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CHURCH RECORDS ARE AT RUTHERS

WHAT GOD HATH JOINED TOGETHER

A HISTORY OF

THE HOLMDEL BAPTIST CHURCH, 1668-1968  
THE HOLMDEL REFORMED CHURCH, 1699-1968  
THE HOLMDEL COMMUNITY CHURCH  
of the  
United Church of Christ 1968

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## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

NINETEEN SIXTY EIGHT marked the 300th anniversary of the consolidated Baptist and Reformed Churches of Holmdel, New Jersey, which since 1936 has had the distinction of being one of the very few communities in which one pastor served two churches of different denominations. Each of these churches has undergone several changes of name and relationship as has the area in which they are located.

The name Holmdel, officially adopted by the township in 1857, is explained in two different ways. In Baptist Church history, it is said to have been named for the Holmes family, who were among the earliest Baptist settlers; in accounts of the Reformed Church, two Saxon words "holm" and "dell" meaning "pleasant" and "valley" are suggested as the origin of the name. The present Holmdel Village, originally known as the Pleasant Valley section of the Middletown area, was for many years called Baptisttown. However, when an application for a post office was made in 1849, it was found that the name Baptisttown had been preempted by another New Jersey locality.

The village is situated on land which, in 1664, was purchased by the earliest settlers from the Indians through their Chief Popomora and his brother Mishacoing. This tract, comprising thousands of acres, was bought "for 201 fathoms of black and white wampum (strings of beads or sea shells) plus five coats, one gun, one clout capp, one shirt, 12 pounds of tobacco, and one ankar of wine." The deed to the land was recorded on April 7, 1665.

It was to this area that sixteen families of the Baptist faith migrated from Rhode Island in 1667 to create a Baptist congregation, which was the first of its kind to be organized south of Rhode Island. The first Baptist Church building was occupied in 1705. By 1690, Dutch settlers from New York and Long Island had also begun to populate the Monmouth County area, and between 1719 and 1721 the first Dutch Reformed Church was built about a mile from Holmdel Village. Thus the two denominations embarked in the same area and epoch on a long period of independent religious development.

Both churches can be proud not only of the very able and illustrious men who filled their pulpits, but also of the outstanding men and women who occupied their pews. Both churches have been cited among the important ones in the histories of their denominations. It was these venerable

bodies which, out of mutual need and in the great depression of the 1930's, federated into one worshipping congregation. It was agreed that alternate use would be made of the church buildings, and that the tenets of each church body would be harmoniously respected by both congregations. This successful shared experience of two long-standing traditions speaks eloquently of the broad outlook and true religious convictions of the membership.

The detailed historical study of the Holmdel Community Church is presented here not only because of its intrinsic interest but also as a means of providing better understanding of how our predecessors struggled to solve their problems and to keep their faith. It is a history of the pilgrimage of two stalwart religious communities, culminating as an act of faith into organic union and entering into a new relationship with the United Church of Christ. The plan of narration treats the development of the two churches separately. Because of the earlier date of its founding, our story begins with the first Baptist worship conducted in the Middletown area.

## CHAPTER 2

## THE UPPER CONGREGATION OF THE MIDDLETOWN BAPTIST CHURCH

2.1 Historical Beginnings

An inscription on the Holmdel Baptist Church building says "Organized 1668." Even though there are no records to substantiate this date conclusively, there is much evidence to indicate that there was a group of Baptists who worshipped together in 1668 or even a few years earlier in the neighborhood of what is now Holmdel Village.

The first permanent settlers of the area arrived in the spring of 1664. In the fall of that year, Governor Richard Nicolls, on authority of the Duke of York, issued a proclamation which promised religious freedom as an incentive for the establishment of more settlements in New Jersey. As a result, many more families came in 1665. The tract of land known as Newasink or Navesink comprising what is now Holmdel, Raritan, Matawan, and Middletown townships was purchased from Chief Poppanora and his brother Mishacoing in 1664. All the expense of the purchase, including payment to the Indians, the services of men and boats for several voyages made,<sup>1</sup> and the recording of the deeds in New York was £149 6s.10d.

The grant for all this land, called the Monmouth Patent, specifically states that the patentees "shall have free liberty of conscience without any molestation or disturbance whatsoever in their way of worship." Nearly all of the original Middletown purchasers had previously experienced opposition, disfranchisement, confiscation of property, and persecutions on account of their faith.

Of the twelve original patentees and their twenty-four associates, at least eighteen were Baptists.<sup>2</sup> Of these, at least two residents, John Bowne and James Ashton, were recognized as capable of conducting worship and of preaching. Although conclusive evidence cannot be given, it seems almost certain that families with strong Baptist convictions joined in religious services from 1668 or earlier. Since there is no record of a church building before 1705, these services must have been held in private homes.

