

# 1. HOW OUR CHURCH BEGAN

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**T**HE TOWN OF NEEDHAM AND THE FIRST CHURCH HAD THEIR BEGINNING AT THE SAME TIME. The Massachusetts Bay Colony was a theocracy and no town could be incorporated without the promise to support a licensed minister of religion.



The Townsend House, as it appeared at the time of the Revolutionary War.

The forty-five families struggling to make a living farming the poor soil in the western part of Dedham north of the Charles River became eager to have a church more conveniently located to their homes. Especially in the winter it was hard for them to travel the five to ten miles, crossing a river to attend meetings and services. Dedham granted tax relief in 1710 if they would support a minister of their own. In May of 1710, forty farmers petitioned Colonial Governor Joseph

Dudley, deputy for Queen Anne, England's last Stuart monarch, to start a new town of their own. The charter was finally granted on November 6, 1711 (old time, Julian calendar) or November 17 (new time, Gregorian calendar.) The town then included land which is now the Town of Wellesley.

Religious meetings were held in people's homes until 1712, when the first edifice was begun at town expense on the corner of Nehoiden St. and Central Ave., then the center of the town. The building was not completely finished until 1717. Various supply preachers filled the pulpit and some 20 candidates were considered for the ministry, but refused to settle for a salary of 70 pounds and firewood. Famous ministers Increase and Cotton Mather were among the professionals consulted in the search.

Finally, in 1720, Rev. Jonathan Townsend, 22 years old and a graduate of Harvard, agreed to be the minister for 80 pounds, firewood and a settlement fee. The church could then officially be established with the signing of the Church Covenant by twenty men on March 20, 1720, and, a few days later, by nineteen women. Townsend served in Needham for the rest of his life — for most of that time being the only college-educated person in the community. The house he built with money from his wife, Mary Sugars, is still standing, set back from the street, at 980 Central Avenue. It now has a mansard roof.

The town supported the meetinghouse and paid the minister's salary until 1834. Townsend's salary, which never exceeded 90 pounds, was often in arrears. The minister taught a grammar school, cut wood from the ministerial woodlot and from time to time preached elsewhere to earn more money. Townsend



Porringer which belonged to Rev. Townsend's wife, Mary Sugars Townsend.

kept a meticulous diary with records of the church. During his ministry there were 1630 baptisms, 238 persons joining the church, and 219 marriages. The diary is still extant today with tiny writing in ink now brown with age. In parts there is a second layer of writing superimposed perpendicularly over the first, to conserve paper. One of the most fascinating entries tells of Townsend's admonishing his congregation to be more welcoming of French refugees from Acadia in what is now Nova Scotia,



The headstone of the Rev. Townsend in the Needham Cemetery.

considering that their own recent forebears had been refugees from England. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow later dramatized the plight of the Acadians in his long narrative poem, "Evangeline."

Townsend died on September 30, 1762, age 65, in the forty-third year of his ministry. He was buried in the graveyard near the church on Nehoiden Street. George Kuhn Clarke, who much later resided in the Townsend house, said in his "History of Needham," written in 1911, "Mr. Townsend was a serious, dignified minister of the old school, but had tact, and held the affections of the people to the end."

## 2. A SECOND MINISTER, A NEW BUILDING AND THE OUTBREAK OF THE REVOLUTION

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THE REV. SAMUEL WEST, 26 YEARS OLD, UNMARRIED AND, LIKE TOWNSEND, A GRADUATE OF Harvard, became the second minister of the First Church. He had been one of several men to supply the pulpit after Townsend's death. West was ordained on April 25, 1764, in an outdoor ceremony to accommodate the large attendance. In 1769 he married Priscilla Plimpton of Medfield and soon purchased the house and land of his predecessor. He lived in the house as long as he stayed in Needham. His salary was some 73 pounds, with a settlement fee of a little over 133 pounds. To supplement his income, he taught boys who were preparing for college, boarding them at his home. He was in the habit of preaching without notes.

West wrote in his Memoirs that at first he thought the people of Needham "extremely rude and uncultivated." Once settled, however, he found that he was "treated with great kindness by the people in general."

