

A Church Of Summer

There's A Reunion Of Sorts Sundays In West Fairlee

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WEST FAIRLEE —

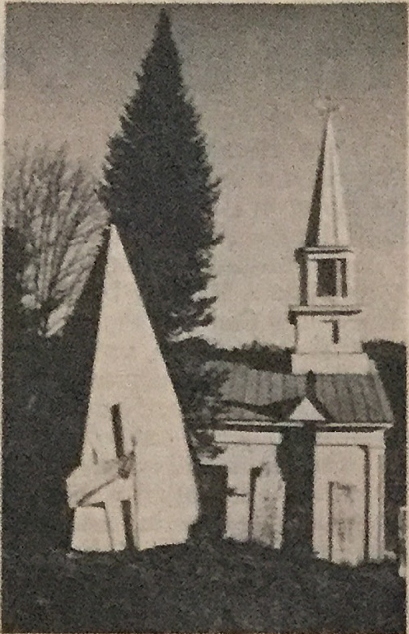
When the West Fairlee Center Church opened its doors last Sunday evening for its summer schedule of services, people arrived plenty early. They had old friends to talk to, in the same pews many of their ancestors knew. For some, there was a stroll through the graveyard before the service began, to look at the headstones, among them many of the Morey and Niles families.

On the highest knoll of this hilly graveyard is the pyramid-shaped monument to West Fairlee Center's most famous citizen, Nathaniel Niles. The people here are doubly proud, for Niles was not only one of Vermont's — and America's — early patriots, he was also the congregation's founder and first preacher.

It seems the congregation's services may have been somewhat seasonal in its early days as they are today for they voted their spiritual leader to the state legislature for seven terms and to the National House of Representatives in Philadelphia. When Niles was home at Elmwood Farm, just down the road from the church, his kitchen was open for Congregational services on Sundays.

According to Rev. Gary Wait of South Newbury, Niles often preached on the theme of liberty as a gift of God which gives all people the right and the responsibility to work for their own livelihood and that of the community, and the right to enjoy an equal voice in government. Wait, who is a historian with the Connecticut Historical Society, said that published sermons from the period 1774-76 place Niles among those ministers who used their pulpit to advocate independence. These ideals led Niles, as a young theological student who traveled from pulpit to pulpit in seaboard New England, to join the Continental Army when war broke out. Wait said that Niles' journal describes the Battle of Bunker Hill but by the early 1780s he was on the Middle Brook to the west of Fairlee where he and some associates from Windsor, Conn., had bought land.

The congregation he led in West Fairlee Center, however, did not build their church until after his death, on the site of land where the town meeting house once stood. Today, the small, classic Congregational church with its spire reaching through the trees, appears to stand at the end of Middle Brook Road when in reality the road bends around the church and continues on to Bradford.



Nathaniel Niles' grave stands near the West Fairlee Center Church.

Doris Honig of Ely remembers the church from the 1920s and '30s when she arrived at Elmwood Farm each summer from New Jersey with her family. In those days Elmwood Farm was still occupied by some of Niles' descendants. It was both a boarding house and a working farm which Honig loved to visit.

"We used to go to the church when Mr. Rose was there. He was the last pastor. In those days it was a year-round church but today the congregation is too small to support a pastor," Honig said.

Honig said the church serves as a kind of Old Home Day for anybody who has a connection with the town, whenever they return: "Anybody from West Fairlee Center likes to come back. We also get summer people from the lake. It is an evening service people like."

Although still a member of the United Churches of Christ, it is a community church in spirit, Wait said. The visiting ministers, as well as the summer congregation, mostly come from nearby churches, no matter what their denomination.

Marjorie Graves of Ely estimates the church was a full-time church for about a hundred years after it was built in 1855. "It had the same Congregational minister as West Fairlee and Vershire," she recalled. Graves said it still has a Congregational service, with the old Congregational hymnbook.

A small church committee keeps things going. They meet in late May and choose the ministers and organists for the summer. A building committee looks after what needs to be done to the property.

"Everybody does what they feel they can do," Graves said. "Barbara Slack is the clerk and she and her husband also mow the grass."

Fifteen years ago the church committee had to decide what to do about a foundation that was rotting and a steeple that was about to topple. An appeal to old friends of the church, and an unexpected grant from the Eva Gebhard-Gourgaud Foundation in New York City, provided the \$20,000 that was needed.

Many people remember the day the new 24-foot, aluminum-based steeple was brought in on a trailer from Raymond Moore's workshop in Bethlehem, N.H. and raised atop the belfry. The Valley News was there, reporting that a kind of procession formed, following the steeple into town and providing a few sidewalk foremen as the crane lifted the steeple into position.

Honig worries, however, that there are not enough younger people to continue to care about the church. "We don't know how long it will go on," she said. "Some young people who are descended from the early families still care, but not enough of them."

Despite its seeming emphasis on history, ancestry, and community, there is a modernness and openness about the church. Many who come by on a summer evening come from other towns and for their own reasons. Don Fifield of Thetford Center is one who likes an evening service. Others come for a particular minister's message. On the first Sunday, some people came from Hanover to hear Rev. Karen Sheldon's tribute to the late Rev. Doris Rikert: a sermon which described a contemporary understanding of healing.