

Chapter 6 - First Baptist Church of Bellingham (Bellingham Historical Commission)

Section I - Pre Church

The Town of Bellingham was founded by settlers attempting to gain freedom to practice their beliefs without interference or persecution. Although the colony of Massachusetts Bay was established because of religious intolerance in its mother country, it did not easily allow dissent from its own state religion.

The land area of Bellingham was not attractive to many settlers. The ground was rocky or swampy, seldom good for crops or animals. The area was heavily forested but probably not of high quality due to the soils. The settlers who came here came to get away, whether through a desire for freedom to practice religion or simply to get away from the fast growing towns to the east. Of the thirty two original petitioners for a charter for the Town, at least nine were practicing Baptists at the time or during the next twenty years and another five to ten may have been, since others in their family were.

It was not easy to be different even in the wilds that then existed. The Governor for whom the Town was named by the General Court in 1719 had imprisoned the Baptists of Boston in the 1660's and kept them there until he died. There were few towns that would allow them to practice their religion even into the 1800's. The Puritan Protestant church, more familiarly called Congregational, was the state church. The Bellinghams, the Winthrops, the Bradfords and the Standishes and the rest of the early settlers wanted freedom only for their religion. They established a near theocracy in Massachusetts Bay. Each Town was required to have a Congregational parish, often referred to as simply The Parish in the town.

The petition to incorporate Bellingham was met with one condition, within three years the Town must hire a minister. It need not be said that the minister had to be Congregational.

The citizens of Bellingham, like those of every other town were to be taxed to support this minister. It did not matter their own beliefs. All must pay. Because Bellingham was so divided, collecting taxes to support the church was not easily done. Of the 48 men on the 1726 tax list, at least 17 were Baptists or Quakers. In 1734, 12 out of 29 on the ministerial tax list were Baptists or Quakers.

The Constables were responsible for collecting the ministerial money, as a result Baptists refused this position, an act that could lead to fines or jail under the ecclesiastical laws then being enforced. Joseph Scott of Bellingham was called before the Suffolk County Court in May 1727 for refusing to serve as constable though he had been elected. Scott *"for excuse said that Great number of the Inhabitants [in Bellingham] are Quakers & Baptists, who have not nor will pay their respective Rates to the Minister of sd Town unless distrained upon, which their numbers being so many may be attended with great inconveniencies, And secondly that the sd Scott being himself a Baptist pays to a Minister of his own perswasion & therefore thinks it a hardship (as well as the rest of his Brethren) to pay towards the Maintenance of another."* The Court *"being of Opinion that he had not shewn sufficient cause for his excuse ordered Scott, who refused to pay his fine for not serving, to be distrained to that amount by the sheriff of Suffolk County."*

" This was not an isolated incident, except in Bellingham.

Despite the Scott incident, the citizenry of Bellingham did not reflect a public concern about their religious differences, except in their inability to support a minister. The Town's elected offices were divided between Congregational and Baptist without any appearance of religious division. Religion appeared to be a non factor in the political life of the Town. On June 20, 1728 a law was passed that Baptists and Quakers should not be taxed to support the town churches, provided they attend their own church and live within five miles of it. According to the preamble of this law, the act was passed because many persons:

"Called Anabaptists and others called Quakers, refuse to pay any part or proportion of such taxes as are from time to time assessed for the support of the ministry in the several towns whereto they belong, alledging a scruple of conscience for such their refusal; and thereupon frequent application has bin made to this court for their relief.....Therefore

from and after the publication of this act none of the persons commonly called Anabaptists, nor any of those commonly called Quakers, that are or shall be enrolled or entred in their respective societys as members thereof, and who alledge a scruple of conscience as the reason of their refusal to pay any part or proportion of such taxes as are from time to time assessed for the support of the minister or ministers of the churches established by the laws of this province in the town or place where they dwell, shall have their polls taxed towards the support of such minister or ministers; nor shall their bodys be at any time taken in execution to satisfy any such ministerial rate or tax assess'd upon their estates or faculty: provided that such persons do usuall attend the meetings of their respective societys assembling upon the Lord's day for the worship of God, and that they live within five miles of the place of such meeting."

The act further exempted and prohibited Quakers and Baptists and others exempted under this act from participating in meetings, etc. that had to do with ministerial affairs. Other town affairs were not affected.

In December 1729, the Exemption was extended to real & personal estates:

"from and after the publication of this act, the proper estates, real and personal of the aforemention'd Anabaptists and Quakers, being in their own hands and under their actual management and improvement, shall be exempted in the same manner and under the same conditions and limitations that their polls are or were in and by."

