

5. A SUCCESSION OF SHORT-TERM MINISTRIES, THE DEPARTURE OF BOTH THE EVANGELICALS AND THE WEST PARISH, AND A MOVE ACROSS TOWN

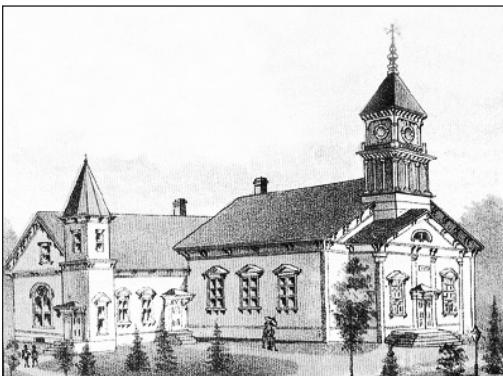
THE FIRST FOUR MINISTERS OF OUR CHURCH SERVED FOR SIGNIFICANT LENGTHS OF TIME; TWO OF them, Townsend and Palmer, for their entire careers. After Ritchie, shortly before the second half of the nineteenth century, there began a series of brief pastorates, a few of which are worth mentioning. The Rev. Charles H.A. Dall was called in 1847 and in 1848 began living in a new parsonage built on Nehoiden Street, just west of the cemetery. The next year he was asked to leave, which he did in 1850. Among the reasons given for the displeasure of the church were his anti-slavery stance, his interest in Transcendentalism, his great interest in the Sunday School and his being too much of a politician. His wife, Caroline Healey Dall overheard some parishioners say. . .“that they would never again engage a minister for more than a year.” [this from her diary] A few years later, Dall became the first Unitarian missionary in India where he served with distinction in Calcutta until he died in 1888. His wife remained in the Boston area and gained considerable stature as a writer among the literary giants of her day, including Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Alcotts. A Transcendentalist, she also taught, was allied with the abolitionist cause and was an early supporter of women’s rights.



Caroline Healey Dall, wife of Rev. Charles H.A. Dall, was a noted writer and abolitionist.

Three ministers were Universalists—Andrew N. Adams, John S. Barry and George B. Emerson, serving in succession from 1855-1866. Albert B. Vorse, called in 1870, remained one year, whereupon a better financial offer, which could not be matched or bettered by the church in Needham, attracted him to the Unitarian Society in Grantville [now Wellesley Hills], where he served until his death. It would appear that the modest salary offered by the Needham church was the chief reason for the rapid turnover of ministers.

By 1855 the more orthodox members of the congregation decided to withdraw from First Parish to form the Evangelical Congregational Church. At first they met in two existing public halls, Nehoiden Hall and Village Hall. In 1859 their first chapel was dedicated, giving the name to Chapel Street. The street did not then run through as far as Highland Avenue as it does today.



The church in its new location in 1880, one year after its move (*top*) and showing the addition of Parish Hall in 1888. (*bottom*)

At a meeting of First Parish on March 14, 1870, the men voted to allow women to become qualified voters of the parish. In 1871 the Rev. Solon W. Bush began a significant 18-year ministry. Clarke says of him in his History of Needham, “He was greatly interested in the welfare of his people, kind and patient, and much beloved.”

A railroad built to carry fill from Needham hills to Boston to create Back Bay heralded a change in the center of Needham. In addition, the West Parish of Needham, which had been restless for years to become a separate town, but was frustrated by the delay of the Civil War, moved towards achievement of its dream. This was finalized in 1881 by the formation of the Town of Wellesley. First Parish members foresaw that Central Avenue would no longer be the center of town and voted to move the church building in 1879. In March the 73-day journey began, with the church dragged on rollers across one and one-half miles of wetlands which are now full of homes today. At one period there was a thaw so that the procession had to wait until the ground refroze. On May 20 the move

was complete. It is interesting to note in Clarke’s History that the Evangelical Congregational Church offered the use of their Chapel to the First Parish from 2 P.M. to 6 P.M. each Sabbath “while their house of worship is being repaired.”

The ladies of the church had zealously raised money to help with the move. With what was left over, they sought to buy a lot of land. They were so incensed that they could not own land in their own right that they instigated legislation in the state so that this would be possible. The “Ladies’ Lot,” located at the corner of Highland Avenue and May Street, was not used by First Parish, but was later sold to St. Joseph’s Church for its building.

The third edifice in its new location was changed to a more Italianate appearance. The white spire, injured in the move, was replaced by a pyramidal cap. Windows, formerly pointed Gothic, were topped instead by shallow pyramid shapes and the church was painted a light brown.

Two front doors gave way to one. In 1888 what is now called the Parish Hall building was created for parish functions and Sunday School use, each class meeting in a separate corner. A small tower decorated the northeast outside corner of the structure. In old records this building was variously called the vestry or chapel. Clarke’s History of Needham suggests that either Mr. or Mrs. Bush was the “unknown donor of \$500 toward paying for the vestry.” Bush preached his farewell sermon in Needham on February 17, 1889, and died in Boston in 1898, in his eightieth year.

