

Interview Transcript

Key:

KFR: Katherine Fallon-Reusch, Interviewer

SM: Suzanne Moller, The First Presbyterian Church of Woodbridge's historian and archivist, Interviewee

KFR: So I'm Katherine Fallon-Reusch, and today I am here with Suzanne Moller, who's the archivist and historian for the First Presbyterian Church of Woodbridge. Thank you for coming.

SM: You're welcome.

KFR: Could you tell me a little bit about the First Presbyterian Church of Woodbridge's history?

SM: Sure. Um, as you know, in colonial times and, and even earlier than that, the church was actually the heart of town life. And it wasn't just a place of worship but also the place where town meetings were held and the government of Woodbridge took place. So, on May 27, 1675, a Meeting House was erected on the land that was set aside for the church. It was called the Kirk Green, cause Kirk is a Scottish term for church, and that's where we are sitting right now, where the church stands today. Um, the building was very plain, it was described as about thirty feet square, unpainted, no heat, no steeple, no bell. And it's, there has been a place of worship at this very spot since 1675!

Then, in 1710, the congregation decided to become Presbyterian.

The next big improvement [to the Meeting House] was, um, they added a stove for heat, in 1803, the Meeting House was replaced by a new building, and Jonathan Freeman was the architect of that building. He's also a member of the "Troop of Light Horse" during the Revolutionary War, and he's buried in our cemetery. And I think you're all familiar with Freeman Street¹ – named after the Freeman family. And this new building that was built in 1803 now has a spire, and a bell was added to it in 1825.

Then, in 1875, the building was remodeled again to look more Victorian in nature. Now, there's an organ and a beautiful chandelier, which is still hanging and in use today.²

We added Fellowship Hall in the 1950s, and that has our Sunday School rooms, and a lounge, and an auditorium.

¹ Freeman Street is in Woodbridge, New Jersey

² Both the organ and the chandelier are still in the church today. If you go into the sanctuary of the church, you can view them both. Images of the organ and the chandelier, as well as other parts of the church and its cemetery, are attached to the First Presbyterian Church of Woodbridge's oral history record in Middlesex College's Oral History Digital Collections: <http://digital-collections.middlesexcc.edu/oralhis>

And then, in 1972, we did a major renovation. The steeple was leaning a little bit, the foundation needed to be bolstered. Everything was strengthened and fixed and improved. And the result is the church that you see today. We still use the original pews, and we– the chandelier is still in use – it’s a– all over 160 years old.

And then in 2007, both the cemetery and the church were added to New Jersey’s Historical places list and to the National Register of Historical Places.

What else can I tell you? Oh yes, we’ve had 25 pastors since 1675 – six of whom are buried in this cemetery.

The church came through the COVID epidemic and is still active today, and we’re looking forward to our 350TH anniversary in 2025, and to a long and exciting future.

KFR: So I know that the Old White Church³ was founded in 1675, which means that soon it will be 350 years old, like you just said! It’s been around for longer than America was officially its own nation– do you think it would make sense to say that the Church grew up with America knowing its history?

SM: Well, I’d have to say that the church definitely “grew up”, as you put it, with America. It was active, you have to understand, it was active 100 years before the colonies became the United States. So, in many ways, the cemetery tells the story of America, and definitely all aspects of our history.

There are graves of people who came from Europe and settled in Woodbridge in the 1600s. The oldest legible stone is from 1690⁴.

There are graves of Revolutionary War heroes, Civil War veterans – all the wars. There are burials of black servants from before the Civil War. James Parker, the founder of Parker Press – the first printing press in NJ – he was born in Woodbridge in 1714. He died in 1770 and is buried here. John Pike, the great great great grandfather of General Zebulon Pike who discovered Pike’s Peak, Colorado, is buried here. Joseph Bloomfield – the 4th Governor of New Jersey and for whom the town of Bloomfield, New Jersey is named – he’s the son of Moses Bloomfield who is buried in our cemetery. There are victims of the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic– that epidemic claimed over 8,000 lives in New Jersey. And the Hungarian church suffered from that epidemic, they lost so many people, they had no room to bury them. They asked if they could bury them in

³ “The Old White Church” is a nickname/another name for the First Presbyterian Church of Woodbridge, and was given in the past due to both the church’s age and outer white exterior. Both names will be used throughout this record.

⁴ The oldest legible headstone, which is from 1690, belonged to a man named Elijah F. Bunn. The stone reads *E.F.B. Feb 24 1690*. Images of this headstone, as well as many others, can be found within the oral history record for First Presbyterian Church of Woodbridge in Middlesex College’s Oral History Digital Collections, the link for which can be found in footnote 2.

our churchyard. And we said yes, and therefore there is a Hungarian Section of the cemetery as a result, and we've got a plaque commemorating that sad time in America's history.

So yes, I'd have to say that America's history and the church's history are intimately connected.

And then if you want to talk about the history of Woodbridge, it's even—even more closely related to Woodbridge's history as many of the founding families of Woodbridge are buried here. Mary Compton Campbell— she was the first child born in Woodbridge— she's buried here. And she was born in 1668. We also have past mayors, judges, town clerks, workers in the clay industry, Boyntons known for Boyton Beach, the first letter carrier, etc., and many, many citizens of Woodbridge Township.

KFR: I feel like one of the best ways to see the history of the Church is to look at its cemetery and that history. I know that you had mentioned to me that there are many veterans buried here, especially those from the Revolutionary War. Could you tell me more about them?

SM: Wow, this is a difficult one, because there are more than 64 people from the Revolutionary War – both veterans and participants – buried in our cemetery. Um, I will pick just a couple to highlight here, but we have many, many more.

