“When Our Lovely Meetinghouse Was New”

At the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.
On January 25, 2015
By The Rev. Ken Sawyer

It is a delight to see you.

Let me offer my congratulations on your having had so thorough, thoughtful, and successful a search process, and finding, calling, and installing Stephanie May as minister. And I cannot pass up the chance to say how deeply grateful and awed I was and am at the good-by I was given as Stephanie’s predecessor.

My thanks to Stephanie for the invitation to give the sermon on this – what I take to be a – memorable occasion, the 200th anniversary to the day of the services when this meetinghouse was dedicated and a new, young minister was ordained.

By the early years of the nineteenth century, this town’s meetinghouse, which also served as the place of worship for this congregation, was getting on in years and run down. It had been built in 1726, reusing timbers from the third meetinghouse. The third, like the two before it, was located in what we call North Cemetery, when the town of Sudbury included land on both sides of the river.

When a second Sudbury congregation was gathered on the west side, the east side was too small, and farmers in northern Natick were persuaded to add their land. But now the meetinghouse site was too far north, so the fourth meetinghouse was built on a spot diagonally across the common from where we are now.

“It had become necessary to build a new meeting house,” it was later written. “The old house had been standing more

than ninety years…. It was … old-fashioned, much time-worn and, for the last few years, intentionally left without much repairing. It had become so open, that in the summer season its attic was a resort for bats."

Those words were written in retrospect by the Rev. John Burt Wight, the major player in this morning's drama. For he would arrive in 1814 to fill the pulpit in the old meetinghouse while work was being completed on the fifth, the one we are in today, dedicated on January 25, 1815, the same day the congregation ordained him.

It is hard to imagine a more momentous day in the life of this congregation, and few in the life of the town, given the striking beauty of this building. But getting to that day was anything but easy.

In those days, the meetinghouse belonged to the town, as had been the case since the first meetinghouse went up in 1643. So a decision as where to build the new one was up to town meeting. When I celebrated the 175th anniversary of January 25, 1815, I shared the pulpit with the late John Seiler, who had done research into the 39 town meetings that took place over many years to decide what to do and where.

For instance, in May, 1806, a motion was made "to remove the old meetinghouse from its site and build a new meetinghouse thereon." It failed. In November, it was moved "to build a new meetinghouse on a new site." It failed. The next May, it was moved to either build a new meetinghouse or repair the old one." It failed.

The minister at the time was Joel Foster, the congregation's sixth, known for his practical jokes, impolitic humor, and habit of playing his violin at church meetings when discussions got heated – which they often did in the years of debate about where to site this building, Before the matter was settled, though, Foster died, at 57, in 1812. The congregation struggled along with its contentions without

benefit of clergy or violin until finally reaching a decision and beginning construction on this building two years later.

At issue had been the building's place on one side or the other of Mill Brook, which now flows under the intersection out front, but then could flood and impede travel, as it still can do on rare occasion.

They almost did one thing or another until finally, after so many years and votes, it was agreed "that if the citizens from the south end of town would buy one acre of Mr. Wyman's land for a meetinghouse and carriage sheds, the north end of town would vote to accept the site. This motion passed in the affirmative…. " And, John Seiler noted, "from this point on, it was clear sailing."

"On June 1, 1814, all able-bodied men of East Sudbury were notified that the frame of the church was ready for raising," wrote town historian Alfred Wayland Cutting. "Not only the men, but the women were busy. Kettles were bubbling in the nearby houses, tables were spread in the open air, and small boys were climbing over the great timbers…. " There were six teams of oxen.

Construction was "finished within the Autumn of the same year," wrote Wight. "Laying the foundation, finishing the interior, and elevating the bell, furnished a succession of gala-days very pleasant and interesting to the people."

Master builder Andrews Palmer of Newburyport oversaw construction, relying for design on the guidebook of Asher Benjamin, as did many builders of that time, each varying the details of the basic federal style. The $9,500 cost was paid for by the successful sale of pews and of carriage sheds, then three times more numerous.

