

## TWO HUNDRED YEARS OF CONGREGATIONALISM IN THE TOWN OF EPSOM 1761-1961

*An address compiled by Gilbert H. Knowles and delivered by him at the special Anniversary Service held at the site of the first Meeting House, Epsom Center, Sunday, August 20, 1961 at 3:00 pm. The service was arranged by the Union Congregational Church of New Rye, Rev.H. Franklin Parker, Pastor. [note: he gave a similar address in 1975 to the Epsom Historical Association using these and a few additional notes written in the margins, below is a combination of all his remarks.]*

As one who has long been interested in local history I was naturally pleased when I learned that the New Rye Church was taking cognizance of the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Congregationalism in the town of Epsom. Epsom was incorporated in 1727 and of course, in 1927 we observed in a big way the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the town. But Epsom's first minister did not come until 1761. Now that does not mean that the early settlers were without religion or religious leadership; it does mean, I am sure, that the sparsely settled township was unable to support a minister before 1761. There is good evidence that the quota of twenty settled families as required by the charter was not reached until 1750, and I doubt very much if there were more than thirty, or thirty-five families at most, living within the bounds of Epsom at the time the first minister arrived. As early as 1742 it was voted to raise 300 pounds to hire a preacher, but the settlers had to wait another nineteen years before a pastor was actually settled.

The first minister's name was Rev. John Tucke, and fortunately many of Mr. Tucke's records are still in existence. They are with the New Hampshire Historical Society. I will tell you how they start off: "April 18, 1761. I went to Epsom to preach. June 25, they gave me a call. August 14, they renewed the call. August 17, I accepted the call. Sept. 23, I was ordained. My venerable father preached the sermon from 2 Timothy 2-1, and then gave me the most sacred charge. The Reverend Mr. Aaron Whittemore gave me the right hand of fellowship."

The Church was organized on the very same day as the ordination and the covenant was signed by the fourteen original members. Since the first meeting house was not built until three years later, 1764, there seems to be no way we can know exactly in what building, or buildings, the very first meetings were held. [note 1975: First meetings were probably held at McClary's Farm Tavern (now land owned by Serrine)]. There is some basis for the idea that there could have been a small community meeting place here on the hill as early as 1761, or possibly earlier, or, of course, the first meetings could have been held in a private home. The meeting house that was built in 1764 was a building fifty by forty five feet. It is said to have had galleries, square pews and an immense sounding board. I was interested to learn that the town of Loudon in voting some few years later to build its first meeting house, specified that it should be build according to the same plan as the one at Epsom.

During the next ten or fifteen years following the settlement at Epsom increased much more rapidly than during the preceding period and the church membership grew accordingly, so that near the close of Mr. Tucke's ministry the Congregational Church in Epsom had more than seventy members, including a few who were resident of Chichester and Deerfield. Churches had not yet been established in those towns and quite a number of people came on Sunday's to worship with the Epsom group on Center Hill. Membership included the families of most of the early settlers of Epsom; the Blakes, the McClarys, the Libbeys, Wallaces, Sanborns, Lockes, the Mardens, Bickfords and a little later the Casses, Grays, Chesleys and a few others. Mr. Tucke left records of some one-hundred and sixty-seven baptisms of children and among them of the following three adults; Mr. Tucke's servant, Abraham; Phebe, a young woman about twenty, no surname given; and Samuel Blake's man-servant, who seems not to have had even a first name. We note that the census of 1773 found 2 slaves in Epsom.

When Mr. Tucke came to Epsom he was a young man about twenty-one. He was a graduate of Harvard College and he apparently got along splendidly for some time, but after a period of ten years dissatisfaction crept in. Small things became big things; mole-hills grew into mountains; and a storm developed, so to speak. It wasn't just a little storm, but a big roaring halleluiah storm! It all ended up in the dismissal of the minister in 1774. Feeling ran very high; so high, in fact, that they not only voted to dismiss the minister but "that the meetinghouse shall be shut up till the town sees cause to open said house again." We can almost visualize some of those rugged individualists nailing the door!

Epsom's first minister died about three years later while on his way to join the Revolutionary Army as a chaplain. (He died Feb. 9, 1777, in Salem, N.Y., probably of smallpox.) He left a widow and at least six children who lived on in Epsom until around 1790. The Tucke home was where the present Ambrose home now is. In the year 1797 Mrs. Tucke, then of Pittsfield, and her children deeded the property to Simon Heath who made the house into a tavern and carried on that business for some years.

