

The Old Church On The Knoll

INTERESTING

By Esther L. Smith

AT A CROTCH in the country road between Federal Street and West Road in the Old Corner section of Waterboro rests a large white building. It is known by several names—The Meetinghouse—Old Corner Church—First Baptist Church.

The old structure on the knoll wears no ornamentation, no belfrey, no bell; it is fenced on three sides by white rails fastened to pitted gray granite posts. Inside the fence decrepit maples, their bark mottled with moss, reliably green-out in Spring and later give an Autumn spectacular in yellow and crimson.

Abenaki Indians traveled through wearing down a crooked path on their treks to the sea from Sebago Lake, before white men pushed in here to settle in 1768. One fancies the Abenaki camped on the knoll, refreshed by cool water from the nearby brook.

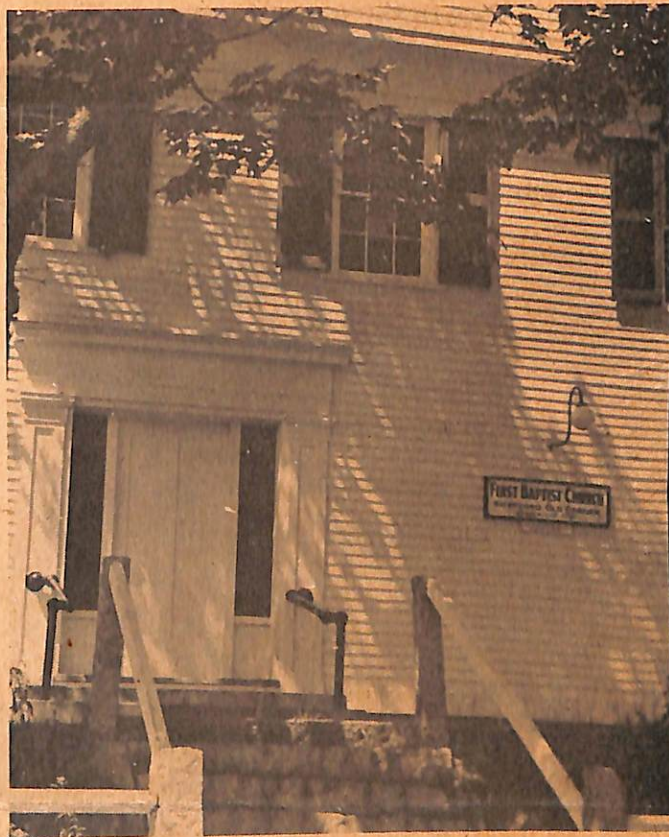
Early historians wrote that Old Corner, the first part of "Waterborough" to be settled, was laid out in hope it would some day become a city, but the steady flow of settlers quickly slowed because of the Revolution and never really began again.

Predictably, since 1804, much changed around this rural section with the church as the hub, but through it all the Meetinghouse has been a changeless landmark to transients and natives.

For example, it witnessed a well-documented happening in February, 1820, when 100 head of burly oxen pulled a two-masted schooner on huge sleds through Old Corner on a three day trip to Kennebunk for the launching. The vessel was built by the Swett family on the side of Ossipee Hill, the highest point of land in York County.

THE PROCESSION toiled through Old Corner the first day and drivers urged the awkward load over protesting hard-packed snow as the animals snorted frosty breaths, lumbering up the incline onto Federal Street past the church.

The horse and buggy age lasted well over a hundred years for the church people; behind the building long sheds opened to the east to provide horses shelter in winter and protection from summer sun. The first cars came to town in the early 1900s and as they were challenged by Blaisdell's Hill on the West Road side they added new sounds chugging through the sandy road, frightening horses and dogs.



First Baptist Church of Waterboro, taken by the late Samuel W. Handley.

Nearby, Old Corner School was a companion to the church from the 1860s to 1934, and the pupils were mindful of the property when sliding down the snowy knoll or especially when the many-paned windows were in jeopardy during a flourishing ball game, but damage was practically none. The school building is now a private dwelling.

Likewise, the property stood up to the destructive hurricane of September 1938, and not a maple was lost, while in other near locations whole stands of trees went down and roofs blew off.

Again there was no damage when acrid smoke swirled through the community for many days in the brutal forest

fire of October 1947. When tired home-owners fearfully crept back the day after the flames rushed through to the sea, many took heart when they found the Meetinghouse standing. Indeed, most of the nearby homes were spared but timber loss was great.

SO ALTHOUGH THE OUTWARD appearance of the building has changed not in 175 years, through the doors generations have come and gone, seventeen pastors labored with varying success (Can it be measured?) and membership climbed to one hundred twenty-three in 1863.

