The Meetinghouse

275 Years Ago

A Church, A Town

THE MEETINGHOUSE

An Early History of the Town and Parish of NEEDHAM, MASSACHUSETTS

containing a Social History of the Townsend Years

1720 - 1762

and Brief Treatises on

The First Church and Meetinghouses

and

How the Third (and Present) Meetinghouse

was Moved

Published November 17, 1986
to celebrate the 275th Anniversary
of the Town and the Parish

Ministers of
THE FIRST PARISH IN NEEDHAM
Unitarian Universalist

Jonathan Townsend, 1720-1762
Samuel West, 1764-1788
Stephen Palmer, 1792-1821
William Ritchie, 1821-1846
Charles H.A. Dall, 1847-1850
James F. Hicks, 1852-1853
George C. Channing, 1853-1855
Andrew N. Adams, 1855-1857
John S. Barry, 1858-1860
George B. Emerson, 1860-1866
Albert B. Vorse, 1870-1871
Solon W. Bush, 1871-1889
Charles A. Allen, 1889-1893
Philip S. Thacher, 1884-1901
William W. Peck, 1901-1908
J. Adams Puffer, 1908-1912
Arthur W. Littlefield, 1912-1920
Ben F. Allen, 1920-1928
Robert H. Schact, Jr., 1929-1931
James W. Macdonald, 1932-1939
H. Mortimer Gesner, 1940-1944
Fred I. Cairns, 1944-1949
Russell R. Bletzer, 1949-1956
Jack D. Zoerheide, 1957-1969
Charles C. Lemert, III 1969-1971
Peter T. Richardson, 1971-1974
John Baker, 1975-1985
Robert E. Wolf, 1986-

NEEDHAM - CHURCH AND TOWN
THE FIRST HALF HUNDRED YEARS

by Henry Hicks

The settlement of the area of Dedham west of the Charles and the eventual establishment, first of a church, and then of a town, well fits into one of the major theories current in colonial research. It has become obvious to students of town growth and development that the further from the church center people lived, the more dissatisfied, "radical" and non-supportive of the "old" order they became, and, conversely, that the center landholders viewed them as non-contributors and pugnacious. The separation of Needham from Dedham (the new town would be some five miles separate from the old town) reflects many tensions. Within Dedham there were many tensions over landownership, taxing, church membership, admissions to the community, water use rights, etc. In what is one of the basic explanations of the development of the United States up to this century, the dissidents moved to the frontier—in this case north of the Charles! By 1710, many of the Dedhamites who had been petitioning in Town over various grievances had moved and settled here. Grazing tough Devon red cattle (they ate almost any kind of grass and could survive the winter with limited care), or planting wheat and Indian corn on land near the river or in areas perhaps cleared by Indian burnings (to encourage berry growth), these second and third generation descendents of Englishmen who had come here before the Puritan triumph of 1618, numbered about fifty families. They were granted—in 1710—by Dedham an exemption "from paying taxes for the support of the minister provided they would have preaching among themselves." Early in the next year they were further granted "two lots of land containing 133 acres for the support of the minister among them." Although neither a permanent minister nor building was to appear for some time (1720), a gathered church does precede the political division.

The original covenant, in part, reads:

> "To seek the Lord God of their Fathers with all their heart and with all their soul, saying, come, let us join ourselves under the Lord in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten."

In 1710 some forty Dedhamites took a further step — the classical one of political separation. They pulled out all the stops, appealing to several "good" reasons for the necessity of the step. These range from pointing out that the proposed town's five square miles would be large enough, that they would need and could support a school, that both the distance and character of the Charles River as a physical obstacle—particularly in the winter—kept them from everything from church to town meeting, and therefore they were not enjoying the privileges to which their belonging to Dedham should have entitled them—a rather extraordinary early concept of town planning, namely that a town should have a small number of people, and that it is best to separate after reaching a

certain size to avert disputes and other problems arising from too large a population. A decision was delayed by the General Court for a year but they finally approved the incorporation of Needham. This act passed the Council on 5 November (Guy Fawkes Day) 1711. The Governor signed it the next day, so 6 November (old style) or 17 November (new style) is the date best settled on for Needham's birthday. Although boundary disputes were to follow, the Town was soon to be bounded by lines that were to last through the century. Incidentally, although there are several Needhams in England and there is absolutely no record of any of the first settlers having any relationship with any of them, the best explanation of the origin is that Governor Dudley simply picked the name of a small English town in the County of Suffolk near Dedham for the name of the new Suffolk County town in the Massachusetts Bay separating from Dedham. There is an interesting relationship, however, in that Needham Market was a Puritan town, still possessing one of the oldest congregational churches in England. Some people from there did settle Wrentham.

The church was somewhat ready for occupancy in 1717 (ordered by the General Court to be located on what is now the second hill from Central Avenue or Nehoiden Street on the left, and right next to a cemetery set aside as early as 1710). In that cemetery and looking toward the site of the church he would serve so many years lies the grave of our first called minister.

