

First Presbyterian Church of Northport, NY

Our History



First Presbyterian Church of Northport
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COURTESY OF THE NORTHPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Celebrating 225 Years
of Worship
1785 - 2010

**PASTORS OF THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NORTHPORT, NEW YORK**

(Names in parentheses were associate and/or assistant pastors.)

Rev. Joshua Hartt	1785-1809
Rev. Nathaniel S. Prime	1809-1812
Rev. Henry Fuller	1816-1819
Rev. Ebenezer Platt	1822-1824
Rev. Nehemiah B. Cook	1826-1832
Revs. McLaughlin, Wickham, Sparry	1833-1835
Rev. Nehemiah Cook	1835-1837
Rev. William Townley	1837-1843
Rev. Ebenezer Platt	1844-1850
Rev. Israel B. Smith	1851-1856
Rev. S. G. Law	1858-1872
Rev. Henry C. Woodruff	1872-1880
Rev. John F. Shaw	1883-1885
Rev. George H. Cleveland	1885-1889
Rev. James C. Hume	1889-1892
Rev. Charles G. Ellis	1893-1901
Rev. Allen F. DeCamp	1902-1905
Rev. Charles S. Tator	1906-1917
Rev. Homer A. Taylor	1918
Rev. U. A. Guss	1919-1923
Rev. Paul E. Thurlow	1924-1925
Rev. William M. Mitchell	1926-1946
Rev. Lewis A. Briner	1947-1950
Rev. Homer B. Ogle	1950-1953
Rev. John M. Deason	1954-1966
(Rev. Michael Lukens)	1962-1965
(Rev. James Watson)	1965-1967
Rev. Robert W. Jewett	1967-1978
(Rev. Eugene R. Augustine)	1968-1973
Rev. Leon Flanders	1978-1979
Rev. Michael L. Lindvall	1979-1992
(Rev. Scott Sheldon)	1985-1989
(Rev. David G. Harvey)	1989-1994
Rev. Barbara B. Lucia	1993-1994
Rev. Stephen D. Michie	1994-2004
(Rev. Hans Fetzer)	1995-1998
(Rev. Todd Schumpert)	2000-2001
Rev. Charles M. Webster	2004-2006
Rev. Timothy Hoyt Duncan	2006-Present

First Presbyterian Church of Northport

Our History 1785 – 2010

For two hundred and twenty-five years, First Presbyterian Church of Northport has constituted a Christian fellowship and provided a place of worship for area residents.

Today, given its long history, the church seems to stand as a permanent fixture. However, in its beginnings the church struggled for survival.

I. 1785 - 1830

Such changes will involve relocation of the church offices, choir room, nursery, chapel, and the Joshua Hartt Room. Work is expected to commence in the summer of 2011.

When contemplating the significance of the renovation program, the Rev. Timothy Hoyt Duncan, our pastor since 2006, observed that: “The work we are beginning will benefit us, our children, their children and the community of Northport for generations to come. The good that will come from this endeavor is beyond our knowing, and we can take satisfaction that we do this as Christ’s servants and that we do it together.”



**Special thanks to Fred Black
for his many hours of dedicated work
to compile this historical account.**

The American Revolution and the war which followed weakened organized religion in the colonies, especially on Long Island, which the British occupied during much of the conflict. Churches suffered from empty pulpits, suspension of religious services, poor attendance, and damaged buildings. Surprisingly, amidst the general disarray and upheaval, a group of believers had sufficient faith and dedication to organize a religious fellowship and construct a meeting house in a remote corner of Long Island’s North Shore known as Fresh Pond. This was the beginning of First Presbyterian Church of Northport.



COURTESY OF THE NORTHPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

That beginning is poorly documented, and we do not know the identity of the founders. The site is believed to have been the intersection of Makamah Road and today’s Route 25A. When it appeared that England would lose the war and withdraw its troops, residents of the area drew up accounts of monies due them for goods and services commandeered by the British. One entry lists losses resulting from British construction of a fort in Huntington between September 1782 and February 1783.

Among the items the British appropriated were “100 feet of boards taken from Fresh Pond Meeting House.” This is the first mention in the surviving historical documents of the Northport church. It fixes the date of the founding of that organization as 1783, if not before.