In October of 1773, the first Meeting House burned. It was suspected that disgruntled parishioners from West Needham had caused the fire, hoping that the church would be rebuilt nearer to their



The second Meeting House  
as it probably looked in 1774.

settlement. On the very next day after the fire, however, plans were made for building the second edifice in the same place. So great was the continuing rivalry of the two sections of town, however, that when two days of actual construction were begun on August 2, 1774, in the words of George Kuhn Clarke, Needham's historian, "The people of the East, after prayer, got to work at half past five in the morning, and the West Needham contingent, which had threatened to obstruct the raising, did not arrive till nine, and finding the work far advanced, peaceably but sullenly withdrew." At first the building had no tower. Its main

entrance was on the long side, as in the Old South Church in Boston. In the Revolutionary fervor that was stirring, the colonists desired architectural design as different as possible from the Anglican style.

In the gathering storm of the Revolution, munitions were moved from a town storage place on Great Plain Avenue to the basement of Mr. West's parsonage to confuse the British. On April 19, 1775, when word reached Needham of the battle of Concord and Lexington, forty Minute Men from East Needham under Captain Caleb Kingsbery left on foot from the parsonage to walk there. West wrote in his Memoirs, "We could easily trace the march of the troops from the smoke which arose over them, and could hear from my house the report of the cannon and the Platoons fired by the British." On the way the Needham Minute Men met the British soldiers in retreat in what is now Arlington, then known as West Cambridge. Five Needham men who were shot by the British died immediately of their wounds. Four were buried there; one was brought back to Needham for burial. West's Memoirs record his sad duty to notify the five families, consisting of five widows and thirty-five children, of their losses. He wrote, "I visited these families immediately, and with a sympathetic sense of their affliction I gave to some the first intelligence they had of the dreadful event, the death of a Husband and a Parent. The very different manner in which the tidings were received, discovered the very different disposition of the sufferers. While some were almost frantic in their grief others received the news with profound silence as if in a consternation of grief they were incapable of shedding tears or uttering sighs or groans."

In 1778 West was called to serve the Hollis Street Church in Boston, where he was minister until his death in 1808. Mrs. West was blamed by the people of Needham for her husband's leaving town for a larger salary in Boston. (In his 1911 History of Needham, Clarke wrote, "Although Mr. West's salary was raised to eighty pounds . . . he 'forgave' his people at different times nearly 250 pounds, and in 1774 he had no salary at all.") Also in 1778 the town was divided into two parishes, the West Parish building their own Meeting House and calling their own minister. When the West Parish became the Town of Wellesley in 1881, the West Church became the First Congregational Church of Wellesley.

### 3. A CENTENNIAL ANNIVERSARY, A TOWER, AND A PAUL REVERE BELL

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**A**FTER THE DEPARTURE OF THE REV. SAMUEL WEST, SOME THIRTEEN SUPPLY ministers preached at the Meeting House in Needham. Young Stephen Palmer, a graduate of Harvard College like his predecessors, accepted a call on August 5, 1792, and was ordained by the church on November 7. His salary was 80 pounds with a 130 pound settlement fee, and firewood. In 1794 he purchased the home where the former ministers had lived. Like Townsend, Palmer served in Needham for his entire career.

George Kuhn Clarke in his History of Needham described Palmer as “a large, stout man, and when in the pulpit he wore a great deal of lace at his throat. He never entered the meeting-house for a regular service until the people were seated, when he bowed to right and left as he passed up the aisle. He prayed with his eyes wide open and fixed on the top of a certain window.”



The Reverend  
Stephen Palmer  
in his youth.

In 1811 the town and church were due to celebrate their one-hundredth anniversary. The Paul Revere Bell, Foundry No. 129, weighing 960 pounds, was purchased for \$407.61, and a tower to hold it was added to the Meeting House. The bell was first rung on November 15, 1811 on the eve of the Centennial Service, and is still rung at the beginning of Sunday morning services today. Palmer preached his famous Centennial Sermon, which was said to comprise “an accurate history of the Town,” including the names of the Minute Men who lost their lives on April 19, 1775.



The 1774 Meeting House, showing the steeple that was erected in 1811.

Palmer expressed his liberal philosophy in an autobiographical sketch as follows: “Every man will have a creed of his own. I have mine; but have no right to impose it upon others, nor have others any right to impose theirs upon me. . . . He who thinks he has no more light to receive, has seen but little; and he who is not open to conviction is in bondage to himself.”