> Here lies interred ye remains of ye Rev'd Jonathan Townsend late pastor of the church in Needham who died ye 30th day of Sept. 1762 in ye 65th year of his age and the 43rd of his ministry.
>
> "Earths highest station ends in 'Here he lies'
> and dust to dust concludes her noblest song."

A graduate of Harvard College in 1716, a native of Lynn, this was to be his first and only charge. On the 23rd March 1720 he was ordained in the hopefully completed modest meeting house. His successor once removed, the Rev. Mr. Stephen Palmer, was to say of him:

> "He had the character of a great and good man, and his memory has been much venerated by all who knew him. Possessing strong powers of mind, cultivated and improved by education and study, he was enabled to think deeply and correctly. To the people of his charge he was uniformally affectionate and faithful. He preached statedly in the sanctuary and daily by his example."

Any evaluation of his ministry on the role of the church in the community must take into consideration the overall nature and history of the church in New England. Again, remember these Needhamites within and without his congregation are third/fourth-generation Americans. If their ancestors came seeking escape from religious persecution, they need have little to fear. If religious freedom had been an earlier motivation, there is no evidence that a particular Zion was going to come to fruition north of the Charles. The Rev. Mr. Townsend is referred to as a "moderate Calvinist" and his six printed sermons, recorded petitionary prayers, etc. indicate that he was certainly an orthodox Trinitarian and Bible grounded believer. There seems to be an intellectualism that would mistrust enthusiasm. In the 1740's he was to encounter competition from New

Light Congregationalists and Baptists—losing over one quarter of his congregation to the Evangelical revival. But his diary basically comments on the illiteracy of the itinerant preachers who obviously were not his fellow Harvard Alumni.

Historians estimate that by the middle of the 18th century perhaps only one out of seven Massachusetts Bay adults actually attended the parish church. Rev. Mr. Townsend's records perhaps reflect this in contrast to town population growth. While somewhat a guesstimate based on property and voting records, the Town's population went from about:

1711	250 people
1720	375
1730	550
1740	600
1750	800
1760	900

However, for the total of his ministry the recorded number of baptisms is 1030, of receiving into membership of the Church 238, and 219 marriages. For such a considerable population growth the number of church admissions seems to be very modest. Now this does not take into consideration those who may have attended his services or benefited from his ministry, but it does seem to reflect the fairly common numerical ratio of residents to church members in New England some one hundred years after the first settlements.

During his ministry here he was supposed to receive between 80 and 90 pounds a year, it seldom came very close to that, was often two or more years in arrears, and he often had to quite literally ask for relief from his people. He taught the only real grammar school—Needham provided only about eight weeks a year of free public education to her children—for which he received fees. He farmed, cut the ministerial woodlot, and occasionally guest preached elsewhere. We are fortunate in having annotated almanacs in his writing that give insights into his intellectual curiosity and references to books read and convocations attended, but we are forced to recognize that for most of those forty-two years he was the only college-educated resident of the town and probably had to travel some distance for mental stimulation. That he had a strong social conscience is indicated by the calls for kindness to the poor, the "strangers" among us (Scotch-Irish refugees in the 1720's, Arcadian French in the 1750's) and that he was aware of the falling off in religious commitment as in the entry for 14 June 1717:

> "We, the church and congregation in this place, observed a day of fasting and prayer to ask for ye outpouring of ye spirit of grace on the rising generation, and the revival of decaying religion."

Five months later it is interesting to note that there was a town fast "occasioned by the earth quake."

Some General Notes of Interest

In keeping with New England Church custom, seating in the meeting house reflected one's economic, political and social position. In the first meeting house in 1720 men sat in the front gallery and women in the pews under the stairs, boys

Silver Communion Set presented to First Parish by T.H. Townsend and Mrs. Persis Ware.

Christening basin presented by Rev. Stephen Palmer 1815.

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

under twenty were in the west corner. One reads of constant conflict as to where women were to sit—in the front row or behind in the gallery for instance. As the voting for pew arrangements was held in town meeting, one finds it a very heated, often debated topic, and the list of men holding town office and contributing most to the tax records indicated prominence in the dignified pews near the preaching stand.

The first allusion in the church records to music of any kind was in January of 1730: "It was voted that it is agreeable to the mind of the church that Mr. John Smith tune the Psalm, if he pleases, when he is present, and able to do it." Deacon Kingsbury "shall read and tune the psalm in Mr. Smith's absence till May next."

There are many not so new thoughts, problems, etc. to be discovered in the town records.

Separation

As we had broken away from Dedham, so the inhabitants of the new town living near Natick petition for tax relief, permission to attend church elsewhere, try to quite literally steal the Indian church in Natick and generally protest over exactly the same points made in 1711! As early as 1726 we try to have the county dominated by Boston broken apart and Rev. Mr. Townsend is constantly warning his flock of the various temptations and questionable practices found in Boston.

During the ministry of Rev. Mr. Townsend only two young men graduated from Harvard and one of these was the minister's oldest son who became a well known minister. The schools often were not kept despite our stated desire to have a school of our own, and not only does this reflect the poor economy of the area, the often failure of the town to find even small sums of money, but probably a diminished commitment to education in a rural, off the main track town.

Literacy?

