

The Spire

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THE FIRST SUNDAY RECORD

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Themes for the Year

The Parish Committee (ParCom), our church's governing board, gathered for a retreat last month to choose themes to focus on during the coming program year. They decided on three:

Charting the Course, a continuation of last year's visioning work, in which ParCom collected input from the congregation on what First Parish might look like in five to ten years.

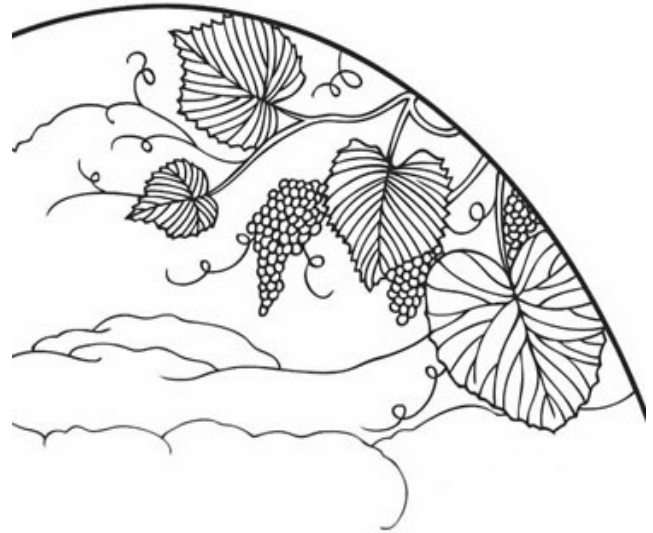
Supporting Volunteering, a continuation of work begun last year on engagement and bolstering volunteers, with an added dimension of looking into membership data, demographics, and our congregation's talents.

Communications, an exploratory group to examine which of our communications avenues are doing well and which areas could be improved.

In other business, ParCom voted to send a letter of witness in support of the Evangelical Haitian Church of Somerville and West Medford, in response to recent hateful speech across the nation. Over the summer the ArCS cluster group, which had its beginnings at First Parish, worked hard to help provide temporary housing to Haitian families. First Parish members have taken turns hosting and providing practical support, such as rides to the families' church.

ParCom unanimously voted to endorse a silent vigil on October 7 on our front lawn, such a visible place in town, with the message "Peace and Justice." The Task Force on the Middle East, under the Social Justice Committee, requested the vote as a way to call for an end to violence, to gather in moral grief, to mourn every life lost in the Middle East over the last year, and to pray for the release of those held captive.

Our employee handbook has been updated and ParCom approved the changes, including aligning retirement policies to meet Unitarian Universalist



Association guidelines. Deep gratitude is expressed to all those involved.

ParCom will host a table during coffee hour on some Sundays. Please stop by with any questions you may have about how to find people, learn which committee does what, make suggestions about First Parish happenings, or pick up a copy of this year's Workings booklet. You also can see the Workings booklet on our church website, www.firstparish.info.

Joanna Pushee, Clerk

Help Our Spiritual Home Sparkle!

From 9 am to noon on Saturday, October 19, join the Property Committee for the fall Clean It /Fix It event. We need volunteers to rake leaves, trim bushes, wash windows, repair chairs, and do a general cleanup of our building and grounds.

Giving First for October

This month we will share half our Sunday Offering with the Native Land Conservancy, the first land trust east of the Mississippi led by Indigenous people.

The Conservancy was founded in 2012 to protect ancestral homelands; it is a nonprofit national organization based in Mashpee, Massachusetts. Its mission is to “protect sacred spaces, habitat areas for our winged and four-legged neighbors, and other essential ecosystem resources to benefit Mother Earth and all human beings.”

Founded on the principle that all land is sacred, the trust works with other land conservation groups and provides Indigenous wisdom about protecting natural resources. Membership and participation are open to everyone. For more, visit www.nativelandconservancy.org.

– Ellen Leigh

Meet the Music Director

The Music Committee is hosting some “meet and greet” events so you can get to know our new music director, Daniel Parsley. The first is on Sunday, October 20, at noon in the Stanton Parlor. Join us for tea and cookies.