In 1816 Palmer gave the church a silver baptismal basin, still in use today for dedication of infants and children. The church’s silver communion service (to replace a pewter one) was purchased at this time with proceeds from sale of wood

on the ministerial land. Palmer's wife, Catharine Palmer, presented a large Bible, now on display in the Historical Room.

Palmer died on October 31, 1821, after a lingering illness of two years. In his 1911 History, Clarke referred to Palmer as "one of the best men and most influential ministers our town has known. Some of the older people say that he was the ablest that the church has had." His name remains in Needham in the large brick Stephen Palmer Building on May Street. Long a bustling elementary school, the structure is now a residence for older citizens and the site of the Needham Senior Center.



The Paul Revere Bell  
at First Parish.

## 4. A FOURTH MINISTER, A THIRD EDIFICE

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OUR CHURCH'S FLOW INTO THE UNITARIAN WAY OF THINKING WAS NOT A RELUCTANT ONE, nor was it conflicted, as was Dedham's. In the Harvard Divinity School Library Townsend is classified as "a mild Calvinist." According to one of our former ministers, the Rev. Peter Richardson, West was



Early photograph of 3rd Edifice,  
constructed on Nehoiden Street, 1836-1837

considered to have gone from Needham to the Hollis Street Church in Boston as a Unitarian. In our last chapter we heard Palmer's magnificent statement of tolerance of other people's beliefs. So it is not surprising that our fourth minister, William Ritchie, a graduate of Dartmouth College in 1804 and ordained in Canton in 1807, "belonged to that fellowship of ministers who call themselves Unitarians," according to the Rev. James Macdonald in his 250th anniversary address given in 1961. Ritchie was called unanimously and installed in Needham December 12, 1821. A quote from Ritchie's second sermon shows his liberal stance: "We are ever to keep our minds open to receive any new light which may shine upon us.

Never to think that all opinions and views of religion which are new must of course be false and consequently close our eye lest we should see more than our fathers."

At first Ritchie boarded with the widow Palmer in the old parsonage, but some of his children were noisy boys who annoyed her and so he purchased a house on Nehoiden Street. He served in Needham for the rest of his life.

During this time Ritchie was a member of the town's school committee for ten years—1826-1836. Four events in the church stand out during his ministry:

The church school was started in 1826.

A regular choir was begun in 1829 accompanied by a small orchestra consisting at various times of a bass viol, clarinet, flute, bassoon, violin, horn, trombone, and bombardon (a tuba).

In 1834 town tax laws changed so that the church was no longer supported by townwide taxation. In the resulting hardship to the church, Mr. Ritchie's salary fell from \$434 to \$400.

The largest change was the building of a new church. According to Needham historian Henry Hicks, the tower had been hastily constructed twenty-five years earlier and was leaking. At first the church voted to repair the building, but reconsidered and voted to rebuild. Mr. Hicks revealed that the Federal government had found in 1836 that it had some 70 million dollars of excess money, which Congress voted to return to the states. Massachusetts in turn declared it would share its money with the towns. Needham expected to receive \$3000, saw only \$1000, but went ahead with the rebuilding anyway.



The wall clock, given to the church in 1837, still hangs in the Sanctuary.

Virgin timber from the 62-year-old second edifice was saved and utilized in the third building (the present one) which then had a gothic style with pointed windows, two large front doors on the short side and a white spire above the tower. A large wall clock, still in use in the sanctuary, was presented to the church at this time by Ebenezer Fisher Jr. of Dedham. Ritchie preached a farewell sermon in the old church on April 24, 1836 and a dedicatory one in the new building on July 26, 1837.

In October 1841 Ritchie lost his daughter and a daughter-in-law within eleven days. On December 17, 1841 he wrote a letter of resignation to his parish, explaining his physical weakness and inability to carry on the duties of his office. He withdrew monetary claims but begged to keep his "relation as pastor." This was granted. He died on February 22, 1842, not quite sixty-one years old, and was buried in the Needham cemetery.

