

## Our History

The simple white chapel of Talmadge Hill Community Church (THCC) is located in sylvan woodland at the intersection of Talmadge Hill Road and Hollow Tree Ridge Road, between the towns of Darien and New Canaan in Connecticut. It has been an active place of worship more or less continuously since it opened its doors in September 1870.

The chapel at Talmadge Hill was built by neighbors, out of timbers cut locally from a familiar design for churches of the era. It is a starkly lovely design, reflecting the late gothic revival architectural style. The foundation is of local stone and it has a gable roof, clapboard siding and cedar shingle roof. Behind a small entrance vestibule the 41' x 24' chapel interior has simple wooden pews with the capacity to seat 100 people. The floors are foot-wide, old pine boards. Tall gothic arched windows look out upon a small contemplative garden. A community room of some 17' x 36' was added to provide for Sunday school and fellowship hour after services. Every part of the church's construction represents the joint efforts and aspirations of neighbors who desired a place for worship and the spiritual and moral education of children from 1870 to the present day.

### **The Need of Neighbors**

The chapel was built on property given by Mr. Minot Kellogg who lived in the third house north of Jelliff Mill Road on Old Stamford Road.

In the 1860s, religious activity in the area was largely confined to services held at private homes and at the schoolhouse. However the railroad from New Canaan to Stamford, completed in 1868, raised great hopes for the neighborhood and led to a great deal of renaming of local landmarks. The Talmadge Hill Station was nearly named "Smith Station" for the numerous Smith families living close by, but because William Talmadge had given a considerable amount of land for the project the stop was named for him. Talmadge Hill Road was known originally as Flat Ridge Hill Road and Talmadge Hill Road was what is now known as Old Stamford Road, which leads up under the railroad bridge enroute to New Canaan. And although first called the Flat Ridge Hill Chapel, the church later took the name of Talmadge Hill Chapel.

As attendance at worship began to increase, the need was felt to provide a regular place of worship.

Consequently, in 1870 Minot Kellogg, gave a small plot of land for the building site. The church was begun and completed in the fall of 1870 in a concerted community effort by the residents of the Flat Hill Ridge area with both financial and moral support being given by other Darien and New Canaan citizens. Neighbors contributed funds, their strong arms, timber from the adjoining woods, and even a team of oxen.

Those who were instrumental in establishing the Flat Hill Ridge Chapel include many families involved in the growth of Darien and New Canaan, and for whom many local streets and landmarks are named. In addition to Mr. Kellogg, others include Mr. and Mrs. Noah Weed, Mr. and Mrs. Thaddeus Hoyt and family, Mrs. Laura Smith, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Buxton (Burtus?) Mrs. Martha Whitney, Mr. and Mrs. John W. Nichols, Mr. and Mrs. Justus Mead, Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Merrill, Mr. and Mrs. I. N. Waterbury, Miss Mary Talmadge, Mr. and Mrs. Warren Samis, Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Jelliff, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Davenport, and Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Selleck and family.

### **Early Community**

From its founding in 1870, the chapel known as the “Flat Ridge Hill Union Christian Society” was the center of the social life of the community. Since there were few if any automobiles in the county before 1920, there was little opportunity to move about freely. Occasional day trips to visit relatives were made by horse and buggy or a very occasional trip by train for a vacation with relatives at a distance.

For the most part, church activities outside of regular services involved fund-raising to supplement the regular collections and donations. Entertainment, plays, church suppers and at a later date, a church fair brought all ages together.

On the occasion of one evening’s entertainment an ice storm developed. The hills became a glade of ice. Walking down the hills was particularly hazardous for the elderly. Fearing a broken leg, two elderly people sat down on the ice and slid down the hills. Humorous but evidence of “Yankee ingenuity.” After supper or entertainment considerable fun and rivalry accompanied the “auctioning off” of surplus food. At times one member of a family would be bidding against another member.

Mr. Minot Kellogg began Sunday school. Later, Theodore Merrill became its superintendent and Elijah Bartram served as librarian. The Sunday school prospered for a number of years. During this period, both prayer meetings and revivals were held.

For many years ministers from the Methodist and Congregational Churches in New Canaan alternated in supplying the pulpit with the result that little ministerial calling was done. However, when Mrs. Merritt reached home from calling one day, she found a much disgruntled father who was usually of a quite gentle disposition. It developed that "old man Benedict" had called. At first she could not figure out who "old man Benedict" was, but her father revealed that it was the minister, a man in his early forties, who had unfortunately prayed for the "aged saint." Her father did not consider himself a saint nor, at sixty, did he like to be classified as an angel.

