



Sanctuary scroll provides puzzle from the past

This article is the fourth in a monthly 2015 series by church Historian Bonnie Healy.

Its unadorned wooden frame promises simplicity, sturdiness, structure. The calligraphy in its manuscript demonstrates patience and the elegance time yields. The “scroll” hanging in the front left corner of the sanctuary speaks of endurance and stability at just a glance.

The scroll was indeed meant to be special. It was given to the church — to us — on Feb. 20, 1966, as the

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Charter members are named in the a scroll by the piano in the sanctuary.

church’s final act celebrating its 150th anniversary. What an excellent idea to present the past so beautifully to the future.

The scroll briefly recounts the church’s history beginning with its pioneer days, continuing through its union with United Baptist, and its return to West Henrietta in 1838. It then lists 19 men identified as “charter members” and church pastors from Rev. Thomas Gorton, the church’s first ordained minister, to Rev. Chuck Bixby, who served as pastor at the time of the 150th anniversary. Retired, Rev. Bixby still faithfully attends church each Sunday.

The puzzle in the scroll is its list of charter members. When were they charter members? Not in 1815. The document itself names those charter members: Rev. and Mrs. Thomas Gorton, Deacon and Mrs. Michael Brininstool, Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Nichols, and Sam Parker. In 1838? The scroll implies that date. It reads: “...in the year 1838, the present West Henrietta Baptist Church was organized. In honor of its Charter Members ... this scroll is presented.”

However, if these 19 men were 1838 “charter members,” why did only eight of them sign the 1838 petition for dismission from United Baptist? And where are their wives? Thirty-seven of the 71 signers of the 1838 petition for dismission were women. Since colonial days, couples have often been numbered among charter members.

There is yet another glitch in this list being an 1838 record: Leonard Bullard died in 1829.

So what is this list of “charter members”? The congregation of 1966 didn’t conjure the names. They may well have possessed a document we do not. One theory that fits the puzzle pieces is that these men were charter members in the 1827 formation of United Baptist. Men conducted the merger negotiations, and men would have signed as charter members. Although a few men remain unidentified, the “charter members” in the scroll are West Henrietta men and likely represented the men in the west side congregation when United Baptist formed.

Odd, isn’t it? Rightly remembered they are, but for a dream of unity.