From the town records of 1728 comes this example of spelling and grammar: "The select men caused the presept directed to the selectmen of the town for to be read in the audiance of the town, and also coled upon the voters then assembled for to bring in thire votes for the choice of a reprsentitive as the law directs infolved, the town brought in thire votes fo slow spending the time until allmost night, that then the select men demanded to know what the matter was and it was declared by several of the town that they ware not willing for to send a representative this year."

Thanks to "warnings out," the lack of economic attractions, the increasing failure of wheat as a viable crop thanks to a blight that spread from the 1690's in New England, and better opportunities elsewhere, the significant population growth in these some 40 years probably reflects the eight to sixteen-children family with perhaps one out of three children born, surviving.

Between 1742 and 1756 the births and deaths of seven blacks are recorded but, although there are references to various people being reimbursed by the Town to provide care for aged or sickly Indians, it is impossible to trace a native American presence in the town's area after the 1730's.

The Sorry State of the Town — 1724

The Rev. Mr. Townsend, in response to a petition on the part of inhabitants of the Town living in the 'leg' near Natick, describes the state of his town in rather sad terms:

> "Much of our land wild, poor, unsubdu'd, and but little profitable."
>
> "Our township (which at the biggest is not accounted to be above 5 miles square) is not ours as it is in other places; much of it belongs to proprietors in Dedham, which lies wild and unprofitable and is of no service to us."
>
> "We have been visited of late years with sickness and mortality whereby nine or ten of the principale men of the town have been removed."

Mrs. Chickering

In my opinion the most outstanding woman in Needham during these years (not to deny the beloved wife of the Pastor, Mary Townsend, a well deserved recognition) was Lydia Chickering.

> 17 July 1737
>
> "This day died here Mrs. Lydia Chickering in the 86th year of her age. She was born at Dedham in New England, on July 14, 1652, and about the year 1671 went up from thence to Hadley, where for the space of about a year she waited upon Col. Whalley and Col. Goff who had fled thither from the men that sought their life. She was the daughter of Capt. Daniel Fisher, of Dedham, one of the magistrates of this colony under the old charter. Having had a virtuous life, she died universally respected, and came to her grave in a full age, as a shock of corn cometh into his season."

Servant to the regicides, wife to an early settler here, recorded as having defied the Royal Governor Andros in 1688, she reveals so much in this brief notation. There can be no doubt that being a woman in 18th century Massachusetts was the most dangerous of existences here—the likelihood of death in unattended-by-a-physician childbirth, the epidemics that seemed to take a disproportionate number of females and children, the possibility of incineration near an open fireplace, the burden of caring for a large family, etc. And yet, Lydia lives to be 86, survives Indian attacks in Hadley, has a distinct link with that most momentous of events in English history, (the beheading of the divine right monarch, Charles I) and lives and dies in respect in Needham.

Democracy in Needham

Although it may not have been based on any philosophical or moral commitment but rather on the practical needs of a small farming community, early on, Needham practiced democracy. Following the practice of the Bay Colony, voters had to meet a property qualification. In the 1740's this was that a man had to own land valued so the amount of the "rents or income thereof for the space of six years" must equal 20 pounds. (Actually somewhat less because one's personal property also was considered.) However, Needham is cited as a classic case of even circumventing this rather modest requirement. Dr. Michael Zuckerman in his definitive study of New England towns in the 18th century writes of our very significant vote of 1750 when it was "put to vote whether it be the mind of the town to allow all freeholders in town to vote for a moderator." The Town so voted. "And that verdict for inclusion was not even as revealing as the method by which that report was reached, for in voting whether to include all in the election, Needham did include all in the procedural issue. Every man did vote on the question of whether every man was to be allowed to vote."

Town residence really became the qualification for voting and "every inhabitant was declared liable for his proportion of the town charges. There could be no real elite because participation in government was too broad.

Another fascinating facet of democracy in Needham comes out in an examination of office holding. Elections were annual—for every office from moderator and selectmen to hogreave and fence viewer we can observe a distinguished citizen elevated to selectman one year and the next serving in one of the mundane or unglamorous offices. There is also considerable variation in rotation in office. Captain Robert Cook appears to be the most significant officeholder in our early years:

Representative to the General Court 1712, 26, 39

Selectmen — beginning in 1711 and ending in 1749, with a few interruptions for a total of 27 years.
Town Treasurer — Thirteen years between 1712 and 1745
Assessor — 27 years

But also note minor elected roles:
Surveyor of Highways 1715, 1733
Field Driver 1720
"Committee to reckon with the Town Treasurer" 1730

The longest term of office I can discover in the 18th century is that of Josiah Ware who spent thirty-five years (1743-1788) as our "Dearreave." (He protected the not-all-that-common deer between 17 January and 1 July.) The office was discontinued in 1797.

Representative to the General Court.

Before 1727 each town in the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay had to pay the salary of its representative to the General Court. We constantly sought to be excused from the "burden" and we frequently sent no one to Boston. While fined—22 pounds in 1730—we usually got the fines returned.

In 1712 Ensign Robert Cook was our first representative.

Deacon Timothy Kingsbury served in 1724.