Daniel was our interim music director for part of last year and became the settled director after being selected by our search committee. We’re happy to welcome him and excited about new things coming up in our music program. These include an inter-generational choir performance in the fall, and an intergenerational orchestra performance in the spring.

Daniel enjoys an active career as a conductor, educator, scholar, and professional chorister. He is Director of Choral Activities and Director of Graduate Conducting Programs at the School of Music at Boston University. At BU, Daniel oversees the comprehensive MM, MSM, and DMA conducting programs, teaches graduate conducting and choral literature, and leads the BU Singers and Symphonic Choir. There’s more about Daniel on our church website’s staff page, at www.firstparish.info.

Reflections

Depending Upon Kindness

History seldom says much about wives and children, because it was written by men concerned with the public affairs of other men. In revising the church timeline I discovered details that are worth knowing

October Night

It was dark.

We were deep in the Sanctuary,
at a crossroads,
between the Maple and Border trails.

In the distance, two Great Horned Owls
were having a conversation.
One with lower tones – Who Who Who.
The other, with a higher calling response –
Who Who.

Our leader, having seen the owls in daylight,
knew that the female had only one eye.
The pair had been returning to the Habitat
for eight years,
Birthing owlets, each and every time.

In the middle of our path stood a large oak tree.
We circled it, touching its rough, inviting bark.
Breathing in its rich, earthy scent.

Further down the path, carefully felt by our feet,
the landscape opened onto a soft meadow
lined by white birches.

Above, the clouds were thick and fierce.
Slowly, tentatively, the full harvest moon
shone through.

We called to her, sang songs of her lore.
Let go the last vestiges of our ordinary days,
Were fully in the moment of shadow and light,
Blessed by the Goddess’s universal kiss.

This is how to make love to nature,
in the woods on an October night.

Carol Wintle

read at the UnFerry Beach Retreat

about the personal life of the church’s first minister, Samuel Cooke, his three wives, and his 13 children.

I will use his first name rather than calling him “Rev. Cooke,” meaning no disrespect, but because this puts him on an even footing with the women in his life.

Samuel was born in Hadley in 1709 and named after his father. When he was called to be Menotomy's minister in 1739, in his acceptance letter he gave a whirlwind account of his life:

"I began to learn Latin in 1720 but being then the only son I was called off to the farm till a brother, born almost out of season, and growing, allowed me to resume my study in the year 1729. I entered Harvard College in 1731 — had my first degree, 1735 — kept school part of a year in Roxbury — one year and a part was in the College Buttery — Nov. 1737, went to Col. Royall's, Medford, for a year to instruct his son — and in 1738 returned to College. I then preached six months at Marlborough, and six at Roxbury and Menotomy. In May 1739 I received a call to settle in the ministry in this place."

There's a lot to unpack in there! Learning Latin was the bedrock of education at this time, and Samuel began wrestling with it when he was 11. But he was his father's only son and his help was needed on the farm, so his studies ended. Luckily for him his parents had another boy, "born almost out of season," meaning he came along when his mother, Ann, thought her childbearing days were done. This boy survived infancy and grew strong enough to take over farm tasks. He seemed unsuited for education, so Samuel was able to resume his study of Latin when he was 20.

He entered Harvard at 22, in 1731. The process of acceptance back then was an interview that assured the college that a candidate was of good moral character and was well-versed in Latin grammar, because the classes were taught in Latin. It took Samuel four years to earn his "first degree." He and his fellow scholars also learned Greek and Hebrew so they could study classical works, along with rhetoric, logic, ethics, politics, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, physics, metaphysics, and theology.

Harvard did not confer a degree in ministry; those who felt the call pursued it on their own after graduation, boarding with settled ministers and practicing in various pulpits. Congregational ministers were ordained by the churches that first hired them.

Samuel "kept school" part of a year in Roxbury, which means he was a paid schoolmaster. They were known for keeping order with violent discipline, but we have no way of knowing how Samuel coped. There were no girls in his classroom. He was there "part of a year" and also worked more than a year in the College Buttery. This was where Harvard handled fresh milk,

either delivered or from their own cows, making it into butter or cheese.

