

**Chatham Historical Society**  
**A History of Chatham Churches (1955)**  
**1965.006.001**

**Brief Description:** This recording made in 1955 gives a history of well-known churches in Chatham. The churches included are the Baptist Church, the Universalist Church, the Congregational Church, and the Methodist Church. The histories of these churches date as far back the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Mrs. Rhoda Woodward and Miss Grace Hardy are among the readers being recorded by the Chatham Historical Society.

**Baptist:** Mrs. Rhoda Woodward  
**Universalist:** Mrs. Rhoda Woodward  
**Congregational:** Miss Grace Hardy  
**Methodist:** Church reader not identified

**Voice:** Mrs. Rhoda Woodward will read a short history of the Chatham Baptist Church and the Chatham Universalist church. (1955)

**Chatham Baptist Church:** It is said that Mary Nickerson of Chatham, a member of the Harwich Church, resolved to hold Baptist meetings at Chatham, which she did in the schoolhouse at Old Harbor. Along for several Sundays she was there joined by Merritt Nickerson, and after several more Sundays two others joined them.

In 1824, the schoolhouse was closed against them and they purchased an old sheep cote, which had been the first school building at North Chatham, and conducted worship there. In October 1824, the church organization was effected and in 1827, the meetinghouse was built. The building was later sold to the St. Martin's Lodge of Masons and has been used by them as lodge rooms since.

**Chatham Universalist Church:** The first gathering of the center, so called, was held in the old bow roof house on Queen Anne Road. This house is now part of the Queen Ann Inn property. At that

time it was owned by the grandfather of Rebecca Harding Swan. This meeting was held to discuss the forming of a liberal religious group. The society was organized August 1, 1822 with 22 members and was the first Universalist Church within the limits of Barnstable County. The Universalists were the third denomination to maintain preaching services throughout this period, the other two being the original Congregational Society and the Methodist Church Society organized in 1820.

The first Universalist Church was built in 1823, within the cemetery then known as the Universalist Cemetery, now known as People's Cemetery. In 1851, they purchased the lot and building formally known as Chatham Academy. This was located along side of a house built by the late Ralph Hutchins on Queen Anne Road. The new church building was erected in 1851 at a cost of \$6,000. In 1861, a pipe organ was installed to replace the Seraphine at this cost of \$1,030. The first resident minister to serve from 1824 to 1827, in the first building, was the Rev. Calvin Monroe. The Rev. Alvin Abbott served as the first minister in the second edifice.

About 1877, a movement, apparently headed by the pastor, the Rev. B.L. Bennett, was inaugurated to remove the meetinghouse to a location on Main Street. This was approved by a majority of the church members. In October 16, 1878, this church building was burnt to the ground. It was thought to be the work of incendiaries. The present church was built on Main Street and dedicated on November 19, 1879. A new organ was also dedicated and first played by Rhoda Nickerson Taylor, through whose efforts the necessary funds for it were solicited. From April 1883 until January 1891, Dr. Harry Couden, a blind minister, and later the chaplain of the national House of Representatives, served this church. At this time the church had members of wealth and many church minded citizens belonged. It was a large and flourishing church, but industrial and economic changes resulted in smaller congregations.

During the 1870s to 1890s, large sums were raised each year from a two day fair and exhibition held in Town Hall and climaxed by a drama each evening. This too is remembered by the Chatham citizens, and referred to with pride and praise. It was the outstanding social event of the winter. A mission circle was formed in 1905 and reorganized in 1929. Through the years

the Ladies' Social Circle functioned and it was through their efforts that much of the money for carrying on was raised.

During the pastorate of Dr. Richard Evans from 1891 to 1904 the Young People Society was discontinued, also the Sunday school except at intervals. In 1904, the regular meetings of the first Universalist Church of Chatham were discontinued. Services, however, were held nearly every summer during July and August.