Amos Fuller went in 1759 and kindly turned over his pay for the use of the poor.

Absentee Representative

It was not uncommon in the 18th century for a poor town to select a well-off Bostonian to represent them. A politically ambitious man would "officially" take up residence in a town, promise to turn over his provincial pay to the town, and be sent as the town's representative to the General Court.

William Bowdoin represented us from 1755 to 1759. He gave his salary to the town—it was used for school purposes. William was brother to the future governor.

One of the less democratic practices was "Warning out." This was a procedure by which the selectmen could order (through the town constable) a person new to the community to "leave town." This was basically used to keep out paupers, people who were likely to be a drain on the town. If you harbored a stranger, you had to inform the selectmen of all of the particulars or pay a fine of forty shillings. This was common practice throughout the Bay and must certainly have kept the indigent on the move! However, it also affected the well off on at least the information-sharing level. Sometimes we did not succeed in eliminating a future burden. In 1748 Deacon Kingsbury and Henry Dewing were given 2.5 pounds as reimbursement for expenses in going to Boston "to git a warrant to carry Nicholus Mutter out of town." Five years later another Mutter expense appeared: Deacon Josiah Newell was granted 9s 3d for "six pair of gloves for the funeral of Nicholas Mutter."

This can also be looked on in a positive light in that the town, while admittedly exercising the privilege of being selective, was also concerned with the sense of community and does not seem to have been particularly prohibitive. The lists in the town records of those who were "warned out" right down to the 1790's reflect the families of many who did become substantial citizens.

Who Doctored the Town Records?

We are fortunate in having the records of the Town right back to 1711, but

Volume One, although appearing to be old and original, can not be because the dates are given in the new style calendar that was not adopted in the English world until the mid 1750's.

Economy

Climate, soils and markets determine the kinds of crops that farmers raise. The 180 to 240-day growing season was an advantage for cereal crops, but the topography of this part of the Charles River Basin was decidedly disadvantageous. The hills—highest between Boston and the Rhode Island Colony, large gravel deposits, shallow, often sandy soil, poor drainage and rocks. All of these were certainly contributing factors to the low level of return compared with the difficulty of grubbing a living off the land. Rapid deforestation, the necessity of carrying every item produced some eleven miles overland to Boston market instead of down a navigable river, and the competition of more favorably endowed agricultural towns to the north resulted in a basically subsistence economy with very little coin of the realm in evidence. We had one particular product that earned us both money and some modest notoriety. Bundles of branches and a thick long grass were put together and packhorsed into Boston and its near neighbors to be utilized in making very fast-burning and very hot fires for the ovens of the bakeries. For a time there was a sale to the coastal sailing trade also. These faggots came to be known as "Needham currency" and brought both money and goods into the town.

The Charles River had natural falls totaling over fifty feet through the town and as early as 1682 there was an attempt to dam the river for water power, but it was not until the 19th century that much success was in evidence. Some sawmill activity at the Natick end of town did occur. One can be sure that the river was well fished in season by Needham residents, like the Indians before them.

Silver Mines in Needham

Although the real treasures of New England were to be found in the harvesting of the seas and forests, like the Spanish to the far south the early English settlers hoped to discover mineral wealth. In 1649 Dedham residents lay claim to "a mine of metal." This was near the High Rock but nothing was to come of this "discovery"—the rock appearing merely as a landmark in 18th century deeds.

After forty-two years on the North American continent the thirteen English colonies stretched from the Massachusetts Province of Maine to the last founded colony of Georgia and fully occupied the vast coastal plain in to the Piedmont. The French menace in Canada was at an end. Fourth and fifth generations of English colonists now occupied the land. In New England leadership had passed from the clergy to the new merchant class.

World events had not gone unnoticed in Needham. Rev. Mr. Townsend had recorded the Lisbon earthquake. A surprisingly large number of Needham men had served in "the Spanish War," fought in the struggle to control Lakes George and Champlain and seen the fall of Louisbourg. While some new names were appearing, the Fishers, Mills, Fullers, Kingsbury's, Cooks, and Dewings, sons

and grandsons of the original petitioners and signers of the Church Covenant continued to serve the Town/Parish. Yet other things remained constant—the modest church on the hill serving as both spiritual haven and community center, the hard work that went into farming the less than productive soil—the tendency toward dissatisfaction with the center town—but above all changes or continuing problems, in good times and bad, present at times of happiness or sorrow, there was the Reverend Mr. Jonathan Townsend—forty-two years minister to the Church of Christ gathered in Needham. On the 29th December he had preached from a text in Titus (Ch.2:10) that must reflect his own concept of ministry:

> "Shewing all good fidelity; that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things. For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying unGodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and Godly in the present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ."

THE FIRST CHURCH AND PARISH IN NEEDHAM

Extracted from
An Address by Reverend James W. Macdonald,
minister of the First Parish Church, 1932-1939

For a proper understanding of the early history of the First Church and Parish in Needham, we need to know the general relationship between Church and State, at first in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, then in the Province of Massachusetts Bay.

