
CHESTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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The Chester Methodist Church

A Storied Past, An Uncertain Future



The Beginning

As the population of Chester Factories grew with the coming of the railroad, the residents soon saw that they needed a church in that part of town. There was no dominant religious society at the time so it was decided to build a “Union” house that would include Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists and Wesleyan Methodists.

The “Union” church was built in 1843 and all four societies held services there (this church is still in use today as the 2nd Congregational Church) but the very next year the Methodist Society began a subscription to raise funds for their own building.

The largest single contribution was \$100 from Edmund Hubbard, with other large contributors being William Fay at \$60, Harrison Wilcutt at \$40, and Dyer Wilcox, Lewis Wright and William B. Turner at \$20 each. Timothy Fay gave “all the timber for the frame and coarse covering, standing in the woods and the use of a mill to saw it” valued at \$45.

In all, the society raised over \$800 and began construction in 1845. The basement was finished in that first year, with the entire building completed and dedicated in the fall of 1847.

The Temperance Movement

From the start, the congregation was at the forefront of the temperance movement in Chester, with the Reverend Ichabod Marcy reporting in 1849 that “quite an advance has

Historical Society Penny Social
Saturday May 3 7:00pm
Railroad Station

Doors open at 5:30pm

Donations are welcome, see page 7 for phone numbers.

been made in the cause of temperance the past winter.” It was the enthusiasm with which the congregation pursued the temperance cause that led to the most infamous event in the church history, its near destruction just seven years after it was built.

A Carson League had been formed in Chester by members of the Methodist Church and they met in the church building. Carson Leagues were controversial for their zealous and sometimes vigilante tactics against liquor sellers. As shall soon be seen, the Reverend Thomas W.

Higginson of Worcester, certainly had the Chester events of 1854 in his mind when he made his 1855 report as Secretary of the Massachusetts Temperance Society:

“The first operations of the League created a terror among the liquor-dealers, leading to a whole system of concealment. Those who are dissatisfied with the mode in which evidence has been obtained, are not probably aware that the choice lay between that evidence and none. If they are aware of it, they must decide for themselves the question, whether to leave the liquor traffic unchecked, or to have purchases made, for the purpose of obtaining testimony. The simple fact is, that the Carson League is a *voluntary police*, and no police operation could proceed a day without resorting to such means as are here employed. It was very unwillingly that the officers of the League were convinced of this; but being convinced, there was but one course to pursue, and they have pursued it. But they have taken as much care as possible to employ no agents without careful inquiry into their habits and purposes; and it is believed that no one has been employed who has not acted under a sincere desire to serve the cause of temperance.”

Trouble at Chester Factories

Massachusetts had been under partial prohibition since 1838 but in 1852 had enacted a complete prohibition. Enforcement was left to the localities and, in Chester, that meant one overworked constable. So it was on February 22, 1854 that the executive committee of the Carson League took it upon themselves to visit every rum seller in town and warn them of the consequences of their illegal actions. In a letter to the Westfield News Letter, the Reverend

Edward Best, pastor of the Methodist Church, stated that the League, in order “to give every rum seller an opportunity of honorably renouncing their iniquitous occupation, waited upon them officially and informed them of the consequences, if they persisted in it any longer.”

The visits certainly produced a reaction from the liquor sellers, but not the reaction desired by the Carson League. That very night, a keg of gunpowder was exploded in the Methodist Church, the explosion and resulting fire causing damage so great that the first news reports stated that the building was a complete loss, though within a few days the Methodist society was vowing to rebuild. The rebuilding task was made harder when the Berkshire Mutual, insurer of the building, refused to pay a claim. In his letter to the Westfield News Letter, Reverend Best states “that there is justice in such a decision, we cannot by any means discover.”

The town offered a \$200.00 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the perpetrators but got very few leads.

The Methodist Society appealed to all Chester residents for their financial help and Reverend Best traveled to other towns in Western Massachusetts seeking the assistance of Temperance societies. When he visited Westfield a resident wrote a letter to the editor in support of his efforts.

