Church Records of Salem, Massachusetts

The church in Salem was a result of the royal charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company, which formed to provide a colony in New England to be a safe haven for English Puritans persecuted for their religious beliefs. Wealthy Puritan landowners felt it a religious duty to invest in the company to make emigration possible for those unable to pay their way. With that stimulus, religion was bound to play an important part in the formation of any town in New England.

Plymouth was settled first in 1620 because the Separatists tried to abolish church government completely, and eventually were forced to leave England. However, by the time Salem was settled nine years later, the more moderate Puritans had taken over, and the church was established, not as an entity transported to America as in Plymouth, but as individuals from different backgrounds coming together to reform the old church. The company provided three clergymen, Rev. Francis Higginson, Rev. Samuel Skelton, and Rev. Francis Bright who took charge of organizing the church under the authority of their ordination in the Church of England, but enjoying liberty denied them in England.

These people were reformers who had tried for a hundred years to purify the Church of England by doing away with the prayerbook, the formal ritual, the power of the bishops, and discipline of the state church, but whose efforts had failed. Therefore they turned their attention to a new land where they could organize under the official church, but with their own reforms.[1] For generations thereafter, clergymen returned to England for training and ordination, but returned to administer the church in America by Congregational standards of liberty. “Henceforth the balance between the authority of the brethren, the ministers, the neighboring churches, and the state would be questions debated in every particular church.”[2]

The date of 6 August 1629 was set as a day of fasting, and the church leaders informed the Salem people of their agreement on forming a “Reformed Congregation.” Mr. Skelton was ordained Pastor and Mr. Higginson ordained teacher. Having been previously written and agreed upon, their Confession of Faith and Covenant was announced, relying on scripture as the standard, and members were welcomed into the fold. From then on every congregation forming in America would write its own Confession or Constitution of Faith, uniting those families in shared beliefs which may or may not have been accepted by any other parish. It was the beginning of a new ideal of liberty in America, but may have made the church more distant for some who didn’t feel a part of the establishment.

Membership in the newly formed congregation was not automatic. “Some were admitted by expressing their Consent to that written Confession of Faith and Covenant; others did answer to questions about the Principles of Religion that were publickly propounded to them; some did present their Confessions in writing, which was read for them, and some that were able and willing did make their Confession in their own words and way.”[3] Like the church in Plymouth, the church leaders believed “that being free from Scandal, they should be examined by the Elders of the Church, upon whose Approbation of their Fitness, they should Publickly and Personally own the Covenant; so they

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1 Richard D. Pierce, ed, *The Records of the First Church in Salem, Massachusetts, 1629-1736*, Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts, 1974, xii, xiii. (FHL book 974.45/S1 K29r)

2 Richard D. Pierce, ed, *The Records of the First Church in Salem, Massachusetts:* xiii, xvi.

3 Nathaniel Morton, *New-Englands Memorial; Or, A Brief Relation of the Most Memorable and Remarkable Passages of the Providence of God, Manifested to the Planters of New-England in America; With special Reference to the first Colony thereof, Called New-Plimouth.* Cambridge: Printed by S. G. and M. J. for John Usher of Boston, 1669. (Reprinted in Pierce, *The Records of the First Church in Salem, Massachusetts:* xv.)

were to be received unto the Table of the Lord…"[4] The example was set. The Massachusetts colonies would thereafter be the example of countless parishes throughout the new world which would either send to England for a pastor or in time find one in the colonies who would be sent to England for ordination, write their own Covenant of Beliefs, and welcome people into the fold who were willing to submit to both the written Covenant and to the authority of their new religious leader.

Such an effort to reform a heavy-handed church produced autonomous congregations which satisfied the need for freedom, but resulted in problems of unity among the various towns.

> *As the Massachusetts Bay Colony grew in population and churches multiplied, tensions between members and non-members of churches in their local communities, between members of churches in their relationship to their ministers, and between individual churches, which insisted on their local autonomy, and ministers in general, most of whom saw the advisability of calling councils of neighboring churches to obtain some degree of uniformity, bought about unpleasant disputes. Though many new parishes were the result of the settling of new towns, and caused little discussion, others were formed within old communities by the withdrawal of members from existing churches, often for reasons of convenience. At times the older churches opposed what might seem to be natural division because of fear of diminishing influence. Church councils consisting of neighboring churches came to be a device for settling disputes but individual ministers sometimes opposed their use. In the face of threatened chaos over church discipline, the General Court made provision for general meetings or synods of the clergy for the discussion and resolution of prevailing difficulties. One met in 1647 which resulted in the Cambridge Platform of 1648, another in 1663, and still another, 'the reforming synod' in 1679.*[5]

With all this as background, it isn't difficult to understand why some early citizens of these towns who believed in the cause of reformation and had religious leanings, would nevertheless refuse to submit to the process of applying for membership and public witness of the Covenant. Although Henry Birdsall accepted the covenant,[6] Henry and Judith Cook did not. Nor were their children baptized into the church in succeeding years, although another Cooke family was in town about the same time, joined the church and had their children baptized.[7] A search of minutes, intentions, settlements, disputes and censures revealed no mention of Henry or Judith in any record of the church.[8] Perhaps their youth made them feel incapable of such a public commitment. Henry and Judith indeed had taken on themselves liberty, and did not accept the authority of the new church over their lives.

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4 Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana: Or, The Ecclesiastical History of New-England, from Its First Planting in the year 1620, unto the Year of our Lord, 1698*. London, 1702. Book 1, Ch. IV, p. 19. (Reprinted in Pierce, *The Records of the First Church in Salem, Massachusetts:* xv.)

5 Richard D. Pierce, *The Records of the First Church in Salem, Massachusetts:* xvii.)

6 Richard D. Pierce, *The Records of the First Church in Salem, Massachusetts:* "A Catalogue of the names of those persons that are joined in full Comunyon," 24:12:1637, p. 7.)

7 John Cooke and his wife joined "in full Comunyon." She joined 1:7:1640 and he a few months later on 21:1:1641. (p. 11) Their children were born 19:7:1640; 16:3:1641, 22:8:1643

8 James A. Emmerton, M.D., *Notes and extracts from the records of the First Church in Salem, 1629 to 1736*. (FHL book 974.45/S1 K28e)