
CHESTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Volume 3, Issue 1

A Periodic Publication of the Chester Historical Society

March 2004

Upcoming Events

Historical Society Meetings

The Historical Society meets the first Wednesday of every month at 9:00am in the Old Jail building. All are welcome.

Saturday, April 17 9:00am - noon

Methodist Church/Masonic Hall Cleanup Day

Planning for the restoration of the Methodist Church/Masonic Hall continues. As part of the work along Route 20 the town was able to arrange for a handicapped-accessible sidewalk up to the church door. Most exciting, the Historical Society has received initial notification that it will receive some monies from a Turnpike tourism grant to do preservation work on the roof, steeple and siding. We'll pass along more information as soon as it is available.

The Historical Society is planning another cleanup day to prepare the church and grounds for more work. We'll meet at 9:00am and be done by noon, at which time we will go over to the Old Jail for a free lunch! We'll be clearing up brush around the building along with cleaning inside so bring your gloves and work clothes.

Saturday, May 15 7:00pm

Penny Social

The Historical Society will be holding a Penny Social at the Railroad Station at 7:00pm (doors open at 6:00pm). Donations of new items are welcome. (See inside for contacts)

Saturday, June 5 Chester on Track

Old Jail and Methodist Church/Masonic Hall will be open all day.



Louisa Piergiovanni 1917 - 2003

The Chester Historical Society lost a devoted member and friend when Louisa Piergiovanni passed away at home on December 28, 2003. Born and raised in Chester she was one of the founding members of the Historical Society, and her spirit and enthusiasm will be very much missed.

She taught school in Chester and Becket as well as many years in Springfield. The math lab at Forest Park Junior High School in Springfield was named in her honor when she retired from there in 1979 after a 41 year teaching career.

We will always carry our memories of her and, thankfully, her memories of Chester will always be available to future generations. In April of 2003 the Historical Society, through a Cultural Council grant, was able to make a videotaped interview with Louisa, in which she shared her many memories of life in Chester over the last 86 years. Stop by the Old Jail during Chester on Track or during any of our meetings and enjoy this visit with Louisa.

The Baptist and Independent Society of Chester

The story of the political and religious divisions in Chester that led to the creation of the Chester Baptist Church was covered in a previous edition of our newsletter (Volume 1, Issue 2, May 2002). In summary, Dr. Martin Phelps arrived in Chester late in the 1790's at the invitation of the Reverend Aaron Bascom, pastor of the church here, after Phelps was involved in a dispute with his pastor in Belchertown. Though his early years in the Chester church were harmonious, Dr. Phelps was eventually excommunicated partly due to some doctrinal differences with the church, but also because he was a Jeffersonian Democrat and the Rev. Aaron Bascom and his deacons were Adams' Federalists.

Upon his excommunication from the Congregational Church in 1808 he sought to join the Baptist Society in Hinsdale. Some members of the Hinsdale church pointed out that in his years as a Congregationalist Phelps had often written criticisms of the Baptist faith and practices. They asked him to explain his past criticisms and he wrote "*Scripture Reasons for Renouncing the Principles of Pedobaptism and Uniting with the Baptists*". He read the pamphlet publicly in the Hinsdale church, which accepted his conversion and baptized him on July 29, 1809.

Upon hearing this, some members of the Chester Congregational Church expressed their displeasure that the Hinsdale Baptist Church would accept a man that had been excommunicated by them, prompting the Hinsdale minister to reply:

"It is far from our intention to receive any profane or immoral person to our fellowship. We wish to receive none but those, who, in the judgment of charity, ought to be esteemed real disciples and followers of Christ.

We are well apprized that the Doctor has had great and severe trials with the Rev. Aaron Bascom and a considerable part of the brethren of his church; and that they did excommunicate the Doctor. But, a narrative of the facts and proceedings relative to that excommunication, having been published more than a year and a half ago, and nothing having appeared to invalidate or any way discredit that publication, we view it as entitled to full credence from us, and the public.

This being the case, that excommunication is, in our

opinion, so far from attaching any crime or immorality to the Doctor's character, that it has raised our respect and commanded our esteem for him, as one who has stood firm in defence of truth and gospel-order, against the Pedobaptist-Church and Pastor in Chester.

Elder Abraham Jackson

Hinsdale"

Chester Baptist Church is formed

Doctor Phelps spent the next year and a half gathering names in Chester and surrounding towns to start a local Baptist Society. By early 1811 he had over 90 names on a petition which he sent to the General Court in Boston, and the Baptist and Independent Society of Chester was granted a charter on February 26, 1811.

