

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF OUR CHURCH

Although it is known that as far back as 1786 there was a small band of Baptists worshipping between Chester and Rockingham, there is little documentation of these meetings. The name of William Bowler, Minister of the Gospel appears on some documents associated with the Baptists but it is unclear where he resided. He was connected to the Woodstock Baptist Association and it is thought he resided in Rockingham.

A document dated June of 1789 lists 16 members (all male) declared to make up a Baptist Church, assisted by the Baptist Church of Marlow. According to the Hayes History of the Town of Rockingham, after making a careful study of Rockingham Town records there were an additional 31 members (at various times) of the Baptist Church named. The church was accepted into the Woodstock Baptist Association at this time and was supplied Elders to conduct services through 1791.

March 5, 1792 At the annual Town Meeting in Rockingham it was voted to allot times for the use of the town hall (the Rockingham Meetinghouse) by the Congregational Society, the Baptists and the Episcopalians, though they were at that time not formed into a Society.

In 1789 the membership is listed as 43, in 1791 it is 35, in 1792 it's 40 and in 1793 it is listed as 31.

There is little information available on our church family and its location until April of 1854 when we apparently had moved into the Village of Bellows Falls. At that time a meeting was held at the home of Benjamin Dean a former resident of Grafton now residing in Bellows Falls. At the meeting it was decided to form a new church, subject to the approval of neighboring Baptist churches. Thirty people attending the meeting became the cornerstone for the new Baptist Church of Bellows Falls. Representatives from Brattleboro, Cavendish, Grafton and other surrounding towns attended the meeting as well to act as witnesses to the organization of the new society. That same day a public service of recognition was held in the evening at the Congregational church.

On Saturday, May 5, 1854 our church family held their first meeting at Wightmans Hall, located between Rockingham and Canal Streets. It was voted at this time to hold a bi-monthly worship meeting and weekly Thursday prayer meetings. Supply Pastors included Rev. A. Jones of Burlington and Rev. W.B. Jones of Connecticut. During the summer of 1856 S.F. Brown of Fairfax, Vt. Supplied the pulpit and performed pastoral services. In August of that year the church extended a call to S.F. Brown to become its pastor and he accepted. He was ordained and installed on Sept. 11, 1856 at a service held in the Congregational Church.

On May 13, 1858 Pastor Brown purchased the land on which our church building now stands. The purchase was for \$700 and the deed was from Col. Roswell Shurtleff, who

built the infamous Island House on the island. The deed given to Col. Shurtleff four years earlier by John Arms (the Arms Block across the stairs) stipulated that only a dwelling and outbuildings, or the equivalent thereto, should be built upon the land, and that no building should extend more than 20 feet farther south than a line drawn east from the south corner of the Arms dwelling across the street. This restriction led to a delay in the building of the church for 2 years.

The new Baptist Church was dedicated Dec. 27, 1860. In the erection of the church a mortgage for an important amount of money remained upon the property for some years, making a heavy burden for a struggling church.

S.F. Brown resigned in 1863 feeling he was leaving the church well established with the addition of several new members above the original members that had organized the church.

In March 1866 the church extended a call to Rev. N. Pierce, which he accepted. He was ordained in April of that year and at once began his work in earnest. He resigned in February 1868.

Next up was Rev. C.F. Nicholson, ordination date unknown. The only dated record to be found is from July 28, 1869 stating: "owing to a combination of peculiar and embarrassing circumstances the pastor considering it his privilege and not knowing but it was his positive duty, tendered his resignation to take effect at the close of the pastoral year, Sept. 25<sup>th</sup>." His resignation was accepted.

October 31, 1869 brought Rev. J.R. Haskins to the pastorate. During the winter of 1870 – 71 a revival of some proportions was the result of several meetings. The need of a baptistry was urgent. The church had been observing the ordinance of baptism in the canal at a point near where the paper mill of the Wyman Flint & Sons Co. stood. The canal at that time flowed wide open and formed a large pond at that point. At times the baptisms were held when it was necessary to cut a hole in the ice for the purpose! Now that shows commitment!!

Gov. Levi K. Fuller, a Bellows Falls native, gave the church the baptistry that we still use today. It was first used Feb. 5, 1871. Gov. Fuller also provided funds to finish off the two rooms downstairs.

Rev. Haskins was also successful in securing funds to build the first parsonage owned by the church. Substantial assistance came, once again, from Gov. Levi Fuller as well as the Estey family of Brattleboro. At this time the Ladies of the church were successful in fundraising of their own in order to purchase the church bell which was rung for the first time May 25, 1873.

Rev. Haskins resigned in October 1876.

E.A. Herring, a young, unordained preacher was called in Sept. 1876 and ordained in Nov. of that year. He served until October 1878.

Rev. S.H. Emery served as pastor from Dec. 1878 to Nov. 1883.

A chaplain of the US Navy, Rev. W.H. Stewart supplied the pulpit from late 1883 through spring of 1884.

The church issued a call to Rev. Edward Green in April 1884. He resigned in April 1885 over a change of doctrinal opinions. He later joined the Unitarian denomination where he held an "estimable position". Apparently they liked his doctrinal opinions!

