



Third and recent meeting house of the First Parish Church United. This was a Unitarian Church from 1828 until 1936. It is now a Community Church.

Westford Recollections

by Mrs. Charles S. Kennedy

The 3rd and present meetinghouse (the taller of the two churches which comprise the First Parish Church United of Westford), was made necessary by the burning down of its predecessor late in 1793. Its inception was a vote of the town Jan. 13, 1794 (176 years ago), very promptly choosing a committee of five to report a convenient site.

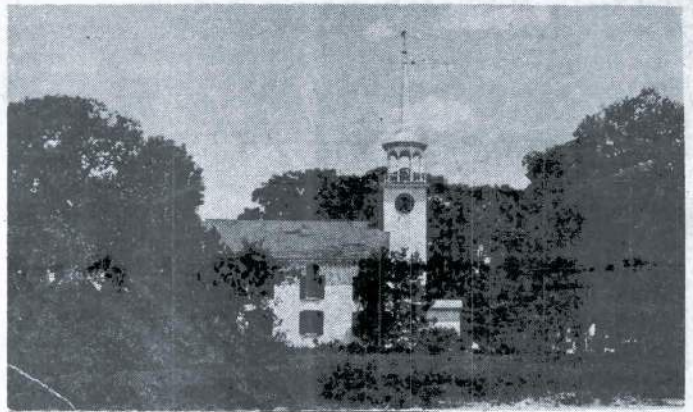
'In its original form it embodied all the well-known characteristics of our Puritan ecclesiastical architecture unaltered and unabridged, and was in its appearance in many respects quite different from what it is now. Outwardly it stood lengthwise with the street, being 65 feet long and 48 feet wide, and 28 feet (at) posts with a tower at the West. On the tower was a Boston bell inscribed the couplet: 'I, to the church, the living call. And to the grave I summons all'. A porch ran along the front side, the front door being in the middle.

'Inwardly it was all one room, with galleries on three of its sides, and its pulpit on the fourth. The pulpit was an elaborate structure, raised high, so that literally its minister had to be looked up to at least by his people on the floor, crimson-curtained behind, as if to veil off the eternal mysteries from common eyes, and overhung the ceiling with a huge sounding-board, designed to increase the volume of the preacher's voice (but which, on account of the apparent ease with which the

Lord, when displeased with what he was saying, might sever its slender rod and drop it as an extinguisher on his head, was supposed by youthful minds to get its name from its keeping His doctrines sound.)

'Its pews, square in form, and the most honorable ones around the wall a step above the floor, were built with railings at the top, supported by handsomely turned balustrades....The seats in them were fitted to turn up while the audience listened, standing, to the long prayer, dropping back at its close with a loud-resounding clatter, which constituted the Puritan amen. From the appointment of a 'seating committee' at the time of its building, it would seem that only a part of the floors were occupied at first with pews, and that the old custom still somewhat prevailed of long seats (deacon's benches) on which the congregation at large were arranged according to their social and religious rank. (Another account says there were '58 pews on the floor, a portion of them square, and 24 in the gallery'.)

I might add that the raising of the meetinghouse took place on May 28 (1794), and on Nov. 1 it was so nearly finished that a committee was chosen to 'dress its pulpit in crimson color,' and 'thursday, Nov. 13' beginning at 9 o'clock, appointed for the selling of its pews 'at public vendue,' and for the seating of its people, the proviso being added that those buying pews should not be entitled seats. A pew was apparently considered to be valuable property for the



Current photo of First Parish Church United of Westford.

subsequent sale of it to another party involved a lengthy legal document complete with witnesses and were even rented at a profit. 'On one side of the pulpit was a special deacon's bench. A conspicuous figure, not yet done away with, was the tithing-man with his long pole to wake the sleepy up and keep the too wakeful quiet.

'In the gallery, at the front, where the minister could keep his eye on them, were the choir:....Violins and flutes as yet were not; base viols and organs years away; a tuning fork alone being regarded as sacred enough to be used in making music to the Lord.'

