



## Lebanon at 250: A reflection on the occasion of Lebanon's 250<sup>th</sup> birthday

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*First Congregational Church of Lebanon*

*Isaiah LVIII 1-12*

Almost 250 years ago this week that something truly momentous happened. That's right. In 1761, the first piece of construction equipment showed up at 12A and began work that has yet to be finished. Okay, maybe it feels like it's been two and a half centuries since construction began on the other side of town.

But something momentous did occur in 1761. It was on July 4th of that year that Governor Benning-Wentworth signed the charter for Lebanon and Norwich and Enfield and for some people who seemed to be trying to earn some brownie points with the king—Hanover.

There's something reflective of our national character that can be seen in the genesis of our communities. As you may know those charters were issued to some men who had fought up in the wild north against the French and the Indians and they were traveling home to Connecticut when they passed through this neighborhood and they thought, there's some money to be made. So they got those charters to establish the communities.

The idea was not that they would live here but that they could get other people to live here. They were the proprietors. But they weren't the only ones who were interested in turning a buck. The governor was a pretty smart guy too. And written into the charter was a clause that said that for every 50 acres granted, five had to be put under cultivation. If that didn't happen the charter reverted to the crown. So there was an incentive for those proprietors to get some people here and fast.

So using inducements of money and land they recruited some settlers. Within two years there was a sawmill on the Mascoma and by 1775 there were 342 people living in Lebanon. You maybe recall something began to happen in 1775. Depending on your perspective it was either the War of Independence or a rebellion. There wasn't much disagreement though about what was going on here in town. Every single eligible male voter signed a statement supporting the Congress of the United American Colonies and before we might think that this was just an effort to get along with the neighbors we should remember that signing that document in 1775 was an act of sedition.

So, we had a bunch of revolutionaries in town and some of them went off to fight in places like Bennington and perhaps Bunker Hill. During the years of the revolution our forbearers had to start to make political arrangements on a larger scale. And it is interesting that give the fact that Lebanon produced a governor of NH, two US senators and a member of the House of Representatives that our political forefathers didn't want to be part of NH.

In 1778 and 1781 the town fathers tried to affiliate with Vermont. The reason? They thought the people down in Exeter NH, where the government was located at the time, were too focused on Massachusetts. Does that familiar? All the bad things are coming from Massachusetts. It's more

than two centuries of tradition! Geography won out, the communities to the east of the river became part of New Hampshire and Lebanon grew.

Now the center of gravity for Lebanon where things began was in West Lebanon and then the village grew up in East Lebanon and finally when it was decided to build a Meetinghouse things started happening around here because Mr. Colburn was willing to give the land for the church and the park.

Now in early development that's also worth noting, given the number of doctors and nurses and other health care folks we have in our community, was that healthcare has been a part of the story of Lebanon right from the beginning. It was in 1780 that Phineas Parkhurst burst on the historical scene, and Dr. Parkhurst made a name for himself as the Paul Revere of the Upper Valley by warning his townsmen in Royalton VT of a pending attack by Indians who were in the pay of the British.

He barely delivered the news, he was almost killed, and the shot he took in the back prevented him from going to war. So instead he decided to become a doctor. He trained and he dabbled in other lines of work too—investing in mills and also apparently becoming a very successful mule trader. So, medical people, if you are thinking of a way to boost your income, we can talk about renting out the parking lot if you want to trade mules.

Who would have thought that some 200 years ago that we would go from a doctor trading mules to two great medical centers within our town borders, and that we would have a helicopter. A lot has changed while a lot still seems to have stayed the same.

In the first half of the century the community grew and subsistence farming was joined by the raising of sheep and the development of a woolen industry. And that industry peaked in 1945 and fortunately for this community two years later the railroad arrived and Lebanon became an important place in the railroad network here in northern New England, with three depots, and that enabled the growth of other industries, bringing new prosperity to town.

The civil war came along in 1861, one hundred years after the founding of the community. There were 2300 residents in town and more than 280 of them went off to fight - places like Antxxx, xx, Fredericksburg, Cold Harbor and Gettysburg. And after the war, the growth of the community continued. There were wire shops, a sponge factory, metal works. And then what seems to be an unfortunate but all to recurring feature in the history of Lebanon, there was a fire in 1887. It wasn't the first one to wipe out a part of town, but it was the first one to be remembered as a great fire. Out of that destruction a new level emerged, one that focused on the textile industry. And that industry grew over the years and gave us names we recognize like Carter and DoleXXX.