All the while, there were worship services in the old, decrepit fourth meetinghouse, led by John Burt Wight. He had graduated six years before from Brown University as the youngest member of his class, at 18, but with the highest

honors. He subsequently studied at Harvard Divinity School and theology with a Dr. Emmons of Franklin and earned a Masters from Harvard.

Wight would later recall, "I was kindly received….. On the 28th of November the church and the town gave me a unanimous call to settle among them in the Gospel ministry; to which I answered in the affirmative.

"My ordination, in connection with the dedication of the new meeting-house, took place on the last Wednesday of January, 1815," which was the 25th.

"Though it was a cold winter day" – and this was before the building was heated – "the house was thronged…. The exercises were appropriate and highly acceptable to all; and doubtless were peculiarly interesting to those whose wishes were fulfilled by the erection of a new and commodious temple for worship, and the settlement among them of a young minister whom they had unanimously chosen."

I will get to the two ceremonies anon, but first I will tell you what happened the day before, as was dictated by long-established practice. An ecclesiastical council gathered that day, made up of a minister and a lay delegate each from sixteen churches, most nearby. "Committees from the church and town communicated the proceedings and votes, relative to the call of the candidate, and his answer to the same. [The Council] voted, that these appear to be ecclesiastically regular and valid.

"The evidences were then exhibited of his regular standing, in the visible church of Christ, as a licentiate preacher. He also exhibited an explicit and satisfactory confession of faith."

And so the Council "voted unanimously that [they] are ready to proceed to his ordination."

In our small-c congregational tradition, only a local congregation has the power to ordain; but part of that tradition was associational, the independent congregations being bound

together in practice and, for a long time, in belief. Hence, ecclesiastical councils prior to an ordination. White reports that "The town furnished a bountiful feast to the members of the Council."

At the dedication ceremony, here in this building but not in this room, the floor being an 1850 change, the Marlborough and Lincoln ministers contributed an address and a prayer, and a psalm was sung as well as an anthem, "Peace Be Within Thy Walls."

Then on to the ordination. "In those days," wrote Wight, "ordinations were much thought of, and the people in adjoining towns were in the habit of attending them."

The ordination sermon was given by Dr. McKeon of Harvard University, based on a text from the biblical book of Matthew, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." It closed with these words, expressing a sentiment I think we share, even if we may not often use the language common to that age:

"May Almighty God enable each one of us, so to prize the blessings, use the opportunities, and discharge the duties, we respectively have in charge; and assist us by God's good Spirit so to sustain our various religious and social relations in … love and fellowship."

Maybe even more significant to Wight was the charge to the minister, given by his father, a minister in Bristol, Rhode Island, who had also been part of the Council.

The service began with a prayer, then the sermon, a renewal of the call and its acceptance, the imposition of hands, a consecrating prayer, the charge, something called a fellowship (possibly greetings from fellow clergy), a hymn, another prayer, another hymn, this time to psalm words, and – as is still the custom – a benediction by the newly ordained minister. Indeed, most of the elements are still practiced today.

Wight would serve this congregation for twenty years. After three years, he married a local young woman, Sarah Grout. They would have four children, two girls and two boys. With much help from townspeople, he built a house on Cochituate Road on land Sarah's father provided, on the left, across from what is now parkland. Later owners of the home had it moved up the hill, where it abides at the end of Bennett Road.

The year that East Sudbury became Wayland, 1835, Wight ended his professional ministry here. He went on to serve four congregations in Maine, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts, but maintained his home in Wayland, returned here, and went on to serve in the state legislature, where in 1851 he introduced the legislation that made it legal for towns to use tax money to support their libraries, as Wayland did, making ours arguably the oldest tax-supported free public library in the state. He had himself created an East Sudbury Charitable Library while minister. He also served as superintendent of schools, expanding the curricula at the six schools in town, and as chair ex officio of the School Committee.

Wight died in 1883, 32 years after his wife; both are buried near his old home site, in South Cemetery.