'There was no fire in the building except the few live coals brought in foot stoves from the altar of a neighbor's kitchen (and the very ample kind set forth in its doctrines; and as this doctrinal kind was not supposed to be inflammable to gunpowder....the place was used not only as a magazine of truth, but as a safe storehouse also for the town's cartridges and flints.

As mentioned before church attendance was required by the entire town and subject to penalty as late as 1835. The meetinghouse was for religion on Sunday and politics on Monday.

The history of Westford Academy (1792) is interwoven with that of the church. Rev. Blake, during his pastorate, was one of the original subscribers to the formation of that institution. The Rev. Ephraim who served the church from 1831 to 1836, and again from 1841 to 1845 was also preceptor of the Westford Academy for nine years, during a period of which he was pastor. For many years the graduating exercises of Westford Academy were held in this church, and continued to be until the year 1907.

The horse sheds at the church ran the whole width of the lot back of the church. The sheds were closed on the back and ends, the front open, and partitions divided the shed into stalls wide enough to allow a single or a pair of horses to drive in, so that the carriages as well as the horses could be protected from the weather. Because of the limited area back of the church, much of the shed went over onto the land of J. C. Abbott, whose garden was beyond the sheds. This, of course, was later in the history of this meetinghouse. This cooperation was typical of the Abbott family as for generations they had been active supporters of the church.

Many changes were made at the meetinghouse:

'In 1814 it chose the last of its tithing-men...

'In 1818 its gunpowder was

removed to another place...

'In 1820 the subject of heating it was earthly fire was introduced and, tho received then with great coolness and voted down without kindling a spark even of contention, resulted 3 years later...in the voting into it of a full-sized wood stove, and in the appointment of a special, full-powered committee for the putting up of its funnel.

'With the new stove, music also had its innings, for about 1824 a base viol, in spite of the scripture text, 'I will not hear the melody of thy viols,' (often quoted against it), was allowed its choir, possibly with the proviso, here, as elsewhere, that to differentiate it from the common fiddle it should be played standing on its upper end. (Later a violin and melodeon joined the bass viol. In 1894 it was noted that the leader of the choir also played a violin). In 1828 the split in the church resulted in the building of the Congregational Church across the common--now reunited.

'In 1831 its steeple...was given new timbers and new paint

'In 1835 a new bell tried its tongue at calling the people', but in 1854 this had to be recast or another one purchased. The present bell is dated 1856.

'In 1837 a fine clock, the gift of John Abbott, one of its devoted sons, drew the eyes of the whole village...

'In 1847 (or 1846) its partitioned off its lower floor as a special room for the use of its old mother, the town which somehow...had got entirely left out of doors (windows are still the same, office ceiling may be old gallery).

'And in 1868 (it underwent a change)...in its relation to the points of the compass (a 90 degree turn resulted in the original front's now facing the library), it got a new organ -- still beng used, and while keeping its old walls and memories, modernized into the many-roomed house of today, the whole at a cost of some \$6,500.00 (including the cost of the organ).

Between the partitioning off into two floors of 1847 and the modernizing and shifting of the building in 1868, the old galleries, the high pulpit, the sounding board and the square pews with their movable seats had gone.

In a burst of good feeling in 1868, women were allowed to vote in

In 1894 the centennial of the building was celebrated with many a speech.

In 1910 the church was a recipient of the beautiful memorial window and attractive railing, gifts of Edwin D. Metcalf, of Auburn, N.Y., in memory of his mother, both of whom were former residents.

Marden Seavey said he pumped the organ as a boy. He was paid 25¢ an hour when a pupil was taking a lesson on the organ. Today the First Parish Meetinghouse retains many of its lovely old features -- mellow pine floors and wainscotting, the old organ and amidst its picturesque setting on the village green. Next week look for the history behind the other church building on the common, now part of First Parish Church United.