Such a conclusion accords with the findings of Nathaniel S. Prime, author of history of Long Island published in 1845. Prime, who served as pastor of the Fresh Pond Meeting House, from 1809 to 1812, writes that at Fresh Pond “a house of worship was erected some sixty years ago...” He adds that “it was supplied, a part of the time, by the Rev. Joshua Hartt...” Hartt is regarded as the first pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Northport.

No records generated by the Fresh Pond Church itself can be found for its first twenty- five years. The next mention in the historical documents comes in 1794, when a committee of the Presbytery of Suffolk County made a visit to Fresh Pond and conducted an inquiry. The committee learned that “no church had been organized there constitutionally.” On the basis of the report, the presbytery directed Joshua Hartt to form a church “agreeable to the constitution” and asked that “he supply them as much as his convenience will admit.” Not until October 1796 did Hartt report to the presbytery that he had organized the church at Fresh Pond. According to a listing assembled in 1809, at least twenty-seven people had become members of the church by 1796.

Doubtless, the church focused inward on the spiritual need of its members, but under the direction of the presbytery it contributed funds to several “out reach” programs - support of “invalid ministers of our denomination;” missionary work among the Indians on “the frontier;” and the rebuilding of the College of New Jersey (Princeton).

The Fresh Pond congregation endorsed temperance and accepted the presbytery’s recommendation that Christians should not include ardent spirits in the hospitality extended to others.

Since 1950, there has occurred a steady proliferation of organizations within the church, giving greater recognition to different ministries in the congregation. Also there has been a broadening of the membership of existing agencies and committees. The multiplication of groups and activities within the church has been paralleled by an expansion of its mission in the local community and in the world at large, as evident in a number of undertakings. The church, in essence, donated occupancy of the building immediately to its west, known as The Place, for use by Concepts for Narcotics Prevention. Since 1970, The Place has provided Northport with a program to alleviate drug-related substance abuse problems. Other community services provided by the church are the Food Pantry (housed in the basement) and the Weekday Nursery School, which currently serves ninety children ages three to five years.

Moving further afield geographically, the Northport Presbyterian Church gives support and financial assistance to the Iglesia Presyteriana Hispana of Hempstead. Its members constitute an outreach congregation and are considered members of our church. An even more distant outreach program consists of our connection with the Presbyterian church at Nueva Paz, Cuba, which began in 1985. In 2004, the Northport church assisted in the rebuilding of the sanctuary of the Cuban church. Most recently, in December 2009, a group of seven from Northport visited Nueva Paz to celebrate Christmas and the New Year.

Membership in the First Presbyterian Church of Northport presently stands at 514 with approximately 120 children enrolled in the Sunday school. The church is currently embarked on a campaign of extensive physical improvements. Just under 1.3 million dollars were raised by the congregation to renovate the center section of the church building. That undertaking addresses a number of needs: handicap accessibility, climate control, more rest rooms, enlarged meeting space, greater security, and improvements in the Food Pantry.

In addition to longer periods of service, the ministry of the church changed in other ways. One development was the appointment of assistant and associate ministers; the first to be so installed was Michael Lukens in 1962. In another unusual happening, Hans Fetzer of Sindelfingen, Germany, held the position of ecumenical associate between 1995 and 1998. Finally, in another first, a woman, Barbara B. Lucia, occupied the pulpit of the church, serving in an interim capacity for one year beginning in March 1993.

The pastorate of Reverend Lucia has symbolic importance. Until the second half of the twentieth century, the Northport church, as did American society at large, made a distinction between the “proper” roles of men and women. During religious services in the early days of the Fresh Pond-Northport church, men sat on one side of the sanctuary and women on the other. Although full members of the church, women did not vote when the congregation considered such matters as the selection of a pastor. Beginning in the 1880s, organizations composed entirely of women and with their own officers began to be formed, such as the Ladies Aid Society and the Women’s Mission Association. Since child care and child rearing were traditional functions of women, they were to be found in Sunday Schools as teachers and in other capacities.

It seems that not until the 1950s did women take their place on important committees, such as those nominating elders and engaged in the recruitment of new pastors. The first two women elected as elders were Rose E. Skidmore and Rose F. Veit, both ordained in 1955. Today, women and men share as equals in the opportunities and responsibilities of church membership.