## 5. A SUCCESSION OF SHORT-TERM MINISTRIES, THE DEPARTURE OF BOTH THE EVANGELICALS AND THE WEST PARISH, AND A MOVE ACROSS TOWN

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THE FIRST FOUR MINISTERS OF OUR CHURCH SERVED FOR SIGNIFICANT LENGTHS OF TIME; TWO OF them, Townsend and Palmer, for their entire careers. After Ritchie, shortly before the second half of the nineteenth century, there began a series of brief pastorates, a few of which are worth mentioning. The Rev. Charles H.A. Dall was called in 1847 and in 1848 began living in a new parsonage built on Nehoiden Street, just west of the cemetery. The next year he was asked to leave, which he did in 1850. Among the reasons given for the displeasure of the church were his anti-slavery stance, his interest in Transcendentalism, his great interest in the Sunday School and his being too much of a politician. His wife, Caroline Healey Dall wrote in her diary that she overheard some parishioners say, “that they would never again engage a minister for more than a year.” A few years later, Dall became the first Unitarian missionary in India where he served with distinction in Calcutta until he died in 1888. His wife remained in the Boston area and gained considerable stature as a writer among the literary giants of her day, including Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Alcotts. A Transcendentalist, she also taught, was allied with the abolitionist cause and was an early supporter of women’s rights.



Caroline Healey Dall, wife of Rev. Charles H.A. Dall, was a noted writer and abolitionist.

Three ministers were Universalists—Andrew N. Adams, John S. Barry and George B. Emerson, serving in succession from 1855-1866. Albert B. Vorse, called in 1870, remained one year, whereupon a better financial offer, which could not be matched or bettered by the church in Needham, attracted him to the Unitarian Society in Grantville (now Wellesley Hills), where he served until his death. It would appear that the modest salary offered by the Needham church was the chief reason for the rapid turnover of ministers.

By 1855 the more orthodox members of the congregation decided to withdraw from First Parish to form the Evangelical Congregational Church. At first they met in two existing public halls, Nehoiden Hall and Village Hall. In 1859 their first chapel was dedicated, giving the name to Chapel Street. The street did not then run through to Highland Avenue as it does today.

At a meeting of First Parish on March 14, 1870, the men voted to allow women to become qualified

voters of the parish. In 1871 the Rev. Solon W. Bush began a significant 18-year ministry. Clarke says of him in his History of Needham, “He was greatly interested in the welfare of his people, kind and patient, and much beloved.”

A railroad built to carry fill from Needham hills to Boston to create Back Bay heralded a change in the center of Needham. In addition, the West Parish of Needham, which for years had desired to become a



The church in its new location in 1880, one year after its move (*top*) and showing the addition of Parish Hall in 1888. (*bottom*)

separate town, but was frustrated by the delay caused by the Civil War, moved towards achievement of its dream. This was finalized in 1881 by the formation of the Town of Wellesley. First Parish members foresaw that Central Avenue would no longer be the center of town and voted to move the church building in 1879. In March the 73-day journey began, with the church dragged on rollers across one and one-half miles of wetlands which today are full of homes. At one period there was a thaw so that the procession had to wait until the ground refroze. On May 20 the move was complete. It is interesting to note in Clarke’s History that the Evangelical Congregational Church offered the use of their Chapel to the First Parish from 2 P.M. to 6 P.M. each Sabbath “while their house of worship is being repaired.”

The ladies of the church had zealously raised money to help with the move. With what was left over, they sought to buy a plot of land. They were so incensed that they could not own land in their own right that they instigated legislation in the state so that this would be possible. The “Ladies’ Lot,” located at the corner of Highland Avenue and May Street, was not used by First Parish, but was later sold to St. Joseph’s Church for its building.

The third edifice in its new location was changed to be in an American Renaissance style. The white spire, damaged in the move, was replaced by a pyramidal cap. Windows, formerly pointed Gothic, were topped instead by shallow pyramid shapes and the church was painted a light brown.

Two front doors gave way to one. In 1888 what is now called the Parish Hall building was created for parish functions and Sunday School use, each class meeting in a separate corner. A small tower decorated the northeast outside corner of the structure. In old records this building was variously called the vestry or chapel. Clarke’s History of Needham suggests that either Mr. or Mrs. Bush was the “unknown donor of \$500 toward paying for the vestry.” Bush preached his farewell sermon in Needham on February 17, 1889, and died in Boston in 1898, in his eightieth year.



Betty May (far right) with her mother Mrs. Edith C. May and brother Gordon, about 1920.

