

It was hard work, but a great delight, to create the timeline of our church's history that hangs in the hallway near the minister's office. Although the year the church was established seemed an obvious place to start, I wanted to honor the memory of the people who lived in this place for tens of thousands of years.

The land we're sitting on was bought from a band of people called the Massachuset, led by a woman called Squaw Sachem, which means "female leader" – we don't know her name, just her title. It was a sign of respect to avoid saying a sachem's name.

Europeans saw New England Indians as illiterate, prone to drunkenness, untrustworthy, pagan, sinful – the very essence of frightening wildness. A brief account of a woman selling some land for a pittance makes her seem very simple. But I found details about Squaw Sachem that paint a fascinating picture of a culture full of complexity.

It helps to understand that many of our ideas about the Americas before the arrival of Columbus are mistaken. In a wonderful book called *1491*, Charles Mann takes on the prevalent myths. One is that there were not many people here before Europeans arrived. There were millions, and they covered North, Central, and South America, hundreds of tribes with their own languages and different cultures. For tens of thousands of years they built empires, waged wars, made confederations, and managed the land.

That's another fallacy – that the Indians, if we may call them that for convenience, lived lightly on the land and had little effect on it. In fact, everywhere on these continents they managed the land, including the rainforests, which we think of as untouched.

The first European visitors described New England as like parkland in England, with tall trees and wide grassy pastures. The woods were not choked with undergrowth, but cleared in a fine habitat for deer and game. The Indians created this landscape with fire. They loved to set fires. It cleared out the brush to make meadows, so the deer were visible and nearby.

A fire at night was an exciting and beautiful entertainment. These were not the destructive wildfires we see now in the West – those are the result of suppressing fire for a century in a land meant to burn, and burn regularly. Because fires were set so often they were small, and animals could outrun them. There were no big buildings to worry about, no unmovable accumulations of possessions to lose.

Of course, this penchant for setting fires terrified the Europeans, who saw and still see uncontrolled fire as an evil thing to be avoided at all costs. There could hardly be a more telling example of the difference in world view of these two cultures.

The Indians also planted fruit and nut trees all over the place, so they could find food wherever they went. This was called mast. Mann speculates that the huge numbers of passenger pigeons seen by early settlers were the result of the flocks gorging on all the mast that was no longer being eaten by the Indians.

The Indians were no longer eating the mast because nearly all of them died within a few decades of first contact – over 90 percent mortality in some places. Smallpox, typhus, measles, influenza, plague, cholera, tuberculosis, pertussis – these were the gifts of the Old World to the New. It was truly an apocalypse, the end of a world.

The Indians the settlers met were the shocked survivors. Squaw Sachem's first husband, Nanpashemet, had been head of the Pawtucket Confederation, which allied the Saugus, Naumkeag, Winnisimmet, and Musketaquid tribes. He was killed by Abenaki warriors in 1619, and although she remarried, Squaw Sachem remained the hereditary leader. Her three sons became sagamores – leaders – in other parts of eastern Massachusetts.

In about 1638 Squaw Sachem sold part of her land, the part we're on right now, to the colonial government. Her people lived on the western edge of Mystic Lake as settlements expanded around them. She died in 1667. In 1675 King Philip's War spelled the end of most New England tribes, as nearly all were killed or sold into slavery.

European settlement began here in about 1637, when a mill took advantage of the power of the Mill Brook. People built houses and began farming close to where they could get their grain ground into flour. They called this area Menotomy, an Algonquin word meaning place of swift-running waters. The area became a neighborhood of the town of Cambridge. In 1688 Menotomy's 24 taxpayers petitioned Cambridge to build a school, and they placed it on land that is now the Old Burying Ground.

Folks from Menotomy traveled to Harvard Square to attend the First Church of Christ in Cambridge, a trip of about three and a half miles. They would rise very early to walk, ride a horse, or load the family into a wagon, and spend the whole morning at the service. At lunchtime they would go to a nearby tavern – there were always taverns near churches – to have a glass of cider and whatever was bubbling in the pot on the fire (pot luck), and then they went back to church for the afternoon service. Then they began the long journey home, hoping a storm was not about to strike. There were no forecasts to warn of wind, rain, hail, or blizzard.

Their religious philosophy was harsh. We have found many ways to make ourselves miserable, but Calvinism has to be one of the most effective. They believed in predestination: Everything that happened was part of God's plan, and that plan existed eternally. Before you were born God had decided whether you were saved or damned, and

there was nothing you could do to change that destiny. Good deeds and virtuous living had no effect; you had to have been granted God's grace, through no actions of your own.

I was raised Catholic, and despite its faults, it offers a hopeful message of redemption. It is never too late to repent, even on your deathbed – especially on your deathbed! – and enter the kingdom of heaven as a reformed sinner. Calvinists had no such hope.