He also spent a year as a private tutor to the son of Isaac Royall of Medford. The Royalls enslaved some 30 people, the most of any family in the colony. Samuel came to know many people who lived in bondage during his time in Medford.



In 1738, when he was 29, Samuel went back to Harvard to polish his ministerial skills. He preached for six months in Marlborough, but not as the settled minister, then another six months in churches in Roxbury and Menotomy. His sermons in Menotomy surely recommended him to the committee searching for a minister, a task they were finding very challenging. In five years, four candidates turned them down, wary of a congregation that could afford only a very small salary and seemed to like to argue.

Samuel was 30 when he accepted Menotomy's call, saying that he was "taking it for granted that you will always make proper allowance if our paper money should continue falling, as it hath done for years past; also depending upon the kindness commonly shown to ministers, particularly as to building and firewood."

Money in Britain's American colonies was in a dreadful muddle. Many resorted to barter to avoid entanglements with paper bills of uncertain value. Like other ministers, Samuel expected the church to provide him with a parsonage, as well as such necessities as a supply of firewood.

A parsonage was duly built, and the newly ordained Rev. Cooke lost no time in taking a wife. He married Sarah Porter in August 1740, and the very next year she gave him a son, Samuel Cooke, Jr.

Childbirth and infancy were filled with hazards. Little Samuel lived barely two weeks, and his mother died a week later. She was just 24. Both of them caught "the throat distemper," as Samuel called it, a relatively new disease, diphtheria. It spread easily and killed a great many people, especially children. It is the "D" in the DPT vaccine that protects babies today.

Samuel was left alone in his new parsonage. He wrote that his sister, Miriam, “kindly came and kept my house.” She cooked and cleaned, did his laundry, stoked the fire, made him tea, and mourned with him.

A year or so later Samuel married Anna Cotton, who was 19. The difference in their ages was not unusual. Older men often took younger wives, hoping to find it easier to compel them to obey their lord and master. A minister was a good catch, assuring high social status.

They proceeded to try and fill the parsonage with children. Their first boy, born in 1741, was given his father’s name, but like the first Samuel Jr. he died in infancy. A sister named for her mother also died shortly after birth, in 1743.

In 1745 Anna had twins. They named the boy Samuel and the girl Elizabeth. This third Samuel did not survive, but his sister would live to be 39. The next few children fared better. Mary was born in 1747 and would live 77 years. Sarah, born in 1750, would pass at age 38.

In 1752 Anna had another boy. They tried once again to give his father a namesake, and this fourth Samuel Cooke made it to adulthood, living until he was 43.

In 1754 Anna had a girl they named Hannah Gibbs Cooke. The “Gibbs” surely honored some friend or family member. Hannah would live 39 years.

Two more babies did not survive, but in 1758 Anna had a girl named Rebecca.

Their final child was born in 1761 and promptly died. Anna also died that year; she may have fallen ill after the birth. Part of the extraordinarily high infant mortality of the time was due to minimal hygiene; germs were as yet unknown.

Anna left Samuel with six children, three under the age of 10. Like most widowers he found a new wife quickly. The next year, in 1762, he married Lucy Hancock. She was 49 and he was 53. Lucy was the widow of Rev. Nicholas Bowes, whom she married in 1733 in Boston when she was 20, and with whom she had nine children, most of whom grew up.

Lucy’s grandfather was Rev. John Hancock, her brother was Rev. John Hancock Jr., and her nephew was Rev. John Hancock III – the one who would vigorously sign the Declaration of Independence.

Lucy probably brought some of her children to live in the parsonage. Her oldest was 28, but the younger ones surely came with her from Boston to Menotomy.

Samuel’s youngest, Rebecca, age 4, got some playmates in Nancy Bowes, 5, and Mary Bowes, 7.

Elizabeth Cooke, 17, may have discussed potential suitors with Dorcas Bowes, 18. Their younger sisters Mary Cooke, 15, and Lydia Bowes, 13, probably listened in, anticipating their turn at finding a mate.

In the middle were Thomas Bowes, 15; Sarah Cooke, 12; Samuel Cooke, 10; and Hannah Cooke, 8.