At their first meeting the new society made it clear they insisted on the separation of church and state and would not stand to be taxed to support the "other religious society" from which they had just split.

"Voted: That while we cheerfully submit to the civil laws and ordinances of our country, and are disposed to render all due honor and respect to our civil leaders and legislators, all power claimed by civil law or government to support the Christian Religion is inconsistent with the unalienable right of every man to worship God. And we disavow the exercise of all authority, by virtue of the act of incorporation, to tax our members for the support of social and religious worship, in like manner as we are, and ought to be, taxed to support civil government. And all the benefit or advantage we intend or wish to derive from the Act of Incorporation is merely defensive, in order to guard and defend our persons and property against the unjust claims and demands of the town, or other religious society, to oblige us to pay for the support of their religious tenets."

By presenting a certificate of membership from the minister or clerk of the Baptist Society to the town clerk, members of the society were removed from the obligation to pay taxes in support of the Congregational Church. Although only 22 of the 90 people that signed the initial petition to form the Baptist Church joined in the first year, the society grew quickly

and within a year there were 55 men and 27 women members.

It is believed that they built a meeting-house in Chester Center (near the intersection of Crane Road and Skyline Trail) on land donated by Dr. Martin Phelps, and installed Elder John Grant as the minister. At the first meeting, Dr. Phelps was elected clerk of the society.

They soon voted to appropriate \$800 to purchase land and a house for Elder Grant, later adjusting the amount to \$400. The final report showed they spent a total of \$275.96 for the parsonage.

Lt. Abner Smith – a deathbed conversion

Lt. Abner Smith, one of the wealthiest residents of Chester, had signed the petition to form the Baptist Society, but died before the society was organized. In his will he stipulated that “one flaggon, two platters, two cups” of solid silver be given to the new Baptist Society to be used in the “ordinance of the Lord’s Supper.”

His wife, Abigail, honored her husband’s request but made it clear in the letters that followed between her and the Baptist Church that she would not be following her husband’s conversion.

“Madam,

We now present you the grateful acknowledgement of the Church for the donation received by your hand, according to the request of your late worthy consort. The church accepts the same as a valuable token of the friendship of the deceased and an expression of his attachment to the belief of which he gave his hearty assent in the near view of death and eternity, but death prevented his open profession by publicly submitting to the Ordinance of Baptism.

That you, Madam, may through grace be enabled to imitate your departed husband, and that you cordially submit to every Institution and Ordinance which He has, by precept or example, enjoined on His church and followers, is our united and sincere prayer.

Elder John Grant
Martin Phelps
Titus Doolittle”

“Dear Brethren,

In reply to your grateful letter, permit me to answer you and the Church that the gratitude and respect

which you expressed for my late beloved husband affords me peculiar pleasure.

The severity of his Christian profession I do not doubt, and the full conviction which he expressed near the close of life that professed believers were the only proper subjects, and immersion in water the Gospel mode of baptism was evidently the result of his attention to the Oracles of truth.

I do not pretend to gainsay those sentiments, though I am not so fully satisfied about the importance of the mode of baptism.

That I may at last meet you with my departed husband among the redeemed in the world of Glory, is the prayer of your sincere friend.

Abigail Smith”

Lt. Abner Smith’s name was entered posthumously into the church records in July of 1812, 14 months after his death.

Church discipline in the early years

Like other churches of the day, the Chester Baptist Church did not hesitate to discipline members.

The first such case in their records occurred at a meeting on Christmas eve, 1814, when Reuben Judd “confessed to the church that he had been overtaken by intemperate drinking of ardent spirits.” The church voted to allow Judd to remain a member so long as he made a full public confession and “offer compensation to Mr. Nathaniel Collins for the abuse of his house on the above occasion.”

The second time around, the church was not so forgiving. In 1823, Judd “acknowledged that the reports respecting his disorderly walks occasioned by too free use of ardent spirits were true.” This time, the church “voted to withdraw from him, the said brother, as a disorderly walker.”

In 1817 Mary Smith was accused of playing cards with Earl Bigelow but denied it “in the most solemn manner, in public and private.”

However, “proof being sought and obtained, she was convicted and excluded.”

A new minister and meeting-house

The first minister, Elder John Grant, moved from Chester in 1819 and in August of 1820 the church “voted unanimously to invite Elder Samuel Abbot to move with his family into this town and settle as a Gospel minister of this church.” In February of the following year the records reflect that he and his wife Sally had arrived here from the Baptist Church in Middleborough, MA.