For Bellingham, the freedom to refuse to pay religious taxes, meant the eventual death of the first Parish. With fewer families from whom to collect, the payments to the minister became less frequent and soon he was gone. (Although this was not the only reason, it was clearly a large factor for his leaving.) Forty eight persons were on the tax list in 1726 before the Exemption law was passed. By 1734 the ministerial tax list was reduced to 29 in Bellingham.

The Exemption law was renewed in 1734, dropping the five mile limit and allowing each denomination to file lists. It was further renewed in 1739 for seven years.

Many availed themselves of the Law in Bellingham. The Town records list the names of the earliest Baptists, even before a church was established in the Town. After 1728, the Town, when it wished to discuss religious affairs, called "Ministerial town meetings". Those on the exempt lists could not attend. The Baptist Church, once formed, appointed a person yearly to file its exempt list.

Section II - Founding of the First Baptist Church

Prior to 1736, Baptists journeyed to Boston or Swansea (spelled Swansey at the time) for services. Many made near weekly pilgrimages to Swansey for all day meetings. Traveling by horseback and wagon over 30 miles of dirt roads, the worshippers must have spent a full day of the week traveling and attending services.

By 1736 seven Bellingham residents had been baptized in Swansea.

"This is to Certifie that the following parsons were Baptized upon profession of their faith viz: William Hayward, Nicholas Cook, John Thomson, Eleazer Hayward, Samuel Hayward, Ebenezer Hayward, Joseph Partridge, all inhabitation of Bellingham.

"the Last of these parsons was Baptized Sep^m 21. 1736 and all the other sometime before and have had the advice of the old Church in Swansey to assembl to gather on the Lords Days and do come down to Swansey as often as they can attend it to Communicate with the Church and as often as they can procure a minister to preach to them they are careful to do it.

Attested by me Samuel Maxwell, Minister

Jonathan Kingsley, Deacon

Swansey January 13, 1736

The long journey and the desire for their own church led on October 6, 1737 to a petition for their own "October 6, 1737 Att a Church meeting of the old Church in Swansey the desire of the Brethren Dwelling in Bellingham to form themselves into a church state was communicated to the church by their Elder which motion of theirs was approved of.

Witnes my hand

Samuel Maxwell"

On November 23, 1737, fifteen men met in Mendon and signed the first church covenant. This first church document is a remarkable profession of faith. It provides a view of the early Baptist thinking in Bellingham.

"Wee who have hereunto set our names being in some measure made sensible of our sinful and miserable condition by nature do solemnly profess our deep humiliation for our many sins and adore the full Grace of God in translating us (as we hope) out of the Kingdom of Satan into the

Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ to partake with all them that are sanctified of the priviledges of his house and Kingdom and being in some measure made willing to be conformed to Christ do now in the presence of God give up our selves to the Lord in his Everlasting covenant of free grace taking our Lord Jesus Christ to be our great high priest to justifie and sanctifie us and our prophet to instruct and teach us and our King and Lord to govern and rule us according to his own Laws and ordinances that we may do his will and serve him in our generation and now after solemn and serious looking to God by humble prayer we do with harts and hands Lift up to him offer our selves this Day as so many living sacrifices and being satisfied it is our Duty to walk in all his ordinances and to submit to our Lord Jesus Christ we do Solemnly join our selves together in a vizable Gospel Church Relation both to Jesus Christ our head and as one another as Brethren Engaging in the strength and help of his Grace to attend all the Duties that are required of us in this Relation and to Exercise and submit to the Discipline of Christ in his Church and do therefore now promise by the help of Christ (1) that we will walk in all holiness and humility and Brotherly love (2) that we will watch over one another and warn and admonish one another in all meekness according to the Rules which Christ hath left us and to Bare one anothers Burdens and to pray with and for one another (3) that we will strive together for the truth of the Gospel and the purity of Christ ordinances and will avoid all Causes of Division (4) that when it shall please God to provide a paster for us we will Endeavour to do our Duty toward him and according to our ability to communicate to him and that we will then meet together on the Lords day this is to be understood the first days of every week and at other times as we shall agree for the worship of God and the Edification and Comfort of one another those and all other Gospel Duties we purpose to attend and perform Depending upon the Grace and assistance of our Lord Jesus Christ hoping that God will accept us in him and this our free will offering though of ourselves unworthy imploring Gods assistance and acceptance through the merits and mediation of our LOrd Jesus Christ to join with the Father and the Holy Spirit be all Honour and Glory now and forever Amen: Signed at Mendon the 23 Day of the Eleventh month in the year of our Lord Christ 1737

*Nicholas Cook Edward Pickering Ebenezer Hayward
John Thomson Joseph Partridge
Eliphelet Holbrook Samuel Hayward
Benjamin Force Elezer Hayward
Elezer Taft Peter Thomson
Samuel Thomson Elnathan Wight
Jonathan Thomson Joseph Wight*

Of the fifteen men who signed the 1737 covenant, five had also signed the petition for incorporation of the Town of Bellingham in 1719. (Nicholas Cook, Samuel Hayward, Eliphelet Holbrook, John Thomson, and Samuel Thomson).

