000 people, for almost exclusively religious reasons, settled in the area that is now eastern Massachusetts. We all have the general idea of their motive, but few Americans are familiar with enough British history to know why the migration ended.

The English Civil War started in 1642, and among the results was the beheading of Charles the First in 1649 and the beheading of the much hated Archbishop Laud in 1645. Cromwell's overthrow of the monarchy and the creation of a short lived republic called the Commonwealth of England [1649-1659] ended any reason to leave. In fact, some of the Puritans returned to their homes when life for them had become perfectly safe. In any case, from that time on, all population growth in New England for almost two centuries was completely internal.

After Nehemiah was ordained, he built a home in 1722. We still enjoy it to this day as our Parish House. In 1724 he married Lydia Jacob, a descendent of the Jacobs who were with Peter Hobart in 1635. Lydia died in 1736, and in 1739 Nehemiah married Elizabeth Pratt. She was descended from a Mayflower family and was, by the way, one of 15 children. Her brother Aaron was the father of 9, and his son Aaron fathered 16.

Nehemiah died in 1740, never to see the present Meeting House. In 1752 Sarah Hobart, a daughter of Lydia and Nehemiah, married Francis Lincoln, a carpenter who worked on the Meeting House. He died in 1762 and Sarah married Deacon Isaac Lincoln, a cousin of Francis. Both men, of course, were descended from a Lincoln who was one of the first to arrive in Hingham in 1635. Isaac, by the way, fathered 13 children.

A major reason to have the status of a precinct [not granted until 1717] was the need to build and fund a school. It wasn't until 1728, however, that a school committee was elected. The first members were John Jacob, [an uncle of Nehemiah's first wife Lydia], Joshua Bates, one of the men who planned the present Meeting House, [the other two men were James Stutson and John Stephenson] and John Orcutt from over the line in Scituate. All three men were descended from original families.

Well, in 1750 John Browne bought the Parish House from the Hobart estate and began his ministry. Rev. Browne's father was a 1714 Harvard College classmate of Nehemiah Hobart and of Hingham's Rev. Ebenezer Gay. Although John Browne was a vigorous supporter of the revolutionary cause, and Ebenezer Gay remained a Tory throughout the war, the friendship of these men seemed able to survive their differences, and they shared pulpits after the war.

By 1800 Jacob Flint is the minister at First Parish, and the fragile equilibrium that has been holding most of the old Congregational churches together is starting to weaken. In 1803 an important Chair at Harvard, after much dispute, has gone to a liberal, the Rev. Henry Ware of Hingham. [At this point the term Unitarian is not in common use. Ware and others call themselves "liberal" Christians, "rational" Christians, and even "catholic" Christians.] In 1808 a leader of the orthodox wing, Dr. Morse, has managed to fund the creation of the Andover Theological Seminary for the purpose of training men to oppose the liberal Harvard graduates. In 1819 William Ellery Channing gives his Baltimore Sermon, and in 1820 The Dedham Decision stuns the orthodox members of the various congregations by depriving them of the church properties should they choose to leave.

Here in Cohasset, Rev. Flint has seen a Bible Study Group formed in order to have young ministers from Andover Theological come and preach in the more orthodox homes. Although Jacob Flint is hardly a Unitarian, certainly not by Channing's standards, his views on salvation and original sin are apparently not satisfactory to the orthodox members, because in 1820 "as a result of religious differences" 20 parishioners sign articles of agreement to build another meeting house. Those twenty people, with the possible exception of two, ARE ALL DESCENDED FROM THE FIRST FAMILIES.

Part of my reason for trying to understand all of this has been an interest in these people as everyday parishioners. What were they like? Most of us know each other reasonably well, but what if we knew each other's fathers and mothers and maybe all the cousins and grandmothers and grandfathers? What if we knew how many apple trees or pear trees were in each other's orchards, or knew the names of everyone's horses and how much milk their cows were giving?

Could we go in peace?