Ordained as minister of the Presbyterian church in Smithtown in 1774, Hartt filled the pulpits at Fresh Pond and Smithtown until he was dismissed from the latter in 1787. In 1799, the presbytery appointed him as the stated supply at both Fresh Pond and Hempstead, and during much of his career Hartt served as minister of two churches at the same time. He also engaged in other activities, being a missionary to the Indians in the vicinity of Cherry Valley, operating a school, and making land surveys in Huntington and elsewhere. These various demands may have conflicted with his responsibilities to his Fresh Pond congregation.

In April 1808, problems between Hartt and his flock were brought to the attention of the presbytery by Elder Robert Rogers. At Rogers’s request, a committee of the presbytery traveled to Fresh Pond and gathered information from Hartt and from members of the congregation. The presbytery’s committee reported:

“In this place there exists and has existed for years a very general neglect of the means of grace — that the public worship has been attended by few and the sacraments for a long time had not been administered.... It also appeared that these difficulties have arisen and continue principally from the people’s being so many of them dissatisfied with Mr. Hartt as a minister....”

In view of these “melancholy facts,” the committee recommended, and the presbytery concurred, that with respect to Fresh Pond, “in the future the Rev. Mr. Hartt desist from preaching and other ministerial labors....” Hartt agreed with the findings and recommendations of the committee. He did not resist his termination. On the verge of extinction, the church had the good fortune to quickly find a competent replacement, Nathaniel S. Prime, who served from 1809 to 1812. In the winter of 1809-1810, Prime divided his time between the churches of Smithtown and Fresh Pond. Thereafter, he devoted his full attention to the latter, which he soon revitalized, arranging for the regular election of elders, initiating the maintenance of church records, and doubling the membership.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Fresh Pond Church had a series of ministers, most of whom served for only two or three years. Sometimes the pulpit was vacant, as during the four years after Prime's departure. At other times the Fresh Pond church had to share its minister with another congregation. During one period it briefly merged with the church at Smithtown. Despite the rapid clerical turnover and occasional vacant pulpit, the Fresh Pond Church steadily enrolled new members. Perhaps with hopes of an even larger membership, a decision was made to move the church to a new location.

II. 1829 - 1890

In 1829, the building used by the Fresh Pond Church was dismantled and reassembled in an area then known as Red Hook, the intersection of today's 25A and Vernon Valley Road. Church records do not explain reasons for the move. However, while Fresh Pond remained an area of dispersed farms, Red Hook, because of its location near the convergence of a number of important roadways, was becoming something of a commercial and population center, boasting a general store, a post office and a growing number of homes. Soon to be found among those homes was the first parsonage of the Fresh Pond Church. Probably because it had been incorporated in 1828 as the "Presbyterian Church and Congregation of Fresh Pond," the original name continued to be used despite the move to a different site.

In the antebellum years, the church at Fresh Pond church drew its congregation from a sizeable area, as evident in arrangements made in 1833 to conduct Sunday evening prayer meetings at five school houses. Those buildings were located at Commack, Clay Pits (today's East Northport), Crab Meadow, Fresh Pond, and "the neck." An elder supervised the prayer meeting at each of four of the schools. The pastor had charge of the meeting at the school 'at the neck,' the location of which has not been determined. The church's reach extended further east, and on an earlier occasion the session held one of its meetings at the school house in Sunken Meadow.

The exterior of the church received attention in 1980, when the wall were repaired and repainted. The undertaking also included repair of sidewalks, dry wells and other cement work, installing storm windows, rehabilitating the rear entrance, repair of the parking lot retaining wall, and installation of a mechanical chair lift for the handicapped on the east side of the front steps. Fifty thousand dollars were raised to finance these various improvements.

Most of the time, the deterioration of the physical plant comes slowly. Not so with respect to one incident in the recent history of the church. At approximately 5:10 P.M. on Saturday, August 27, 1993, during a brief and violent rain storm, a bolt of lightning struck the ninety-five foot steeple of Northport's Presbyterian Church. The bolt blew off the entirety of the west side of the steeple. The rest of the steeple was damaged and had to be removed. On the other side of Church Street, parishioners of St. Philip Neri RCC were celebrating mass. Their lights flickered and the organ malfunctioned briefly. Their service continued, but under the distraction of the noise and commotion outside, as the fire department quickly arrived on the scene. The members of St. Philip Neri RCC contributed \$1,000 toward the cost of replacing the steeple.