“We are much pleased to learn that the Reverend Mr. Best, the pastor of the church at Chester Factories has commenced the work of collecting funds for this object. He is now in our town. Let us make a thankful offering. Let us put up that church, and write on every beam and board, **TEMPERANCE FOREVER!**”

The donations allowed the society to repair the building while only taking on a small debt, and it was rededicated on August 6, 1854.

However, the trouble between temperance and anti-temperance forces in town was far from over.

“The Council of the Wicked”

The outrage of most residents in town provided the political will to attempt the closing of the establishments involved in the liquor trade, and the constable, again with the assistance of the Carson League, raided a number of establishments in the days following the explosion. In just one week they seized over 40 gallons of rum and

arrested one resident for selling liquor. The liquor sellers, finding themselves damaged in their business, decided to pursue the election of selectmen that might turn a blind eye to liquor sales. Reverend Best gives a colorful description of election day.

“The rum party, determined to carry the matter into politics, designed appointing two of their RUMMIE CHIEFS as town agents for the sale of intoxicating liquors. And most assuredly they set about their work with a zeal worthy of a better cause. Every toper, young and old, within the bounds of the township, was crowded to the polls.

On they went – headed by two of King Alcohol’s select champions upon horseback – then followed a capacious wagon filled with his humble subjects.

On they went, but who can describe the motley crew? Tattered garments – shapeless hats – bloated forms – blotched faces, and crimson complexions.

On they went, and many a little shoeless child ran to the window and sighed to see their fathers in such society.

On they went, and many a pious woman prayed as they passed, that God would make void the council of the wicked.”

The temperance crowd organized their own march to the polls, and such was the mood of the town that they elected a slate of temperance selectmen by a large majority.

Going Undercover in Chester

Still no arrest had been made for the bombing of the church and the Carson League, never ones to sit by idly, again took matters into their own hands. With their own funds they hired Benjamin Chamberlain, an ex-policeman from Albany, to come to Chester posing as a liquor salesman to infiltrate the anti-temperance group. The Carson League arranged for a public quarrel to occur between Chamberlain and the secretary of the league, and even to have the detective “arrested” for selling liquor to help him gain the sympathies of those he came to investigate. Chamberlain worked undercover for six months, gradually securing the liquor sellers confidence, until he learned of a plot to blow up the grist mill of Dwight Wilcox, a member of the Methodist

Church and the Carson League.

Chamberlain had just enough time to inform the league members who rushed to the grist mill, surprising the perpetrators as they fled the burning mill. Though they were too late to save the mill, they were able to identify some of the men and discover an unexploded keg of gunpowder, which they felt connected the mill burners to the Methodist Church crime. Four men were arrested the next day and charged with burning the mill, blowing up the Methodist Church and “shearing the horse of Henry Dewey”. Amazingly, one of the men was Edmund Hubbard III who, though we can’t be certain, was presumably the son or grandson of the Edmund Hubbard who gave the largest single donation to build the Methodist Church some nine years earlier.

In all, seven men would eventually be arrested; Edmund Hubbard III, John Gardner, Rufus Case, Albert Nooney, Samuel O. Hamilton, B. L. Kingsley, A. L. Richards and Lewis Gibbs. Four of them were convicted of burning the mill and shearing the horse; Hubbard, Kingsley, Richards and Gibbs. Charges were dropped against three; Gardner, Case and Nooney. The seventh, Samuel Hamilton, “left for parts unknown” and was never prosecuted. None of them were convicted of blowing up the Methodist Church.

Pillars of Methodist Church Arrested

This remarkable story still had one more surprise. A day after the four men were convicted they brought counter charges against members of the Carson League and Chamberlain, the ex-policeman, charging them with conspiracy and entrapment. They alleged to have twenty witnesses that would testify that it was Chamberlain himself that came up with the idea of shearing the horse and burning down the grist mill, and that he planted the keg of gunpowder found at the grist mill site.

