

A definitive Chelmsford landmark

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For more than three and a quarter centuries, a meeting house has watched over the "center" of Chelmsford from the high ground that rises to the north from Beaver Brook. The present white edifice with its clock and steeple is the fourth church building to occupy this site.

Only 35 years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, this area had been settled by people from Concord and Woburn and the Town of Chelmsford had been incorporated in May of 1655. One of the first considerations of the citizenry was the establishment of a church to meet their spiritual needs.

The Rev. John Fiske of Wenham accepted the invitation and came with the majority of his flock. Rev. Mr. Fiske served the community as both a minister and a physician. The church was organized on November 13, 1655, making it the oldest organization in town. Although referred to as the First Parish Unitarian-Universalist Church today, its legal name is the First Congregational Society (Unitarian) of Chelmsford.

In 1657 upon the earnest solicitation of his parishioners, Mr. Fiske composed a catechism especially for the instruction of the local young people. He titled it "Watering of the Olive Plant in Christ's Garden or a Short Catechism for the Entrance of our Chelmsford Children. Enlarged by a threefold appendix. "The only known copy was sold at auction to the Lenox Library of New York in 1894 for \$106. Think what it might bring today!

One of the few existing records of the second minister is the agreement he signed with the Town. At that time it was expected that a minister would remain for the duration of his life so a detailed agreement was

The way It was

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necessary to protect the interests of both parties. The Rev. Thomas Clark came as Mr. Fiske's assistant in 1675 and became the second minister of the Chelmsford church on Mr. Fiske's death in 1676.

Mr. Clark's daughter, Elizabeth, married the Rev. John Hancock of Lexington and her grandson, John Hancock, was the first to sign the Declaration of Independence and later became the first governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

The town was involved in hiring the minister because the Town and the Church were one and the same. It wasn't until 1831 that the minister was hired by the church members rather than the town meeting.

The transition from the original Puritanical trinitarian doctrines to the more liberal Unitarianism took place over many years in the first half of the 1800's in Chelmsford with the vestiges of the earlier theology continuing into the 20th century.

The first Meeting House (or church building) was probably erected in the 1650's. It served as a place of worship as well as for town meetings and other official gatherings for about 60 years. Because it had fallen into disrepair, it was replaced in 1712.

The second Meeting House lasted until

1792. Rev. Ebenezer Bridge wrote in his diary of May 15, 1791: "Preached all day but omitted reading by reason of the pulpit being so wet after the rain." The 1792 Meeting House was erected on the site of its predecessor so, during construction, services and meetings were held in the hall at Oliver Barron's tavern.

The third Meeting House came to a sudden and untimely demise in 1842 when, "On the night of February 13th, about midnight, The Centre Meeting House... was discovered to be on fire and in a few minutes was entirely consumed." The fire was so hot that it melted the bell.

The previous Meeting Houses had been erected by the Town but the present wooden structure, above the basement, was built by a private subscription at a cost, including the bell and the expense of the dedication, of \$4002.40, which was well over the original estimate of \$2500.

The brick basement was constructed by the Town for \$1426.06. It was considered to be separate from the "church" and served as the Town Hall until 1879 when the present Town Hall was erected across the street.

The steeple clock was installed by a group of private citizens in 1876. It was turned over to the Town in 1892 and is currently maintained by the Town.

(For a more detailed history, see "325 Years — The Story of the First Parish Church, Chelmsford, 1655-1980" compiled by the present writer.)

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