The society also voted in 1820 to raise \$1,000 for the purpose of erecting a new meeting-house, which was completed in November 1821. It was built on land owned by James Elder, on the site now occupied by the North Chester Chapel. Other sources report that the Chester Center church was moved to North Chester, so presumably the old meeting-house was dismantled and the materials were used for the new meeting-house in North Chester.

A committee was formed to determine the pew assignments but they later decided against assigned pews and voted that members “be allowed to take any seat not occupied by any other person.”

At a service in June of 1821, “Sylvina Geer, a coloured woman, related her religious experiences and gained the fellowship of the church.”

By 1823 the church had over 125 members. The Baptist and Independent Society of Chester, formed to a large degree by the efforts of Dr. Martin Phelps after his excommunication from the Congregational Church, was a success.

So, did Dr. Phelps, who had entered into public disagreements with his last two pastors in Belchertown and Chester, live out the rest of his days in peace and harmony within the Chester Baptist Church?

Conflict hits the church

The first indication of a developing storm was in a vote taken in March of 1823 that made Silas Kingsley a co-Moderator with the minister, Samuel Abbot, and stipulated that they were to have equal powers. Some months later the society voted to form a committee to inquire into why Elder Abbot had missed some Sunday services. They requested his attendance at the next meeting, at which meeting Elder Abbot informed the society that they had not paid him what they had agreed upon.

This began a year of various committees, charges and counter-charges with the disputed amount varying throughout the year. At least one of the committees formed by the society came to the conclusion that

Elder Abbot actually owed *them* money.

Then, at a meeting on April 21st 1825, Dr. Martin Phelps accused Elder Abbot of improper conduct towards the doctor’s wife. “He came to her, clasping her in his arms, pressed her so closely that he raised one of her feet from the floor, saying (according to her best recollection), ‘How I love you.’” Elder Abbot did not deny that it took place but said it had happened years earlier and had been meant merely as a “friendly salutation”. He asked the church to forgive him if his actions were misinterpreted. The church voted to forgive him. Immediately, Silas Kingsley rose and accused Abbot of seducing Ann Wadsworth. Abbot again asked for forgiveness if his kindness to her was misconstrued. The church voted to forgive him.

Dr. Phelps and Silas Kingsley then asked that a committee be formed to investigate Abbot’s character, and the church voted to create such a committee.

Just five days later the committee returned with written and oral testimony from three more women alleging improper behavior on the part of Elder Abbott. Ruth Phelps, the doctor’s daughter, testified that Elder Abbot had attempted to kiss her one day when she was alone in the parlor of her house, sweeping out the hearth. She alleged that it had happened years earlier when Abbot had first arrived in the area and was staying temporarily in Phelps’ home.

Susanna Collins said that on a sleigh ride home from Becket, alone with Elder Abbot, he had asked her if she was cold. Though she answered that she was not, he put his arm around her and “pressed her towards him.” She stated that it made her so uncomfortable that she “made an excuse to stop at Mrs. Dewey’s and not return home with him.”

In a written statement Laura Winchel recounted a number of advances by Elder Abbot towards her, and added that he had afterwards encouraged her not to speak of it to her husband or anyone else. She closed her testimony with a plea. “And now, Elder Abbot, I appeal to your conscience to witness the truth of what I have been stating. I should have borne this as a burden, according to your request, until my dying day, had not a conviction of duty forced it from me.”

After an Ecclesiastical Council (formed from local churches) appealed to the church and Elder Abbot to resolve their differences, Elder Abbot submitted a letter to the church acknowledging his weaknesses,

pledging to do better and asking for forgiveness. "I feel it my duty to communicate the following: That I am not only sinful in heart, but imperfect in my life, too often indulging in imprudencies, and not maintaining that steady course of life which becomes a minister of the Gospel.

It is my desire that you would give me a letter of dismissal to some sister church as I expect to leave this region as soon as God in his providence permits." Despite his confession the church voted to exclude him from the church and not provide him with a letter of dismissal, required for him to join another Baptist society.

The church, however, was apparently not united in this action. At a meeting two weeks later, with Dr. Phelps and Silas Kingsley conspicuously absent, the members present voted to restore Abbot to the fellowship of the church, then immediately voted to give him, and his wife Sally, letters of dismissal to the Hinsdale Baptist church.