After a time the old meetinghouse began to be used some more. There were several temporary preachers. Rev. Benjamin Thurston supplied for a time and was given a call. For some reason, however, he did not accept. Perhaps he was afraid of another "storm". So there was no settled preacher here on the hill again until after the close of the Revolutionary War. Then came the long pastorate of the Rev. Ebenezer Hazeltine, thirty-years. So far as I know Mr. Hazeltine's records are lost. That is regrettable. He was evidently a fine man and had his virtues pronounced in his funeral sermon. He lived at what is now the Jaquith place. The house had been built for a parsonage and Mr. Hazeltine was probably the first to occupy it. Mr. Hazeltine's grave is here in the old part of the McClary Cemetery, and on the bottom of the stone is the inscription, "An Israelite indeed, in whom was no guile." He died in his 59<sup>th</sup> year (a comparatively young man). He did not, however, leave as many church members as did Mr. Tucke. Historian Moses once suggested that perhaps Mr. Tucke caught some of his with guile.

The Rev. Jonathan Curtis followed Mr. Hazeltine as pastor here at the old meeting house. He had a ministry of ten or eleven years and was a respected and capable man. Mr. Curtis became interested in the early history of the town and there is a pamphlet that he wrote in the Epsom Public Library which I sometimes look to for reference.

After 1820 other denominations had sprung up in the town and there was sometimes controversy over the way in which the various groups would share the use of the meeting house. The first meeting house had been built by the town rather than by the Congregational Society so it was natural for the new denominations to claim the right to use the building part time. For a time controversy centered around the key to the building. The new groups had been using the meeting house some and it seems that it had become quite a habit, when a meeting was over, for the minister to lock the door and take the key away. The Congregationalists would come back and not be able to get in to the building. After this went on for a time one of the Chesley families decided to "take the bull by the horns" so to speak, and have another key made for the door. But they didn't get the pattern quite right and the key didn't fit; so they had to wait a little until they could get hold of the original key to make comparison and then adjust the new key so that it too would lock and unlock the door. Having solved their problem they wrote up a little verse about it:

*"The clergymen, the cheaters,  
They do as they please;  
They lock up the door,  
They carry off the keys!  
But we are determined  
They'll do it no more;  
For now we have a key,  
And we'll unlock the door".*

After Rev. Winthrop Fifield left Center Hill in 1846 or 1847 there is a lapse of about thirty years during which period I have not thus far been able to pick up any records as to who occupied the 'parsonage house.' It may have been vacant for a while." "Although I have found nothing written up about it, Mr. Luther Hall, who died in 1939, and lived in the beautiful house just west of here until it burned, told Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Nutter that an ell part of the 'parsonage' was sold and moved by oxen down the lane and then made into another house on the lot where Charles and Ruth Batchelder now live. Mr. Hall told that in turning the corner on the main road with the oxen that their load there was some damage to the grounds of the property of George Batchelder (now Watson Ambrose) and that Mr. Batchelder made quite a fuss about it. As Mr. Batchelder died in 1889 the date of the ell moving must have been a number of years earlier." "Of course the town, or the Congregational Society, must have eventually deeded the 'parsonage' to some individual. A tracing back of the deeds would be the only way to determine when the transfer was made.

We do know that Mr. and Mrs. George Piper came here around 1875. They were still living here when I was a small boy and I remember them very well. They used to drive down to the store with horse and wagon. Mr. Piper was a shoe worker and he had a room with a cobbler's bench, etc., upstairs in the front of this house (the east front room). He used to try to complete six pairs of shoes each day. Mrs. Piper's maiden name was Betsey Langley; she was a sister of Josiah Langley who lived where my brother George Knowles now lives. Mrs. Flora Sullivan's grandmother (Mrs. Chas. Henry Hall) was also a sister of 'Betty' Piper. As you know, the 'parsonage' property later came into the ownership of Mrs. Bernice Piper Cox. She is the granddaughter of George and Betsey Piper. She has vivid memories of the cobbler's bench and of her grandfather working there when she was a little girl." "Mrs. Bernice Cox sold the property here to Edwin and Doris Jaquith; Jaquith's sold to Hughes, and now Dr. James Wells family has full possession, and we hope they will want to live here for a long long time. One 'Margaret' lived here in the beginning, and a little 'Margaret' lives here now!

