

New England Towne Cemetery

Situated along the south bank of the Cohansey River, just over a half mile from where the river bends ninety degrees west in its course to the Delaware Bay, is the site where Puritan settlers from Fairfield, Connecticut built their first Meeting House. At the site called New England Towne, the congregation would be known through the years as Christ's Church at Cohanzy, the Church of Christ in Fairfield and the Fairfield Presbyterian Church.

Two church buildings would be erected in this location. Lawrence Roff's excellent history of the Fairfield Presbyterians cites an unpublished manuscript by S. R. Anderson (1876) and *The West Jersey Presbyterian*, June 1904, in giving descriptions of these Meeting Houses:

While the site of the earliest Meeting House is known, details of its construction have not been preserved. The allocation of one thousand acres of land for the church, in the letter to Rev. Bridges from the West Jersey Society, would indicate that it was not until sometime after his arrival and commencement of pastoral labors that the building was raised. But its size, shape, and furnishings remain a mystery. The only detail preserved is the fact that it was a log structure. But then, most of the dwellings in the area at that time were likely of similar construction.

By 1717, this building had deteriorated and was no longer fit for use. A more comfortable structure was erected in the same location. It was a frame building covered with shingles on the sides as well as the roof. Plain benches were arranged inside for seating. It was situated on the southeast corner of the lot. *The Fairfield Presbyterians, Puritanism in West Jersey from 1680, p. 5, Lawrence C. Roff*

Eventually, the second Meeting House would also deteriorate to the point where it was torn down in 1775. The pulpit and benches were arranged outside under a large oak tree and public worship was rendered when the weather was agreeable to such.

As was the custom of most churches during this time, the burial grounds for the congregation extended from the periphery of the Meeting House to the surrounding grove of oaks, maples and cedars. There could be found no more serene resting place than in the midst of these stately trees. The earliest existing grave marker in this cemetery is that of Thomas Parvin d. 28 Aug 1743, age 80 yrs, 3 mos, 3 days. Only a few were buried at this site after the congregation moved to the site of the Old Stone Church in 1780.



Fairfield Agreement Monument

In June, 1909, the Presbytery of West Jersey erected a granite monument to the memory of the original founders of the "Church of Christ in Fairfield." In plain, but beautiful simplicity the monument records the names of those who were the "Signers of Agreement in Fairfield." John Ogden is the only signer of the *Fairfield Agreement* to have a grave marker still existing at the present, having entered his eternal rest on December 22, 1745, the 75th year of his life.

Two pastors were laid to rest in this cemetery, the Rev. Mr. Daniel Elmer and his successor, the Rev. Mr. William Ramsey. Ramsey's table stone (a grave marker set horizontally on bricks) is in need of repair, having broken in pieces over the years

Through the years, there have been cycles of interest, neglect, decay, and some

preservative care to the burial grounds at New England Town. In 1899, the Daughters of the American Revolution solicited funds to erect a fence around the cemetery. The complete fence was never set up, though one at the entrance of the cemetery was eventually erected. There is need for restorative work at the present; the current congregation of Fairfield church has been encouraged by the efforts of member Bill McLean, and volunteer care takers Richard Blew and Bill Morrison who have traipsed through the dense brush engulfing the gravestones, marked them and cleared the growth away.

With great care and effort, Bill Morrison and Richard Blew have maintained the Michael Swing Cemetery and have continued to cut the grass and do general maintenance at the Presbyterian grounds too; they see both cemeteries as one.

The current congregation does not own the grounds (the Presbytery of West Jersey does), but is soliciting funds to aid in the preserving and restoring process. The restoration will include a survey of the cemetery, charting and numbering all grave markers. From the data contained in the survey, volunteers will take photos of the stones, do rubbings of them and seek expert help to repair the table stone marker of Pastor Ramsey. Fairfield Church plans then to put the information gleaned from this restoration project into a digital form that will be usable for many, especially for those who would do genealogical research.

See the 325th Anniversary page for information on how to donate to this work.



The view from the Rev. Daniel Elmer's stone looking to the Fairfield Agreement Stone Monument.

See part 2 for more photos of the New England Town Cemetery.