It all began when The First Baptist Church of Waterboro was organized twelve years before the building went up. Eight men "Of the Baptist persuasion" met at the Nathaniel Haines home on the West Road in 1791 with pastors and delegates from Lyman and Shapleigh. The delegates listened to testimony and found the eight men "Sound in faith and agreeable to the truths of the gospel", and granted them full fellowship as a Baptist Church of Christ.

Elder Henry Smith, a local farmer with a talent for preaching, became their regular pastor in 1794, and was ordained several months later. From the clerk's record:

Brother Smith shall receive a reasonable compensation from us of our worldly goods from time to time so as to make him comfortable, that he may be better able to discharge his ministerial duties as long as God in his all wise providence shall continue him among us.

However, he served forty years, and upon retiring he said: "I have preached forty years, I have not missed forty Sabbaths, I have not received forty dollars." Fortunately he lived on a prosperous farm.

So it took courage and vision to decide to build a place of worship—there was little cash around. But amazingly,

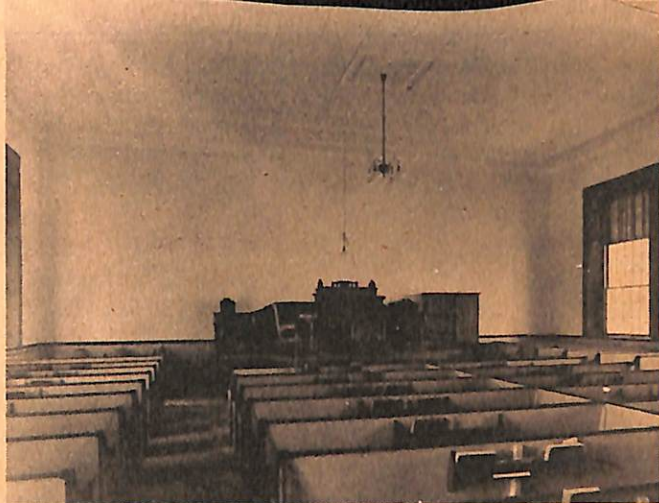
"The name 'Meetinghouse' recognized social needs."

\$1924.00 was raised by public auction when—pew privileges were sold. Money was due one-half down and the rest within a year. This paid for the building, erected in 1803-4.

Tradition has it that the lumber was cut near Middle Branch pond, some four or five miles away; the carpenter work was put out to bids and Old Corner laborers began their tasks. John Scribner gave a low bid on the framework which he completed for \$368.00. Benjamin Warren did the exterior for \$650.00:

Outside to be boarded, shingled, and clapboarded. Glazed windows to be twenty eight equares below and twenty-four above, the glass 7 x 9, sash to be primed, the trimmings painted.

Elder Henry Smith was granted the underpinning work, at a cost of \$190.00. (Granite—sturdy and true today.) Samuel Dam did the rest, painting the interior dark mahogany and outside white with a slate colored roof.



Sanctuary of the Old Corner Church.

Unfortunately, one can have only a mental image of the interior, from written descriptions and lore. There was a high pulpit with a sounding-board behind it. The floor sloped from the back. No form of heating was provided, and tin charcoal heaters were brought by individuals when bitter weather came, to heat their box-pew area. Of course their dress was layers of woolen plenty of it. Lighting was by candles and later kerosene lamps.

GOING TO CHURCH was all the diversion from hard work that many experienced in the early 1800s, so it was a social happening, too. Thus the name "Meetinghouse" around which the community revolved, drawing people from other sections of Waterboro, and from Alfred Gore, Ross Corner and Lyman.

Members were expected to conduct themselves in an approved manner. In the clerk's records with its careful penmanship one reads of meetings to discuss the actions of those who came under censure. A committee was appointed to call on the offender and if satisfaction was not gained the sinner was dropped from the rolls. Gossip, slander, absence from worship, foul language and drinking were some of the most commonly frowned upon situations. usually the one in question was repentant but once in a while there would be flat-footed rebellion, with dismissal. One woman was taken to task because she sold "improperly dressed fowl". She told the committee she was very sorry and in the future would be more careful.

As they progressed, in 1831 a Missionary Society was formed, each member to pay one cent amonth. One half for domestic and the other for foreign missions!

Other progress was that Old Corner Church was mother to new congregations—thirteen members were dismissed in 1844 to establish a Baptist Church at Alfred Gore, and in 1889 a Baptist Church at Waterboro Village was formed from dismissed members. Both churches are still active.