At first, Church and State in Massachusetts were practically one. The Puritans who left England to settle in Massachusetts came to create a state in which religion and political government should be constituent parts of a theocratic commonwealth. One invariable condition insisted upon by the General Court of the Colony in granting a petition of settlers for incorporation as a town, was that they should choose, support and maintain among them "a learned minister of religion." A law passed in the year 1637 imposed upon town officers the duty of assessing and collecting taxes upon the estates of all the inhabitants for the support of the minister of the town. This provision for ministers and churches runs through the Colony Records, through the Province Laws, and, after the Revolution, through the Statutes of the Massachusetts Commonwealth, with some variations, down even to the year 1834. The Town built the Meeting House, and paid the minister's salary. The Colony Laws gave to the Town the right of choosing the minister. Later, under the Charter of the Province of Massachusetts Bay, which was granted in 1691, the right of initiative in the choice was given to covenanted members of the Church, but a minister could not be settled without the approval of the town, or parish.

In May, 1710, the settlers, 45 families, in that part of the Town of Dedham designated "The North Side of Charles River," petitioned the General Court of the Province of Massachusetts Bay, to be set off as a separate town, because, as the petition stated, "By reason of our remote living from the place of the Public Worship of God—some 6, 7, 8 and 10 miles, which renders it impossible for us with our families duly to attend on the public worship of God there"—they petitioned to be set off "a distinct town, to the intent we may be allowed and enabled to support the Gospel of Christ among ourselves; and in due time, as God shall enable us, a School for the education of our children."

The petition was not immediately granted. But on November 13, of the same year, 1710, the Town of Dedham voted "to exempt the petitioners from paying taxes for the support of the Dedham minister, provided they would have preaching among themselves," by a learned minister; and, as Dedham had earlier made them "the grant of eight pounds, to defray the expense for three months' preaching among themselves," they were enabled to have regular services of worship in one or another of their homes, securing as preacher one of the young ministers, graduated from Harvard College, but not yet settled in a church.

On March 19, 1711, the Town of Dedham granted to the petitioners "a tract of land, 133 acres, for the support of the ministry among them." Thus they were encouraged to establish permanently in their midst the institution of Public Worship.

On November 16, 1711,* the General Court granted the petition for the incorporation of the Town of Needham. On December 25, 1711—a month after incorporation—the Needham Town Meeting voted 80 pounds for the building of a Meeting House.

The Meeting House was raised in the summer of 1712, near what is now the North-East corner of Central Avenue and Nehoiden Street.

The Town employed a number of candidates to preach, and gave a call to first one and then another, who refused the settlement. In January 1720, Jonathan Townsend, 22 years old, a graduate of Harvard College, accepted the unanimous invitation of the Town meeting to become the minister. On the 20th of March of that year the church covenant was signed by 20 men, and a few days later by 19 women.

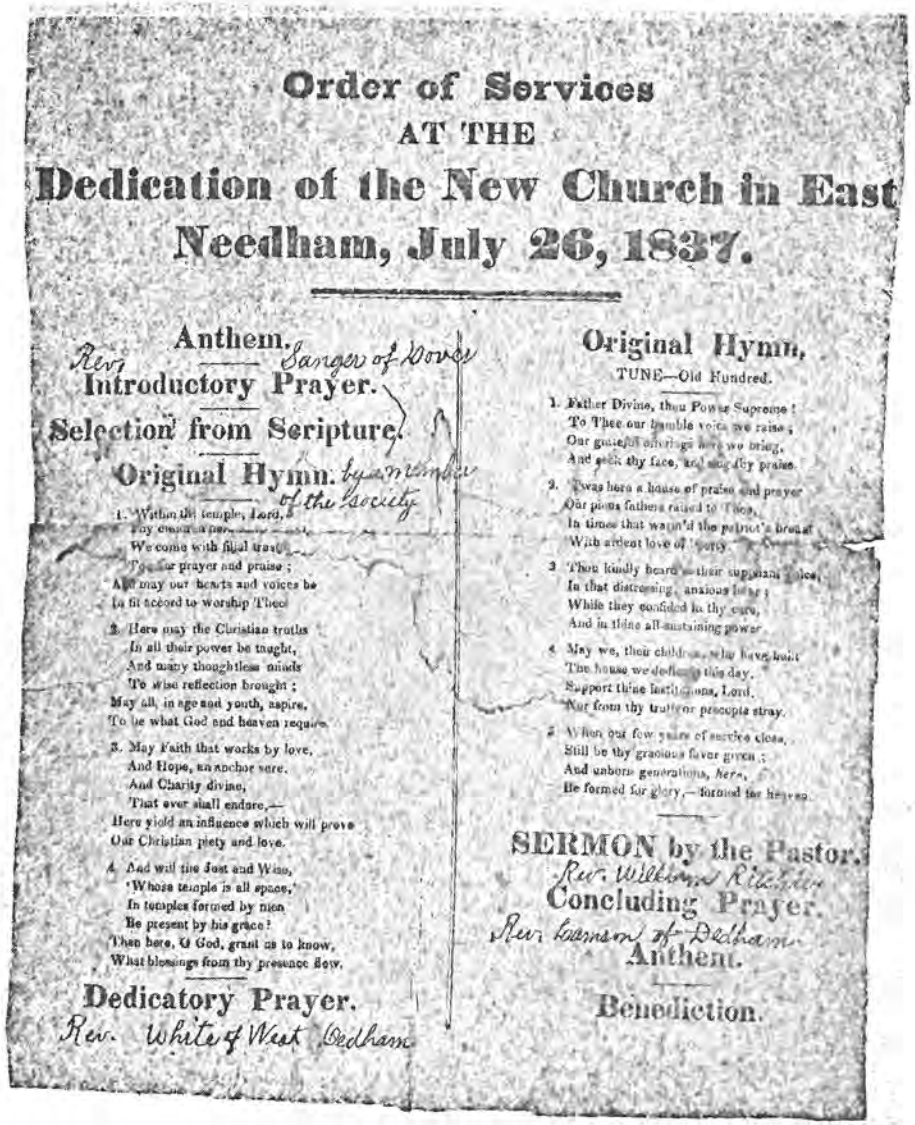
Mr. Townsend was the minister of the Church and Town till his death in 1762, in his 65th year, and the 43rd year of his ministry. Concerning him I quote the words of Rev. Stephen Palmer, in his Centenary Sermon in 1811, half a century after Mr. Townsends death: "Mr. Townsend's praise is still in the churches. He had the character of a great and good man, and his memory has been much venerated by all who knew him. Possessing strong powers of mind, cultivated and improved by education and study, he was enabled to think deeply and correctly. To the people of his charge he was uniformly affectionate and faithful. He preached statedly in the sanctuary, and daily by his example."

