

Methodists to celebrate 200-year heritage

Gordon B. Seavey

In commemoration of two centuries of Methodism, the United Methodist Church of Westford will observe a special "Heritage Week End" October 13 and 14.

A noteworthy Sunday program has been arranged by the pastor, Dr. Richard D. Pittenger, when Dr. Warren Jacobs of New York City, a former student minister, returns to give the commemorative sermon, based on the "Celebration of the Generations." There will be a special musical program.

A fellowship dinner will be served on Saturday at 6 p.m. with musical moments at dessert time. This will be followed by a display of memorial gifts and a slide-tape show depicting the history of the church from its earliest beginnings in 1867 as a Bible class and later a Sabbath School sponsored by Arthur Wright.

A century ago the population of the Graniteville section of the town was small. A group of local residents was anxious to form a religious society of their own to be the third church in Westford.

A boost came two years later when Charles G. Sargent, head of the textile machinery manufacturing which still bears his name, expressed his conviction that there "ought to be regular preaching in Graniteville."

Minor H. A. Evans, a student at the Boston Theological Seminary, was invited to speak in the old school house. The date was July 4, 1869. The building was filled to overflowing with interested citizens, eager for religious representation in their neighborhood.

Initial Gift

Sargent headed a subscription list with \$2,000 to be used to erect a suitable house of worship and also donated a site, perhaps the prettiest location in that area on the banks of Mill Pond, for the edifice. Construction started soon thereafter.

While the church building was under construction, the group met in the school in the winter and in the pine grove at the rear of Samuel Fletcher's home in the summer.

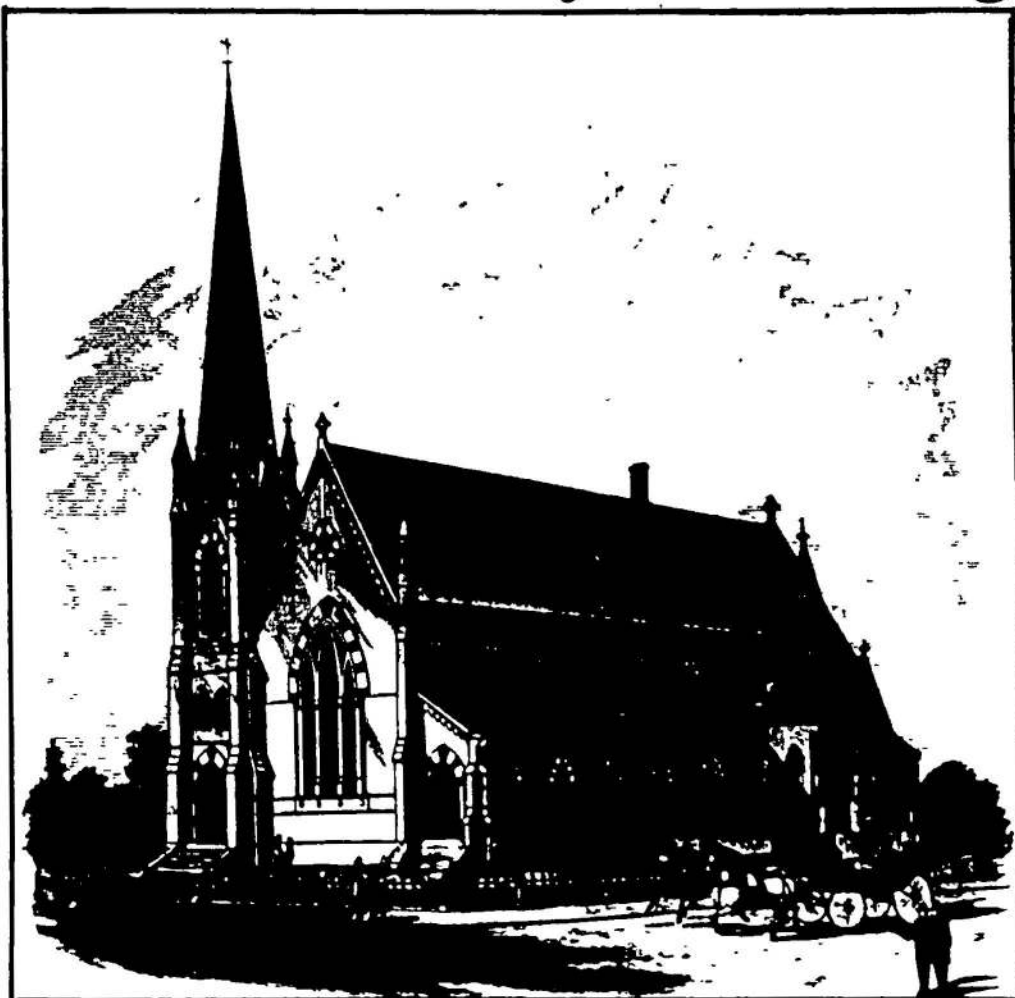
Finally the day came for the dedication, Nov. 20, 1870.

The style of the edifice is strictly Gothic and of such interesting design that more than a century later it was recognized as a typical New England church of this period in an article in the November 1982 issue of Smithsonian magazine.

The architect was S. S. Woodcock and a Concord, N.H., firm erected the building for \$8,900 above the foundation. No doubt much of the foundation work was done by local quarrymen.

Like all organizations of this type, the financial cost laid a heavy burden on the fledgling congregation. Sargent, the chief financial patron of the parish, then known as Methodist Episcopal, died in 1878. His interest was so deep in the endeavor that he had added another \$1,000 in his will. Soon thereafter his heirs and other members of the flock had paid off the entire debt.

Other substantial supporters of the new church at its beginnings, in addition to Wright and Fletcher, were J. K. Proctor, Lyman A. Smith, Cyrus Hosmer and William R. Reed.



Over a century ago an unknown artist made this sketch of the strikingly Gothic design of the Methodist Church of Westford. (Courtesy Gordon B. Seavey)

The current pastor, Dr. Pittenger, is a graduate of South Dakota State University and Drew Theological Seminary. In his 34 years in the ministry, he has served only three local churches. He is a sports enthusiast and also a devotee of the arts. With his wife Dolores, they have six children, with Crysta a senior at Westford Academy.

The Methodist Church is the home for the recently formed Westford Chorus, Alcoholics Anonymous and Overeaters Anonymous, as well as headquarters for Cub, Girl and Boy Scouts.

The parishioners have approved plans to renovate the building to provide nine new classrooms, a new kitchen and a redesigned Fellowship area.

A long time member recalls, "Within our church walls, mourners have found comfort, worshippers blessings in beautiful weddings and baptisms, and most of all, meaningful worship services."