The hurricane of September 1944 damaged the church edifice extensively, both inside and out. After much discussion by parish members and friends of the church, money was raised with a loan from the Massachusetts Universalist Convention. The damage was repaired and the church was reopened for year-round services after a period of 40 years. These services were continued for about nine years. The ministers serving during that time were the Rev. Albert Bigler, Rev. John Christianson, and Rev. Charles DeVries. Mr. DeVries found his congregation so small that he recommended that year-round services be discontinued. This was done, but not until our debts were all paid and there was quite a surplus of funds for church in our treasury. The deeds to the property have, according to the custom, recommended that services be discontinued then turned over to the Massachusetts Universalist Convention. We believe they intend to reopen for summer services at some date in the near future, possibly next summer of 1956.

**Voice:** Miss Grace Hardy will now read of the Congregational Church history.

**Congregational:** William Nickerson was the first settler of Chatham. Before a minister was secured, he is said to have conducted neighborhood services and acted as religious teacher and counselor for the little settlement, which at that time was almost entirely made up of the Nickerson kindred. William Nickerson died in 1690. By that time, many more settlers had arrived and it was realized that the time had come to provide for the people a settled minister and a permanent place of worship.

So a meetinghouse was built in 1700. It was a little building about 22 ft<sup>2</sup> with walls 13 ft high. Its four rooves tapered to a point at the top and looked like the district schoolhouses of later date. It stood by the roadside, just west of Great Hill in that part of the old cemetery where the oldest graves are found. It was certainly not plastered, and probably not shingled. Every man in the settlement had a hand in the building.

Jonathan Vickery was the first minister. He came here from Hull. He was not an ordained minister, but he was a very smart man and a fine speaker and the congregation flourished under his leadership. On April 30, 1702, he went out in an open boat with a party of villagers, probably on a fishing or wailing trip. In some way, the boat was overturned and all were drowned. He left a widow and seven children.

After the death of Mr. Vickery, the town hired several other men to preach. They were educated men, mostly college graduates, and the church prospered under their teaching. All this time there was no organized church in Chatham and matters pertaining to church affairs were arranged by sending messages to the church at Eastham.

A church council was convened at Chatham June 15, 1720 with ministers and messengers from other churches present, and the Chatham church was formally organized and officered. Church attendance had increased so much in the last three years that the meetinghouse could not accommodate all the worshipers, so in 1730 a new building was finished on about the same location. This was a substantial permanent structure and served its purpose for about 100 years. There was no plastering on the walls. Benches on each side of the center aisle were used to seat the people. With one exception, there were no pews. The minister's wife possessed the only pew in the house.

In 1773, this building was enlarged by the addition of a new wing on either side. The locality where these first meetinghouses were built was then the center of the town and the church was supported by the town, in the same way that the schools are now.

During all this time, the church had had no rivals, but in 1816 the Methodists established a society here. The Universalists followed in 1822 and the Baptists in 1824. By 1824, the opposition to the regular church had grown so strong it was no longer possible to continue it as

an institution supported by the town. At a town meeting held on August 9, 1824, the town voted not to raise the \$500 for the minister's salary. The members of the church then met and organized themselves into the first Congregational Parish of Chatham on October 18, 1824.

The center of population was fast changing from the Great Hill section to the east part of the township. As it was out of the question to move the old building, it was decided to tear it down and distribute it to the pew owners. The present building was erected in 1830 on the land now used by the Congregational people and others as a cemetery. It was a neat, up to date, well finished structure and cost \$2920.77.

Many people who believed in very plain worship did not approve of the very elegant house. Especially they criticized the crooked pew arms. The new church had a steeple, but no bell, and about 1831 the parish, wishing to make a little more sound, purchased a sweet toned bell and paid for it by subscription. It was said that at first the janitor wasn't quite sure of his duties, so for a while he rang it before and after the service.

It is in this building, erected in 1830, somewhat remodeled and moved to its present location in 1866, in which we now worship, and it is the same bell whose tones we now hear.

The records of the church were lost in the fire which burn the parsonage in 1861, so these facts have been gathered from the recollections of Deacon Levi Atwood, written in 1895 for the 175th anniversary of the church, and from the historical address written by William C. Nickerson and read by him on the 200th anniversary.