Rev. N.W. Alger of Saxtons River took the pastorate in June of 1885 but in 1888 he was called to California due to the illness of his son. His stay there became lengthy and so he decided it best to resign his pastorate with us in Jan. 1889.

During the winter of 1889-1890 the pulpit was supplied by Rev. C.H. Brown, a student of Newton Theological seminary.

Rev. C.R.B. Dodge, who came here from Nova Scotia, in May of 1890 and became pastor. During his pastorate the church grew in size both spiritually and materially. The membership grew substantially. A beautiful new organ was installed in 1892 and several memorial windows were installed. In 1894 (at a cost of \$55.00 each). At the Annual Meeting in 1898 it was voted to look into enlarging the church to have more seating capacity while at that same meeting it was voted "to appoint Ira Adams as Solicitor to receive funds for the deficiency of the past year". In 1899 the whole building was remodeled and enlarged, the spire was taken down and the tower was built on the corner of the building and the basement was remodeled for social purposes. The pews were removed and "theater seats" were installed. The frescoes in the vestry were repainted. The renovated church was dedicated Sept. 10, 1899. Rev. Dodge resigned in May 1902.

May 1902 brought C.W. Jackson to the church, a student at Yale University. At this time the church membership is at 175!

Notable servant of the church is John O. Spring. He has held the offices of deacon and Sunday School Superintendent for over 25 years!

The minutes from the Annual Meeting of 1903 says the deficiency was discussed and it was decided that at the next Sunday service Rev. Jackson would announce a special offering to offset that deficiency. If enough is not collected then Samuel Daggett is appointed as a special solicitor to visit the homes of those not reached at the service to collect their offering toward the deficit.

The 1905 minutes show a Sunday School with 150 enrolled students, average attendance is 91. The Cradle Roll is 30! 35 people were baptized on Easter Sunday!

In 1907 the average Sunday School attendance had increased to 110. Maybe some of the Cradle Roll kids graduated to Sunday School!

Rev. C.W. Jackson resigned in May 1907.

Rev. J. W. Chesbro is next on the scene in 1913. While here enough capital was raised to do necessary repairs to the parsonage as well as the vestry. In 1917 the

congregation voted to approach the town for approval to grade the lawn, add a sidewalk, cement walkway and cement steps to the front of the church. Permission was granted after the church had the lot surveyed and mapped. The Upper Room was also added. At Annual meeting in 1918 Rev. Chesbro pointed out there was a large payment of \$440.00 coming due in October and suggested that members begin tithing an additional \$1.00 per week to be set aside for this payment.

Rev. Chesbro resigned in 1918.

Lest you think this is all very serious work, here's a look at a little fun for you! Here are some very devout men, some of whom are named on our memorial windows! Butterfield, Mark, Upham along with other church officers dressed for some special event.

Dr. J.S. Weightnour was called next but he died on the train on his way here.

Rev. J.M. Maxwell arrived in 1921. In his pastoral remarks he stated "Our doors are open to all who care to enter." "This church is a Bible church." And "Every person saved is saved to serve". He helped to begin keeping the history of our church updated and created our first church directory.

In March 1925 Rev. Maxwell called a special meeting to discuss past due bills that should get paid. A proposal was made to approach the bank about a loan for \$150 or \$200 to pay these immediately. However, the church voted to appoint a committee to work with the finance committee to see how these bills might get paid without a loan. At Annual Meeting in April 1925 it was announced that all bills were current and a payment of \$350 due to the bank had been covered as well! Deacon Brown, who held a \$500 mortgage on the church had promised to make a gift to the church of this mortgage provided all debts were paid by this date. Accordingly, Mr. Brown presented the mortgage to Rev. Maxwell and while he held it in his hand Mr. Brown lighted a match to the paper and as it burned there was great rejoicing and applause among the people. Also in 1925 Rev. Maxwell reported he had baptized 22 new members into the church. In his 1927 Annual Report Rev. Maxwell reports he delivered 73 sermons, 34 talks to the Junior Congregation and held 37 mid-week sessions. He performed 16 funerals, 9 weddings and baptized 9 people. He made 1041 calls throughout the year. That sounds like one busy man!

Work has begun on revising the constitution to update it.

At Annual Meeting in 1928 concern was expressed that the Sunday School attendance was showing a decline over the previous year. From a weekly average of 77 all the way down to 72!

Rev. Maxwell resigned in Oct. 1928. His salary at that time was \$1,820.00.

Rev. Curry Spidell was called Jan. 1929 at a salary of \$1,800 (rather than the original \$2,000 the church had budgeted). He was ordained on April 29, 1929. Rev. Spidell pushed to get the revised constitution completed. His closing remarks at the 1928

Annual Meeting ring true today: "Finally I would suggest that each member of our church make himself and herself a personal missionary, not to engage in proselyting, but to aid in spreading a Christian influence throughout the community."

I like to think this is the work we are carrying on with.

This carries us through the first 75 years or so of our First Baptist Church of Bellows Falls history!

I would like to note that from the early days there have always been women working in the church as well. There was always strong social and mission work going on! But to include all of that would be another whole presentation! Maybe someday we'll tackle that one!