Huckleberry Meeting House Revives Memories

Gage Hill Church in Pelham Once Used by Methodists and Baptists—Had Varied Career

Pelham, N. H., June 8.

When engaged in clearing brush and slash on the Salem road recently, a walled-in enclosure, where a church once stood, aroused considerable interest and discussion among WPA workmen regarding the identity of the meeting house, long since removed and the history of it. In a review of the purpose and accomplishments of “First Congregational Society in Pelham” given recently in the suburban pages of this newspaper, mention was made of circumstances leading up to the organization of the society, and of local conditions that had influenced such a movement.

Among other contributing causes that led to such expediency, was the growing strength of Christian churches of denominations other than of Congregational order and their influence in town affairs as affecting its long standing rights and privileges.

served five years. In 1864 under the lead of Rev. Mr. Dunham a larger meeting house was built. This house was erected on the Salem road near the Deacon Samuel Kelley place, now the residence of James Sexton. This is the meeting house that occupied the abandoned site first mentioned.

A committee of 13 members was chosen to build it who “prized the pews” according to their real value and the “choice money” went to “settle up” for the new meeting house, also to pay for blinds, stoves, etc.—$10 was paid Simon B. Webster for the lot of land.

The meeting house contained at least 50 pews, as records show that the building of the house was financed mainly by the sale of that many—$33.25 was top price for a pew. And at any rate the society had no trouble in acquiring funds to build this church nor to equip it as mentioned.

Granddaughter Lives Here.

But few relatives survive him. The old Woodman homestead is now owned and occupied by his granddaughter, Mrs. E. Frances (Woodman) Carleton.

It appears that religious convictions in that section of the town, particularly, were more diversified.

Besides the Congregational order which was always well represented there, there had been at least three other religious denominations in contention—active in seeking support for their respective churches. Excepting, perhaps, the Congregational the local strength of all other organizations was eventually seriously impaired by outside influences and by the removal from town of many families directly influential in the support of the doctrinal worship of the church of their chosen order.

Denominational memberships were transferred to churches in Salem, Methuen and East Dracut—a number also affiliating with Congregational church here—either directly as members of the church or indirectly as members of “First Congregational Society in Pelham,” who sponsored the support of this church.

Thus the mission of that Gage Hill church variously known as the “East Meeting House,” The “Methodist Meeting House” and the “Free Will Baptist Meeting House” was ended.
Methodism Strong.

Early in 1800, the Methodist denomination became especially active in the Gage Hill district combined with an adjacent portion of Salem. Methodism was introduced there by Rev. Joseph Snelling who with his family were resident in the Pelham section and church meetings were held in school houses and dwellings, periodically. He succeeded in forming a small society of Methodists and about 1820 a small meeting house was built by proprietors near the Pelham-Salem town line in “Dark Entry Road” so-called in Pelham.

This house was built with the understanding that the different religious sects, represented by the several proprietors, should occupy it their respective shares of time.

There proved to be much financial embarrassment in finishing the building owing to the comparative few proprietors associated, but finally Robert Bradford of Gage Hill completed the work, receiving his pay in pews and thus becoming the chief proprietor.

Rev. Mr. Snelling preached the dedication sermon and also occupied the pulpit there, a portion of time, while resident.

Society Formed.

After a series of revival meetings, under the labors of Rev. L. Harrington, 32 petitioners met and formed a religious society known in law as “The Reformed Methodist Society in Pelham and Salem.” The society was legally established in October, 1842, and in March, 1843, called Rev. Ichabod Dunham as their pastor who

The smaller church was remodelled into a dwelling house later, and was occupied as a parsonage in conjunction with the new church for a time. In still later years it became the permanent home and residence of Rev. Tobias Foss. It is now the residence of the Otto Schmidt family.

Admitted to Boston Group.

Rev. John M. Durgin succeeded to the pastorate in 1850 and was a Free Will Baptist by faith according to clerics who came later. However, in connection with his ministry he taught school in that section and was highly successful and well liked by both parishioners and pupils and well remembered in after life. He was succeeded by Rev. T. P. Moulton in 1853 and at that time the organization was admitted to the Boston quarterly meeting, and received the name of the “Free Will Baptist Society of Pelham and Salem.” Thirty-five members were enrolled shortly in this new society which included practically all who were previously members of the Reformed Methodist church.

Then came Rev. Tobias Foss (1850) for a three-year period succeeded by Rev. S. M. Weeks (1859) who left in the spring of 1861. In 1869-71 Rev. Matthew M. Parkhurst, who was boarding in town for the recuperation of his health, aroused much interest as a Methodist Episcopal preacher, and during the following three years M. E. preachers who successively served at the “East Meeting house” as the church was then called were Rev. Albert N. Fisher, Rev. Amos B. Russell and Rev. Charles Newell. The membership dissolved in 1863.

In 1867 Rev. Mr. Foss returned to Gage Hill and by his efforts preaching, was again resumed. In 1868 Rev. N. C. Lathrop became pastor and remained till 1870. In 1872 Rev. Jonathan Woodman was called to that pulpit giving valuable service to the community, for several years, and was nearly 80 years of age when he resigned. He was the last to preach at that church.

Standing deserted and alone, it was after the conclusion of all religious services there and its final abandonment as a church that townpeople of both Pelham and Salem became accustomed to refer to it as “The Huckleberry Meeting House.”

During the year 1883 the building was sold to Benjamin Kittredge, a resident, who took it down and with the salvaged lumber attempted to construct a private hall with stage on a lot of land near the Otis Ticcomb place. But a lack of necessary funds defeated the project and after a short time the building was resold to a Ticcomb family. The building was again torn down and a portion was used in building a lean-to on the barn now owned by Edmund Young on the same highway. It has recently been called to the writer’s attention that the windows, of old Gothic design, were used later in a building at the old Moody Hobbs place — the buildings now all extinct.

But few are left, even in Gage Hill, who can now recall incidents of the time and activities of the church during the period of the existence of Huckleberry Meeting house as last known—the meeting house of 1844-1883 and doubtless there are many who have heard of it, only, in a vague way.

However, Mrs. E. Frances Carleton has interesting data passed down to her — notes written by her grandfather, “Elder” Jonathan Woodman, who officiated as mentioned and who terminated its mission. Mr. Forrest E. Kelley has old church records in which are chronicled the annual business affairs of both societies.

And also Mr. and Mrs. Gage A. Fox relate from memory incidents of their active participation in events of that period.