



A WINDOW INTO OUR PAST - HONORING OUR "FOREMOTHERS"

*An article marking our 125th anniversary highlights women in our church.
The information was gleaned from our church historical collection.*

Of the 27 founding members in 1898, 20 were women. Reflecting the time and the legalities of the day, it was the seven men who were elected to the seven offices at the organizational meeting. The women were voting members of the congregation, not a given in every church community of the day. While the men were seeing to the legalities of incorporation, securing pastoral leadership, and seeking recognition as a member church by the regional Congregational Church governance, the women had their own allied agenda.

On Wednesday afternoon, April 13, 1898, (just three days after our congregation's organizational meeting) 17 women gathered at the home of Mrs. A.A. Farmer for the initial meeting of the Women's Auxiliary of the Congregational Church. They organized as a "sewing society" and at their first weekly meetings were busy with cutting and hand sewing aprons and sun bonnets, doing "fancywork", and creating carpet rags for fundraising events. Hostess duties rotated through the membership and the hostess prepared a luncheon at their house for the members. In addition to their donated labor, members and guests also paid "dues" (\$.05) at each meeting they attended. Fines of \$.25 were charged for seconds of food or beverage!

In the first months of our church, our Women's Auxiliary held an ice cream dinner, organized a Sunday School picnic, planned a "Fair" at the Opera House that required eight cooked turkeys, purchased a communion set, communion linens, and Sunday School song books. The group made an initial \$200 gift to start the subscription list for a church building campaign. Thus began a vital service to the congregation's life and finances.

Women of the congregation worked, shared, and learned together as the congregation grew. Connections were made with church women in other congregations and within the wider church. I am struck by how tirelessly they organized countless food-focused events and fundraising efforts, often combining the two. Over the years they have made and sold Christmas hard candy (created from the still secret recipe of Evelyn C. Smith), had magazine subscription drives, held church bazaars, offered Christmas cookie exchanges, sponsored congregational meeting dinners, created "assigned" potlucks, planned fundraising meals open to the wider community, served meals following funerals and memorial services, held receptions for new members, confirmations, ordinations and installations, and hosted fellowship times after Sunday worship. Cookbooks were created as fundraisers several times over the years, most recently in 2000. These and other fundraising efforts allowed the women's group to provide significant financial support to annual budgets, and to purchase needed equipment and supplies.

In November 1952, the Women's Auxiliary changed their name to the Women's Fellowship of First Congregational Church of Port Washington. The membership was divided into five smaller groups called "Circles" to facilitate regular gathering in members' homes. Programmed meetings, fundraisers, and sewing at meetings continued to be part of the calendar of events. Attendance at meetings of Women's Fellowship groups declined in the 1970s and Women's Fellowship activities were eventually incorporated into the Church Council with the Fellowship Team structure we know today. As seems appropriate, the Fellowship Team now includes both men and women and still provides the people power to allow us to gather, eat, and celebrate as a community.

Submitted by Jane Spalding,
125th Anniversary
Planning Team Member