50 ministers have served this old church since William Nickerson first gathered his kindred and neighbors together for worship. Never at any time during its history has the meetinghouse been closed, except for a Sunday or two and never has a minister been dismissed, but that immediately steps have been taken to secure another to take his place.

**Methodist Church:** The bishops commissioned circuit riders who are given large territories to work in as best they could, preaching whenever and wherever they could find hearers. Many of these men were without formal education, but were required to have rugged health, a horse, a

Bible, and zeal. Such a man was Jessie Lee, who asked to be assigned to New England, not because the region was without churches, but he felt religion here had become too formalized, too much a matter of the head and not enough of the heart. He was on the Cape between 1791 and 1796 and as a result, the area from Provincetown to Sandwich was set off as a circuit and preachers assigned. One of these preachers, Rev. Snelling, wrote in 1796 of being warmly received in Chatham.

But, the breaking away from our Congregational Church came with the formation of a Methodist Church in East Harwich in 1795. They built a meetinghouse in 1799. The church grew rapidly and was incorporated in 1809 with certain Chatham men on the list of incorporators. In 1811 and 12, they erected a new meetinghouse nearer the Chatham line and this house is still the place of worship for that community. The list of contributors to the building fund was headed by Ensign Nickerson of Chathamport with a gift of \$500. We cannot say how many Chatham people belonged there, but there was quite a number.

All went well until 1816 when Phineas Brett, a former minister, decided that Methodism was growing soft and too worldly and he set out on a reformation. The result was a broken church. At the height of the excitement the preacher, Moses Fifield, was forbidden in the pulpit. This break seems to have been the reason a class was started in Chatham in October 1816. The leader was Isaiah Nye. Other members were Henry and Martha Gorham, Micajah and Rebecca Howes, William and Mehitable Hamilton, Samuel Nye, Dorcas Eldredge, Temper (Temperance) Eldredge, Dorcas Bloomer, and Tabitha Harding.

By now the circuit had been cut in two and Moses Fifield covered the part from East Harwich to Sandwich, traveling the territory on horseback. These men had no parsonage or home. They billeted among the members, sure of care for themselves and their horse. They took collections at each station and kept \$64 a year each by way of wages. If they collected more than that, the extra was taken to annual conference where it was distributed among the less fortunate. The group was kept in readiness for the preacher's visit by the craftsmen. As more people came in, new classes were formed and leaders assigned by the preacher.

In the class instruction in the church tenets, advice, admonishment, encouragement, were given by the leader generally, and to each person separately. When the preacher came the regular functions of the church such as baptism, reception of members, and communion were performed as well as consultation with the leaders. Professional meetings were part of the preacher's visit. This was a lengthening of the evening meeting with the period of testimony and exultation, quite often, in fact, generally an emotional affair.

In 1819 and 20, Chatham Methodists built a meetinghouse – a rough hall with benches for seats lighted by candles fastened to the wall with two tined forks, with the candle set a roller from the saltworks lighting the pulpit. The whole cost was \$900.

Financial support was voluntary, but Massachusetts law said every taxpayer should contribute in his proportion to the established order. Therefore, the minister's tax was part of the town's tax bill and collected by town officers. To avoid having to contribute to two churches, a member of the newer sect would secure a certificate of membership from the secretary of his church which, presented to the town officer, acted to remove the minister's tax from his general town tax. But, the law still required that he pay a ministers tax, so there came about the formation of church societies. These attended to the collection of taxes and other monies, and the paying out of the same.

The Methodist society was organized in 1821 with Christopher Taylor, a Baptisan, as secretary, a position he had been filling. He continued to serve in some official capacity in the church until 1866. This body also chose ten "rodeans" at their first meeting. These men were charged with keeping order in the house of public worship, somewhat of the same nature as the tithing men. Where the word "rodean" came from we haven't been able to discover, but it belonged to this body here.