The county sheriff was obliged to make arrests based on the charges and among those arrested were some of the most important men in Chester, including Dr. Heman S. Lucas (later founder of the Hampden Emery Company), Dr. Edward L. Hill, Henry Dewey and Henry M. Bradley. The case was postponed twice and then was never

reported on again in the newspapers so presumably the charges were eventually dismissed.

“May the Future be More Prosperous”

After the events of the past year, the Methodist Church turned toward rebuilding their society. The pastor that took over the following year, Reverend Daniel Wait, spoke more of the spiritual needs of the congregation in his annual address than any of the events just endured. “I must say in candor, that in my opinion, if the membership had attended to the prayer and class meetings as they should have done, God would have honored us out a blessing. May the future be more prosperous.”

By 1857 the membership in the society had grown to 50 but many more attended Sunday services. In 1859, Reverend John Noon, chose to be humorous in his annual address in describing how he came to be in Chester. “At the close of the Annual Conference held at Worcester April 1858 among the appointments which the Bishop read from his mysterious papers was that of John Noon in connection with Chester Factories. A day or two after that reading I came to the place assigned to me as the scene of labor for the year.

And now that its rapid months have passed and its multifarious labors have been completed, what record ought in sincerity to be entered on the historical pages of the Church Books? With thankfulness we record that the year has been a peaceful one.”

In 1862 the Reverend E. D. Winslow was assigned to Chester “and labored very acceptable about three months and then entered the military service of his country.”

By 1865, the pastor, Reverend William D. Bridge, was rejoicing in a revival in the society and expressing great optimism for their future. “This Revival was remarkably deep – powerful – Pentecostal. It called to God the youth, the grayhaired sexagenarian, the drunkard, the wayward backslider; and exerted an influence on the community such as had not been felt for 7 or 8 years.”

“In July 1864 the Ladies Social Circle was

reorganized and continues with great prosperity. Sunday pm March 26 1865 I preached my last sermon in Chester and closed my labors by a good prayer meeting in the evening.

I bear no grudges, no ill will to aught. I rejoice in the retrospect, and also in the prospect for the M. E. Church in Chester. May God bless the young converts, strengthen the old and fullness of life unto all.”

Sometimes the church records leave us wanting to know more, such as this entry concerning Reverend J. F. Bassett who arrived in Chester in 1867.

“Brother Bassett was cordially received on his arrival and in the fore part of this year his labors were quite acceptable and there were hopeful indications of success. Toward the close of the year there was some abatement of the feelings of cordiality between Mr. Bassett and some of the people growing out of imprudencies on his part, and he was not returned.”

Or this report from Reverend William Gordon in 1869.

“During the fall and winter of my second year there was quite an awakening to the subject of preparation for the usefulness and heaven, especially among the young people of the congregation.

These young people together with a few in mature life, appeared to run well for a season. But an injudicious affair connected with a gathering of some of these young persons on an evening after one of their meetings, gave rise to some offenses which led to the stumbling of some of them and finally to their halting in the way.”

Reverend L. A. Bosworth doesn’t hide the fact that he would like to leave Chester at the end of his first year in 1872, writing that he “sent an earnest request to the Presiding Elder that we might be assigned another field of labor. This, however, was not heeded and on April 10, we returned for another years toil for the Master.” Although Reverend Bosworth was obviously not enthusiastic to be serving as Pastor in Chester, the congregation was numerous and prosperous by that year, with over 100 people attending Sunday services. It was reported at a trustees meeting that there were more people that wished to purchase pews (the primary source of revenue for the

church) than were available. There was some discussion as to whether to begin a subscription to raise \$10,000 to build a larger building to accommodate them, but nothing came of it. The church records are often good sources for town history as well. Reverend Erastus Burlingham reported in 1874, "The flood of July 12th by the giving away of the Reservoir at "Blush Hollow" done much damage to property and gardens to most of our brothers who live near the river and much anxiety was felt. Some of our brothers did nobly in the aid rendered those who were exposed, in placing them on dry land."

