

Westford Recollections

The Union Congregational Church 150th Anniversary - 1828-1978

By JUNE W. KENNEDY

The First Parish Church United of Westford began its life and work as "The Second Church of Christ in Chelmsford." It became "The First Church of Christ in Westford" when the town of Westford was incorporated on September 23, 1729. For just over a hundred years the people of this town worshiped in the town meetinghouse (two earlier buildings both located nearby the third and present 1794 First Parish Church). In 1828 theological controversy caused a division in Westford, as well as in over a hundred churches in eastern Massachusetts. For the next hundred or so years, those of the more liberal faith remained in the old 1794 meetinghouse and became Unitarians. Those of a more orthodox faith chose to move across the Common and form the Union Congregational Church. It should be noted that in 1955 the two churches formally rejoined to form the Corporation of the First Parish Church United of Westford.

On Sunday morning, December 3, 1978, First Parish Church will honor its Congregational heritage by holding a 150th Anniversary Service commemorating the organization of that Society. The 10:30 a.m. worship will be held in the old Congregational building at the corner of Lincoln St. and Boston Rd. (Parish Hall of the First Parish Church United of Westford). The community is invited to attend this historic service. It seems fitting to turn back to the early days of the Union Congregational Church.

It was on August 11, 1828, that 34 men obtained a warrant from Jonathan Prescott, a Justice of the Peace, to hold a meeting to organize another religious society in the town of Westford. The new Society sent a committee to Andover Theological Seminary to see about a minister when they had neither church or meetinghouse. November 18, it was voted that the hiring committee hire a Mr. Luce, a recent graduate, so long as they had the "means" to pay him. On December 25, 1828, a council examined 59 persons as to their religious belief and experimental acquaintance with the religion, and voted that these persons be regularly organized into a church to be known as "The Union Church of Christ in Westford"—"Union" because Littleton people were included. Services were held for four Sundays in the old meetinghouse and then here and there, and for a time in the Hall of the Westford Academy (which is today the Town Museum).

In January of 1829, the new Union Society voted to build a meetinghouse. On July 30, they had a grand raising. As various parts were put in place, prayers were given and hymns were sung. The ladies brought refreshments and coffee. The strong drink of which we read at raisings seems to have been missing. The attitude of the new Church in this respect is reflected 2 1/2 years later when by Church vote all parishioners had to comply with the temperance regulations. The new meetinghouse was dedicated October 8, 1829.

It was a nearly square structure whose roof had much less pitch than now. A square belfry was at the west end. Stone steps extended nearly across the front end. Originally three doors graced the front of the church.

Immediately within was a long entryway at each end of which were stairways to the cellar and to the gallery above where the singers sat. This was at the north end of the church and was very much higher than the pulpit. You can judge something of its height when the choir was singing. It was the custom in the early days for the congregation to rise, turn and face them. It has been said that only those parishioners sitting well up towards the pulpit could get a view of the choir. In those days, also, the congregation rose and faced about with their backs to the minister during the hymn singing.

The pulpit was in the middle of the opposite or south end of the one room. It was an imposing high fixture with high front so that a short man didn't appear to view above the shoulders. There were two stairways of six steps each leading to the pulpit.

There were rows of pews with an aisle opposite each entrance door. The pews were very much like those today in the old Parish Church across the Common. There were doors to the pews then. There also were wing pews at each side of the pulpit at right angles to the other pews.

Only one month after the dedication, as the icy blasts of winter were approaching, a committee was appointed (November 1829) for warming the meetinghouse. Soon, in the entry, were two stoves for heating with long stove pipes running the length of the Church and upheld by wires fastened to the ceiling and entering two chimneys at the south end of the Church on either side of the pulpit. For further warmth, foot stoves were extensively used. Live coals were shoveled out of one of the box stoves for the footstoves.

The story goes that once a devout patriarch fell asleep in this Church. The preacher raised his voice so suddenly to awaken him that the gentleman threw his hymn book, nearly knocking off the bonnet of the lady in front of him and landing the book in the astonished lady's lap. Records of 1878 note that the afternoon services were omitted—to the apparent satisfaction of all. At this same point in time the clerk's records indicate that the Church numbered 92 with 65 females and 27 males. Also, the pulpit was removed to make way for a platform with a more modern moveable desk. The old gallery was cut

out leaving an entry in each corner about two feet above the main floor with an orchestra between for the singers. A large window replaced the old center door and window. A furnace replaced the stoves.

Going back in time again, it was reported that committees were appointed to provide singing at Mr. Luce's ordination and the dedication of his house (the present home of the Russo Family on Main St. and right next door to the present parsonage of the First Parish Church). The first note in the church records in regard to music is a bill of sale somewhat in the form of a deed of "one seraphine new" in their meetinghouse for \$112 paid by the Ladies' Sewing Circle on February 11, 1857. (A seraphine was a diminutive ancestor of the piano.) Time was when there was a string band to provide music, consisting of a varying number of violins with bass and double bass viola.

Then there was the advent of a reed organ especially built for the Church by a firm in Concord, N. H.

About 1842 horse sheds were erected and that year was voted a rental of land for a shed of ten cents a year. Also voted, a charge of a dollar a year for the privilege of putting a horse under the meetinghouse. The area was limited at the Congregational Church, but sheds were built on two sides of the lot, one against the land of J. M. Fletcher in back of his grocery store (now the property of Austin Fletcher), and the other on the back side next to what was the blacksmith shop. It is difficult to visualize room for all these sheds on the limited space, but it must be realized that zoning was not a factor; the sheds could be right up to the property line and horses did not create a traffic jam.

Until 1896 there was no place for prayer meetings or socials, Ladies' Aid or any division of the Sunday School. Private houses took the place of vestry. In 1896 this condition came to be considered unbearable. A radical renovation of the building was undertaken. The building was enlarged, the roof-line raised and the interior reshaped. Sunday School rooms and kitchen-dining room facilities were added. Taking architectural ideas from the prevailing church building concepts of the 1890's, the people departed from the old, nearly square "meetinghouse" shape and embraced the fashionable "Akron" architecture of their day.

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Union Congregational Church after remodeling in 1896. Referred to generally as "the brown church." Today it is the Parish Hall of the First Parish Church United of Westford.



Union Congregational Building, 1878, with horsesheds to the left and blacksmith shop to the right. (Photo courtesy of the First Parish Church United of Westford)

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Meeting of the Ladies' Missionary Society at the home of Mrs. Roudenbush, 1925. This Society focused upon the expanding program of Home and Foreign Mission Work of the Congregational Church (Photo courtesy of the First Parish Church United of Westford)

In 1892 the Union Congregational Church became incorporated so that by Commonwealth law it could hold property and transact business. Essentially it cleared the way for the restoration of the church. It should be noted that at the re-dedication ceremony on April 20, 1897 special tribute was paid to Charles I. Hildreth for the numerous items he provided for the Church including the Ryder pipe organ.

The horsesheds were soon to disappear and by 1912 electricity was installed in the Congregational Church. In 1937 the expense of maintaining two churches in the center was not practical. In 1937 the two denominations

Unitarian and Congregational joined to form the First Parish Church United of Westford. However it was 1955 before it became officially incorporated. Today it continues its affiliation to the Unitarian Universalist Society and the United Church of Christ Congregational. In reality First Parish Church United of Westford is a community church with members from many churches including Methodist, Quaker, Catholic, Presbyterian and all Christian churches. It is a church which believes in the sanctity of individual conscience and the freedom of personal belief. It is with quiet pride that First Parish celebrates the 150th Anniversary of its Congregational heritage.