



CUTTYHUNK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

MONOGRAPH

THE CUTTYHUNK CHURCH • 1881–2006 CELEBRATING 125 YEARS

The Cuttyhunk Church. The Little Church on the Hill. Always white, brightened by summer sun, and anchoring a community at worship, in song and in celebration. Pretty as a picture, subject of paintings and postcards, the Cuttyhunk Union Methodist Church celebrates 125 years of doors open to the community.



The Little Church

Postcard, Cuttyhunk Church, early 1900s.

Little is known about the religious beliefs of the early Cuttyhunk families, the Slocums and Allens, though some believe they were Quakers. By the mid-1800s Baptists and Methodists were fairly equal in number in New England so it is not surprising that both played a part on Cuttyhunk. Church records trace the first island services to a group of Baptist



Cow investigating building in former "Fattening Pasture," date unknown.

deacons, fishermen from New London, who gathered to worship in an unspecified old farmhouse from 1823–33. Another Baptist deacon, Nathan Davis from Somerset — who transported stone to Cuttyhunk for the first lighthouse — preached during summers from 1833 until 1879. It is reported that island

farmers would leave their fields at harvest time to listen to his powerful words.

The movement to build a church coincided with the advent of regular ferry service to the island in 1880. William Renwick, head of the Cuttyhunk Club, a private fishing club, donated not only the 50' by 75' plot known as "The Fattening Pasture," but also paint and blinds. Islanders came together, raised \$1,066.79 for the church, and then built it across from the eight-year-old Cuttyhunk School. It opened with a dedication and dinner served under a tent in July 1881. Rev. John S. Bell, a Methodist, was the first minister of the Cuttyhunk Methodist Episcopal Church, and he lived on island. His salary was \$3.00 per service plus board. Minutes of an early meeting reported "spiritual advance slow but sure." The original church trustees, V. Clifford, P. Wainwright, A. Daggett and C. Church, paid off all debts within a year.

While ministers have come and gone, the sanctuary has stayed the same — tall windows spaced along the curiously bumpy pale blue pressed tin walls. Few improvements have been necessary over the 125-year life of the building. The turn of the last century saw a fund drive: in 1900 four ice cream socials brought in \$32.06, and islanders and Cuttyhunk Club members all contributed for the addition of the first organ, the belfry and the bell (\$25), wallpaper and carpet. Electricity was added on 1922.

No one seems to remember when the 'witch's cap' steeple was added, but it was not popular. After it was struck by lightning in 1969, the original lines of the belfry were restored. Dr. William Douglas saw the need for a study during his 1960s ministry, and that addition has since been used for Sunday School, and as an office and library.

The bass weathervane, created by islander Steve Baldwin in 1971 (and replaced in 1997 by Bill Archer, Mark Brodeur and crew) continues to distinguish the roofline, as if in homage to the first Baptist deacon fishermen and the Cuttyhunk Club's generosity. Island artistry also shines inside the Church. Two of Manuel Sarmiento's (1906–1986)



Evening Worship, Rev. Jim Todd Preaching, 2005.



Church with 'Witch's Cap' Steeple, mid-1900s.



Stephen Baldwin and Bass Weathervane, 1971.



St. Francis, Quahog Mosaic by Manuel Sarmiento.

most magnificent quahog mosaics, depicting the Madonna and St. Francis of Assisi, flank the altar.



The isolated island had to be creative in finding church leaders. No one has surpassed Deacon Davis's 47-year tenure, though John Ward recently came close. Among a patchwork of preachers, Levi B. Clark, lighthouse keeper and Episcopal lay reader, led Sunday School, Bible classes, and Sunday services from 1913 to 1915. In 1921 the Church, with its five members, reorganized as the Cuttyhunk Union Methodist Episcopal Church. (The 'Episcopal' was probably dropped from the name around 1940, according to John Ward, but the word 'Union' remains, causing confusion but adding distinction!)



Louise Taylor Haskell, Lay Preacher, 1931-1947.

The years from 1923–1934 were active and full of growth. William Wood, who had purchased the Cuttyhunk Club and other island residences in 1921, began inviting friends, and the summer community grew. In 1931, island librarian and school-teacher Louise Taylor (who later married George Haskell) became the church's first woman lay preacher. She preached intermittently until 1947.