In 1876 the trustees estimated the value of the church to be \$2,500.00 and set the pastor's salary at \$700.00.

There has been speculation whether there was ever a bell hung in the Methodist Church. There is only one reference to a bell in the church records, in 1879 a committee was formed "to ascertain the probable cost of preparing the church for hanging a church bell." The records do not contain a report from the committee and no further mention is made of a bell so it is presumed that one was never hung.

The pastor's salary had dropped to \$650.00 in 1888 but the society was having trouble meeting even the reduced amount, in addition to reporting a deficit of \$101.00. The congregation voted to express confidence in their pastor, Reverend S. A. Bragg, "and our desire for his return, and that we promise him definitely \$550 and \$650 if it can be raised". He did not return.

Improvements to the Church Building

Despite difficulties meeting their bills in 1888 the congregation began, over the next few years, a rather aggressive campaign of capital improvements. At a meeting in 1889 a vote was taken "that a committee be appointed to raise money for the purpose of repairing and refitting the church, sum not to exceed \$600.00."

Within a year they reported having spent \$858.78, and less than a year after that, another \$200.00.

In 1892 a committee was formed to look into buying a new organ and they reported that an organ could be purchased for around \$250.00. By the time the organ was installed the next year

they had spent \$500.00 on it.

A new preacher arrived in April 1892, Reverend W. H. Dockham, and in his first report had some harsh words concerning the rum business in Chester. While the earlier prohibition laws had been repealed there was a local license system in effect and Chester had voted not to grant any liquor licenses, officially making it a "dry" town. Reverend Dockham objected to the number of saloons selling liquor in violation of the license laws.

"It seems to me that in a little town like Chester, a half dozen saloons running in open violation of the laws, will negative not only the work of two, but of a half dozen churches. It may be an error of judgment on my part, but it seems to me that before God will come down to answer our prayers to any great extent for the salvation of souls, He will demand that the Christian citizens of Chester do that which it is in their power to do, namely, execute the laws upon these soulless rum sellers who are sinking to perdition the young men of our community by scores, and drive them out of the business or out of the town."

Apparently no one had informed him of the results of the last temperance movement undertaken by the congregation.

A New Parsonage....and Increased Debt

Up until this time, the society had been renting a house on Maple Street as a parsonage but in 1893 decided to purchase a house for that use. They bought a house from Henry Wilcox at the corner of Huntington Street and Maple Street for \$1400.00, and spent another \$250.00 on improvements to it.

That same year they were making improvements to the church as well. The Reverend Dockham detailed the work in his annual address.

"Quite extensive repairs and improvements have been made upon the church property during the past three months. The earth has been removed from under the west end of the church and a room furnished which will be a matter of great convenience to the people.

A bank wall has also been laid on the line of the south side of the church. A furnace put in. The main vestry remodeled, and a new organ bought for it.

The entire cost of these repairs and improvements

is \$700.00.”

By 1894 the society reported a debt of \$1730.00 on property valued at \$3500.00. For each of the next two years they petitioned to the Greater Springfield District of the New England Conference of Methodist Churches for aid in removing their debt. They received \$500.00 in the first year and \$300.00 in the second. It appears that they used the \$500.00 in reducing the debt but the \$300.00 apparently went to operating expenses since they were still reporting debt of \$1250.00 after those two years. In July of 1895 they sold a small plot of land next to the parsonage to the town for \$25.00 so the town could erect the Maple Street bridge. In this same month they reported that, in addition to the debt on their property, they also had \$301.00 in outstanding bills. The pastor forfeited \$75.00 of his salary, other members of the congregation forgave loans they had made to the society, and a special subscription was carried out to pay their current bills.