The most recent improvements to the church building include a complete repainting of the sanctuary and steeple, reconstructing the front steps, rebuilding the basement foundation walls, new windows in the basement, installation of new brick pavers, and new landscaping in the Memorial Garden.

Almost since the very beginning of the Northport Presbyterian Church, most of its pastors remained only a few years. This pattern fades in the years after 1950, when tenures of a decade or more became common. John Deason had a twelve-year pastorate (1954-1966); Robert W. Jewett, eleven years (1967-1978); Michael Lindvall, thirteen years (1979-1992); and Stephen Michie, ten years (1994-2004).

In December 1946, an amplification system for the chimes was dedicated to three men of the church who had died while in the service.

IV. 1950 - 2010

Perhaps because of the Great Depression and World War II, no major building improvement occurred in the 1930s and the 1940s. Significant innovations began in 1952 with alterations in the lighting and heating systems and an overhaul of the organ. More importantly, the Parish House was remodeled to provide additional space for classrooms and offices. However, the refurbished Parish House proved inadequate for the growing membership and activity. Church membership totaled 422 in January 1951, and the Church School had an enrollment of 208. In 1953, the number of new church members totaled sixty-five.

Given this growth, the decision was made to replace the Parish House with a three-story brick structure to house a Fellowship Hall intended for social functions, church organizations, and community use. The new facility also included a gym and stage, additional class rooms and offices, a modern kitchen, and a large parlor (now the Joshua Hartt Room). The project was completed in 1958.

In 1972, the sanctuary underwent a major renovation and rearrangement at a cost of \$89,000. Work required stripping the old sanctuary to the bare walls. The new sanctuary has an eloquent simplicity that seems in accord with the antiquity of the church and its roots in the Reformed tradition.

Between 1830 and 1860, no major changes seem to have occurred in the church, its structure, beliefs, or congregation. However, for some time Presbyterianism in America suffered from a major schism. A division between the so-called Old School and the New School originated in the 1820s and lasted until the 1860s. Old School clerics charged the New School with departing from theological orthodoxy by reinterpreting such central theological elements as original sin. Accusations of unorthodoxy produced hearings and trials at various levels, and presbyteries and synods split. In 1845, two organizations both claimed to be the Presbytery of Long Island. The Fresh Pond church was affiliated with the Old School presbytery. By the 1860s, the schism in Presbyterianism nationwide became less acute, both sides recognizing the need to be tolerant of different views. However, problems in Northport were just beginning.

The impact of the schism upon Presbyterianism in Northport is clear enough, but we do not know any of the details. A harbinger of troubles may have appeared in 1856, when a clergyman from New York City declined an offer from the church to become its pastor because of his apprehension “that the discordant elements in your parish are not yet so entirely harmonized as to preclude the possibility of their making trouble hereafter.” Trouble did occur thereafter. Israel B. Smith had served as the Fresh Pond pastor from 1851 to 1856 without any unusual happenings. But four years after his departure from that position, he formed a second Presbyterian church known as the New School Church. That organization acquired a building on the site now occupied by the St. Philip Neri church. Smith remained at the head of the New School church until at least 1868.

The division among Northport Presbyterians between Old School and New School occurred belatedly, but lasted for almost fifteen years. It became visually more vivid when the Fresh Pond Church again relocated, building a new edifice at its present location, immediately across the street from its rival.

How the split involved the decision of the Old School church to build a new house of worship is unknown. Prior to 1872, there had been an increase in church membership, church attendance and enrollment in the Sunday School. These increases may have led Rev. Sydney Law (1858-1872) to advocate that the church be moved to larger quarters in Northport. Discussion of a new location and a new structure took place at the same time as efforts were made to unite the two Presbyterian churches. A committee of the presbytery visited Northport and promoted the union. Some objections arose because it appeared that uniting the two institutions would require the resignation of Reverend Law, popular among the Old School parishioners. However, Law recommended that the issue be considered apart from his own circumstances. When the matter was put for a test vote before a meeting of the Red Hook congregation in April 1872, questions were raised about the legality of such a gathering, and a large proportion of members did not vote. The measure in favor of union passed, receiving about thirty-seven votes, almost all of those cast.