How did you know you were counted among the saved? Well, you had an inner conviction, a feeling that you were in God's grace. And of course you could tell if you were saved by how well your life was going. If you were rich and healthy, surrounded by family and the goods of the world, well then God had obviously smiled upon you. If your life was full of trouble and hardship, well, God had obviously turned his face against you, and you deserved your afflictions. You were paying for either your own sins, or those of your parents.

Only those assured of their place among the saved were allowed to take communion in the First Church of Christ in Cambridge. Everyone else, in doubt about their status, hung back and watched. Even those deemed surely to be saved – say, ministers – wrote in their diaries about the constant nagging doubt that maybe they were mistaken, and they were actually doomed to eternal hellfire.

We have more Calvinism in us than we think. The Western mind, deep down, still thinks that bad things happen to bad people because they're bad, and that good things happen to good people. In nearly all our stories, attractive people are good, and ugly people are evil villains.

When there's a tragedy, someone usually says something along the lines of "He didn't deserve it" or "She didn't deserve to die like that." This implies that some people do deserve to have terrible things happen to them, and that those things are part of a just world, part of a larger plan. We desperately want to live in a world where the good are rewarded and the evil are punished, and someone is in charge.

The other thing you hear all the time is a survivor saying, "God was with me. God saved me. It wasn't my time." This implies that all the other people who did not survive were abandoned by God. If he could save one person from the earthquake or plane crash or mudslide or explosion, why couldn't he save more? Were they all unworthy – the toddlers, the babies? This line of reasoning harkens back to our Calvinist roots, and the idea that "it's all part of God's plan" and "everything happens for a reason."

The folks of Menotomy must have had some exciting trips to Harvard Square. After about 40 years of this they asked the Cambridge Town Meeting for permission to form their own precinct so they could build a church.

Cambridge ignored their first request in 1725. The minister did not want to lose part of his flock, especially their financial contributions. They kept asking for seven years, then went over Cambridge's head to the Great and General Court in Boston. In 1732 they became the Northwest Precinct of Cambridge.

In 1733 they appointed a Parish Committee. Our Parish Committee goes back 283 years! Sadly, no historian has recorded when it was first shortened to ParCom, or I would have put it on the timeline.

The first meetinghouse was built in 1734, near the school, at the edge of the Burying Ground. They called it, of course, the Second Church of Christ in Cambridge. It had 17 box pews with doors, bought and paid for by the more well-off residents, for their exclusive use. Those of higher status sat closer to the pulpit. Others sat on benches in the back, and seats over the stairs were for servants and slaves.

The search for a minister began in 1735. One of my favorite facts on the whole timeline is that four candidates in five years turned them down because the salary was too small, and the congregation was known to be quarrelsome. If you're new here you may not realize how consistent the congregation has remained in this regard.

Finally, in 1739, Rev. Samuel Cooke, age 30, just out of Harvard Divinity School, agreed to take the job. He covenanted with 83 souls. The next year they built him a two-story parsonage. He was minister for the next 44 years.

In Reverend Cooke's church, as in most churches in the 1700s, there was no organ or piano. Hymns were "lined out" – a leader sang a line and everyone repeated it – because hymnbooks were expensive, and few could read music. The prevalent style was to sing as loudly as you possibly could, so God could hear your voice among all the others ascending to heaven.

Hymns were built for a congregation without written music, often repeating the last line of each verse several times, so everyone could join in.

"How Firm a Foundation," which we heard the choir sing, was popular in Rev. Cooke's day and remains so today. It distills the basic attitude of the time: Life is a vale of tears, full of suffering. God does not promise to spare you – in fact, he guarantees that you will suffer – but he promises to be with you and help you endure. It's all part of his plan: "your dross to consume and your gold to refine." To make gold pure, you burn away all the lesser metals. So doth God build your character by sending trials. First comes weaning and teething, then croup and fever and lice and toothache and migraines and blisters and scoliosis and childbirth and kidney stones and arthritis and all the joys of old age – if you're lucky.

This is another idea we carry around in our unconscious, that suffering builds character: “That which does not kill us makes us stronger.”

Rev. Cooke was our minister through the Revolution. In 1780 he was dismayed when a Baptist church was founded in his precinct. The Baptists resisted paying taxes to support both Cooke’s church and their own. As elsewhere, every resident was expected to attend church and pay to support it, so this upset the unity that Cooke relied on to keep his church and himself solvent. (As I drive around, whenever I pass a Baptist church I have taken to exclaiming “Baptists!” – echoing Cooke’s opinion.)

