

Old First Presbyterian Church (founded 1658, present building 1784)

125 Main Street (NW corner of Main St. & Sabbath Day Path), Huntington

As the oldest church in Huntington, the large white-shingled structure just east on Main Street from the center of Huntington Village is an important and imposing landmark. The church was initially organized in 1658 as a Congregational Church and its first minister from 1658 to 1669 was Rev. William Leverich, who was also Huntington's first miller. In addition to town meetings and court trials, religious services were held in Jonas Holdworth's (Huntington's first teacher) schoolroom. From 1748 to the present, the church has been Presbyterian.

The first meeting house was constructed in accordance with the "Duke's Laws" enacted in 1664. Duke's Laws not only made it mandatory to build houses for public worship, but also dictated how the meeting house should be built and how many people it could accommodate. Duke's Laws insisted that any Town not already having a church had to build one immediately large enough to hold 200 people.

Town records indicate that the first Huntington meeting house was constructed in 1665 on the northwest corner of Meeting House Brook (now Prime Avenue) in Huntington Village. However, as the needs of the Town increased during the 1676-1723 ministry of Rev. Eliphalet Jones, it became necessary to construct a new meeting house. Although there was considerable disagreement in the community over the siting of the new structure, in 1715 it was finally built on the present site at the top of the rise just to the east of the 1665 location.

Rev. Ebenezer Prime, the church's third minister from 1723 to 1779, was, like many of his fellow Presbyterian pastors, an enthusiastic supporter of the American Revolution. During the Revolutionary War, the Old First Church, being the largest building in the area, was taken over by the British and transformed into horse stables and quarters for storing supplies and sheltering troops. Rev. Prime's nearby house (still standing at 18 Spring Road) was also seized and occupied, and his library vandalized. Although in 1777 the 556 lb. church bell had been removed from its tower by patriots and hidden in the home of John Wicks, the British discovered its location and seized it for use on a succession of British warships, including the brigs *Swan* and *Rinoceros* [sic].

However, indignities to the Old First Church reached their peak on Nov. 26, 1782 when British Colonel Benjamin Thompson (1763-1814) (later known as Count Rumford) ordered the structure to be dismantled and the timbers used to construct a new fort in the middle of the Town's Old Burying Ground. Among the many graves desecrated by this action was Rev. Ebenezer Prime's. It is reported that when building the fort, Col. Thompson made sure that its exit was placed in front of the Rev. Prime's grave so that he might have the pleasure of "treading on the old Rebel" whenever he departed or entered the fort. (See "Old Burying Ground" for further information on the construction of "Fort Golgotha" from the timbers of the Old First Church.)

After the British troops were evacuated four months later in March 1783, the Town's residents began reconstruction of the church on its 1715 site where it still stands today. In August 1783 the original church bell was located on board the *Rinoceros* [sic] docked on the East River in New York City. However, the bell had been cracked and could not be used. Eventually, it was sent to Hartford, Connecticut where it was recast before being restored to service. The recast bell, which was used at the church until 1967 and remains on display in the 1784 building, has the words "THE TOWN ENDURES" engraved on its interior where the clapper strikes.



Old First Church, (undated photograph, probably from the early 1900s).

*Excerpted and paraphrased with permission from
Portrait of a Small Town II: Huntington, New York "In the Beginning"
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