In 1764, Rev. Samuel West, 26 years old, a graduate of Harvard College, succeeded Mr. Townsend as minister, the town having concurred in the choice which the church had made. At the time Needham contained 129 houses, 168 families, and 945 inhabitants. Mr. West was the minister in Needham for 24 years, til 1788, when he accepted a call to the Hollis Street Church, Boston. He is classed among the pioneers of the liberal religious movement which eventually led many of the New England ministers and laymen to form in 1825 the liberal fellowship called The American Unitarian Association.

In October 1773, the tenth year of Mr. West's ministry in Needham, the First Meeting House was destroyed by fire; and a month later the Town voted 200 pounds for the building of the Second Meeting House, which was built the following summer on the same site as the First. Five years later, in 1778, the Town was divided, by consent of the General Court, into two precincts, and correspondingly two parishes, the First Parish and the West Parish, the people of the West Parish undertaking to build their own Meeting House and call a minister. A century later, in 1881, when, by act of the General Court, the West Precinct became the Town of Wellesley (which separation decreased the Town

*The correct date was November 17, according to Clarke's *History of Needham*. However, Rev. Macdonald can hardly be faulted, since the Town celebrated November 16, 1811, as its centennial.

PAUL REVERE BELL
Foundry No. 129 Weight 960 lb. $407.61
Purchased 1811 for Second Edifice. First rung 15 Nov. 1811 at Eve of Centennial Service.



Order of Services
AT THE
Dedication of the New Church in East Needham, July 26, 1837.

Anthem.
Rev. Sanger of Dover
Introductory Prayer.
Selection from Scripture.
Original Hymn. by a member of the society

1. Within the temple, Lord,
Thy children [illegible]
We come with filial trust
To offer prayer and praise;
And may our hearts and voices be
In fit accord to worship Thee!

2. Here may the Christian truths
In all their power be taught,
And many thoughtless minds
To wise reflection brought;
May all, in age and youth, aspire,
To be what God and heaven require.

3. May Faith that works by love,
And Hope, an anchor sure,
And Charity divine,
That ever shall endure,—
Here yield an influence which will prove
Our Christian piety and love.

4. And will the Just and Wise,
'Whose temple is all space,'
In temples formed by men
Be present by his grace?
Then here, O God, grant us to know,
What blessings from thy presence flow.

Dedicatory Prayer.
Rev. White of West Dedham

Original Hymn.
TUNE—Old Hundred.

1. Father Divine, thou Power Supreme!
To Thee our humble voice we raise;
Our grateful offerings here we bring,
And seek thy face, and sing thy praise.

2. 'Twas here a house of praise and prayer
Our pious fathers raised to Thee,
In times that warm'd the patriot's breast
With ardent love of liberty.

3. Thou kindly heard'st their suppliant voice,
In that distressing, anxious hour;
While they confided in thy care,
And in thine all-sustaining power.

4. May we, their children, who have built
The house we dedicate this day,
Support thine institutions, Lord,
Nor from thy truth or precepts stray.

5. When our few years of service close,
Still be thy gracious favor given;
And unborn generations, here,
Be formed for glory,—formed for heaven.

SERMON by the Pastor.
Rev. William Ritchie
Concluding Prayer.
Rev. Lamson of Dedham
Anthem.
Benediction.

of Needham to about half its original area), the West Church of Needham became the First Congregational Church of Wellesley; and the Unitarian Church of Grantville in West Needham, organized in 1871, changed its name in 1885 to the Unitarian Church of Wellesley Hills.