The Chapel was built with logs given by this same "aged saint" and several neighbors.

For reasons unknown, the Sunday school was later disbanded and the chapel closed. Theodore Merrill reopened the chapel for evening services at a later date, but he was forced to give up his efforts some years later due to ill health. In an attempt to keep the chapel going, a "Christian Endeavor Society" was established and regular meetings were held, but this, too, failed and once again the chapel was closed.

*(The dates on which these events occurred, have not come to light. A written three page history of the church was prepared and read by Mrs. M. C. Merritt in the New Canaan Congregational Church during its Bicentennial Celebration in 1933, however dates and names are often lacking.)*

The chapel had was built on property given by Mr. Minot Kellogg who lived in the third house north of Jelliff Mill Road on Old Stamford Road, with the stipulation that the property would revert to his heirs if it ceased to be used as a place of worship. Theodore Merrill, whose daughter founded the Merrill Business Schools, although not a minister, would preach to empty seats when services had to be abandoned because "rowdies" from a neighboring town broke up the services. One sage said, "Only a fool would preach to empty benches" but he did not know the reason behind the action. Mr. Merrill was not going to have the Chapel revert to its previous owner.

The doors of the Chapel were about to be closed for the second time when Mr. Clarence Samis promised Mr. Kellogg that if he would give him the keys he would see that the Chapel was never closed as long as he lived. As the years passed, leaders at the Chapel were content "to let sleeping dogs lie" and many did not even know of Mr. Kellogg's stipulation. Eventually, it seemed to Dr. Merritt and her brother, that the title to the property should be cleared. A bit of research at the Darien Town Hall (Volume 124 Page 583-589), in which the Chapel is located, some ten feet over the boundary line, revealed the Mr. Edwin Bertine, Mrs. Mildred C. Bertine, Mrs. Dorothy H. Lightner, Mr.

Clarence Lightner, Mr. Edward H. Hufnagel, Mrs. Cora L. Hufnagel, Mr. Bernard M. Hufnagel, Mrs. Mary Hufnagel, Lucile R. Hufnagel and Mr. Frederick F. Hufnagel, were the heirs or next of kin of Minot C. Kellogg. And, although visiting in the community each summer, they were unaware of the provision of the deed. When approached they said that they would be glad to relinquish any claim and to give a deed free from any restrictions. Being lawyers, they quickly executed the necessary documents on January 26, 1948, so that the church corporation now owns the property, unencumbered. Among those families who built the Chapel, only three families were still represented in the Chapel by 1973; the Merrill, Nichol, and Waterbury families. Other local names connected with the early days of the Chapel are Jelliff, Bartram, Mead, Hoyt, Weed, Davenport, Waterbury, Shutes, Whitney and Tailor.

Mr. Frank Shutes, the not-to-be-forgotten tall and handsome Marshall of the Memorial Day Parades in New Canaan, was among the Superintendents of the Sunday school, as was Judge Floyd Bartram, Miss Mary A. Nichols, teacher of the district school, Mrs. Margaret Chalmers Merritt, Mr. David Bennett, and Mr. Robert Ogden. The resumption of activity in the Chapel occurred when Clarence Sammis, who later became a trustee of the Chapel, pledged his labors to keep the Chapel open. In spite of there being only one or two others present in the Chapel for services on occasion, Mr. Sammis remained true to his word and kept the Chapel going. Eventually, Frank Shutes, a resident of Talmadge Hill, again started a Sunday school. Mr. Thomas Rae, father of Thomas and James Rae of Talmadge Hill, followed Mr. Shutes as Superintendent.

In 1904, a summer resident from New York City, David Schuyler Bennett took a lively interest in the affairs of the church and became superintendent of the Sunday school until about 1924. He named a young law student, who was later to become a distinguished judge, Floyd B. Bartram, as associate superintendent. Mr. Bennett is said to have driven around the neighborhood corralling children and transported the children to and from Sunday school. He also persuaded some of the other men of the Chapel to help him pay the cost of hiring ministers to supply the pulpit. An arrangement was made whereby the pastors of the Congregational and Methodist churches took turns preaching on alternate Sundays.

Recently, Mr. Bennett's granddaughter was married at the church. Her mother recalled that the grandfather, David Schyluer Bennett would hitch up his wagon early Sunday morning and collect the local children for Sunday school, then return home and hitch his team to his buggy and ride up the hill to the Congregational Church for worship. "This was the church for the workers," she explained. And so it has always been—a church of workers, those who work to build the Kingdom of God.