Samuel Cooke died in the last year of the war, in 1783. Three years later we managed to hire our second minister: Thaddeus Fiske, age 25. The new United States was finding its way in a time of turmoil and economic hardship. Fiske hesitated before he accepted, because the parish was so poor. He wound up drawing only part of his tiny salary and became the schoolmaster to support himself. He also boarded students and led the singing school.

The singing school no doubt sang pieces written by William Billings of Boston, a self-taught composer who published six books of his own hymns. Most are vigorous and forceful. But I particularly love this tender little round he wrote, acknowledging that we’re all guilty, guilty, guilty as sin. Surprisingly, it’s in our hymnal, number 261. Let’s wallow in it together!

When Jesus wept, the falling tear
In mercy flowed beyond all bound.
When Jesus groaned, a trembling fear
Seized all the guilty world around.

In 1805 the church built its second meetinghouse. It had a bell, but no heat. In winter people set their feet on heated stones wrapped in cloth, and rejoiced at how much their characters were being improved.

In 1807 our precinct became a town, West Cambridge. The first Town Meeting was held in the new meetinghouse. The church changed its name again, to First Parish in West Cambridge.

In 1817, two church members, both named Eliza, wanted to start a Sunday school. Rev. Fiske, now age 56, had been instructing the children by himself at the parsonage, and he denied their request. But they gathered the children in the church vestibule, which was outside the minister’s jurisdiction. Uppity women, those two Elizas!

Eleven years later, Rev. Fiske left his post, his old ideas in conflict with a new focus on universal salvation and the unity, or oneness, of God. People had begun to reject Calvinism.

The next year, 1829, we called our first Unitarian minister, Rev. Frederick Hedge. Rather than resisting a Sunday school, he strengthened the Sabbath School Teacher Association and helped form the Cambridge Anti-Slavery Association, a bold move at the time.

More drama arose in 1833. At a lightly attended Parish Committee meeting, some members voted to declare the church Universalist. The next meeting was well attended by those opposed, and the resolution was overturned. So the Universalists left to form their own congregation. Two years later, Rev. Hedge resigned in the aftermath of this turmoil, and the church was left with only about 40 members.

Luckily we called Rev. David Damon, another Unitarian, if not a Universalist, and membership rebounded.

West Cambridge grew and became full of prosperous farms. In 1840 our third meetinghouse was built, with our first organ – but no heat. Town Meeting and other government activities were still held at our church, despite the separation of church and state.

In 1849 our church's female members founded the Social Circle, which became the Women's Alliance. In 1857 the fourth meetinghouse, the one before this one, was dedicated, with the second tallest steeple in New England. And it finally had heat!

The Civil War raged in the middle of the century, and in 1862 a song had a huge effect on the way people saw the war. It was written by Julia Ward Howe, an abolitionist from this area, who had visited Washington with her husband. He had founded the Perkins School for the Blind in 1829.

During her visit Julia toured the Union camps and then wrote "Battle Hymn of the Republic," setting new words to an old camp-meeting melody. Until then the war had mainly been seen as about preserving the union, but Julia reframed it as a noble, religious quest to end the evil of slavery.

About 20 years earlier, Julia had suffered, in a short time, the deaths of her father, brother, and sister-in-law. She turned to the religion of her upbringing, though her reading had exposed her to more liberal ideas. Later she wrote, "I studied my way out of all the mental agonies which Calvinism can engender and became a Unitarian."

I'm sure Julia's song was sung in this church. It's been so abused and parodied that it can be hard to imagine what it must have been like to hear it for the first time.

Every Civil War regiment, North and South, had a band. They played for ceremonies, marching, and entertainment. Sometimes on the night before a battle, if the two sides were near enough, the Confederate band would play "Dixie," the Union band would answer with "Battle Hymn," and back and forth they would go through the night, trading songs like bullets. Toward dawn they would play, together, "Home, Sweet Home."

Sometimes bands played during battles. This is not so surprising when you consider the tactics involved someone standing in front of the regiment and shouting, "Follow me, boys!" If ever there was a song that could inspire people to march into a hail of cannonballs and bullets, this was it.

My own history with this church goes back to 1989, when I was in a group called the Cambridge Chorale, conducted by then Music Director Kenneth Seitz. We rehearsed and performed here. I began to attend, and met my husband at coffee hour. We were married here in 1991. Our daughter was born in 1994 and spent nearly every Sunday of her life here, first in Sunday school and then as a member of the Youth Group.

I've sung in the choir for some 27 years. Music has a special place here, and I am delighted to see fresh energy arrive with our new director and accompanist.

I've found inspiration here for writing songs and living life. Through good times and bad, the community has been here, and researching this history has given me a new appreciation for the role it has played in peoples' lives for such a long time. May it continue to be a place where people gather to live their lives, together.