In March 1873, the Old School congregation approved contracting with Henry Sammis, a local carpenter, to construct the new church for the sum of \$8,000 plus the old Vernon Valley building. Sammis moved that structure to a site at the foot of Main Street where it remained until demolished in 1965. Work on the new church was complete in late 1873 and was occupied by the reunited congregation. Perhaps the actual merger took place in 1874, when the records indicate twenty-five persons were added to the membership.

Unification of the Old and New School congregations was not accompanied by unanimity of opinion on such issues as the mission of the church and its role in the community. Conservative elders resisted programs designed for women and young people and objected to allowing use of the church for non-religious activities, such as school commencements.

China Child Welfare. Speakers included a missionary to Tripoli and a Princeton Theological Seminary student from the Middle East. Several churches in the Brooklyn area received support from the Northport church. In March 1938, two Northport elders attended a special meeting to deal with the threatened foreclosure of the Community Church of Flushing. And in 1944, the session voted a small sum for the First Spanish Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn.

Occasionally, social and political issues in the nation were addressed by the session and the congregation. Although Prohibition was the law of the land in the 1920s, it suffered from lack of enforcement in some areas, such as New York. In May 1926 the session requested the Anti-Saloon League provide a speaker on one Sunday during the following month. Some New Deal measures encountered objections. In December 1933, Presbyterians arranged a Conference on the Religious Implications of the National Recovery Program. Two of the elders of the Northport church attended, the conference held in Manhattan. Six years later, the session informed New York's senatorial and congressional delegations of its opposition to the inclusion of Presbyterian clergymen in the old-age pension program of the Social Security system.

The greatest impact of the world at large on the Northport Church and its people was World War II. One piece of evidence suggests that at least sixty men who were church members or otherwise connected with the church served in the armed forces during the war. In 1943, the church sent to those men copies of a booklet, "Prayer for men in Service." Other literature distributed by the church included a pamphlet, "Your Church in War-time Service," and a program entitled "A Service for Worship for V.E. Day." Church groups prepared kit bags for servicemen and provided money for the USO, war orphans, and war refugees.

The church in the years 1926 to 1946 generally followed a schedule of a Sunday morning service, a Sunday evening service and a mid-week prayer service. Of course, Lent and Holy Week were the occasions of increased activity. In 1938, for example, the session voted to hold services every evening, except Saturdays during the two weeks preceding Easter. Frequently, the Presbyterians, Methodists and Episcopalians joined together for services in the period before Easter, rotating the location and the leader of the services among the three institutions and their clergymen.

Cooperation among the three Main Street Protestant churches of Northport was most evident during the Easter season. But it also occurred at other times. However, interdenominationalism had its limits. In February 1943, the session considered a proposal for an "organic union" of the Episcopalian and Presbyterian churches in the United States. The session was lukewarm in its reaction to the proposal, voting to continue negotiations but giving support to reservations and exceptions outlined by a committee of the presbytery.

One unique event occurred shortly before Mitchell became pastor. During the first two weeks of February 1925, a revivalist, Isaac Ward, conducted a series of services in the Presbyterian Church of Northport. Ward had been a chief assistant to Billy Sunday, the best known revivalist clergyman in the years 1900 to 1920. However, Ward was no Elmer Gantry-type. His presentation was "constructive, deliberate and without the spectacular display usually present at evangelistic services." As a result of Ward's endeavors, thirty people joined the church.

Reverend Mitchell may have had a special interest in missionary activity and on several occasions delivered an illustrated sermon on missionary work. During the Mitchell era, in addition to the regular missions, during the Mitchell era, the church supported relief work in Puerto Rico and a fund for

A more progressive view came to prevail in the disputes respecting what was proper in the activities of churches. Greater attention and support was given to the Sunday School and to foreign and domestic missions. New organizations within the church included the Ladies Aid Society and the Women's Missionary Society. Changes occurred in Sunday services because of the organization of a choir in 1875.