That’s 11 youngsters in the parsonage, plus Samuel and Lucy. If Lucy’s older children – Elizabeth, Nicholas, Lucie, and William – all came to call, it’s hard to imagine where they put 17 people.

Some of the older children may have lived with other families, a common arrangement in which neighbors took in teens to train them in various tasks and put them to work. Leaving the home “nest” ensured that they would not be coddled.

Samuel and Lucy had only five years together. She died in 1768, at age 56. Her youngest, Nancy, also died that year. Samuel wrote that his wife passed “after years of sore distress from the gravel” – kidney stones.

In 1770, two months after the Boston Massacre, Samuel gave a sermon in Cambridge before the governor of the Massachusetts colony and other high officials. First, he explored the nature of proper governance, at great length. People had more time and patience with very long speeches back then. He then issued a call for justice, cautiously, prefacing his remarks by assuring his listeners that he was only



making a suggestion, “humbly.” But as he got rolling his words grew more forceful:

I trust, on this occasion, I may, without offence, plead the cause of our African slaves; and humbly propose the pursuit of some effectual measures, at least, to prevent the future importation of them.

Let the time past more than suffice, wherein we, the patrons of liberty, have dishonored the Christian name and degraded human nature. . . Let not sordid gain, acquired by the merchandize of slaves, and the souls of men, harden our hearts.

May it be the glory of this province. . . to lead in the cause of the oppressed. This will avert the impending vengeance of heaven. . . and be an example which would excite the highest attention of our sister colonies.

We don’t know what the governor and assembled dignitaries thought of this. Some may have frowned, squirmed, or nodded in agreement. Such a statement from the highly regarded pastor of the Second Church of Christ in Cambridge was powerful, indeed.

The Cookes never kept anyone in bondage, and Samuel baptized many children and adults of color. He also officiated at the weddings of some enslaved people. His unusually compassionate attitude coexisted with his contempt for Indigenous people. His parents had lived through conflicts that resulted in the deaths and enslavement of most of the Indigenous people in New England, and he had heard of many atrocities. Of course, the atrocities happened on both sides, but the winners write the history.

During the Revolution, Samuel was a devoted patriot, preaching often on British misdeeds. He addressed companies of soldiers and deeply mourned the loss of his friend Jason Russell, killed just down the road on April 19, 1775, along with many others.

On that fateful day Samuel yearned to join the fight, but his son Samuel, 23, knew that this was unwise for a man of 66. As the church was being looted of valuables, the younger Samuel Cooke loaded his reluctant father into a carriage and fled the scene of combat, past burning houses and farms.

In the middle of the war Samuel suffered another loss. He wrote, “My daughter Rebecca died 2 Feb. 1778, aged 19 – after eight months distress from the effects of the small-pox, which she bore with inimitable patience and even surprising calmness. She seldom from her birth was out of temper, and rarely cried but from tenderness for others.”



Samuel went on to muse about the vagaries of life. “Few families have met with more and greater change by Death in equal time. But let us not tarry then – it is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed – the father is continued, and lives parted in old age. Seven out of thirteen remain. Let us prepare to follow – be ye also ready.”

The seven of thirteen were his surviving children. He thanked heaven that he was not “consumed” with grief and resolved to keep working, awaiting a reunion in heaven with so many loved ones.

In 1780, three years before the end of the war, he faced another challenge. A Baptist church was founded just down the road, and its members soon filed lawsuits arguing that they should not have to pay taxes to support Samuel’s church as well as their own. Much to Rev. Cooke’s dismay, religious diversity had come to Menotomy.

In 1781 the Continental Army defeated the largest British army and Cornwallis surrendered, but the British kept control of New York City and Charleston, South Carolina. Samuel surely rejoiced at this unexpected victory that assured a colonial victory.

He did not quite live to see the treaty that officially ended the war signed in September 1783. He died in June at age 74 and was laid to rest in the burying ground. His children mourned him, along with his congregation and a host of friends and colleagues.

Rev. Cooke apparently never sat for a portrait. The only image we have of him is a silhouette, drawn from life. Someone traced his profile in the shadow cast by a lantern or a window. You can see a facsimile in the balcony, and on the timeline.

Diane Taraz Shriver
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The Spire

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