And then the 20th century arrived and with it the First World War, and then in the 1930's, the Great Depression. There were a lot of poor people in town at that point, a lot of people taking advantage of that rail network to show up here to seek assistance and the town had to grapple with that. But by 1938 things seemed to have righted themselves enough that the WPA guide to New Hampshire was able to describe Lebanon as being prosperous and having a complete set of industry.

The 1930s gave way to the 1940s and the Second World War and members of our community, who are here today, participated in that conflict. And then after the war came the great boom, the explosion of the national economy. And the second great transportation revolution took place, with the arrival of the Interstate. Talk about a fortuitous development! It was at that moment in

time in the 1950s that Lebanon produced a governor and a US Senator. Lange WinnelXXX, Norris Cotton—members of this church—were able to secure an extra exit on the Interstate which was no small feat and they were able to have the highway routed to the east of downtown, rather than across Storrs Hill.

Little did they know just how critical that highway was going to be to the fortunes of this community? Because as the Interstate was growing and patterns of living were changing, the textile industry was dying. But the Interstate and Lebanon's location next to Dartmouth allowed new industries to grown up—the service economy. And of course, just as things were looking great, what happens in 1964 but another fire. A good chunk of downtown was lost and we now have the benefits, if you would like to call them that, of urban renewal. But that of course gave people a sense of what they lost and what they want to preserve, it helps shape Lebanon's thinking moving into the future as it continues to grapple with development and growth.

So here we are 2011 celebrating 250 years and we can look at beautiful new developments like the Centerra Park or the new Medical Center, we can look at expansion that will go on at APD, we can joke about what we see—the new businesses going in on 12A, and the new homes being built. More than 12,000 people live in Lebanon—now a city. Of course we remember why it became a city—part of that ongoing fight between the folks here in Lebanon and the folks in West Lebanon. But dealing with the political problems is also a way of looking to the future, embracing hope for what could come and be.

So why tell this story in church today? True, our congregation has been along for just about the entire ride. Indeed it was the first pastor of this church, Charles Downs (Steve, our church records indicate Isaiah Potter was the first) wrote the first history of Lebanon, and as I've noted we have produced leading statesmen. We have also had leaders in other parts of civic life and volunteer organizations.

I tell this story today not so we can toot our own horn, but so we can look at the story of this community through a particular lense. Were you listening to the words that Bob read from Isaiah? Those 12 verses from chapter 58 are both challenging and inspiring. The part of the book of Isaiah, that we call 3rd Isaiah, the part of the book that was written during the restoration, in the years when the Jews returned from exile in Babylon to rebuild their homeland. There had been a dream and an expectation that the return from exile would mark the beginning of a golden age but the reality was different. There was division, there was fighting, there was dissention, as people argued for the community to move forward. People were focused on their own priorities and their own needs. Often times they confused what they wanted with the will of God. And in doing so they were drawn away from God in the climate community that God wanted the people to build.

Does any of this sound familiar? It should. The words that Isaiah spoke more than two millennia ago, speak to us today. Tomorrow we are going to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the City of Lebanon's founding and the 235th anniversary of our Declaration of Independence. And we have much for which we can be grateful.

We live in a nation of unparalleled prosperity and opportunity, the freedom where we get to govern ourselves and pursue our dreams. But we know that not all is in our republic, that there are still too many people without a job, without a home, without opportunity, without the chance to fully participate in our civic life. Our involvement overseas continues to be a source of division within the body politic, and the body politic itself causes us pause. We wonder about our political

institutions, our judicial system. Now noting these failings and weaknesses isn't an instance of beating up on America it is part of claiming our heritage as Americans.

We declared our right, our duty to govern ourselves. And being a free people doesn't mean we lay claim to privileges, but we assume duties and responsibilities. We're in charge—that means we're responsible. And there is a notion of responsibility for us in the church, while the political reality is grounded in a deeper reality, and that is our calling as Christians. God has called us to be partners and we see that in the readings from Isaiah. God has called us to build a particular kind of community, one rooted in justice and righteousness and a knowledge of God. That is a pretty heady calling, it is a big responsibility but it is one that our God believes us capable of shouldering.

So tomorrow let's celebrate. Let's rejoice in the many blessings in our lives, the many achievements of our community and our country. Let's give thanks to our forbearers have done, whether they were famous or anonymous. Let's claim that heritage for our own so that we can build a community, so that we can build a church that is worth of our children and worthy of our God.