During an interview in 2003, Betty May, still active in the church at this writing, recalled her church school experience in Parish Hall in the 1920s. There were settees in rows, she said. Classes met in corners and in the Parlor which was closable. Classes meeting in corners could listen to each other's classes if bored with their own. There was a dining room table in the Parlor, with classes of eight girls. (Betty was glad to be a girl.) The boys were separated. Gordon was in a class with two ages. Mrs. Mills, the lady in the portrait in the parlor, taught 100 kids (supposedly mainly girls) over the years and kept track of them all. She wore black with a white collar. Other teachers Betty had were Leslie Cutler, who became State Senator, and Ethel Peirce. Betty was sometimes taken into church. Children were allowed to run in the Meeting House, but not on Sundays.

## 6. A TWO-HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY AND SEVERAL BUILDING CHANGES

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THE YEAR 1911 SAW CONSIDERABLE CELEBRATION OF THE BICENTENNIAL OF THE TOWN AND THE gathering of the church. George Kuhn Clarke's History of Needham was published at this time. The church had further commemoration on March 20, 1920 to mark the anniversary of the official founding of the church after the first minister, Jonathan Townsend, arrived.

In the years leading up to nation-wide Women's Suffrage in 1918, the women often placed yellow flowers, symbol of the Suffragists in the Meeting House on Sunday mornings. Suffragettes was the British term, according to Theresa DuBois, a long-time member of the church. Theresa added that the minister, Arthur W. Littlefield, was originally opposed to Women's Suffrage, but he was ignorant of the color's significance, so he didn't object. He was later won over to the cause. Adah Gay Fuller, a descendant of two early Needham settlers, and another devoted long-time member of the church and a strong leader in the community. organized and led marches of the Suffragists in Boston. She also attended national conventions. She and Theresa led a victory parade on Beacon Street when Women's Suffrage was finally achieved. Adah possessed a strong contralto voice and often sang solos as well as being part of a church quartet and later, of the choir. Betty May, an alto still singing in the choir since she joined in 1938, remembers that Adah had an operatic or near-operatic career and that when Betty stood next to Adah it didn't much matter what she sang because Adah's voice was so powerful.



Sign on outside of church, World War I era.

The memorial pews, still in use today, were added in 1924 during the ministry of Ben Franklin Allen, who also presented the new pulpit in memory of his mother, who had died when he was a child. In 1927, still during his ministry, the excavation of Fuller Hall was achieved beneath the sanctuary. Every cubic foot of earth had to be removed by a hand shovel and hauled away in a cart. Liliias Macintosh recalled in 1987 when she was 100 years old that before the full excavation “fathers drove the horses down under the church into stables where Fuller Hall is now. . . . Ones who arrived later had to tie up out back. . . . Sometimes during the service we could hear the horses down below.”

Two Sunday services were held on November 28, 1937, during the ministry of James W. Macdonald, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the erecting and dedication of the third Meeting House. At this time the hand carved Jacobean Bible Box was presented to the church by Dr. Mary F. Hobart. In 1938 the copper-covered dome, nicknamed “the Prussian Helmet” by some at the time, replaced the squat wooden pyramidal cap of the tower. For a long time we assumed that the cap had been injured in the severe hurricane of September 21, 1938. Recently, however, old articles clipped from the Needham Chronicle surfaced in our archives and we learned that the copper dome was part of a summer-long upgrade of the building which included painting inside and out and making changes in the tower. Services were held in the Parish Hall during the renovation. The completion of these projects was celebrated in a special service on September 11, 1938, at which the principal speaker was the Rev. Frederick May Eliot, then President of the American Unitarian Association. One newspaper article states that the change was made “in an attempt to restore the grace of the tower. . . . The architect, Oscar A. Thayer of Boston, has been guided by precedent furnished by many colonial churches on which this type of dome was found. The remodeled tower with its dome and finial is definitely reminiscent of the bell-tower with dome added in the Second Meeting House (built in 1774) which addition was made to provide for the church bell, purchased in 1811 from Paul Revere and Son.” So the new dome withstood the force of the hurricane rather than being a replacement needed because of it. The Wayside Pulpit was a gift from the ladies of the parish at about the same time.



Caroline Gay Mills

Caroline Gay Mills, a descendent of early settlers, herself a devoted long-time member of the church and an aunt of Adah Gay Fuller, was active in many church functions and especially concerned with the Church School. Betty May recalls that Mrs. Mills carried records, both of the Church School and of births, marriages and deaths in the Parish, in a black cloth bag with handles as she walked to the church from her home at 171 Warren Street. Upon Mrs. Mills’ death at age 95 in 1944, her house was left to the church for use as a parsonage. Her portrait by Arthur Oakman graces the wall of the Parlor.



