

A Brief Historical Survey of Central Baptist Church

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1700-1800

An entry dated June 5, 1743, in Rev. Dr. MacSparran's diary reads: "Mr. Morris officiated at my church and I went and officiated at Conanicut." This starts a page of Jamestown history. For some years Dr. MacSparran served the people of Jamestown in the homes of Capt. Josiah Arnold, Capt. Payne, John Martin, Esq., and others.

There is strong evidence to indicate that Baptists worshiped in Jamestown as early as 1833. It was almost 100 years after Dr. MacSparran's first sermon here on Conanicut that recorded Baptist history began.

In June 1841, the first Baptist Society of Jamestown was formed at a meeting in the North School House. A year later a meetinghouse was erected on North Road just south of Carr's Lane. Things went along smoothly until 1845, when there was quite a controversy over whether the Lord's Day was to be considered the first or the seventh day of the week.

The most outstanding of the articles and rules of this Baptist Society of Jamestown was Article #2: that no person shall be eligible for election to any office or admitted into said society unless he professes to believe that immersion in water is the only scriptural mode of Baptist. And that professors who believe in Jesus Christ are the only proper subjects to baptize.

The seats were free and all alterations and repairs on "said house" were to be done by free voluntary subscription and contribution or donation.

A problem arose when several families moved to the southern part of the island and found it difficult to attend church. After much debate it was decided to build a new house of worship somewhere between the Friends Meeting House and the bridge over the creek. For reasons unknown, the new church never materialized and in 1863, funds were raised to cover repairs at the First Meeting House in the northern end of the island. The First Baptist Society continued in existence until 1905, when it was formally and legally dissolved.

In the meantime, a meeting was called in the Town Hall on February 21, 1897, for the purpose of organizing a church. There were seven people: Henry Gardner, a ferry captain; Stephen Gardner, a sea captain; Benjamin Gardner, a farmer (probably at Fox Hill) and his wife, Mary; William Gardner, a farmer (mid island) and his wife Hannah; as well as Rev. James Hammond. Brother Hammond, who lived on Fox Island, was called as pastor.

Brother Hammond would take no money for his services but would, and did, accept farm produce. It is said that after entering the pulpit he would take off his coat and tie, in order to settle down to the business of preaching.

The Associated Baptist Church name was changed to the Central Baptist Church of Jamestown one month later-March 1867.

In January, 1868, the church voted to build a meeting house in the vicinity of "the four corners." A lot was secured from John Howland for the sum of \$100.00. In less than nine months the congregation moved into a new House of God, holding their first meeting on September 5, 1868.

An interesting notation—at a special business meeting that same September, Brother Hammond called for a report of the Investigating Committee. Brother Ashby reported that he had talked with Brother D. Howland several times in relation to his fellowship with the church, and he stated that it was of no use for him to try to live his religion. Deacon Gardner received the same response. As a result, Brother Daniel Howland's name was dropped from the church

records for “disorderly walking.” In June of 1871, another member, Brother Tourja, also met the same “disorderly walking” fate!

Money was always needed in the church and in the early days it was raised by an auction in the Spring, and by the rental of pews. In 1876, all pews and seats were made free forever and it was further agreed to take an offering every Sunday to pay the pastor, the evening offering to give to the missionary fund. Clambakes and church suppers were held in an attempt to raise additional funds.

In 1888, a committee was formed to investigate the cost involved in enlarging the church edifice or building a new church. The committee recommended the erection of a new church and subsequently the old church building was sold for \$500.00 and moved to its location on Cole Street, where it still stands—converted into a residence now. For many years it was used for worship in summer months by the Mt. Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church. Some members of our church used to attend Sunday evening services to sing along with and enjoy the gospel music singing.

During construction of the new church building, church services were held in the town hall, and in a livery stable; during the summer months in a tent. Under the supervision of Mr. Adolphus Knowles (who also was responsible for the building of the original Bay View Hotel) after about a year, at a cost of \$5,500.00, the new church was complete and dedicated in September 1891.

1900 to 1960

A baptistery was installed in the new church in 1906. In the early 1900’s the entrance to the sanctuary was at the northwest corner of the room. A hot air furnace supplied heat for the church with pipes extending to several registers in the floor. Kerosene lamps lighted the room and the windows were of opaque glass. The “Peace” window now in the entryway was behind the pulpit, where now the organ pipes are situated.

Straight ahead from the front door was the entrance to the Sunday School room—now the parlor. This room was separated from the sanctuary by roll-up wooden curtains. Sections of these curtains now serve as wainscoting around the lower walls of the sanctuary and parlor. These curtains could be raised in cases of special services such as funerals or weddings when the sanctuary was overcrowded, but were usually kept closed to conserve heat. The Sunday School room was heated by a stove about where the coffee table stands now. The south part of the room was the Primary and Kindergarten, also separated from the larger room by roller curtains. Entrance to the basement was by means of a trap door in the floor about where the Pastor’s study is now located. The basement had a dirt floor and contained on the furnace and the coal supply to operate it.

The entrance to the second floor was by means of an unfinished, rough, circular stairway in the southwest corner of the church entry. The room was sparsely furnished, with wide floor boards and was used only in warmer weather, usually for the Boys’ Sunday School class. There was a small, sliding door that could be partly opened into the upper wall in the west side of the sanctuary—possibly to supply a bit of heat to the room. On one occasion a group of Sunday School boys gathered near the special sliding door and sang a hymn during the service.