The records of the First Baptist Church in Bellingham go back to its very beginning. Although sparse at times, the recording of events began with a book called "Bellingham in the year 1737, Baptist Church Book to Keep Church Records". Handwritten, it provides a history of the church through its formation and growth. Subsequent books continue this record showing the church in its high times and low ebb. The ability of the church to survive often seems to be its greatest

strength.

The first recorded business meeting of the Church was on February 23, 1738 at the Bellingham home of John Thompson. The latter was elected the first church moderator. Eliphelet Holbrook was chosen "Book keeper to Enter Church Notes" and Nicholas Cook was voted the first Church deacon.

Brother Holbrook was not an avid note taker. The next entry in the "Church Book" was in 1742, when

"Bellingham September the Second-----1742

"the Anabaptist church legally asembled and meet at the House of Brother Eliphelet Holbrooks and Chosen Brother Eliezer Taft moderadoor for said meeting. att said meeting wee proceed in order to choos a man amongs us to call a Church meeting and to order and to rule as a head among us untill wee are otherwise provided. at the above said meeting wee proceeded and made choise of Brother Joseph Wight to be our head as afore said."

The Bellingham church was the fourth to be formed in Massachusetts after the First in Boston, First in Swansea and one in South Brimfield. By 1740 there were four more (Rehoboth, Sutton, Leicester and West Springfield).

The Church met at the homes of its members in the beginning. The religious meetings were likely presided over either by the Deacon or by Joseph Wight, its elected head. At times ministers from other parishes visited. Reverend Jeremiah Condy of Boston visited at least twice in 1742 and 1743 and Reverend Moulton of Brimfield in 1743. These visits were not only opportunities to worship but a time to undertake the work of the church that could only be done by a minister. Baptisms were reserved for these times. Several of the baptized were female, the first mention of women in the church books.

Women were not participants in the governing of the Church anymore than they participated in the town or colonial government. The Church was far ahead of the secular areas in recognizing women and providing them a role, but it was still many years in the future.

During the 1740's, neither the town parish nor the Baptist Church had a minister. Neither was large enough or wealthy enough to support their own. Members of both churches may have looked to each other for support. The desire for spiritual guidance was stronger than any differences in their religious beliefs. A letter sent by the Baptists in 1743 was friendly and compromising but unanswered.

"Bellingham, June the 24th 1743

We the Antepedo Baptist Church in Bellingham upon the Desier of the pedobaptist Church in the same Town. Concerning your settelling a minister you say you are not able to maintain a minister yourselves without wee will come in and joine with you. So far wee are willing to joine with you that is by subscription and when one year is out and then what to give the next year and

so on untill the time shall come that we shall have one to settel over us in the gospel of our own Denomination provided that you can git Mr Reed or Mr Biriam either one of these two before mentioned and as near as we can be our part toward his suport as aford sd provided that we may have one of our owne Denomination to come four times in a year to Administer the word and ordinances to us provided that you will contribute to him to his suppor with us.

"Furthermore we are willing to give something to encorage either one of the above mentioned parsons to be your minister besides the subscription towards supporting him to preach the word of God to you and to us above mentioned where unto we have sett our Names

Maintenance Encouragement

Eliphelet Holbrook 3 - 10 - 0 5 - 0 - 0

Joseph Wight jun 5 - 0 - 0 6 - 0 - 0

Jonathan Thomson 4 - 10 - 0 6 - 0 - 0

Elnathan Wight 5 - 0 - 0 6 - 0 - 0

Cornelius Darling 3 - 0 - 0 3 - 0 - 0

Peter Thomson 5 - 0 - 0 6 - 0 - 0

Eliezer Hayward 6 - 0 - 0 7 - 0 - 0

Samuel Darling jun 1 - 0 - 0 1 - 10 - 0

Ebenezer Holbrook 2 - 10 - 0 3 - 0 - 0

Total 35 - 10 - 0 43 - 10 - 0 total

"these of us that have sett our names would have this what we have Subscribed to be understood to be in the old tenner."

Religious debate was not a problem in Bellingham. The Baptists were willing to set aside their own differences in order to obtain a minister within the Town. This overture was not accepted. Neither town nor church records indicate the reaction to this proposal.

Section III - The First Baptist Meeting House

The Church had a second need. Meetings were held in the homes of its members. If they were to lure a minister, they must have a meeting house. Even then, although only 20 years old, the town meeting house was in disrepair. It was used by the Parish and the Town for meetings. The Town, after 1738 had several proposals to move its site until it was finally torn down in 1774.