The 1930s brought summertime church-sponsored treasure hunts, costume dances, and picnics for the young. Norman Bailey, the island's school superintendent, was preacher from 1936–1939. A massive man with black curly hair and a hearty voice, he shared his love of music by leading a teenage choir. The girls, frocked in dresses with sashes, sat on the front row bench. Just behind them sat the boys, who managed furtively to tie the sashes to the bench rungs so that the girls stood up with a bench attached! So tells Wye Garfield, who has summerved on the island since 1929. He also fondly recalls annual Sunday School Picnics hosted by Eleanor and Bob Moore at the Cuttyhunk Club lawn in the 1940s and 1950s. Bonnie Veeder was among the organizers of games and races for the young, while oldtimers like 'Captain' Harold Dean watched.

Ministers were harder to come by during the World War II years, but theology students were found to assist Louise Haskell. Flora Hall Lovell, the church's current lay leader, shared a vivid memory. On VJ day, August 14, 1945, while clamming at the West End, she heard the church bell "pealing without ceasing." Islanders came together at the church to learn that the war was over. Louise delivered a stirring service of thanksgiving to an overflowing church, "a most superb expression of the great joy and relief all felt at the end of the war."



Cuttyhunk Sunday School, with Rev. Merle Ames (left) and Teacher Margaret Brewer (right), circa 1923.

Sunday School has always been a lively and important part of church life. Phebe Slocum, widow of George Slocum, organized the first Sunday School in 1853. Classes were held throughout the year until 1883 when they became summer only. Many summer folk joined the church in the 1920s and their children swelled the ranks of the Sunday School. Flora Lovell remembers the girls — happily dressed up in dresses and patent leather shoes, and the boys, less pleased with Sunday best — performing a weekly song-filled flag raising ceremony organized by Frank House at Avalon, which preceded Sunday School. Children in the Wood, Kidder, Hall, Garfield and House families had a full Sunday morning to look forward to.

Margaret Brewer, perhaps the most well remembered Sunday School teacher, taught in the 1920s and again for most of the 1950s, when sports coats and dresses were the children's typical attire. Margaret likened Buzzards Bay to the Sea of Galilee and wove the work of the students' sea-based relatives into the Bible stories. Other dear teachers of all faiths — often ministers' wives or island parents — who have welcomed children into the church at 10 a.m. on Sundays include Mrs. Bailey in the late 1930s, Mary Sarmiento from 1985 until the late 1990s, and, since the mid-1980s, Judith Archer. She and Ginny Doran continue to guide children age two and older in songs, prayers and activities. The Song Time of today includes old favorites such as "This Little Light of Mine" and "Noah's Ark."

By the 1950s the summer community was well established, with grandchildren arriving on the scene. Local preachers were not always available, so boarding had to be arranged. The Woods offered the Rose Cottage for two summers, but a permanent solution was needed. In 1957 the neighboring Millard Ashley family sold property to the church

Let the lower lights be
burning!
Send a gleam across
the wave!
Some poor fainting,
struggling seaman
You may rescue, you
may save.

*Refrain, "Brightly Beams
Our Father's Mercy" —
Philip Bliss (1838–76)*

and oversaw construction of the parsonage that also has served as housing for schoolteachers off-season.

Presbyterian minister Bill Yolton was the first to occupy the new residence (1958–1961). He and his wife Katie are remembered for addressing social concerns and adding fun and drama to the youth programming. Beginning in the 1930s, the Church's intermittent talent shows allowed island talent and humor to shine. Leila Hall, who had written scripts for her children in the '30s, was a grandmother by the 1960s. Once again she offered ideas for the young. Mary Wadleigh's costumes for skits involving hospital amputations, island fashions, and boys dressed as bridge-playing women brought laughter from the Town Hall audience. Yolton taught puppet making, thereby adding more characters to the talent shows. He also introduced children to the songs so many sang (and still know!) before the Church-sponsored 25¢ Saturday night movies in Town Hall. Sound effects and long-windedness characterized such songs as "She'll be Coming 'round the Mountain" and "John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt."

