

OUR CHURCH HISTORY

In 1731, one year before George Washington was born, 13 farmers asked the towns of Greenwich (known then as Horseneck) and Stamford for a new parish in the back country of Connecticut. In those days a New England town could not exist without a church, and the government had to approve any new parish. In October of that year it was resolved “that the parish be called and known by the name of Stanwich with all parish powers and privileges that other parishes in this colony are by law endowed with.” Though the town of Stanwich no longer exists, the legacy of the little church built in the back country lives on today by the full grace and blessing of God.



Stanwich Church in the mid 1800's

The first Stanwich Meeting House was erected on the corner of Stanwich and North Taconic Road, even before the Connecticut General Assembly approved the parish. The farmer families worked together to build the simple structure, which was 32 feet long by 26 feet wide. Today we wonder whether they ever dreamed how this act of faith would continue to bless countless people hundreds of years later. In 1804 the Meeting House was torn down to build a larger church on the same site. The new building was known as one of the most beautiful landmarks in Greenwich. It contained an excellent library, and was the spiritual, intellectual and social center for families in the back country.

An unoccupied Methodist chapel nearby at 237 Taconic Road, which was originally built in 1846, was purchased by three members of Stanwich in 1895 and donated to the church for a neighborhood community center. The congregation had no idea at that time that this building would become their new church home less than 30 years later. On August 22, 1923, a bolt of lightning struck the Stanwich steeple in the early morning hours, and hundreds of spectators stood helpless in the wind and rain as their beloved church burned to the ground. Only the pulpit, pulpit chairs, altar table and hymn boards were rescued from the blaze. Though stunned and grief-stricken, the 150 church members went ahead with a fair that had been planned for that very day, relocating it to the old Methodist chapel. Though the building had burned down, the real church – the body of believers – relied on their faith to press on and say by their actions, “Yesterday is gone. What is God calling us to do today?”



The interior of the old Stanwich Church building was graced with two beautiful organs.



The old Methodist chapel became the new home of Stanwich Church in 1923.

After becoming the new home of Stanwich Church in 1923, the chapel was renovated several times, including the addition of a steeple in 1927, an adjacent parsonage in 1939, a second floor for the kitchen, vestry and Upper Room in 1960, and renovation of the horse shed into Sunday School classrooms in 1964. The building could not be expanded further because it sits on less than a quarter acre, and adjacent land could not be purchased due to state restrictions on watershed areas. For several years a few members of the congregation searched the roads surrounding Stanwich for property large enough to build a new church, but nothing was available. Meanwhile, the congregation continued to grow, adding many new ministries as well as a second morning worship service and a contemporary evening service. The evening service grew so successfully that in 1999 Stanwich “birthed” Trinity Church, and sent many from the congregation to continue to grow this new church.

In July of 1999 a split in the main truss of the sanctuary roof was discovered. Though emergency measures were taken to add steel reinforcements, the added weight in the roof could not be borne by the aging walls for very long. At this juncture we began to sense God's divine hand leading us where we never expected to go. Within a week of learning about the main truss, 30 acres of land on Taconic Road were put up for sale. An anonymous group of "Friends of Stanwich" appeared from within the congregation to invest in the land at their own risk until such time as the congregation could consider such a bold solution. Although the land was eventually found to have drainage problems that could not sustain a church and parking lot, the excitement of new possibilities had begun to grow. The congregation authorized church leaders to spend six months looking for land "in the neighborhood."

Within weeks, a perfect four-acre parcel at 202 Taconic Road came on the market, which was not adequate for an enlarged church facility but was ideal in every other way. The "Friends" agreed to purchase the property and hold it until an adjacent parcel became available, leaving the timing and financing in God's hands. Only a few months later, an adjacent lot at 190 Taconic Road became available, but it was being sought by a local developer and was beyond the capacity of the "Friends" to purchase. Purely out of obedience to the possibility that this might be God at work, an announcement was made from the pulpit that a new set of "Friends" was needed if we were to secure this land for Stanwich before it sold. Amazingly, the phones began to ring the next day, and within a week a second group of "Friends" had successfully contracted for the property. When the congregation was called together to be updated about God's remarkable provision of land, they prayed together and voted unanimously in favor of building a new church.



Project manager Gina Higbie explains the vision of the future sanctuary to Stanwich friends.



Artist rendering of the new Stanwich Church at 202 Taconic Road, Greenwich



A piece of history for the new site: the bell originally given to Stanwich in 1926 by the Westover School in Middlebury, CT.

Project manager Gina Higbie and architect Ira Grandberg offered their extraordinary gifts of time and talent to lead the project. The entire congregation was invited to submit ideas and photographs of favorite churches around New England. What emerged was a vision of a new church which would retain all the sacred beauty of our simple, historic heritage. It would be nestled among the mature trees on the property and would recreate the ambiance of the original Stanwich hamlet of 1731. It would welcome twice as many worshippers without sacrificing the intimacy and holiness of the existing sanctuary. It would retain the glorious play of light on the altar wall through triple-hung windows, and would retain the quiet and holy focus of communing with God by keeping the altar wall free of all adornment except the cross. Additional areas for Christian education, fellowship and offices would continue the historic style of separate buildings in a community setting by attaching buildings of slightly different roof lines around a simple, open-air cloister. While the entire facility would be built to look old, it would house state-of-the-art technology and safety features, and would provide handicap access to all areas. The beautiful iron bell, whose deep, rich tone had been ringing at Stanwich since 1926, would be moved into the new steeple to continue the long tradition of welcoming worshippers, visitors and friends.

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