

First Congregational Church – Celebrating 150 Years of Expansion and Volunteerism
By Ann Gray

The church building completed in 1869 at a cost of \$7,826.06 had little resemblance to the current church. There was a long flight of outside stairs for entry into the sanctuary. These stairs ended where the fanlight window is now located and entrance to the downstairs was from Church Street.

In December 1913, there was a Congregational vote to repair and rebuild the original church. The outside stairs were removed, a small hill in what is now the lawn was removed, the wood frame was bricked over, and the present entrance vestibule was built. At the same time a parish house was built to form the “L” in the rear of the Church. The cost of remodeling the entrance and building the parish house was \$18,000.

The church kitchen was completely rebuilt in the late 1940’s. The ladies of the church were mainly responsible for the kitchen design. However, the Rev. Earl Vincent drafted the plans and supervised the work – not a normal part of a pastor’s job description.

In 1959, it was determined additional space was needed and a single story addition on Church Street was designed. The cost for the addition and a complete renovation of the Parish House was approximately \$90,000. This project was completed in 1961.

In addition to the church itself, First Church owns other property. In 1887, Bryon Steven’s house in the back of the Church was purchased for a parsonage; and in 1961, the Hildreth property (current Thrift Shop) was purchased in order to gain additional parking.

With the completion of the one-story addition and the purchase of the Hildreth property, First Church and the surroundings resemble the current church property -- none of this growth would have been possible without the help of church members volunteering their time.

In the very beginning, a volunteer building committee oversaw the construction of the original church; and in the 1870’s, the ladies of First Church managed the victualing (serving of food) at the Chittenden County Fair – no easy task as this fair was located in Burlington near the corner of North Street and North Avenue requiring travel by horse or train and probably transporting of some of the food in the same manner. In 1873, they raised \$366.23 toward a parsonage.

The men of First Church also did their fair share. In 1960, they did an every member canvass to raise the funds for the one-story addition raising \$59,000 in pledges and cash before authorizing the architect to proceed with plans.

Volunteerism at First Church continues today. Members serve on the governing board of the church, on committees, and for outreach projects such as the Food Pantry and Essex Eats Out and will continue volunteering as First Church embarks on a capital campaign to raise funds for needed infrastructure repairs. These repairs will ensure First Church buildings and members will serve the community well into the next 150 years.