

Methodism in Rowayton 1789 – 2007

The first Methodist sermon preached in Rowayton (then called Five Mile River) was given by Reverend Jesse Lee in 1789 in the Gershom Raymond house at the corner of Witch Lane and Rowayton Avenue. Rev. Lee (1758-1816) became a preacher in 1783 and formed his first Methodist class in New England at Stratford, CT on September 26, 1787. As a circuit riding minister, he established churches from Connecticut to Maine, ordaining lay leaders to keep the Churches flourishing between his return visits. There is a bronze plaque in Norwalk commemorating his ministry to our area in the median at the intersection of Rt. 1 and Rt 123.

In 1839, Methodists from Roton Hill (Highland Avenue) and Flax Hill Road met to form a Sunday School. Rev. William C. Hoyt led classes in a building on Rowayton Avenue, across from Jacob Street, in 1846. Worship was held at the new schoolhouse built in 1848 at 1 Cudlipp Street. The building was later moved to where it sits today behind the offices of Rowayton Fuel.

A Union Church was built in 1859 at 17 Cudlipp Street, intended to serve people of all denominations. However, the Baptists took control and the Methodists withdrew and returned to the schoolhouse. In 1864, Captain Charles W. Bell was appointed Sunday School Superintendent. He held that office for 52 years.

In 1866 a Ladies Aid Society was formed, which conducted sociables and festivals to raise \$400 toward the cost of the proposed church building. Elias R. Pennoyer gave a parcel of land 55' x 100'. Henry Chasmer and David Fallon were engaged to erect a building 32' x 52'. Ground was broken June 11, 1867. The cornerstone was laid October 1.

The building, dedicated August 4, 1868, was a white clapboard structure with entrance on Rowayton Avenue and cost \$2,700 (including painting, fencing, and insurance). \$1,200 was borrowed from the Norwalk Savings bank. Membership at the time was 21 members and 7 probationers. The fellowship hall (33' x 22') was built in 1892 at a cost of \$542.

In 1903 the parsonage was purchased. It was a white clapboard house built in the 1870s. It was purchased free of debt thanks to generous donations from Mr. & Mrs. John Sherman Hoyt and Mr. C.F. DeKlyn. In 1907, the kitchen and bedroom addition was made to the house.

Also through the generosity of Mr. & Mrs. Hoyt and Mr. DeKlyn, the church was entirely remodeled. The Hoyt's had been inspired by the timber and masonry construction they had seen on their trip to England, and led the renovation in that style. The entrance was re-oriented from Rowayton Avenue to Pennoyer Street. The Church was remodeled with stained glass windows added to serve as memorials to pioneers of the Church. The kitchen and library were also built at this time. The newly renovated structure was dedicated March 4, 1907.

In 1951, an attempt was made to merge the Rowayton Methodist and Baptist churches into the United Church of Rowayton. However, about a dozen Methodist members refused to participate in the merger, remaining in the facility on Pennoyer, even without a minister for a few years.

By the 1960s, the Sunday School and Church membership had grown so large that it was necessary to add to the church building. On October 15, 1967, ground was broken for an educational wing, which was dedicated on June 16, 1968. In 1988 the Church established in this wing its Five Mile River Nursery School.

(Francine Hubbell, Church Historian)