Mrs. Mills’ black bag

The Rev. Fred I. Cairns conducted an extensive correspondence with parish members serving in World War II. Some of his letters and replies from service personnel are in our archives. After the war, the so-called Religious Education wing, also containing office space, a chapel (now called the Yellow Room) and five tiny basement classrooms (soon combined into one large room for pre-schoolers) was built, the outside of the building then looking much as it does today. Flexible curtains were later added in Fuller Hall to allow division into six spaces for Church School classes on Sunday.

The Rev. Russell R. Bletzer (1949-1956) encouraged the church members who were making repairs to the church roof and other structures to enlarge the project and redecorate the sanctuary. The style was changed from Victorian to the simple Colonial that it is today. Larger windows replaced the old ones, a huge, electrified former whale oil lamp was removed from the center of the ceiling and the four still-existing chandeliers were installed. In 1956 Bletzer's sudden departure to serve the North Shore Unitarian Church in Deerfield, Illinois so soon after the renovation of the church in Needham was a surprise to the community.



The church as it appears today.

## 7. THE MIDDLE YEARS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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**I**N 1961 THE TOWN AND THE CHURCH ENGAGED IN LARGE CELEBRATIONS OF THE 250TH ANNIVERSARY. James W. Macdonald, returned as a parishioner to the church after his retirement from active ministry elsewhere, delivered a scholarly address to the Needham Historical Society on the history of the First Church and Parish, which was published at the time. In May of 1961 the church voted to join the newly-formed Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA.)

Jack Daniel Zoerheide became our minister in April of 1957 and served through June of 1969. He supported a popular Child Study Group open to the public, was especially interested in social justice and preached frequently on Civil Rights issues. In March of 1964 he joined a march in Williamston N.C. protesting the local public access statutes prohibiting blacks from entering any public place. He and another Unitarian minister, Bill Moore of the Sherborn Unitarian Church, walked into a restaurant with a black man and asked to be served. The men were arrested and jailed for three nights. Members of First Parish rose and applauded Jack as he returned to our pulpit the next Sunday.

Towards the end of Jack's time with us, a serious conflict arose concerning our financial problems, Church School facilities and the deteriorating state of the building. A plan was formed to demolish the



(Top) A 1969 model of the Meeting House moved to Warren Street, with new addition.

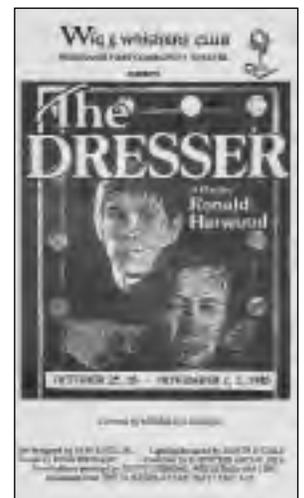
(Above) The former parsonage, bequeathed to the church by Caroline Gay Mills in 1944.

building, sell the land to a willing bank which offered \$250,000; and to rebuild on land near where North Hill Retirement Center is now, with better Religious Education (R.E.) facilities. The suggestion to abandon our historic Meeting House deeply upset a large portion of the congregation as well as a number of citizens in the town who were not members of the church, who felt that the oldest public building in town should be preserved in its central location. Some people left the church. A new plan was considered, to move the Meeting House to land where the parsonage was. In the new site, it was proposed, a better building for R.E. facilities could be erected next to the transported Meeting House. Finally, it was determined that there was not anywhere near enough money to accomplish the project, and it was dropped. Much anguish could have been avoided had the approximate financial cost of the “dream” been determined at the outset. A further plan, whose drawings still exist, was envisioned by an “On-Site Expansion Committee” to enlarge the facilities at 23 Dedham Avenue, but not acted upon.

By 1970, due to the declining birth rate, our Church School numbers decreased considerably. An energetic group in the church started a Community School project, offering classes in recreational and educational subjects to all ages. At its peak, some fifty courses were offered, such as chess, candle craft, “Rides on Great Things,” chamber music, chair caning, Middle East belly dancing, and “Food and More.” At the outset there were 400 registrants. The school gave much enjoyment to church families and also to many outside the church, some of whom became members. A few people, however, felt that the regular Church School suffered from competition with the Community School. The First Parish Community School lasted ten years

Another successful recreational project was a little theatre group, Wig and Whiskers, started in 1938 under the direction of Theresa DuBois. After an hiatus during World War II it was reorganized by Martha and Munroe Husbands, who were professionally trained in the theatre. Twice a year the group, open to outsiders as well as those in the church, offered near-professional performances of Broadway comedies, dramas and an occasional musical on the Fuller Hall stage. The club lasted until 1989, when some of the original players aged and were replaced largely by outsiders, and Fuller Hall became needed almost full-time by the Children’s Day Care Center.