The 1960s were the 'Ecumenical Decade.' Methodist Sunday evening worship was a regular event. Dr. Douglas arranged for an 8:00 a.m. Episcopal service, under the rotating leadership of summer residents Dr. Boone Porter and Dr. William Munds. Catholic services were next. In 1967 Father Philip Kelly — who regularly flew in by seaplane — conducted the first Mass in the Church, assisted by the new Methodist clergyman, Dr. John W. Ward. The story goes, Father Kelly, realizing he had no music source, knocked on the parsonage door and asked for help. John's musical wife Carmen, still eating breakfast, put down her spoon and went to play organ — beginning a long tradition. Boaters are said to have planned their itineraries so as to be able to attend Father Phil's standing-room only Sunday morning Masses in the Cuttyhunk Church.



Dr. William Munds, Episcopal priest; Father William Kelly; Dr. John Ward, Methodist Pastor, on Steps of Cuttyhunk Church, 1967.

Today Ann Conway leads Catholic prayer services, and Ned and Bev Prevost have held Episcopal Communion or prayer over the past 20 summers. Boone Porter's son Nick has also preached in recent years.

As music comes out of the opened screened windows and door, passersby often linger on Sunday evenings during Hymn Sing. Whether to a verse from the island favorite, No. 148, "Brightly Beams Our Father's Mercy," "Abide with Me," or other requested hymns — stellar accompaniment is heard. Both the old organ and a newer one given in memory of Tim House (1925–1962) in 1964 — as well as the Bob Lazear Memorial piano, new in 1999 — have been played ably by Leila Hall, Don Frothingham, Piney Wheeler, Jim Lovell, and most recently Carmen Ward, over the years. Meanwhile, churchgoers inside watch the sun set through the northwest windows.



John Ward served as gatekeeper at the two summer Church fairs that date back to at least the 1950s, when Louise Haskell and Margaret Brewer (who sold 25¢ "surprise bags") were the organizers. With an eye on his watch and a twinkle in his eye, John admitted children in batches (according to age) before the official 2:00 opening, to visit the toy table without the crowds awaiting crafts, baked goods, and white elephants. These fairs, as we all know, were virtually over by 2:20, with smiling shoppers carrying sticky buns, baked beans, sweets, and 'new' furnishings in unwieldy piles for comparison with friends outside on the Tower Hill walls. It is just this kind of magic that has always made the Cuttyhunk Church central to the community. Ellen Warr chaired the fairs for years, with Flora Lovell overseeing the food table, Rachel Garfield the toys, and many enthusiastic volunteers, including Elaine Doran, Tibbie Field and Ann Parsons.

The now famous August Musicale evenings, starring Cuttyhunkers of all ages, have replaced talent shows.



After Sunday Morning Services, 2000.



(Left to right) Ellen Warr, Judith Archer, and Smoke Twicbell, at Church Fair 'Elegant Junque' Table, 1999.

Dads and Girls: (Left to right) Anika Schwarzwald, Dave Twicbell, Kelly Kimball, Joth Davis, Hannah Davis, Doug Billman, Megan Billman, Seth Garfield, Kassie Garfield in "Honey Bun," from South Pacific, 2001 Musicale.





*Carmen and John Ward,
Retirement Party, 1999.*

Judith Archer, who also conducts a mellifluous children's choir, has organized these extravaganzas for nearly 20 years. First held in the Woods' Winter House, the event moved to the acoustically fine church space. Bob Lazear, John Ward, the 'Cuttyhunk Cruisers,' and creative islanders young and old have entertained an enthusiastic audience. Highlights include a number with daughters in sailor suits and their dads in sarongs and clam-shell bras; and John Ward, dressed in pinafore and bonnet, mouthing the words to "Somewhere, Over the Rainbow."

As music comes out of the opened screened windows and door, passersby often linger on Sunday evenings during Hymn Sing. Whether to a verse from the island favorite, No. 148, "Brightly Beams Our Father's Mercy," or other requested hymns — stellar accompaniment is heard. Both the old organ and a newer one given in memory of Tim House (1925–1962) in 1964 — as well as the Bob Lazear Memorial piano, new in 1999 — have been played ably by Leila Hall, Don Frothingham, Piney Wheeler, Jim Lovell, and most recently Carmen Ward.