In October 1878, steps were taken formally to abandon the original name of the church and to substitute instead the designation the "Presbyterian Church and Congregation of Northport." Within a few years, the term the "First Presbyterian Church" came into use. These changes in nomenclature were fitting since it appeared that the church had entered a new era.

III. 1890 - 1950

After the uniting of the New School and Old School congregations, there never was a question about the survival of the First Presbyterian Church of Northport. Challenges would arise but nothing that jeopardized the existence of the church.

In the three decades after 1890, the church building experienced improvements. Most important was completion in 1907 of the Parish House behind the sanctuary. The addition contained a pastor's study and rooms for the choir and Sunday School. Modern utilities came to the church in 1894 with the installation of electric lights. In 1898 and 1903 running water was installed in the parsonage and the church itself. The first organ appeared in the sanctuary in 1901. In 1907 renovation of the sanctuary occurred, including redecorating, new cushions, and new windows. In 1914 improvements included new carpeting in the sanctuary, improved kitchen and dining facilities, and installing a Moeller pipe organ. Many of the improvements in the physical plant were financed by women's groups, such as the Ladies Aid Society and the Stitches.

Of greater importance than the physical plant ranked the recruitment, reappointment, and dismissal of pastors. Unusual circumstances surrounded one pastor's decision to resign. The active ministry of Charles S. Tator stretched from 1906 until 1917, when he obtained a leave of absence from the church. He entered the United States Army, then engaged in what became known as World War I. Serving as a captain in the chaplains corps, Tator was sent to France. His military duties brought him close enough to the front to experience and suffer from artillery bombardment and gas attack.

In the mid-1920s, the Northport Church encountered difficulties in the dismissal of two pastors and the election of a third. Uriah Guss, installed in 1919 became increasingly unpopular with the congregation. According to one elder, Guss was "reserved, distant and not easily approachable." At a meeting of the session in April 1923, it was moved that Guss be requested to resign. In his capacity as moderator Guss refused to allow action on that motion. Subsequently Guss explained that "he felt that he had been called here [the Northport pulpit] by the Lord and would leave when the Lord called him away...." At one meeting, the congregation by a vote of forty-four to eleven called on the presbytery to "dissolve the Pastoral relation" between them and Guss. Guss also appealed to the presbytery and asked for a commission to investigate all aspects of the church, "everything temporal and spiritual connected with the church and congregation." A committee appointed by the presbytery made an investigation, but more importantly it also persuaded Guss to resign.

Guss's successor, Paul Thurlow, also resisted his dismissal. He had been granted a one year appointment starting May 30, 1924. When the session announced a congregational meeting in early September 1925 to select a new pastor, Thurlow took "great exception," apparently citing some irregularities in the session's announcement. After further meetings of the congregation and the intervention of the Presbytery, Thurlow agreed to an arrangement whereby he was relieved of his pastoral responsibilities and continued to receive his salary until November 1.

The hard feelings and unpleasanties generated by the Guss and Thurlow episodes seemed likely to continue because of the circumstances whereby William Mitchell was named as the next pastor. This time the bitterness was between factions in the congregation. In a meeting of the congregation summoned to elect a pastor, twenty-two ballots were cast for Mitchell and twenty-two for another candidate Rev. John A. Erikson. On the next ballot, Mitchell received twenty-two votes and Erickson twenty-one, with one blank ballot. Erickson's supporters stood firm to the bitter end, and twenty of them voted against a motion to have the record declare that Mitchell had been elected unanimously.

Fortunately, that rocky beginning was not prophetic of Mitchell's ministry. His abilities and efforts proved sufficient to maintain him in office for two decades, the longest pastorate in the history of the church. The Mitchell years, 1926 to 1946, coincided with turmoil in the nation and the world at large. Through it all, the First Presbyterian Church made its way without encountering major obstacles.

During the Mitchell pastorate, the church changed little in its governance, organizations, worship services, and relationship with the community. In June 1926, the church adopted the rotation system for the session, whereby one-third of the elders were elected each year for a three-year term. However, that system was not immediately observed, and at annual meetings the congregation repeatedly re-elected the same elders. Ultimately, the new system was implemented, producing a session with a broader, more diverse composition and more responsive to the concerns of the congregation.