His was an exciting time to be minister here, although not necessarily an easy time. For he arrived as the Unitarian Controversy, as it came to be called, began to tear apart the old Standing Order of Massachusetts congregational churches. The ecclesiastical cloth that had held together for two hundred years was sorely strained, and here and there rips were apparent.

The confession of faith that Wight offered the Council in 1815 was pretty conservative on a number of points, perhaps part of an effort then being made to find a middle ground which all could still affirm with a little personal reinterpretation. Before the decade was out, though, the

middle ground essentially disappeared, and in the 1820s, the rips turned into a long tear down the whole length of Massachusetts Congregationalism, with liberal churches joining into an American Unitarian Association, formed in 1825. Under Wight's leadership, this church took that step in 1828.

Wight himself wrote that "after my settlement, there was no essential change in my religious views; but with increasing knowledge and experience, they gradually became more enlarged, consistent, excellent and delightful." Not everyone thought them so.

Alfred Wayland Cutting wrote in 1926, "For several years after the settlement of Rev. John B. Wight and the occupancy of the new church…, the life of the town ran on smoothly, but not for long. The Unitarian question was the paramount issue of the time. Mr. Wight, settled as an Orthodox Trinitarian" – although actually, even his confession of faith to the Council does not go that far – "as a young man, soon became imbued with the growing liberalism, and in the eyes of the conservative, to fall from grace.

"The outcome was inevitable," Cutting goes on. "Mr. Wight would not recant, and he had a large majority on his side, so the irreconcilable minority could do nothing but consider the formation of a new church." Which they did, creating the Evangelical Trinitarian Society of East Sudbury, with its own chapel, and a minister a year later.

Meanwhile, Wight and those of liberal theology continued here; but other changes were afoot. First the law was changed so that taxpayers could support their own churches instead of contributing to our operation as the town church, as since 1640. Even before the Trinitarian minority moved across the street, there were Baptists and Methodists who worshipped in the surrounding towns who qualified. (By the way, the instigators of this change were the Universalists of Gloucester.)

And then in 1833 Massachusetts became the last place in the country to sever church and state; we were disestablished.

The new atmosphere of church-state separation was one we grew not only to accept but to welcome and champion. But the reality of it at the start was that the salary and status of the First Parish minister went into deep decline. In 1835, Wight resigned his ministry here by mutual agreement.

The church had hopes of reconciling its differences with the Trinitarians if the controversial Mr. Wight were gone, but that did not happen. The changes in outlook that had been developing at First Parish for a century – away from the harsher doctrines of Calvinism and away from creedal conformity – were not to be reversed, any more than were the changes in church-state relations.

John Burt Wight's ministry was welcomed in 1815 as the beginning of a new era of peace and prosperity for the church in its wonderful new building. And indeed, membership during his tenure did increase, with 86 new members. But the end to establishment meant the end to the easy means and attendance of earlier years. And peace was nothing the congregational churches of the Commonwealth were going to see in the 1820s.

What they got instead was something maybe better: a beautiful building that the ages would delight in and honor them for, and a minister of strength and courage who would serve them ably through a difficult, divisive time, providing clear – if not universally welcome – theological leadership.

By 1835, an essentially new world had been born. Church and state were separate, even in Massachusetts. The effort to restate old doctrines of predestination, election, biblical infallibility, native depravity, and the trinity in some bearable way could be abandoned. A religion of reason, faith, love, service, tolerance, and freedom was emergent, and the radical views of Waldo Emerson and of Theodore Parker were only a very few years away.

From that perspective, the world of 1815 as it lived in East Sudbury in the ceremonies of 200 years ago seems a long age away, not just from today but from the world of 1835. I like to think, though, that many among "those whose wishes were fulfilled" by the events of that Wednesday felt every bit as gratified when from their new world they looked back on the erection of this commodious temple and the ordination of that young minister, John Burt Wight, who helped carry them through, in this lovely meetinghouse.