

CHURCH HISTORY NOTES Jonathan C. Stock, Church Historian

Building the Second Church Part II: Architectural Influence--Economy and Beauty

Construction projects, like all major life activities, mandate decisions: strategic choices that mould results. Building the Second Church demanded that we strike a balance between two such choices: **what we could afford** and **what we wanted**. What we could afford had to fit the slender resources of a “New England Country Parish.” What we wanted was an exquisitely beautiful House of Worship.

The key decisions about building our Second Church were made in a series of rapid-fire Society Meetings held between January and March of 1835. We need to focus initially upon a special committee appointment recorded on February 2, 1835:

Voted. That James Jennings, James Johnson, Jeremiah Oakley, Thomas Dimon and William Coley be a Committee to view different Houses and draught Plan for the House. (Book I, p.127)



Courtesy of the Saugatuck Congregational Church

The committee mandate was clear--to find the best architectural model from among neighboring Churches and, within modest resources, to build the best result. Of the aforementioned members, two merit special attention: James Johnson, the Contractor and James Jennings, the Architect. The Contractor had to build what we could afford; the Architect had to design what we wanted.

We know that James Johnson was the contractor, because he received specifications from our Governing Body. These specifications were frugal indeed. A Society Meeting held on January 27, 1835 implied clearly that the project had to go forward with stringently limited resources:

*Voted. That we build a new Meeting House near where the present one now stands, and appropriate the old one in part payment of the new House *** - - - - - (Book I, p. 126)*

No relocation costs were allowed. Costs for new materials were minimized by recycling still useable boards from the original structure into the new Meeting House. Nor was there a mandate for greatly increased space. Measurements for the original Church had been set forth by a Society Meeting held January 3, 1763 mandating that the House should be “In length 47 foot In bredth 35 foot, posts 23 foot” (Book I, p.9). By contrast, a meeting held on February 9 of 1835 authorized only slight enlargement:



Courtesy of the Saugatuck Congregational Church



*Voted. That we build the said House 50 Feet by 36 Feet and that we have w Spire Steeple the highth of which to be in proportion to the House ---
--- -----(Book I, p. 127)*

Courtesy of the Saugatuck Congregational Church

The 1835 Church was to be only three feet longer and one foot wider than its 1763 predecessor. Interestingly, there is no itemization of construction costs; nor is there any listing out of special contributions earmarked for the project. These absences are significant because, linked to the restrictive specifications, they suggest very tight funding. James Johnson had his work cut out for him.

So did James Jennings, the architect. That he filled this role is strongly suggested by his first position—ahead even of James Johnson—on the “viewing committee” authorized February 2, 1835. Further compelling evidence emerges in A New England Country Parish as Rev. Hines cites a brief line from the now vanished diary of Bradford Winton. The entry is dated May 31, 1843:

Died James Jennings - noted carpenter and builder.

Another important clue may be found in our January, 2009 newsletter concerning the sampler created by his eldest daughter Harriet: a sampler incorporating the image of a Church on a Hill—an image of the 1763 Meeting House embroidered with guidance from her father’s sketch. James Jennings had officially joined the Church eight years before the project on March 4, 1827—ample time for him to have drawn the original Sanctuary and, with its image in his mind, to envision the new.

The Committee, guided by James Jennings, had a mandate “to view different Houses and draught Plan for the House.” Many houses were viewed; but only one, the very best, was chosen as a model for our own. What was that very best model—the one that would build Jerusalem in Easton’s green and pleasant land? We have a clue. Our clue comes in a Society Meeting resolution dated February 9, 1835:



Voted. That the painting of the interior of the house be like that of Saugatuck Meeting house. --- ----- (Book I, p. 127)

Not only did they paint like Saugatuck, but they **built** like Saugatuck It was the inspiration for our Easton Church.

Courtesy of the Saugatuck Congregational Church

James Jennings, eminently qualified for his task, was the viewing committee’s chairperson and architect. He knew what was “state of the art” in its time; and, in its time, Saugatuck Church was state of the art. Our historical bookcase collection includes Early Connecticut Meetinghouses by J. Frederick Kelly, an invaluable resource incorporating a detailed chapter about Saugatuck: its construction, architecture, and subsequent building history. Kelly tells us what we need to know. The original parish had been Greens Farms, founded in 1711. The Greens Farms Society, then known as Saugatuck, included the modern municipality of Westport. Thirty-six members of the Greens Farms Congregational Church withdrew effective July 5, 1832. Slightly more than one month later on August 15, the Saugatuck building committee reported that their new structure had reached completion. Kelly pointedly cites a passage from this report which casts significant light on their available resources, resources in stark contrast to

our own three years later:

*...although the house is not perfect in all its parts, it is well adapted to the object for which it is designed, and the committee trust it will be approved by its Patrons. Your committee deem it proper to further state that in their judgment the house **at any calculation is worth its cost.***

The Saugatuck Congregation, composed of affluent families transferring from an outlying parish toward a bustling commercial center, could afford to deem its new Meeting House worth the cost “at any calculation.” These records, unlike our own, include a subscription list setting forth donors names with amounts; and, also unlike our own, they indicate specific costs by line item. Uriah Ambler, the contractor, received \$2,900.00 and—with allowed supplementary expenses added in—the total figure was \$3,365.63. That was big money in 1832. Saugatuck could build **beauty**; and it could build **large**, setting a high standard.



Courtesy of the Saugatuck Congregational Church

James Jennings did, indeed, have his work cut out for him. There was no hope for building **large**. He could not match the outer dimensions, the massive bell tower, the lofty ceilings, the large windows, the powerful columns supporting an expansive balcony, or the spacious pews ranked in three units from right to left with a central tier bisected down the middle. Our architect could not build **large**, but he could build **small**—emulating in miniature the majesty of his model. For a New England country parish, small was better. It fitted our size but, more importantly, it matched our spirit. Beauty would arise from economy. Economy and beauty would be one and indivisible. That was how Jerusalem was built in Easton’s green and pleasant land.

¹J. Frederick Kelly, Early Connecticut Meeting Houses, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1948), II, 280-285. A special note of gratitude is owing to Phillip Doremus for recommending the resource to this writer’s attention.

²Ibid., p.280.

³Five images, reproduced within this article, have been generously provided by the Saugatuck Congregational Church. A special note of thanks is owing to three Saugatuck colleagues: Mr. John Loeck who was the photographer, Mr. Gary Stuart who provided the link, and Marsha Harrington—their most supportive Church Secretary who facilitated access as well as providing helpful background information.

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old familiar carols play.
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of Peace on earth, good will to men.

I heard the bells on Christmas Day