Cuttyhunkers have contributed to the Church in so many ways over the course of its life. Early members formed outreach and fundraising groups. The 1920 church report mentions the Help One Another Society Auxiliary organized by Elsie Veeder, with 17 members who held eleven fundraising whist parties during the winter. In 1926 Sarah Tilton, also an active singer, headed the Ladies Aid Society. More recently, the church has contributed to a town recreation program, a first aid supply center, relief after Hurricane Carol in 1954, and the Penikese Island School.

Church records of the past 125 years show the names of all who contributed as board members, deacons, and committee members. Some individuals stand out for special gifts to the Church. For years Wilfred Tilton created countless magnificent bouquets from his own flower garden and delivered them to the church for Sunday services. Wally Ketcham, who could repair anything, kept the building in fine repair under John Ward's ministry. According to his son Bob, Wally, a deacon, even fixed his friend John's violin "with spit and baling wire." And we must not forget Kathy Olsen and Karen Brown who in 2003 brought out a brand new version of *Cuttyhunk Favorites*, the church cookbook that had shared islanders' recipes in several previous editions.

The Church also played a crucial role in the birth of the Cuttyhunk Historical Society. In 1978 the

Church Board voted to start an institution to preserve island history with a \$1,000 contribution from a DuPont family member. Materials were collected and displayed in various town buildings, and eventually the new CHS building housed it all. Current minister, Jim Todd, with his wife Mary, has followed in the footsteps of John Ward in serving as a docent at the CHS Museum across Tower Hill Road.

Over the years, the Church was always the site for islanders' baptisms (now with holy water poured from a shell), memorial services and funerals. As the summer population grew, island weddings became popular. Both Becky Lovell Scott and Kit Ackerman Dennis were married in the Church in 1972, and nary a summer has gone by without at least one bride and groom exiting the Church as man and wife! Other island celebrations include Manny and Mary Sarmento's 50th wedding anniversary and John Ward's retirement party in 1999 after 33 years as pastor.

The Church celebrated 100 years on August 9, 1981, with a July 4th open house at the Cuttyhunk Club and special events on August 9. After a service at the cemetery, bagpiper Scott Macleod led a procession to church for a rousing evening hymn sing.

As the Cuttyhunk Union Methodist Church marks its 125th birthday, Jim Todd, pastor since 2002, remarks "One of the most unique features of this striped bass-ornamented building is the way in which all faiths, and even those of no particular faith, work together for the good of the community and the world." Jim has symbolized this with the construction of the beach stone *Inunnguag* figure near the church. In traditional Inuit cultures the figure marks a place where people are welcoming.

Whether the approach to the little church is by the Church Path or Tower Hill, whether its doors are open or closed, whether you are inside the building or merely passing by, it is, beyond doubt, a welcoming and comforting place to which so many have a special connection.

LOUISE GARFIELD BACHLER



Monographs are periodically published by the Cuttyhunk Historical Society, Inc., which serves the Elizabeth Islands
Box 181, 23 Tower Hill Road,
Cuttyhunk Island, MA 02713

Museum Director: Alexandra Earle
Editor: Louise Garfield Bachler

SOURCES

Photographs from the CHS Collection.

Bosworth, Janet. "The Cuttyhunk Union Methodist Church, 1881–1981" and notes from church records, compiled 1981.

Bosworth, Janet. *Centennial Brochure: The Cuttyhunk Methodist Church, 1881–1981*.

Haskell, Louise T. "A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church on the Island of Cuttyhunk." 1967.

Wilder, Janet. "Cuttyhunk Sunday School Teacher Brings Sea of Galilee Close for Tots." *New Bedford Standard-Times*, 6/29/58, p.17.

Phone conversations with, and written memories and 2005 Church newsletter by, Flora Hall Lovell.

Phone conversations and correspondence from Judith Archer, Pam Baldwin, Ann Conway, Wyatt & Katharine Garfield, Serena Davis Hall, Bob Ketcham, Carolyn Powers, Bev Prevost, and Jim Todd.

Note: A plaque listing names of all known ministers, made by Joe Twichell in honor of the Church's 125th anniversary, will hang in the Church.