In 1788 Mr. West resigned as minister of the Parish. Three years later, Rev. Stephen Palmer, 25 years old, and, like his two predecessors, a graduate of Harvard, was settled as the minister. He was minister of the parish for 30 years, until his death in 1821.

As an indication how Stephen Palmer, the third minister of the parish, led his people, a century and a half ago, along the path of Liberal Religion, so that it was natural for the parish to call an avowed Unitarian to be his successor, I quote his words from his autobiographical sketch, "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. I have never viewed my opinions to be such mountains as a different faith cannot remove; nor have I ever yet believed myself to be infallible. 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."

After the death of Mr. Palmer the parish in November, 1821, voted unanimously to settle Rev. William Ritchie, as the minister. He faithfully served the parish for 21 years until his death in 1842. He belonged to the liberal fellowship of ministers who were avowed Unitarians, and who in 1825 formed the American Unitarian Association. Mr. Ritchie was the minister when the Third Meeting House was moved to its present site, corner of Great Plain and Dedham Avenues in 1879.

In 1870 women became legal voting members of the parish. The parish records state that on March 14, 1870, the parish meeting, composed of men, "voted that women be invited to become members, and qualified voters of the parish." The clerk then read the following communication: "We, the undersigned, would respectfully announce to the Needham First Parish our desire to become members of said parish, agreeably to an act of the Legislature passed June 2, 1869." The communication was signed by 18 women.

In the long history of The First Church in Needham, its progress, from its Puritan beginnings to the liberal fellowship of a Unitarian church, is indicated by the open covenant which the church adopted in 1905.

The continuing emphasis on the liberal spirit of the church is indicated in its present By-Laws, which include the following articles:

> "The Purpose of this Church is to foster liberal religious living through worship, study, service and fellowship."
>
> "Any person, whose written application to become a member of this Church has included a statement of approval of or support for the purpose of this Church and has been approved by the Parish Committee or the church and filed with the Clerk, shall become a member of this Church."

First Parish in 1880, one year after move to present location. Old Kimball School in background.

FROM THERE TO HERE

by C. J. Gotthardt

It took a bit of doing to move this Meeting House from a knoll on Nehoiden Street near Central Avenue, across a meadow and down a dirt road to the principal intersection in the Village of Great Plain. But the "doing" was much, much more than just a physical move:—feasibility—site location—agreement to move—disagreement to move—voting to move—committee to raise funds, undertake the move, make alterations and repairs. The Parish Clerk at that time, although a gifted penman, was most laconic in his reportings and no details of the actual move are to be found in his notes.

But we do have recollections of some who were told of the move by their parents; the undocumented stories—imaginative, if not exactly true; the papers by latter day historians; the Needham Chronicle; and, of course, Clarke's *History of Needham*.

When this Meeting House was built, the intersection of Nehoiden Street with Central Avenue was the center of town—and had been so since the beginning. But times had changed, and by 1879 the town was centered about a mile to the east, at the Village of Great Plain. It was probably the bell on the railroad's locomotive that tolled the end of the rural community and ushered in an era of development and growth. Progress, if you care to call it that, had left the Meeting House behind on the knoll, with a parsonage and an old burying ground for company.

It was a long trek to Meeting House for Sunday services, and this reality must have prompted the move, as the Parish records say "...to a more convenient location." And what locale could be more convenient than at the junction of Great Plain and Dedham Avenues—and with a commanding view of the great plain. Although hard to imagine today, there really was a great plain—flat land that stretched far to the east and west, and north to Rosemary Street and beyond. Doris MacPhee remembers, as a little girl living on Warren Street, that she could see "clear up to Birds Hill."

The Needham Chronicle, in the January 11, 1879 edition, dutifully reported "We understand that the First Parish has decided upon Lot 9 on the plan of Nehoiden Land Co.as the new location for their church."

What the Chronicle did not report was that but for seven votes this Meeting House would be on the site of St. Joseph's Church at May Street and Highland Avenue. An old town map cryptically labels this lot "Ladies Aid"—but the Parish records note it as "Ladies Lot." The name is incidental to the story—mostly undocumented—of Parish ladies, interested in moving the Church, raising a sum, by means undisclosed, in excess of their needs. With intuitive wisdom they sought to purchase land, only to learn that females could not hold title except through male trustees. Rising up in wrath, as the story goes, they instigated legislation to change all that—and must have succeeded, eventually selling the "Ladies Lot" to St. Joseph's some years later.

With the site acquired, a building committee—Harris, Kingsbury, Martin and Eaton—family names well known in Needham to this day—was chosen to undertake the move forthwith. Seven weeks later the Chronicle noted: "Operations have been commenced on moving the First Parish Church edifice—a move in the right direction."

There is a dearth of detail on the actual moving of the Meeting House. Alger Eaton, as a young man of 16 years, helped with the move according to his son Lawrence. Lawrence said he believed the structure was raised from its foundations with jacks and settled on large timbers. The Meeting House was skidded over the ground on rollers. Multiple teams of heavy draft horses were the customary motive power, and sometimes a horse-powered capstan was needed to increase the pulling power, or when going down grade to brake the momentum.