The interior of the building was gutted as an act of renovation in 1849. The floor was leveled, the roof lowered seven feet, galleries removed on two sides, the sounding-board came down and pulpit area lowered, also the box-pews were ripped out. Elder Sanborn took some



This picture was taken at the Old Corner Church in 1903 or 1904.

of the lovely old paneling and made "spit boxes" for every pew. What price progress.

Thus the church which started with eight men grew to be one of the largest in York County by 1863. There were one hundred twenty three members, and one hundred twenty Sunday School members, with ten teachers.

THE COMMUNITY didn't escape the agony of the Civil War—sons and fathers were called to fight in the South. To mention three: Deacon William Cummings, First Maine Cavalry, met death in Virginia. Joseph Sayward wrote his sister Eunice from a hospital in Maryland that he was getting better and urgently wanted to come home to his motherless children, but he later died there from wounds and fever. Dr. Benjamin Peirce, an assistant surgeon in the Navy, appointed by President Lincoln, apparently drowned off Vicksburg. He was in a small boat going from one hospital ship to another and was not seen again.

During this time many boys recalled their religious training at the church, while under fire in strange surroundings, and dreamed of coming back to worship with family and friends, realizing for the first time its influence in their life.

The first female church officer recorded is Etta Gile, clerk when the 100th anniversary was celebrated November 11, 1891. Ms. Gile wrote glowingly of the all day meeting when former pastors and religious leaders spoke, and there was special choir music. A warm, misty rain fell but it didn't hinder a large turn out.

The *Zion's Advocate*, a religious paper published in Portland, gave an excellent history of the church in their November 25th, edition that year. Another religious publication wrote of the celebration and gave praise to the committee of arrangements:

The house which was recently remodeled and made extremely inviting and pleasant, was tastefully decorated with an arch spanning the pulpit platform covered with evergreen on which were these significant words in gilt letters: "Thou hast established, It abideth."

At this time a vigorous social life revolved around the church family. The Ladies Aid worked to bolster the finances by putting on suppers and sales of fancy goods; they also saw that the parsonage was in tip-top condition inside when Pastors arrived. Their gatherings were enjoyable even when they were working. Lawn parties

and ice cream socials were eagerly anticipated. Found parties were held at the parsonage when the congregation came bringing goods to replenish the pantry.

Also, Independence Day was royally celebrated each year when the Sunday School held a picnic at Ossipee Lake, in Center Waterboro. Buggies and wagons filled with excited children and relaxed adults drove the sandy road some four miles to the pine-shaded grounds. At noon checkered tablecloths were spread with platters of roast chicken, jars of fresh green peas cooked that morning, home made bread and butter, pickles and olives, sumptuous cakes and huge dishes of ice cream, mottled with fresh crushed strawberries. Add to this plenty of freshly squeezed lemonade!

Bathing, ball games, walks and plenty of chatting-time completed a memorable day.

AS TIME WENT on both the membership and congregation dwindled because the rural area lost families to suburban living and mobility. When the Rev. Danville Gammon retired in 1925, a difficult decision to cease hiring a settled pastor was made, and the charming two-storied parsonage just down the road was sold. Supply preachers came from the Congregational Church in Alfred until the mid-1940s when regular services were discontinued.

However, a worship service the second Sunday in August is a tradition since 1917, sponsored by Waterboro

"Remove not the old landmark."

Grange. It is well attended and one greets friends seen only on that day. Weddings are held from time to time.

How does the interior look now? Come inside on a bright summer day, past pots of cheerful geraniums that grace the stone steps, a gesture by caring neighbors.

Passing through, the hall is dim and with a faint musty tinge. In the sanctuary leaf-dappled light spills through the six tall windows, warming the creamy tan walls. Two aisles separate the stiff gray pews which face the small platform on the west wall, where sits the pulpit built by David Brock when the remodeling was done in 1849. Large chairs on the platform are covered with crushed crimson velvet, adding a welcome dash of color. The pump organ, purchased in 1911, still gives sweet accompaniment to hymns. Silent from lack of winding, a Seth Thomas-type clock hands on the south wall, ever waiting.

Some might call the room stark, but one quickly senses the accumulated events of nearly 200 years... the efforts of seventeen ministers... large congregations... small congregations... funerals... weddings... dedications... graduations... Christmas programs... Easter services... a potpourri touching many lives.

Thus the plain white building known by several names sits tranquilly facing the east, eyeing the West Road which has gone from a foot-path to rutted way to paved road; it has seen Maine become a state, three declared-wars, fire, hurricane, and the beauty only Maine can produce each season.

Proverbs 23:10 admonishes: "Remove not the old landmark." □