Two months later, at a meeting with Dr. Phelps and Silas Kingsley present, they voted again to withdraw the hand of fellowship from Elder Abbot, and to communicate that vote to the Hinsdale Baptist Church.

The Hinsdale Baptist Church was understandably confused and asked for an Ecclesiastical Council to rule whether the letter of dismissal was valid, and whether Abbot was a member of the Hinsdale church or not. When the Council ruled that Elder Abbot was a valid member of the Hinsdale Baptist Church, the Chester Baptist Church recorded a terse entry in their books, "Voted to acquiesce with the resolution of the council that Elder Samuel Abbot is a legal member of the Hinsdale Church", and then mentioned the controversy no more.

Elder Silas Kingsley

Though the records do not show that a vote was taken to appoint Silas Kingsley the new minister, that did indeed happen, and he would remain minister for the next 25 years during which time the church grew in numbers and influence.

The makeup of the congregation at this point had members from Norwich, Chester Village (now Huntington), Chester Center, North Chester and Chester Factories. They continued to meet in the North Chester meeting-house, as well as the schoolhouse at Norwich Bridge and in Chester Village. In June of 1827 they reported the first meeting of the "West Branch of the Baptist Church of Chester, held

at the schoolhouse." The records gave no more clues as to where exactly this was.

They did lose a few members around this time when a group from "Norwich Hollow" notified them that they were now Methodists and requested their names be struck from the Baptist church records. The records become sketchy at this point, often with only one entry per year listing the members that would represent the church at the annual Baptist Association meetings. The lack of detail is certainly due to Dr. Phelps resigning as clerk, we have him to thank for most of what we know of the early years of the Chester Baptist Church. He died at Chester Village on November 26, 1838 at the age of 82, and is buried in the Chester Center Cemetery on Chester Hill.

Though the records in the 1840's lack the rich detail that Dr. Phelps provided, we can pick up a few tidbits from the remaining entries. The last time they mention meeting at the North Chester meeting-house is in August of 1840, though other sources report the North Chester meeting-house was still used by the Baptists until 1850 or so. The first mention of a service in Chester Village is in September 1842, probably in the "Union House" built there in 1836.

They first met in Chester Factories in November of 1842, but that was a year before their "Union House" was completed so it is not known where they held their service. Over the next few years they mention meeting in three locations; the Union church in Chester Factories, the Union church in Chester Village and the schoolhouse near Norwich Bridge, but as mentioned above, they were probably still meeting in North Chester as well.

The records end on September 29, 1849 and it is perhaps appropriate that the very last line in the church records is one of reconciliation.

"Restored Sister Laura Bigelow to fellowship with the church."

Laura Bigelow had been dismissed 13 years earlier.

At some point in the next few years the Baptist and Independent Society of Chester was dissolved, but the exact date is not recorded. It was replaced by the formation of the Chester Village Baptist Church in 1852, which changed its name to the Huntington Baptist Church in 1855. Joseph Stanton, who had been deacon of the Chester Baptist Church from its inception, was instrumental in starting the successor church, which thrived in Huntington for many years.

From our collections

This letter, addressed to the Selectmen of Chester, was penned by the Reverend Silas Kingsley, minister of the Chester Baptist Church for 25 years, and signed in a shaky hand by Sally Clarke. She had moved into a house near the "Glass Factory" with her husband and children, but her husband was now imprisoned in Springfield for theft. The letter asks the selectmen for assistance until she can move in the spring.

Chester June 5, 1829

To the Selectmen of the Town of Chester

Gentlemen,

I regret that I am compelled by necessity to call upon you for help in support of myself and children at this time. My husband Alford Clarke moved us into one of the houses near the Glass Factory about two months since he is now committed to Springfield jail for theft I am left with three small children in this cold season without fire-wood or provisions or any thing to procure them with and should have suffered severely if not have perished before this time had it not been for the charity of my neighbors. I suppose our residence will be found in Grandy in this County but I need help immediately and am told that the proper way is to apply to you

I am with respect your Humble Servant

Sally Clarke

The above statement is correct so far as I know and it is wished by the neighbors here that you would attend to the business as soon as possible and if consistent that you would send a line by the bearer to some person in the neighborhood to provide for them until you can attend to the business yourselves for the near neighbors find enough to do to support themselves

Yours Respectfully
Silas Kingsley

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If you have comments on this newsletter please contact the editor, John Garvey, at:
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| 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 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 | | | \$3.00 |
| | 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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