

## Westford Recollections



Congregational Church on Lincoln St. in Westford Center as renovated in 1896

by Mrs Charles S Kennedy  
The Union Congregational Society

Located on the corner of Lincoln St and Boston Rd is the church known as the Union

Congregational Society Today it is one of the two buildings composing the First Parish Church United of Westford. Not all we might wish to know of the

beginnings of this Church is on record. There had been disagreements in the old Parish for at least 50 years. The loyalty of Parson Hall, the first and then the only minister of the Town, to the Crown in Revolutionary days could not fail to bring discontent. Westford was not alone for many a New England Church underwent theological controversies as a more liberal religion dominated the thinking of the parishioners. On August 11, 1828, 34 men obtained a warrant from Jonathan Prescott, a Justice of the Peace, to hold a meeting to organize another religious society.

The new society sent a committee to Andover Theological Seminary to see about a minister when they had neither church or meetinghouse. Nov 18, it was voted that the hiring committee hire a Mr Luce, a recent graduate, so long as they have the 'meanes' to pay him. On Dec 25 a council examined 59 persons as to their religious belief and experimental acquaintance with the religion of Christ, 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 upper room of the Fire House).

In Jan. of 1829 the 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 on refreshments and coffee. The strong drink of which we read at raisings seems to have been missing and the attitude of the new Church in this respect is shown 2 1/2 years later when the Church voted that it required of those persons who shall hereafter unite with the Church that they comply with the temperance regulations. The new meetinghouse was dedicated Oct. 8, 1829.

It was a nearly square structure whose roof had much less pitch than now (in fact, the building has been so completely remodeled that the newly installed minister of First Parish United, Rev George Downey, didn't recognize the picture hanging in his study to be his own church across the common.) in the earliest days of its existence. A square belfry was at the west end. Stone steps extended nearly across the end. Near the end of the steps was a door with a window above and a third door and window in the center.

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 from the custom when the choir was singing for the Congregation to

rise, turn and face the choir and only those well up towards the pulpit could get a view of the choir on account of its elevation. In those days the congregation also arose 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. After the style of those days 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 four 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 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 (Nov 1829) for warming the meeting house. Soon, in the entry, were two stoves for beating the Church with long stove pipes running the length of the Church upheld by wires fastened to the ceiling and entering two chimneys at the south end of the Church on either side of the pulpit. In addition to these stoves, foot stoves were extensively used. Live coals were shovelled out of one of those box stoves for the footstoves.

The story goes that once a devout patriarch fell asleep in this Church. The preacher raised his voice to awaken him so suddenly that he 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.

In 1878 the records note that the afternoon services were omitted to the apparent satisfaction of all. At the same time the clerk reports that the Church then numbered about 82, female 65, male 27. 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 with an orchestra between for the singers about two feet above the main floor. A large window replaced the old centre door and window. A furnace replaced the stoves.

Committees were appointed to provide singing at Mr Luce's ordination and at the dedication of the house (the present home of the Sherman 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 Feb. 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 viols.

Then there was the advent of a reed organ especially built for the Church by a firm in Con-

cord, N H.

In Sept. 27, 1852 the Church 'Voted to raise the sum of \$350 in the Church, each male member to pay \$3 as a poll tax and the remainder to be paid according to property.'

Formerly the laws of the State did not recognize Churches as bodies competent to transact business, relegating all their business matters to the Society (otherwise called the parish).

This arrangement was a fruitful source of trouble. Those who composed the Parish or Society were not all Church members and did not take theology as seriously and were not all as spiritually minded. In Westford, as in other churches, a third body, the Proprietors, existed. This body comprised the pew owners and they owned the meetinghouse, holding deeds of their pews and renting them for profit. In time the State authorized the incorporation of Churches so that they might transact their own business. This was so incorporated in 1892.

About 1842 horsesheds 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 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 hard to visualize room for all these sheds on the limited area, 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. Shortly before the Town House was built there were some negotiations for fitting up the cellar (sometimes called the vestry) for the use of the Town for its meetings and its offices, but the expense was apparently too much for the facilities available.

In 1896 this condition came to be considered unendurable (SS classes met in pews and choir loft, after church for at least awhile).

Thanks to the strenuous and almost heroic efforts of then Pastor A. A. Bickford, a Baptist also serving the S. Chelmsford Baptist Church, the proprietors were persuaded to deed their pews to the church and on April 6, of that year both the Society and the Proprietors conveyed all their property to the incorporated Church, thus clearing the way for a radical renovation of the building making it as you see it today. A Charles Hildreth (who built the Harris house later, in which he and his sister lived) gave the pipe organ at this time. The Church was renovated during the summer and services were held downstairs in the Unitarian Church.

The time came when with the influx of new churches it became an expense to maintain two churches in the center of Westford. In 1936 the two denominations joined together for services calling themselves the First Parish Church United of Westford. For many years separate annual meetings were held, but in 1955 the First Parish Church United of Westford became officially incorporated, so that the one Church, now retaining its affiliations with both the Unitarian - Universalist Society and the United Church of Christ (congregational) is in reality a community church with members from many denominations such as the Methodist, Quaker, Presbyterian and Christian Churches.