The Wight's, father Joseph and son Elnathan, early settlers in Bellingham, were signers of the first covenant of the Church and their heirs would be prominent for the next century in the Church. From 1740 to 1760, their roles were pre-eminent. No move or decision of the Church was made without their input, Joseph as head of the Church and Deacon and Elnathan as minister.

The meetings of January and February 1744 established the physical foundation of the Church. Elnathan Wight donated land to the Church on which the first Baptist meeting house was to be built. Set on a knoll on the Wight land near Elnathan's own home, the meeting house was "thirty

feet wide and five and thirty feet long and nineteen feet post". The location of the meeting house is noted today by a stone marker on High Street, just off North Main Street, dedicated in November 1912, on the one hundred and seventy-fifth anniversary of the signing of the covenant.

Eliezer Hayward, Joseph Wight, Jr and Jonathan Thomson were chosen to manage and carry on the work. On March 20, 1744, the first Baptist meeting house was "raised". A second committee of Samuel Hayward, Eliphelet Holbrook and Peter Thomson was chosen on April 30 to work toward "enclosing and covring" the meeting house.

By December, the meeting house was erected. The formal transfer of the deed was made from Elnathan Wight to Jonathan Thomson, Eliphelet Holbrook and Joseph Wight, Jr. as trustees of the church in February.

"I Elnathan Wight of Bellingham in his Majesty's Province of Massachusetts Bay in New England Yeoman for Divers good Causes & Valuable Considerations, and for five Shillings paid by Jonathan Thompson, Eliphalet Holbrook and Joseph Wight all of Bellingham Yeoman, have granted unto them as Feoffees in Trust, land.....near the road to the Second Bridge River, to the Public use, benefit and behoof of that Church or society of Baptized Believers whereunto the said Elnatham Wight and the others do now stand related as members, for and so long a time as the said church shall hold to and walk in faith which they now possess....but in case they Apostatize and decline from the said Faith and Practice or in case of Annihilation, then the said land hereby Granted to Revert and Remain to the only proper use, benefit and behoof of the next & right heir of the said Elnathan Wight....Feb 22 1744."

The Baptist Church has never actually owned its own building even through this day, ownership always being placed in a trust. The early church was not allowed to own land because of colonial regulations. There is no record of when the building was first used except that a meeting was held in the building in December 1744.

It would be another six years before a permanent minister would finally be settled. During this time, as before, ministers from other areas preached from time to time.

The record of the layout of this structure is sparse. It was likely a very austere, clapboard building, rectangular in shape with a minimum of windows. Pews were wood benches without padding except that which came with the worshipper. Seating was assigned, perhaps pews were sold to raise money as was the tradition of the day. Families sat together.

By decree of the colonial legislature, the Town's parish was dissolved in 1747. Unable to find a minister, the Congregational members petitioned to be split off to parishes in Medway, Mendon and Wrentham. The Baptist Church was the only church remaining in Town, but was still without a minister.

Section IV - Referand Elnathan Wight

Elnathan Wight was born about 1715 at Medfield, Ma. His father, Joseph Wight moved his family to Bellingham sometime after 1720. His early life was the hard life of the son of a farmer. Long hours were spent assisting his father feeding the animals, working in the fields, and doing whatever else was needed to survive in the wilderness of Bellingham.

Wight's name is found in town records on the tax lists and as the elected Hog Reive in 1743. His early education was sparse, there was no formal school in the town, except for periodic schoolmasters hired infrequently for short periods. At the age of 23, he was a signer of the first Church covenant.

Wight's personal life and early beliefs are not known until 1745 when he began to keep a diary, which has since been lost. Some of the entries were used in a short Bellingham history in 1822:

"Nothing farther is known of him [Elnathan Wight] till 1745. At that time he began to keep a diary, which he continued nearly ten years. From this it appears that he had had thoughts of preaching before he commenced his diary. Jan 11, 1746, he writes that he had just heard of the success of the pretender to the British throne, by which he was led to fear the triumph of popery, and that persecution would follow. This led him to regret that he had not before entered the work of the Lord. Soon afterwards he was much tried on the subject of elevating himself to the work of the ministry. Being convinced of the necessity of education to the minister of the gospel, he thought it his duty to devote himself to his entering on the work. In contemplating this subject, he had many discouragements to meet. He knew that money must be expended, with little hope of receiving any thing like a remuneration for his expenditures. He knew also that the prospect of being supported by his labours as a preacher were very small.

"In these trials, he sought advice from ministers in the vicinity; but they refused to give him the direction and encouragement he desired and needed, because he did not agree with them on the mode and subjects of baptism. This was peculiarly afflicting to him, as he had none of his own denomination with whom he could consult. He was induced, from these circumstances, to lay his case with peculiar earnestness before God, his only hope and guide; and from him he received the wisdom he needed. He commenced his studies some time this year [1746], under the Rev. Mr. Graham, of Southborough, Mass. where he pursued them for more than three years. The languages and theology seem to have occupied most of the time. Mr. Graham was to him a friend and a father.