Electric lights were installed in 1913 and plumbing in 1917. The parsonage was built in 1918. In 1932 the church was thoroughly renovated in the interior, and the new memorial stained glass windows were installed at a cost of \$460.00. Donations for the memorial windows exceeded the cost by \$59.00!

No one in the congregation could be considered to be wealthy, but what they lacked in strong financial support, they made up in service. The ladies raised money to turn the upper room into Memorial Hall, as a tribute to the Founders of the Church—whose names appear on the plaque on the wall of what is now the primary classroom. The men did the work and Memorial Hall (upstairs) became the headquarters of the social activities of the church. The Beneficial Society—women’s group—held its suppers there.

In about 1948-49, the young people of the church worked long and hard under the leadership of the Rev. Myron Hertel, digging out from the furnace room eastward through ashes and dirt; and laying a concrete floor in the basement and kitchen area using a cement mixer turned by hand. The men did further work on the basement and kitchen. Now some of the same “not so young” people and others have made the basement area the attractive place it has become to be known as Fellowship Hall, where Sunday School classes, church suppers, June Festival activities, church sales, and all manner of social activities are held.

Between 1950 and 1955 the church interior was again renovated. The ceiling in the Sanctuary was lowered, new wall and ceiling surfaces installed, and lighting fixtures changed. The pews were stripped and refinished and the heating system was improved. More recent times have seen the renovation of the upper Memorial Hall; addition of the Pastor’s study (‘60’s); new roofing and vinyl siding (‘70’s); new entrance way, and improvements to Fellowship Hall.

1970 to Present

In the nineteen seventies and eighties there was an increase in ecumenical activities amongst the three churches on the island. CBC spearheaded a very active Jamestown Youth Organization, which was made up of youth from all three churches, often serving 40-50 of the island youth with spiritual and contemporary discussions, dances, ski trips, and service projects in the community.

Many joint worship services were held involving all three churches, and the Jamestown Ecumenical Council was formed. This council plans joint services, and meets regularly to discuss the concerns of the island’s parishioners and distributes assistance to those families in need through the establishment of the Katherine (“Kit”) Wright Fund.

Dr. William Litterick, along with his wife Diana and their two children, lead Central Baptist Church from 1975 to 1988, a period marked by increased attendance at Sunday worship, and continued growth in youth activities. During his time of service, active membership was over 100, and inactive membership ranged from 60 to 90. Sunday school attendance averaged from 30 to 40 children per week. Other activities included Easter Sunrise Service, communion to shut-ins, Thanksgiving Day service, three or more church dinners per year, attendance at the American Baptist Convention and the CBC Junior Band. The financial condition of the church was healthy, allowing for upgrades and improvements to the Church. At the end of Dr. Litterick’s tenure, the congregation bestowed upon him the title of “Pastor Emeritus”.

Dr. Robert Morton-Ranney, his wife Sonya, and their two children joined the church in the fall of 1988. Dr. Morton-Ranney served until 2005, bringing innovative sermons and continued increases in membership and attendance, building on the foundation that Dr. Litterick had established. Through the 1990’s attendance at Sunday services ranged from 90 to 100 attendees and Sunday school attendance averaged from 40 to 55 children. This strong participation contributed to the continuation of many established activities for both adults and children including camperships, mission trips, mission support, an active choir and successful financial support of the church. A part time Administrative Assistant position was also created.

While church attendance remained strong through 2005, the number of children attending Sunday school gradually declined to approximately 14 students in 2004. In the years 2004 and 2005, a major addition to the church was undertaken, adding basement classrooms, a pastor's office and an administrative assistance office in the basement area. The second floor area included an expanded sanctuary, renovated parlor, addition of a handicap accessible bathroom, small kitchen and a large gathering space now known as Clarke Hall, and dedicated to the memory of Fred and Dorothy Clarke, who were instrumental in the project.

Reverend Frank Robertson, along with his wife Jill, served Central Baptist Church as interim minister from the spring of 2006 until the end of that year.

Reverend Kathryn Palen began her service to Central Baptist Church in the January of 2007, bringing strong organizational skills and new ideas for maintaining and growing our congregation. Many of the events and outreach programs were maintained, despite some decline in membership, through the added energies of a determined and hardworking congregation. While the church continued to welcome new members, the passing of older members surpassed the gains. With less younger families attending, Sunday school attendance dropped to 4-6 children per week. Attendance at Sunday services averaged 70 for 2006-2010, and 50 for 2012-2015. During that difficult time, the congregation was faced with reducing staff salaries in order to balance the budget. Some of the cuts made to salaries were restored in 2012-2013 but not to previous levels. In spite of difficult times, existing programs were maintained and new ones were tried. A major fundraising event to replace the roof and pay off the mortgage, in an attempt to maintain and strengthen the finances of the church, was successfully completed. Reverend Kathryn Palen resigned in September 2014.

Central Baptist Church is an American Baptist church, and a community church with members coming from 26 different denominational backgrounds, forming a remarkable spiritual tapestry. The people of Central Baptist Church seek to provide an atmosphere of warmth and caring in which a thinking faith can be nurtured and understood.