A vote from a meeting held the next month might provide a clue to their difficulties in meeting their bills. “Voted that Brother Hunt be a committee to visit Brother Simons with regard to the thefts from the contribution boxes by Ralph Simons and report at the next meeting.” If the thefts were discussed at the next meeting, no minutes were taken and so we have no record of the outcome.

To make matters worse, at a July 6th meeting the following year the trustees were forced to deal with more damage to the church.

“Voted that we appoint a committee to confer with the selectmen with regard to damage done to the church property by roughs on the eve of July 4th.”

Why the trustees felt that the selectmen ought to feel any responsibility is not known, but at the next meeting it was reported that the damage was “made good”.

The financial situation stabilized over the next few years, and although they were not able to retire any of their property debt, they were able to pay their bills and even make some more improvements to the church and parsonage.

Between 1896 and 1900 they put a new roof on the parsonage, repaired the terrace in front of the church, repaired the church roof, put “new paper

on ceiling, embossed steel on walls”, painted the church and installed a new carpet.

In 1904 they decided to dispose of the parsonage to reduce their debt but found that they owed more on it than they could gain in a sale, and so quit claimed the property to the mortgagee on December 31. Two years later they were forced to sell some of the furniture from the old parsonage to help pay the pastor.

The Congregation Declines

The removal of the large debt on the parsonage allowed them to stabilize their finances and meet their annual obligations, but the congregation gradually declined in members. By 1909 there were only 35 people attending Sunday services, though they had enough resources to renovate the vestry, lay a new carpet and install electrical lights in 1911.

With further declining numbers the congregation voted in 1921 to merge with the Second Congregational Church as the United Church of Chester. Services would be held in the Congregational Church so the Methodist society closed their church.

In 1923, the Samoset Lodge No. 160, I.O.O.F. of Chester offered the Methodist society \$2,000.00 for the “land, buildings and furnishings”, and this offer was accepted by the society.

On the night of February 8, 1924 about 100 people gathered in the vestry of the Methodist Church for a farewell dinner before turning it over to the Samoset Lodge. Many former members of the congregation that had moved out of town returned for this final farewell to the church building.

The entertainment included a history of Methodism in Chester by Frank Fay, a reading by Mrs. Lydia (Harris) Gibbs, and songs by Misses Bernice Renfrew, Eleanor Orton and Esther Smithies. After the regular entertainment several of the older members “gave reminiscences of earlier days, which caused considerable mirth among the young people.”

The building was used for many years by the Samoset Lodge and then as a Masonic Hall until 1995.

Comments on the newsletter? Contact the editor, John Garvey, care of the Chester Historical Society (see address on back page).

Item	Price	Size	Qty	Total
"Chester Folks - The Founders of the Town, Their Ancestors and Descendants" by William Mills	\$18.00			
"Memories of the Boston and Albany Railroad" by Norvel Parker	\$15.00			
"Gravestone Inscriptions for Chester" by Francis O'Leary	\$18.00			
"Gravestone Inscriptions for Huntington" by Francis O'Leary	\$20.00			
"Gateway District Towns - A Pictorial History"	\$16.99			
"Chester Cookbook" - A reproduction of a 1960's-era Chester PTA cookbook	\$8.50			
"Entering Chester" magnets - A miniature version of the state highway signs	\$1.00			
"The Mystery of the Old Mine" a mystery for children by Gertrude Whitcher	\$10.00			
Chester Historical Society pens	\$1.00			
Chester Tote bags - Over 40 illustrations of Chester scenes	\$15.00			
Chester T-Shirts - Over 40 illustrations of Chester scenes (S - XXL)	\$10.00			
Chester Sweatshirts - Over 40 illustrations of Chester scenes (S - XXL)	\$20.00			
	Shipping + handling			\$2.00
	SUBTOTAL			
Annual Membership in the Chester Historical Society (fully tax deductible)	\$5.00			
Lifetime Membership in the Chester Historical Society (fully tax deductible)	\$25.00			
Additional tax deductible contribution				
	TOTAL			

Make check payable to the "Chester Historical Society" and send to:
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