One of the more famous of the original patentees was Obadiah Holmes, who served as pastor of the Baptist Church in Newport, Rhode Island, and who was arrested while holding services in the home of one of his Baptist brethren in Lynn, Massachusetts, in 1651. Found guilty, he refused to pay the fine and to acknowledge error; he chose to suffer rather than

"deny his Lord." His punishment was thirty lashes with a three-cord whip. The Reverend Obadiah Holmes never actually lived in the Holmdel area, but his lands were settled by his sons and grandsons, whom he occasionally visited.

Other noteworthy Baptists residing in the area at that time were Richard Stout, Thomas Whitlock, John Luckman, Walter Wall, James Grover, William Goulding, and Edward and John Smith.

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The first authenticated formal organization of a Baptist Church took place in 1688 with the assistance of the Reverend Thomas Killingsworth, a recent arrival from England. This was the first Baptist Church organized in New Jersey and, in fact, was among the earliest in America.<sup>3</sup> The name given was the Middletown Baptist Church, and there were two centers where meeting houses were erected for alternate use. One center was in the village of Middletown and the other was at Baptisttown, now called Holmdel. Each place and assembly is designated in the church records: that at Baptisttown was the "Upper Meeting House" in which gathered the "Upper Congregation," and that at Middletown Village was the "Lower Meeting House" with the "Lower Congregation." These congregations were absolutely one, sharing equally in the responsibility and privileges of the church.

One of the early preachers was John Bray; it is not known whether or not he was ordained. The records show that he was an earnest, devout man who took an active interest in the welfare of the church. The church minutes speak of him as a "man of gifts," and it was he who gave to the church the property in Holmdel - the four and one-third acres on which are the meeting house, parsonage, and burial grounds. Mr. Bray had come from England and was a resident and property owner here in 1668. His lands included parts of the Lawrence and Holmes tracts. Thus the land on which the church and parsonage now stand was owned by Baptists since bought from the Indians until the time it was deeded over to the Holmdel Community Church, United Church of Christ in 1968. Since the church could not legally own property while under English rule, the deed was held in trust. Obadiah Holmes and Garret Wall, in a deed of acknowledgment of trust, dated December 18, 1705, address themselves "to all Christian people," and declare that "John Bray and Susanna, his wife, on December 14, 1705, on mere special trust and confidence, for the only use, benefits and behoofs of the society, community or congregational called Baptst," gave and further bound themselves to convey the property to the church, when it shall have a legal existence.<sup>4</sup> Since the church was not incorporated until December 1793, the title was held in trust for 88 years. The deed of trust, which is still in the keeping of the trustees of the church, is the oldest deed held by any Baptist Church in New Jersey.

## NOTES

1. Ellis, Franklin, History of Monmouth County, New Jersey, R. T. Peck and Co., (Philadelphia, 1835) p. 60.
2. Of the 36 names on the town book, the following were Baptists: Richard Stout, Jonathan Bowne, John Buchman, Walter Wall, Jonathan Holmes, William Cheeseman, William Compton, John Bowne, James Grover, John Stout, Obadiah Holmes, John Wilson, John Cox, William Layton, George Mount, James Ashton, James Grover, Jr., and Thomas Whitlock.
3. The early Baptist Churches on this continent and their dates are as follow: Providence, R.I., 1639; First Newport, R.I., 1644; Second Newport, R.I., 1656; First Swansea, Mass., 1663; First Boston, Mass., 1665; North Kingston, R.I., 1665; South Kingston, R.I., 1680; Charleston, S.C., 1683; Tiverton, R.I., 1685; Pennepek, Penna., 1688. Other Baptist Churches in New Jersey include Piscataway, (today Stelton), 1689; Cohansey (at Roadstown), 1690; and Cape May, 1712.
4. Griffiths, Thomas S., "History of the Holmdel Baptist Church," Minutes of the Trenton Baptist Association, June 3-4, 1874.
5. Ellis, op. cit., p. 527 (Quoting from Morgan Edwards' "Materials towards a History of the Baptists in New Jersey" published in 1792.)
6. Maring, Norman, A History of the Baptists in New Jersey, Judson Press (Valley Forge, Pa., 1964) p. 21 (footnote).
7. Abel Morgan's library contained about 300 volumes. An account of these is given in the "Sketch of Abel Morgan" by E. J. Foote in the Minutes of the Trenton Baptist Association of 1883. The Middletown Church possesses three of Morgan's volumes and also a notebook containing outlines of sermons preached from 1743 - 1745. Among the books in his library were the following: Works of John Calvin, 2200 pages, in Latin; Calvin's Institutes, in Latin in the margins; Ciceronis de Philosophia, printed in 1574; works by many Reformed scholars; sermons of Gilbert Tennent; and Benjamin Keach's Gospel Mysteries Unveiled, which had written on the flyleaf, "Obadiah Holmes. His book, a gift from his mother."
8. Abel Morgan prepared dated manuscripts of his sermons.
9. Abel Morgan did not live in the parsonage but owned his own home about a mile from Middletown.