"Towards the close of the year 1749, he wished to obtain a license to preach. This he sought from Presbyterian or Congregational ministers; but they refused to license him. When he found he could not be licensed in this way, he, by the advice of Mr. Graham and some others, set out on a journey to New Jersey, to obtain his desire from Baptist ministers; but he found obstructions in the way, and finally returned without reaching the place of his destination.

"Soon after his return, he succeeded in obtaining from Pedobaptist ministers what he had before sought in vain. This was probably through the kindness of Mr. Graham, as he had for a long time been his friend. After he was licensed, he delayed to commence preaching for some time; and when he approached the time that he was to begin, his feelings were much depressed, and his fears very great. He preached his first sermon March 4, 1750; and notwithstanding his previous

fears, when he came to preach, he found much composure and satisfaction."

On May 28, 1750, Wight was requested to preach to the Church for one month *"upon living as a probation"*. *"Voted that Eliphelet Holbrook and Eliezer Hayward bee the two men and the said Holbrook and Hayward went to M^r Wight and discours^t with M^r Wight and M^r Wight consented thereto."*

The probation was satisfactory, for on June 23, 1750, the Church met *"to proceed upon ways and means for the call and settelment of M^r Elnathan Wight in the pastoral charge ove the sd Church"*.

"& then it was 2^{dly} Voted unanimously that application be made to M^r Elnathan Wight to accept of the sd pastoral charge over us, to preach the everlasting Gospel and to administer the ordinances among us agreeabel to our confession of Faith and Church order.

"3^{dly} Voted that wee will keep up and maintain a free contribution for and towards the support and maintainance of M^r Elnathan Wight in the work of the ministry among us.

4^{thly} that two of the Brethren namely Jonathan Thomson and Eliphelet Holbrook bee a committy to wait upon M^rElnathan Wight upon the Subject matter of the Church's call as bove contained."

Wight did not immediately reply, but in August the Church received the following acceptance:

"Bellingham August the 27th 1750

"Beloved brethren seeing it has pleased god (as I hope) to incline your hearts to invite me to take the pastoral charge over you to preach the Everlasting gospel and to administer the ordinances of Christ among you agreeable to our Confesion of Faith &:

"I think it my Duty, to accept your call Desiring Intirely to depend upon the grace of God which is in Christ Jesus. to enable me faithfully to Discharge Every Duty in that relation. Knowing that of myself I am in no measure sufficient for these things. I am willing to spend and bee spent for you, if it may be for the futherance of the Gospel. I desire your fervant prayers for me that God would furnish me with ministerial gifts and make me faithful in Every thing, which he may call me to. I remain your unworthy servant and Brother in the faith, and fellowship of the Gospel.

Elnathan Wight"

With the appointment of a minister, the Church needed more formal documentation to present in order to have their pastor ordained. Toward that end, a new covenant was drawn up and on October 15, 1750, adopted.

"Memorandum The Articles of Faith and Church Discipline which we the united Brethren and Sisters of the Baptist Church of Christ at Bellingham, do solemnly profess to Believe and to b e ruled and governed by under our Lord Jesus Christ, glorious and Supreme head of the Church, are Contained at Large in a printed Declaration put forth by the Baptist Churches in England of

the Calvinistic persuasion, intituled a Confession of Faith put forth by the Elders and Brethren of many Congregations of Christians, Baptised upon Confession of theri Faith in London and the Country, The which we have not leisure at present herein to Transcribe at Lengrth, but we do unanimously Assent, Consent and fully conclude and agree to adhere and be Governed by the Sacred Scriptures principally, and by the said printed Confession subordinately as the Rule and Standard of our Faith, Practice and Church Discipline. Moreover we have concluded it to be Expedient to draw up and Record the following Church covenant for the Information, perusaal and subscription of all such Baptised Believers whose harts the Lord may incline to join with us.