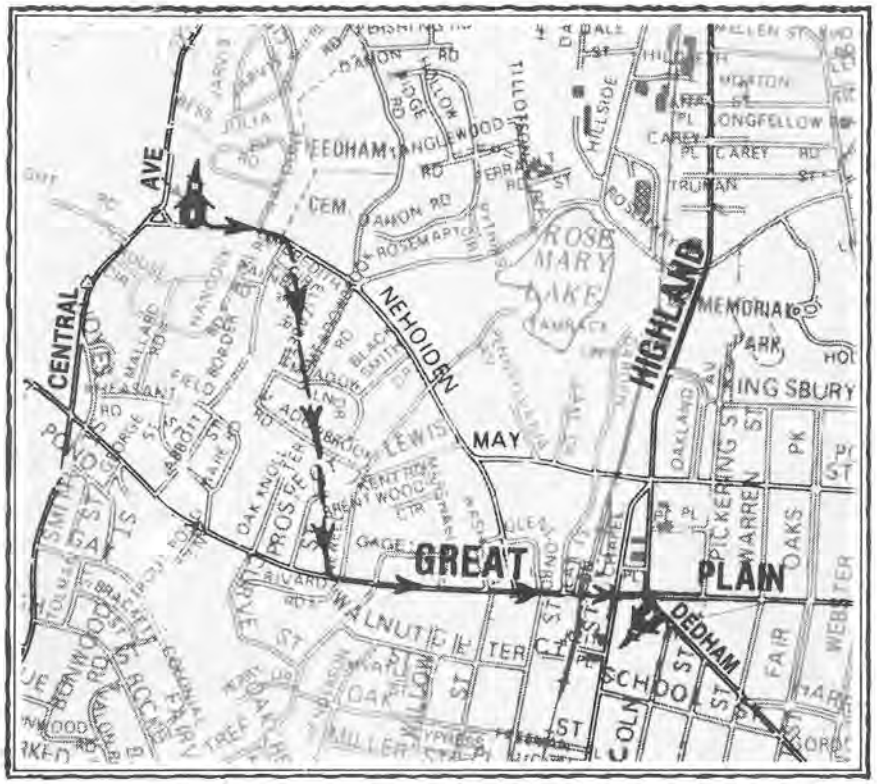
The speculative concensus is that the route taken was easterly on Nehoiden Street to about the cemetary, then southward across the Clarke and Kingsbury meadows to Great Plain Avenue, turning east to the new site—a traverse of about one and one-third miles. Lilias McIntosh, whose father Theodore was 11 years old at the time of the move, is quite certain that the route was over the meadows just east of the high ground near Central Avenue.

Lilias remembers her father telling that the building was moved as far as they could go in a day and left for the night. During the night the Meeting House settled into the marshy meadow and precariously tipped. The men, returning in the morning were somehow able to right the Church and continue the journey. No mention of this near disaster is reported by Clarke in his "History," but he does observe that the Meeting House remained on Clarke land for three weeks before resuming the move. Piecing these two fragments together and with a glance at the calendar, it is possible an early thaw had softened the meadow and the movers prudently parked the Church on firmer ground until the frost was completely out of the ground. On March 20, 1879, the Chronicle reported: "The First Parish Church is now on the field of Miss Mary Kingsbury.

Three weeks later, arriving at Great Plain Avenue, the final leg of the odyssey began, and the newspaper, in acknowlegement observed, "...it will doubtless arrive at its final resting place this summer." Somewhere along the Avenue, Florence Gilette, then 6 or 7 years old hitched a ride as the Church trundled on—according to her daughter, Doris MacPhee.

By May 8th, the editor of the Chronicle saw fit to write of our trip down Great Plain Avenue, "Work on Highland Avenue progresses at a rate which promises speedy completion, in contrast to the dilatory movements of the First Parish Church edifice that 'like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along.'" The "wounded snake" quotation is from, appropriately, Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism*.

May 20, 1879 the 73 day journey ended and the Meeting House was home, at last. There was more to be done to remodel and repair but the move was over and the Chronicle's editor wrote, for all to read, "...altogether (it) will be a great addition to the appearance of the town"—and so it is.



Originally at the corner of Nehoiden Street and Central Avenue, the Church was moved one and one-half miles along the route shown by arrows on the map above. Leaving Nehoiden Street at the corner of the old burying ground, it traversed a meadow, a marsh and the long-gone Blacksmith Pond west to Great Plain Avenue. Turning south on Great Plain, it was trundled on rollers by heavy teams of horses to its present location at the intersection with Dedham Avenue. A 73 day trip!

Acknowledgements:

Concept and Direction: Bill Ganick
Writers: Jack Gotthardt and Henry Hicks
Editorial Coordination: Jim Sargent and Ray Bosworth
Photography: Hal Appleton
Historical Research: Ruth Sutro
Typesetting and Layout: Roberta and Dave Crocker, Betty May
Printing: The Instant Printing Place
And to the many others who helped produce this book.

$3.95

Published by the Needham Historical Society
53 Glendoon Road
and The First Parish In Needham (Unitarian Universalist)
Corner of Great Plain and Dedham Avenues