A third impressive project is the Homegrown Coffee House, started in 1983 by Jim and Beth Sargent, and still functioning strongly. It has become one of the most sought-after sites in the Boston folk music scene, attracting top entertainers.



Wig & Whiskers, a theatre group based in First Parish, gave its last performance in 1989.



The Homegrown Coffeehouse has been a wonderful part of the church since 1983.

In addition, it has proved to be a consistent fund-raiser for our church.

In 1973 a refurbished Historical Room, useful also for a bride's waiting room, was dedicated to the memory of former minister James W. Macdonald (1884-1968) and to that of Stimson Wyeth (1892-1970), a language professor who was a life-long resident of Needham and a devoted member of the church. As a child, Stim had posed for his brother N.C. Wyeth's paintings and illustrations. He was an uncle of artist Andrew Wyeth.

For years there was a problem of pigeon control in the open part of the tower on the bell and bell deck beneath the dome. Two solutions seemed possible—to hire expensive professional help periodically to remove the layers of droppings, or to depend on the action of volunteers, at great risk to their health. Finally, a unique suggestion was made by Frederick A. Bauman, a member of the Needham Bird Club and a Kingsbury Street neighbor of Property Committee Chair Louis Sutro: Cut from plywood silhouettes of owls — pigeons are terrified of owls — paint them black and mount them on two sides of the tower fence. This inexpensive and extremely effective solution should be remembered in perpetuity. The silhouettes can be viewed from the ground.

Peter Tufts Richardson, our minister from 1971 to 1974, brought his great interest in eastern religion and Unitarian Universalist history, including a rare knowledge of the many Unitarian and Universalist churches extant at one time in the Boston area. During his tenure, our distinguished and generous member, State Senator Leslie B. Cutler, died. Peter conducted an impressive memorial service attended by an overflowing audience, which included State officials and U.S. Senator Leverett Saltonstall.

## 8. THE LAST QUARTER OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTY-FIRST

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**I**N ANTICIPATION OF THE NATION'S BICENTENNIAL, A COMMITTEE DECIDED TO STORE OUR CHURCH'S oldest records, which pertained also to the early history of the town, in the Needham Public Library. Active in the venture were Church members Charles Duhig and William Ganick, who was also a library trustee. When a fireproof safe was ready in the archives room of the library in May 1975 the transfer was accomplished with the understanding that our records still belonged to the church, and that permission must be obtained from First Parish before any of the documents may be released for study.

An historical service called “Footnotes to History” took place in the church on April 11, 1976 in recognition of the nation’s Bicentennial. The program included readings from historic documents, dissertations about our fourth minister William Ritchie, the third edifice and the 1837 wall clock, and music appropriate to the period. Refreshments made from historic recipes and served by costumed attendants in Parish Hall followed the service. There was also a display of church documents and pictures.

John Baker came to be our minister in 1975, bringing a rare background of his European childhood and his interest in psychology. He led several workshops, such as one on “Death and Dying” and one entitled “Getting to Yes.” He was instrumental in the founding of a hospice program in Needham. He was a prodigious reader and he constantly nudged us into taking responsible political action. His love of poetry and his wit enchanted us.

John chose not to live in the parsonage on Warren Street. The church rented it out for a while, then found that being in the real estate business was a heavy burden, and that its use for other than church purposes made it subject to taxation. It was decided to sell the property along with an adjoining one, acquired when Adah Fuller died leaving money for the church to buy her home. The capital realized from the double sale was invested wisely, its use restricted to upkeep of the church property. This enabled us to make much-needed repairs to the tower and the roof and to apply vinyl siding to the old peeling clapboards — so expensive to repaint — on the walls of our Meeting House.



“Jack” Gotthardt

In 1979 a special service was held to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the moving of the third edifice to its present site. A number of former ministers were invited to attend and some of them took part in the program. A highlight of the occasion was the delivery of an essay called “From There to Here” by Charles “Jack” Gotthardt chronicling the steps of the 73-day journey and including a number of comments as recorded by deceased church members who had witnessed the move as well as local newspaper articles from the period.