Viz. to, The Church Covenant as followeth

We whose names are hereafter here written. Viz sone that it hath pleased God through the riches of his Grace to call out of Darkness into his marvellous Light and to reveal his son in us where by we Believe that the Lord is our God, and haveing shewn unto us our duty and priviledge as Believers, not only to seperate from the world, both as to doctrine and practice, and worship, but also to congregate and embody ourselves into Church state, and being through Grace well sartisfyed concerning our mutual nearness to the Lord, and Standing together in Christ and being brought in some blessed measure into oneness of Spirit, being Baptised by one spirit in one body, and being agreed in the great and sublime Lord, and to one another by the will of God, to walk together as a Church of Christ in the fellowship of the Gospel and in the observance and practice of the Laws and ordinances, which Christ hath appointed his new testament Churches to be in the practice of, so far as he hath or Shall Enlighten us into the Knowledge of our Duty and privilege and as the Lord shall please to help us we will frequently assemble our selves together as a Chruch of Christ, to attend upon our Lord in the service of his house, especially every Lords Day, and as we Shall be enabled by his Grace and conducted by his Spirit we will stand up together for the Truth and Cause of Christ, against all opposition raised thereto by the world and by Carnal professors and by the same help we will wath over one another in the Lord. And as we shall be under the Conduct of JEHOVAH - we will Keep the Doors of Gods house or Church open always to Believers in Christ, who are sound in Faith about the Salvation of Gods Elect, as it is by the Fathers Grace through the sons Redemtion, and as our God will help us, We wil keep them always as a Testimony of our Cordial belief of those former Doctrins of Faith, contained in the printed Declaration afore referred to in the introduction preceeding this covenant, and of our holy Resolution in the Strength of Grace, to stand and walk together in the fellowship of the Gospel, we call not only Heaven and Earth to witness but we also Subscribe the same with our hands:

Names of the Brethren Names of the Sisters

Elnathan Wight Martha Wheelock Country

Eliphelet Holbrook Gore

Joseph Wight jun^r

Eliazer Taft in Mendon

Jonathan Thomson

Peter Thomson

Eliezer Hayward

Samuel Hayward

Ebenezer Hayward

Ebenezer Holbrook in Mendon

Samuel Darling

John Thomson in the Contry Gore"

"The small number of Baptists in this quarter at that time rendered it difficult to obtain assistance in ordaining Mr. Wight, from his own denomination: in consequence of which, application was made for the purpose to Presbyterian ministers; but they did not choose to ordain him. Three different times were set for this purpose, and at one of them two adjournments took place, but the object could not be obtained. As Mr. Wight held open communion, he seems to have preferred being ordained by Congregational ministers; but he found that his catholicism was not reciprocated. By these attempts Mr. Wight's ordination was deferred till 1755."

On the 14th of January 1755 the ordination was finally undertaken. Reverend Ephraim Bound, Deacon Joseph Collins, Eleazer Kingsbury and William Plimpton from the Baptist Church in Boston and Reverend Ebenezer Moulton, Deacon Jeremiah and Nathan Munger of the Baptist Church in Brimfield were present to participate. Rev. Moulton presided as Moderator and Rev. Bound was Scribe. Rev. Bound's description of the proceedings are the only record and were copied into the church book. (It is unclear if Rev. Bound wrote into the book or someone later copied it in.)

"then come under consideration their articles of Faith and their manner of Discipline & their Church Covenant and after mature Consideration the Counsel voted that their articles were sound, their Discipline Regular and their Church Covenant Scriptural.

"it being then late in the evening the Counsel adjourned till nine of the clock the next morning.

"Wednesday morning January 15 the Counsel being come together they proceeded to the Call given M^r Wight by the Chh and his answer in the affirmative and the question being put to both parties whether they continued of the same mind. They declared they did.

"the Counsel then proceeded to Examine M^r Wight concerning his Experimental of Knowledge of Christ and the way of Salvation by him & also Concerning his ministerial qualification and his Internal Call to the work of the ministry in all which M^r Wight gave the Counsel full satisfaction.

"these things being all adjusted the Counsel agreed to proceed to the ordination of M^r Wight and voted 1st that M^r Wight should preach the ordination Sermon himself. 2nd that the Rev^d M^r Moulton should give M^r Wight his solemn charge. 3rd that the Rev^d M^r Bound give M^r Wight the right hand of fellowship."

"then the Counsel and Chh proceeded to the meetinghouse and the solemnity Began with a prayer made by M^r Bound which was followed by a sutabel Sermon from 2 Corin: 5 & 20 preach^d by M^r Wight after which M^r Moulton pray at the Imposition of hands and gave M^r Wight a very sutabel and solemn Charge and then M^r Bound pray^d and gave the Right hand of Fellowship after which the Rev^d M^r Wight named and read a psalm for the Congregation to sing sutabel to the occasion after which he gave the Blessing and the Solemnity Ended and the Whole was Carried on with Decency Solemnity and in good order.

A true cop^y Attest^d Ephraim Bound Scribe"

Shortly after the ordination the Church selected Joseph Wight and Peter Thomson as Deacons. Communion was to be held four times a year, the first Sundays of April, July, October and January.

