

## 4. A FOURTH MINISTER, A THIRD EDIFICE

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OUR CHURCH'S FLOW INTO THE UNITARIAN WAY OF THINKING WAS NOT A RELUCTANT ONE, nor was it conflicted, as was Dedham's. In the Harvard Divinity School Library Townsend is classified as "a mild Calvinist." According to one of our former ministers, the Rev. Peter Richardson, West was considered to have gone from Needham to the Hollis Street Church in Boston as a Unitarian. In our last chapter we heard Palmer's magnificent statement of tolerance of other people's beliefs. So it is not surprising that our fourth minister, William Ritchie, a graduate of Dartmouth College in 1804 and ordained in Canton in 1807, "belonged to that fellowship of ministers who call themselves Unitarians," according to the Rev. James Macdonald in his 250th anniversary address given in 1961. Ritchie was called unanimously and installed in Needham December 12, 1821. A quote from Ritchie's second sermon shows his liberal stance: "We are ever to keep our minds open to receive any new light which may shine upon us. Never to think that all opinions and views of religion which are new must of course be false and consequently close our eye lest we should see more than our fathers. . ."



Early photograph of 3rd Edifice,  
constructed on Nehoiden Street, 1836-1837

At first Ritchie boarded with the widow Palmer in the old parsonage, but some of his children were noisy boys who annoyed her and so he purchased a house on Nehoiden Street. He served in Needham for the rest of his life.

During this time Ritchie was a member of the town's school committee for ten years—1826-1836. Four events in the church stand out during his ministry:

The church school was started in 1826.

A regular choir was begun in 1829 accompanied by a small orchestra consisting at various times of a bass viola, clarinet, flute, bassoon, violin, horn, trombone, and bombadune.

In 1834 town tax laws changed so that the church was no longer supported by townwide taxation. In the resulting hardship to the church, Mr. Ritchie's salary fell from \$434 to \$400.

The largest change was the building of a new church. According to Needham Historian Henry Hicks, the tower had been hastily constructed twenty-five years earlier and was leaking. At first the church voted to repair the building, but reconsidered and voted to rebuild. Mr. Hicks revealed that the Federal government had found in 1836 that it had some 70 million dollars of excess money, which Congress voted to return to the states. Massachusetts in turn declared it would share its money with the towns. Needham expected to receive \$3000, saw only \$1000, but went ahead with the rebuilding anyway.

Virgin timber from the 62-year-old second edifice was saved and utilized in the third building [the present one] which then had a gothic style with pointed windows, two large front doors on the short side and a white spire above the tower. A large wall clock, still in use in the sanctuary, was presented to the church at this time by Ebenezer Fisher Jr. of Dedham. Ritchie preached a farewell sermon in the old church on April 24, 1836 and a dedicatory one in the new building on July 26, 1837.



The wall clock, given to the church in the 1830's, still hangs in the Sanctuary.

In October 1841 Ritchie lost his daughter and a daughter-in-law within eleven days. On December 17, 1841 he wrote a letter of resignation to his parish, explaining his physical weakness and inability to carry on the duties of his office. He withdrew monetary claims but begged to keep his "relation as pastor." This was granted. He died on February 22, 1842, not quite sixty-one years old, and was buried in the Needham cemetery.