In March of 1985 John Baker’s sudden tragic death by his own hand shook the church. The UUA stepped in magnificently, sending the Rev. Sidney A. Peterman to be resident minister for a week, followed by the Rev. Carl Seaburg for the rest of the church year. The UUA also helped a search committee procure the Rev. Philip Giles, former President of the Universalist Church of America, to serve as our Interim Minister for the year 1985-1986. Phil Giles later wrote, “My task was to keep the wheels running while you had time to recover from John’s death.”

Another search committee, following a new set of guidelines just published by the UUA, chose Robert E. Wolf to be our new minister beginning in September of 1986. Bob was called by unanimous vote of the Parish. He graciously postponed his service of installation until March so that our church could

celebrate its 275th anniversary in November as planned. And celebrate we did! A bean supper was held on Saturday, November 15, open to townspeople, and two services the next day. In the afternoon service Town Historian Henry Hicks gave a talk on “The Rev. Jonathan Townsend’s Ministry to a Radical Community” and there was an impersonation of one of the town’s residents 275 years earlier by Needham resident Sid Diamond, who had served as a chair of the town’s 250th celebration. Music was appropriate to the period and old fashioned refreshments and an historical exhibit followed.

Bob Wolf brought to us rare wisdom, quiet strength and gentle wit, serving to complete the task of healing the church. In a sermon on June 5, 1994, entitled “The Spirit of This Place,” he said, “There is a spirit here which abides from generation to generation, even from century to century, and it is with that spirit you associate yourself when you come to this church. . . . Though I try to nudge it in the right direction, and keep it from going too far off its course, it is not I who generate the spirit here — it is you, who are now the church.” Bob encouraged and supported our becoming a Welcoming Congregation in 1996. He left us in 1997 to serve the UU Church in Keene, New Hampshire.

Our first woman minister, Judith G. Mannheim, served from 1998-2001, bringing a new feminine perspective to the Parish. On March 19, 2000 at a special service in honor of the new century, she preached a sermon on our third minister Stephen Palmer, quoting from his famous “Century Sermon.” The service also included an historical summary by Ruth Sutro. In the afternoon there was held in Parish Hall the largest display in church memory of maps, pictures and documents, including the Jonathan Townsend diary. The double event was attended by many church members as well as guests.

A new ministerial search committee was surprised and delighted that John Buehrens, President of the UUA for eight years, desiring to return to a parish ministry, applied for the position here. He was called with unanimous rejoicing by the Parish in May of 2002. His warmth and energy have greatly impressed us and attracted many new members. A special project of his, a Sunday morning pre-church Lyceum, with guest speakers on subjects of current interest, has also helped us to increase our numbers significantly. John anticipates that the church will continue to be a force in the community, as it was beginning in Colonial times. His enterprise has called us to begin a Capital Campaign aiming to improve our facilities to meet the needs of our growth. Fortunately, the project has been undertaken with much preliminary study.



The church acquired a Hook & Hastings organ in the summer of 2005.

In the summer of 2005 our energetic Music Director Vivian Montgomery learned of a restored 1884 Hook & Hastings organ that was for sale in Pennsylvania. A campaign was undertaken to raise money for it. It replaces a failing electronic organ purchased in the 1960s, which in turn had followed a pipe organ acquired from an old movie theater. The new organ, so appropriate to our historic Meeting House, was dedicated at a special lecture and concert on October 23, 2005.

## AFTERWORD

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Dick Eastman envisioned this project, took many of the pictures, and encouraged the writing of each chapter. Dave Minard found and utilized pictures, some of which he had previously taken, and created the layout. Ed Lane did a final editing.

Telling the story of almost 300 years in a few chapters is a daunting task. In writing the text, I favored anecdotes over lists. Slighted were some of the ministers and interim ministers, the ministerial interns, R.E. directors and teachers, music directors, church secretaries, worthy social action projects, sparkling money-making events and a host of devoted volunteers who keep the work of the church going.

For the last two chapters, I relied heavily on the church publication “Looking Back: the Last Forty Years — 1954-1994,” edited by Norman Abbott. It gives much more detail than I have included. Norm feels that it should be updated every ten years or so.

November 2005



Ruth Wilson Sutro