Peter Thomson was not to serve as Deacon for long. After his selection, he entered the colonial army and was sent to upstate New York to fight. (A battle of the French and Indian War) Thomson was wounded and died soon thereafter. His legacy of three pounds to the Church was used to purchase *"Table Vessels that is two tankers, four cups or Bakers and a platter and a Table Cloth and a napkin: and also voted that the Remainder of the money left besides the vessels and Cloth and napkin shall be laid out towards a pillow for the pulpit: also voted that Eleazer Hayward and Ebenezer Holbrook shall serve as a Committy to Lay out the Churches money as the above said votes for the Tabel."*

Rev. Wight was married August 13, 1754 to Abigail Blood, a widow. They had one daughter, who died in childhood, and two sons, Nathan and Eliab.

Sixty years after his death Rev. Fisher, then pastor of the Bellingham Baptist Church described Wight as:

"Mr. Wight's person was about the middle size, rather spare, and of a good figure. Over his temper, which was naturally quick and irascible, he gained an ascendancy which made him a pleasant and instructive companion. He was a studious man. Most if not all his sermons were written out, and he generally read them. They were full of good sense, and very doctrinal. But notwithstanding his studiousness, he laboured much with his own hands.

"His support was always small, amounting at the most to about forty or fifty dollars annually. His views of doctrine were highly Calvinistick, though not Antinomian. On the subject of addressing the calls of the gospel to sinners in general, he agreed with those who hold what has been called general atonement. In regard to the mode and subjects of baptism, he was a Baptist. It is necessary, however, to observe that he held to open communion, especially in the fore part of his ministry. He tried much to unite the Congregationalists and Baptists, thinking, as he says, that the Baptists were uncharitable in refusing to commune with those who were members of Congregational churches. But his exertions were unavailing: he found to his disappointment that his Pedobaptist brethren in general were not so anxious to commune with the Baptists as he supposed.--Whether Mr. Wight retained his views on communion till his death is unknown, as nothing on that subject is found in his papers or on the records of the church after his ordination. It is most probable, however, that when he found his object was unattainable, he gave it up, or at least ceased to exert himself to obtain what he desired. The church changed their views on the subject, either in his lifetime or afterwards, the time when being unknown.

"Mr. Wight was a very conscientious man, and of distinguished piety, as is evident from his diary, and the inscription placed over his door -- "I know that thou wilt bring me to death, and to the house, appointed for all living." If at any time he had indulged in lightness, improper feelings or actions, he soon repented, and very deeply. He felt much for sinners, and had much conviction

of the constant and universal presence of God. His life was embittered by many painful circumstances, which occasioned him much depression of mind. Although his congregation was sometimes full, yet at others he had to preach to a few. Several were added to the church during his ministry, but no considerable revival took place under his labours. In his day, Mr. Wight sustained the character of a steadfast, able, enlightened, and evangelical preacher. His name will doubtless be had in affectionate remembrance long after we shall be laid in the dust."

On November 6, 1761, Elnathan Wight died of dysentary at the age of 46. He was buried in the North Bellingham Cemetary under the inscription:

"While you are standing here to read
Prepare for Death with care & speed
For sure it is that you must die
And hasten to Eternity.
Prepare for Death he often said
Who in this silent Grave is laid."

Wight's widow Abigail remarried a few years later to Nathan Mann of Franklin. After his death in 1780, she returned to Bellingham and upon her death at 85, she was buried next to Wight. Their son Nathan moved to New York. Eliab lived his life in Bellingham, serving his father's church throughout his life.

Section V - Interregnum

The Church was plunged into mourning at a time it appeared to be rising. Membership, though not high was steadily increasing. It had a settled minister who was young enough to have many years ahead and best of all, who had no need for a large salary because of his own holdings in the Town. Instead the Church was again leaderless.

The first recorded discussion occurred on March 26, 1762, at the home of widow Abigail Wight. It was *"Voted to send to the Revnd M^r Ephraim Bounds of Boston with a Desier that he would send to the jersey to se if M^r Bound can get a minister to come and preach the Gospel among us in Bellingham."*

If Rev. Bounds was willing to help, he was not successful for on October 29 it was *"voted to send Ebenezer Holbrook up to the Jersey to see if said Holbrook can git a minister to be with us to preach the Gospel with us in Bellingham."*

The prospects of finding a minister in Massachusetts Bay was not a good one. Although the Baptist Church was growing, it still did not have a large number of churches in the colony. New Jersey was a faster growing area for the Baptist faithful of the time.

Again the church had to rely on ministers from other towns to fill their pulpit. It was common for the Baptist ministers of the time to travel to other towns to preach. Ministers such as Isaac Backus of Middleborough, Bounds of Boston, Noah Alden of Brimfield and Rev. Hinds of Middleborough spent much time riding from town to town, visiting with other churches and preaching. Isaac Backus, perhaps the most reknown Baptist minister of the time, described in his

diary the constant travel. Often he preached every day of the week for some gathering. Sometimes there were only one or two present. This circuit of ministers was used to fill the Bellingham pulpit, but it could not replace the need for their own minister.