Parallel to this organization was a committee devoted to the spiritual side, including applications for membership and general discipline. This was known by various names and from it was developed the board of stewards. This last was chosen from church members only, but in society any contributor could belong, the power of vote belonging only to legal voters of the

town. Most sections were masculine affairs. It was after 1900 when women were admitted to the board of stewards as regular voting members.

The land for the first meetinghouse was given by Isaiah Nye and land adjoining this was acquired in 1833 for the purpose of erecting a new meetinghouse and to give more room for the cemetery. The new building was 46 by 38 feet with 17 ft posts. After being superseded as a meetinghouse, it was acquired for the town as its first town hall, later it was moved over onto Old Harbor Road, where it was an almshouse and is now a rooming house. The contract called for it to be finished as well and after the manner of the new Congregational meetinghouse, except for the sofa ends of the pews.

In 1834, a preacher was assigned to Chatham alone. This required a parsonage, and such a house existed near the present Eldridge garage. About this time there arose a group called Come-Outers. They were especially strong in 1839 and 40 and did weaken the regular settlers for a while and added to the general dissension of the period, when the interpretation of some Bible text would separate friends – yes, even separate families.

The church was the center of not only religious, but social lives. In 1839, singing school was started by the Methodist people. It grew into a definite social program. The decade from 1842 was one of the busiest in the church's history. It took a stand against intemperance and against slavery – also developed an anti-tobacco pledge. Dancing and the theater were frowned upon, bundling was condemned, and among all this there was much controversy over more room in the old building or for a new building, which culminated in the building of the present edifice in 1849.

Three years previously, a new parsonage had been built on Cross Street. This, turned, moved back and somewhat changed, still serves as the pastor's home. The rest of the hill was bought as the site of the new edifice, the church now numbered 130 families. The minister's salary was \$300, plus parsonage. The new church cost about \$12,725. Pews were sold and added sums toward the building fund. A bell was acquired and in 1851, a clock was installed in the tower, these paid for by gifts. About now, the Sunday school was reorganized. Even adults were in the classes. They had begun to recognize that a knowledge of the Bible was as necessary as

the emotional stand. Music for church service was furnished by a volunteer chorus and accompanied by a small organ played by Miss E. H. Poole.

The woman had been given many tasks, such as teachers in the Sunday school and also custodians of the various pledges previously mentioned, but they had no official standing. In '45, they organized the Female Benevolent Society of the Chatham Methodist Episcopal Church. Its formidable name was shortened to Ladies Aid in its early years. They met each week to sew and thereby earn money. After the new building became available, they changed the meetings at homes to gathering in the church and it was they that finished the room now known as the Ladies' Parlor. Their financial assistance helped the trustees out of several predicaments and finally they were invited to sit in on the meetings of the stewards – not to handle votes, just to sit in.

During the Civil War, the poor fishing bounty was mounted (?) as adding to the difficulties of meeting obligations, this was due to many men being in the armed services and to the Confederate -

In 1864, the total budget was \$1,000, but by 1865 the outlook had cleared in the committee, headed by Ephraim Taylor, undertook the addition of the present choir gallery and the installment of a pipe organ. This change made the rear pews more attractive and their sale able to meeting expense. Before, with the choir sitting in the gallery over the vestibule, now closed off, the people sitting in the rear pews as they stood up to sing had to face a choir, in that they could not see. After 18-, several small things were done to the church. Pew doors were removed and some painting done, but still each pew was an individual affair. It had such cushions, such stools, and such carpeting as it pleased the owner of the pew to put down.

In 1898, Mr. and Mrs. Marcellus Eldredge entirely renovated the building with a new organ, new furniture, new carpet, cushions for the pews, and beautiful stained and painted glass windows.

This is a sketch only of the progress of the Methodist Church and does not cover the modern period. The early days were important. We must remember that the earliest settlers came to this country to establish a church to their own liking, so there were habits as well as

laws which had to be modified to meet the needs induced by more and different denominations. Therefore, the growth of this church also covered the period of growth in the community thinking and was not accomplished without confusion and disagreements.

These records are being made on October 23, 1955.