

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF OUR CHURCH

I'd like to spend a little time with you today and go back to our roots as the First Baptist Church of Bellows Falls. In the interest of time I will limit this to the early history. I hope that you find this as interesting as I do!

The Town of Rockingham was established by a decree by George the Second, King of Great Britain, France and Ireland in 1753. Benning Wentworth acted as agent and Benjamin Bellows of Walpole pushed for the charter and indeed was the driving force to claim this land as Rockingham and "redeem it from a barren wilderness". At this time Rockingham was in New Hampshire territory. It did not officially become Vermont land until February 8, 1791 when Vermont was admitted to the Union.

Businesses in the village included F.W. Wheeler Carriage Maker, four blacksmiths and a General Merchant by the name of Mrs. Josiah B. Divoll. We natives are familiar with that name!

Occasionally a traveling minister would pass through and conduct a service in a private home. Rev. Andrew Gardner of Massachusetts resided occasionally in Rockingham and is recorded as the first minister of Rockingham in 1770 & 1771. No particular denomination mentioned.

At a town meeting in 1771 it was voted to construct a Meetinghouse in the village of Rockingham. The site was chosen. It was "to be set on a hill west of David Pulsiphers house, about 30 or 40 rods." The Meetinghouse was first used for a town meeting on December 12, 1774. I am sure that at some point in time every one of us has visited this historic building. The next time you are there, take a good look at the building and envision the handful of settlers carrying, cutting, carving and connecting EVERY piece of wood you see!

In 1773 Rev. Samuel Whiting took the position of pastor and enjoyed the luxury of a home built at about the same time as the Meetinghouse for the purpose of a parsonage. This home was called the Old Manse because of its size. Today that home is part of the Soboleski Farm.

Although it is known that as far back as 1786 there was a small band of Baptists worshiping 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 Baptist 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 attended the meeting and 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, where currently there is a small Chinese restaurant. 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 price was \$700 and the deed was from Col. Roswell Shurtleff, who built the famous 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 purchase of this land by Rev. Brown shows what great faith he had in God and his church family to make our church a reality! Remember that at this time the daily wage earned was about 70 cents per day. That had to support your family AND provide your tithe to the church which was considered to be the most important expense you had!

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 1865 The First Baptist Church and Society of Bellows Falls became a registered entity by establishing a Preamble (Mission Statement), Constitution and By-Laws. It is signed by 29 men as members of the church. NOTE: Article 7 of the new constitution under Membership says "Any male persons, members, of the Baptist Church of the age of 18 years and upwards and others who contribute statedly to the funds of the society, may become members and be entitled to all its rights and privileges; and subject to its duties and liabilities, by signing this constitution."

From this point we have had several Pastors come and go through the years so I will limit my discussion to the few that have had an impact on our

church history or that have something notable in our church history to report.

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!!

The earliest record of baptism I have found (so far) is for May 1, 1898. That was Florence Underhill. There are records in later years that indicate up to 20 baptisms at a time taking place!

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 the amount of \$175.00 in order to purchase the church bell which was rung for the first time May 25, 1873.

Rev. Haskins resigned in October 1876.

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.

Then came 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 (cost of \$1,100.00 of which the church paid \$1000.00 up front and paid the remaining \$100.00 on time) 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 fresco in the vestry was 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! The church flourished during his service time.

Notable servant of the church is John O. Spring. He has held the offices of deacon and Sunday School Superintendent for over 25 years! His name appears on one of our stained glass windows.

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!

