

The Rev. John Higginson,

Nearly 350 years have passed away since this clergyman came to serve Guilford as schoolmaster and minister. John Higginson was born in Claybrook, England, August 16, 1616, and with his father, Francis Higginson, was among the forerunners of the Puritans to come to New England in 1629. At an early age, John united with the church, mingled with the local Indians and came to understand their language. When he was only fourteen, his father, pastor of the Salem Church, died. Rather than establish the precedent of a pension, Governor Winthrop and some eminent men of the colony took upon themselves the education of the family. At the age of nineteen he was made a freeman and in 1636 came to Hartford and studied with the Rev. Thomas Hooker. Here he served as a schoolmaster until the next year when he was sent to Saybrook where he continued to teach and became chaplain at the fort at the mouth of the river. Sometime between 1641 and 1643, he moved to Guilford where he became assistant to the Rev. Henry Whitfield, and married his daughter, Sarah. This was said to have been the first wedding in the Plantation.

In Guilford, he became the first local schoolmaster, and when the church was formally organized in 1643, he was chosen one of the seven pillars. He served as religious teacher but seems never to be ordained but considered himself as 'regularly in the ministry'. . . When Mr. Whitfield resigned in 1650 and went to England to join the cause of Cromwell with many other New Englanders, Higginson was promoted to the pastorate of the church. He continued as schoolmaster for the next six years.

Steiner's History of Guilford and Madison, records that in 1654, Mr. Higginson wrote to Rev. Thomas Thatcher of Weymouth, showing that he considered himself finally fixed in Guilford: "For myself, I have settled upon my relation to the church and people here, either to stay or go together, as the will of God shall appear." This letter is so interesting, showing the difficulties of the new settlers and the feeling of uncertainty as to their continuance. During his pastorate, it is documented that Mr. Higginson had great involvement with the Colony of New Haven and the United Colonies of New England. In 1658, because of his knowledge of the Indian language, efforts were made to induce him to become a missionary, but he declined.

After being called to the Guilford Church, a town meeting was held to settle his salary. He agreed in writing that "if he were paid 80 pounds a year, and had a new corn house, and 20 pounds to pay his debts, he would continue with them in the work of the ministry as long as the salary be duly paid." By 1658 conditions of things were declining. His salary had fallen into arrears and he felt that the time had come when he must leave the place. The ties which bound them to Guilford had been greatly weakened. It offered no advantages of education for their children, nor, as yet, did any town in the colony. The Hopkins Grammar School at New Haven was not opened until the following year. The Higginsons decided that the time had come to return to England.