So, for example, Dr. Moses Bloomfield— he was a family doctor in town, in Woodbridge. And in 1776 he was the Middlesex County delegate to the Convention of New Jersey that adopted the state's first constitution. Then during the Revolutionary War, he served as a Senior Physician and Surgeon in George Washington's Continental Army. He is also the father of Joseph Bloomfield we talked about earlier.

One of the most fun to talk about is Captain Nathaniel Fitz Randolph. He was a brave and daring Revolutionary War soldier. He was a Captain in the Middlesex Militia. Among other exploits, he would lead raiding trips against the British camps on Staten Island— he would steal weapons, food, supplies – generally caused— general havoc. He died on January 23rd, 1780 of wounds he received at or near the Battle of Springfield, New Jersey. Accord— apparently, “the ball entered his left arm, below the soldier-shoulder, penetrated his body, and came out at the right breast.” He was only 32 years old. And then, the British were so angry with him that they shot his tombstone. The tombstone has the bullet marks and on—in 2015 we found musket balls using a metal detector buried in the ground in front of the tombstone.

Then we've got Colonel Nathaniel Heard and his son John. In June of 1776, General George Washington sent Colonel Heard on a mission. He led a guard of 60 men to Perth Amboy and arrested British Governor William Franklin, the son of Benjamin Franklin— and he was the last Royal Governor of New Jersey. The next month, General George Washington sent Colonel Heard to Staten Island, which had become a British stronghold, with instructions to arrest “any of the Staten Island Tories who made themselves obnoxious to the cause of Liberty.” Nathaniel's son John served in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, and they are both buried here.

Then we've got Jonathan Inslee. Now, this is an interesting story, about Jonathan Inslee and his wife, Grace. Jonathan Inslee was captured by the Tories during the Revolutionary War, and um, as you know, Tories were the colonists who were loyal to England. He was held prisoner in New Brunswick. His wife, Grace Moore Inslee, followed and begged for his release. Because of her persistence, he was released, but sadly, due to cruel exposure and treatment he died on February 24th, 1777. And Grace and Jonathan are both buried in our cemetery.

And there's others. There's people – apparently Captain Nathaniel Fitz Randolph, there's several people that were members of this church and are buried in our cemetery who were– who were– part of his– served under him during the Revolutionary War.

KFR: Ah, that's so fascinating! And I have to ask — so do you think that being Presbyterian influenced the people buried in this cemetery to fight not only in the Revolutionary War, but in the other wars that our country has faced? I feel like as Presbyterians⁵ we put focus and importance on acts of service, but I would love to hear your opinion.

SM: Well, we have veterans from all wars buried in our cemetery – and many people who participated in or were affected by but who did not fight – for example, doctors, wives, etc... But I can't say that being a Presbyterian put any more focus or importance on acts of service than any other religion ... except, maybe, during the Revolutionary War. At that time, people who were against independence and wanted to remain loyal to the English King joined or formed the Episcopal church. Meanwhile, our church had a very patriotic and zealous Minister, Reverend Azel Roe. He was the pastor from 1763 to 1815. He was outspoken and passionate; an ardent supporter of independence. He had a reputation for fiery sermons that inspired the congregation to fight for freedom. And it's said that Reverend Roe was involved in a skirmish at Blazing Star, which is Carteret. Later he was imprisoned by the British in the "Old Sugar House" in Manhattan. He was later released in a prisoner exchange. He and his wives and children are buried in our cemetery.

KFR: So, on behalf of all those who will see this record, or hear this record, in this case, are people allowed to visit the cemetery outside of the church? I know from when I was younger⁶ that there is a beautiful walking path that goes through the cemetery, and that the church is on the National Register of Historic Places, as you mentioned, so I'm sure that there's a lot of those who are passionate about history would love to see it!

SM: Absolutely, yes! As you mentioned, both the cemetery and the church are on the New Jersey Historical Register and the National Register of Historic Places. The cemetery is open to

⁵ I (Katherine Fallon-Reusch, interviewer and creator of this record) was raised as a Presbyterian Christian. The First Presbyterian Church of Woodbridge was the church that I attended throughout my childhood years. Ms. Moller is also a Presbyterian Christian, and has been a member and the historian and archivist at the church for many years.

⁶ Referring to what I mentioned in footnote 5– I attended services at the Old White Church as a child and would sometimes walk through the cemetery, so I was already familiar with the walking path before this interview.

the public for people to visit, and we welcome people to walk around and view the old tomb—tombsteads—tombstones, excuse me, and the interesting inscriptions. And we also have several examples of funerary art – the skull and cross bones of the Puritan era, the skulls and angels wings known as “Death Heads” and later cherub’s faces with angel wings. We also have a few stones signed by the engraver — one of the famous ones was Ebenezer Price and his apprentices.

However, we do ask people be respectful of the dead. Many of the brownstones are old and fragile. Many are broken. Please don’t touch or attempt to clean them, or take rubbings, as they might cause damage. If you stop in the church office, we have a printed walking tour that one can follow that highlights some of the graves⁷. And of course, feel free to contact me if you’ve got any questions or research requests⁸.

KFR: Okay, thank you again so much for your time and for telling so much of this interesting history...

SM: You’re welcome!

KFR: ... It was so fascinating!

⁷ Attached to the oral history record for First Presbyterian Church of Woodbridge in Middlesex College’s Oral History Digital Collections is a draft version of the cemetery walking tour in the form of a digital pdf as a second option for anyone who would care to visit, see, and learn more about the graves of some of the people who Ms. Moller mentioned in this interview, as well as other important individuals who contributed to the church, Woodbrodge, Middlesex county as a whole, and the state of New Jersey.

⁸ At the time that this interview was completed (May 2023) you can reach Ms. Moller at her current email address: sjmoller1@gmail.com