## 1909 - 1929

From about 1909 to 1929, the pastor of the Methodist Church of New Canaan, the Rev. Daniel M. Lewis, held Sunday afternoon services at the Chapel. In 1917, a room was added to the church in which to hold Sunday school classes and also to serve for entertainment and social activities, which were becoming more and more necessary as a means of providing revenue for operating expenses.

The Chapel, which had been incorporated about 1904 as the Talmadge Hill Union Chapel Association, was "in a very prosperous condition." The history of the Chapel since that time has continued to alternate between a series of crises and vigorous efforts that bring at least temporary stability to the church. In 1917, the annual income of the church was \$305.61, and the expenditures were \$287.52, leaving a balance of \$18.09. In 1930, a contribution of \$1000 made possible the enlargement of the Sunday school room to twice its former size.

Under the pastorate of Rev. Edgar M. Brown, in 1933, there was a church membership of nearly fifty with another fifty enrolled in the Sunday school. A Church club known as the Mary A. Nichols Club was formed in 1926, and accomplished much and contributed to the work of the Church. With the contribution of \$25 from a friend, the interior of the Chapel was beautifully redecorated by the club. It also sponsored a \$1 Endowment Fund, which amounted to \$250 in 1933. As that time a substantial library, largely the gift of Miss Amanda P. Weed and sisters, and added to by Mrs. E. A. Burdett and Mrs. John Sterling, was given to the Sunday school. The gift of a bulletin board and two new flags (one U.S. and one Christian) were given by Mr. Clarence M. Sammis and Mrs. Clarence DeForest, Jr., respectively.

Many things were accomplished during the time, including relief of the discomfort during the winter months from a Chapel poorly heated by only a stove. A furnace room was excavated under the Chapel and a large furnace was installed. Through the years of its trials, the Talmadge Hill Community Church received generous support from the churches of New Canaan and Darien. By 1968, the Talmadge Hill Community Church did not have a full-time, ordained minister -- it was being served by Jerry D. Wilhelm, a young teacher of social studies at Darien High School. The Rev. Claude Peters served as minister of the church for the next decade or so and became a much beloved figure in town.

Beginning in the 1980s, Rev. Peter Johnson became Pastor of the Church and served until 1995, when he resigned to pursue a lifelong calling to preach/teach at the University level. In February 1994, Pastor Johnson was unable to hold worship services in the Church because the harsh winter wreaked havoc on the building, freezing all the pipes.

## Recent Era

After a long period of declining membership and physical condition, the church was chosen by AmeriCares to receive a helping hand under the Homefront Program in March of 1994. Much as it had been constructed, the church's revival was the work of neighbors, approximately 60 AmeriCares Homefront volunteers from St. Michael's Church and Community Baptist Church of New Canaan, New Canaan High School, Noroton Presbyterian Church and St. Luke Church of Darien. Volunteers painted the inside and outside of the Church, repaired numerous windows and the altar, and installing a storm door on the "Friendship Hall" door. This effort enabled the Church to be reopened for services.

The Reverend Michael Zeman became Pastor in November of 1995. Ordained in the United Church of Christ, Rev. Zeman had previously been associate minister at Norfield Church in Weston, CT from 1981-1990, and a certified psychoanalyst and pastoral counselor. His daughter, Jobie Zeman, resumed the Sunday school services, and immediately had 12-14 children attending church regularly. Rob Silvan was recruited as Director of Music in the same year, establishing a creative partnership with Rev. Zeman that would yield original music for worship spanning more than twenty years.

The Reverend Carter Via joined the staff in 2009 on a part-time basis. Ordained in the Presbyterian Church, Rev. Via had previously been senior pastor at the White Plains Presbyterian Church and founder of Cross Cultural Thresholds, an organization building schools in the Kibera slum of Nairobi, Kenya. He quickly became integrally involved in the life and ministry of THCC.

By late 2016 the church was beginning to slowly prepare itself for Mich's anticipated retirement in 2020 when an unexpected injury precipitated a long medical leave – and accelerated his move to Minister Emeritus status at the start of 2018. Mich passed away on July 18, 2018 and was celebrated in a memorial service at Talmadge Hill attended by over 300 people.

THCC continued to be served by Carter and Rob, with interim support from the Rev. Susan Townsley. Desiring to retain the diverse benefits of unique but sympathetic co-Ministers, THCC embarked on a several month search process in 2018 and called the Rev. Jennifer McCleery on December 2, 2018 to work alongside Carter to lead our church.