By 1764, the Bellingham Church was showing signs of the wear on their congregation. Backus described his visit on Sunday June 3:

"I came last night, and preacht twice today at Bellingham where Mr. Elnathan Wight was minister, who died in Novr. 6, 1761, since which they have been generally destitute of preaching: and it is a dull time among them, tho' some things look encourageing. Next Mr. Smith came and preacht with a good deal of earnestness and near night Mr. Stillman and his consort came up from Boston, who discoursed very clearly about the nature of preaching the gospel of Christ."

The search continued without end. 1765 came with no minister. It was decided to call *"a Day of fasting and Prayer in order to give a minister a Call to preach the Everlasting Gospel among us and to Call Some Elders in to assist on Said Day."* Thursday, March 21 was appointed and *"The Revnd M^r Mannin of Warren: the Revnd M^r Backus and the Revnd M^r Hinds of Middelbury to be the ministers to be with us on said Day."*

Backus arrived on March 20 and his diary entries are the only record of this meeting.

"....then got in the evening to Bellingham where I met with Mr. Manning, he being also sent for to attend their fast."

"Thursday. Mar. 21. Elder Manning preacht in the forenoon and I did in the afternoon after which he closed with a word of exhortation and prayer. Mr. [James] Mellen also was present who has often preacht to them and they seem united in requesting him to settle with them, and the state of religion looks encouraging in those parts."

Mr. Mellen was asked but to the congregation's regret his reply was not what they had expected.

"honored and beloved: I having taken in to serious consideration the call and Invitation which some time since you gave me to settle among you in work of the gospel ministry and also waited upon the Lord for the direction of his holy spirit in this Important affair I must now confes that God has by his word & Spirit & Providence made it most planly appear to me that it is my duty to leave you not out of any dislike to you but I think by ye word and Spirit & Providence of God I am called another way to labour in the vinyarde of God for the good of preacious & immortal Soules Earnistly Intreate your prayers for me that I may be founde faithfull in such an Important work & I pray God to supply your needs & to send you another sheparde that Shall take you by the hand & leade you in the way in which he would have you to walk. Thus Commending you to God and the word of his Grace . I subscribe your friend and & companian in tribulation of the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ. James Mellen

Framingham June y^e 1, 1765"

Bellingham was now a regular stop on the circuit of Reverend Mr. Backus. He returned on June 29, 1765 *"to administer the Lord's supper. Preacht their lecture in the afternoon."* The next day he *"Preacht twice and administered the Supper with a small degree of comfort. This people have been much disappointed and grieved at Mr. Mellen's leaving of 'em who is gone to settle at Brimfield."*

While the church in the northern part of Bellingham was searching for a minister and, if Backus is to be believed, suffering greatly, there appears to have been a second Baptist Church meeting in South Bellingham. Very little was written about the church there. Because of the unsettled boundary with Rhode Island, the church referred to may have been the Ballou church in Cumberland, but probably not. There is mention in town records of such a meeting house during the latter part of the 18th century. The meeting house was later called a Universalist meeting house and was situated on what is now Wrentham Road just before Crooks Corner.

Backus visited this congregation on October 28, 1765 where he *"Preacht in the forenoon at Deacon Cooks in the south part of Bellingham where there has been a considerable revival of religion lately and a Ch. is gathered consisting of near 30 members, and they appear now cordially to imbrace the pure doctrines of grace where arminianism has formerly prevailed."*

The southern church did not retain its mainstream Baptist beliefs for long and faded from Backus' diary as well as mention elsewhere. The large membership may also have been the result of the lack of a minister to the north. It is very likely many of this number returned to the north church when a new minister was obtained.

The First Baptist Church decided again on March 26 to *"give a minister a call in the worke of the ministry among us and we have agreed and appointed thirsday the Eighth day of May next to be a day of fasting and prayer to God for derection and to call in several Elders to assist us on said day.that Elder Isaac Backus and Elder Ebenezer Hinds of Middleborough come to our assistance on said day."*

The invitation from Bellingham and another letter arrived in Backus hands the same day.

April 13, 1766

"One of the brethren from Bellingham ch. came last night with a request that I would attend a fast there on May 8th to seek direction about calling a minister and they have some thoughts of calling Elder [Noah] Alden. Elder Alden writes that things appear dark of late at Sunderland, but that there has been some revival at Hardwick."

This day of fast and prayer was more successful. Backus preached twice and then returned the following Sunday where *"Elder Alden preacht in the forenoon and I did in the afternoon and then administered the Lords supper: and came and preacht in the evening at Mr. Lethbridge's in Wrentham. Elder Alden appear's solemnly engaged in divine things, and this society are in general well satisfied with him and talk of giving him a call to settle with them tomorrow."*

A new era was dawning in the First Baptist Church in Bellingham, one that was to last over thirty years.