[He inserts remarks here made by Mary L. Cass in 1901 in an Old Home Day speech]

*Probably there are but a few present this afternoon that ever attended a church service in the old meeting house that stood on the hill at what has been called the "Center."*

*I wish I could show a picture of the building, but I do not think there is one in existence. I used to go to the meeting there (as it was called, - not attending church) more than seventy years ago and can remember perfectly well just how it looked and the people who attended the service.*

*It was a large square building with three outside doors – one facing the South, the front door; one on the East and another on the West; each of these doors entered directly into the meeting room; no entries or halls.*

*A walk or aisle led directly from the front door to the pulpit stairs. There were several steps up into the pulpit which was enclosed by a partition so high that when the minister was sitting down he could not be seen by anyone upon the floor.*

*Over the pulpit was the sounding board, as it was called; a sort of canopy attached to the ceiling by a slender rod.*

*The top of the pulpit or desk was covered with a dark cloth trimmed with a fringe. Upon this desk lay the large Bible and the hymn book.*

*At the front of the stairs directly in front of the pulpit was the communion table which was a plain pine board hung to the partition by hinges so that it could be let down when not needed for use. Between this table and the pulpit was the Deacon's seat.*

*There was an aisle around the room far enough from the wall to give room for a row of seats or pews; these pews around the outside were raised one step. There were sixteen of these square pews in the center of the floor – eight upon each side of the center aisle.*

*There were two long seats in front of the pulpit known as the old men's seats; the tythingman also sat there.*

*There was a large gallery upon three sides which was reached by two flights of stairs. A row of pews was built against the wall, while in front of the gallery over the front door and opposite the pulpit were the singer's seats.*

*Upon the East side of the gallery was a long seat where the young women and girls sat, called the girls seat and upon the West side was the boys seat.*

*Whenever the boys got to whispering or making a noise, you would hear a sharp tap-tap-tap on the floor and see the cane of the tythingman pointing toward the offender. I do not remember ever seeing the cane pointed towards the girls seat; perhaps that was because I never sat there myself.*

*This building was guiltless of paint either upon the inside or out.*

*The "meeting" began at half past ten and the form of worship was similar to what is followed at the present, except that the long prayer was a long one indeed; the people were all expected to stand during it and, as many of the seats in the pews were hung with hinges, it was customary to turn them up while the people were standing so that the preacher's "Amen" was frequently supplemented with the slamming of the seats as they were dropped down.*

*In any of the pews you might see two or three flag bottomed chairs for the use of the older members of the family. These pews could accommodate perhaps a dozen people and were frequently occupied by two or more families.*

*The morning service lasted until noon, the sermon often being an hour long. Then came an hour's intermission when there was a general handshaking and inquiry after each others welfare etc.. The dinner baskets or bags were opened and their contents enjoyed; and after luncheon was eaten, the snuff boxes were passed and they had a jolly good time. I remember particularly the big bright snuffboxes of Dea. Ira Sanborn and Moses P. Gray, Esq. and how the old ladies seemed to enjoy the treat.*

*The young women and girls usually went out for a stroll in the graveyard just back of the church if the weather was favorable and then over to squire Merrill's shed to get a drink of cold water from the deep well.*

*The older men usually remained in the house but the younger men and boys took their dinners out doors and either on the doorsteps or out on the common in groups, ate their lunch and enjoyed themselves.*

*In the cold weather the men folks would go to Capt. Heath's Tavern (last owner was Watson Ambrose) and warm their feet by his big fire and their goodies with a generous mug of flip. I have frequently been to that same place for coals to replenish the fire in my Mother's foot stove, for during the cold weather they always carried these and went to some of the neighboring houses at noon for new fire.*

*There were no conveniences for a fire in the old meetinghouse and in the Winter the services were held in the vestry where there was a fire.*

*At precisely one o'clock the minister came again and everyone at once took his accustomed place and the services were renewed. Before the pastor began his long prayer, he frequently read a note from some of his parishioners asking for special prayer in their behalf; if a person were sick, prayer was asked for him; were there a death in the family, prayer was asked that this dispensation of Providence might be sanctified to the relative and friends; if a child was born, thanks was returned; all joys and sorrows were remembered. The afternoon service was equal to the morning and the last prayer was followed by the singing of the Doxology.*

*It was generally past three o'clock when we got home from meeting and as we were obliged to leave home by half past nine, we made quite a day of it, - yet there were others who had farther to go.*

*I could tell much about the occupants of the different pews for they come distinctly to my mind as I think of this old meeting house in which my parents and grandparents worshiped; and not only my ancestors but the ancestors of very many – perhaps most of this company, but lest I weary you, I close.*



Mrs. Cass mentions going to Squire Merrill's deep well for a drink of cold water. Squire Merrill was Thomas D. Merrill who kept a store for many years at the Center. I believe the Merrill buildings were located west of the old meeting house on land that had now been part of the McClary Cemetery for a long time. The deep well is still there in the cemetery covered by a large mill stone.

Also Mrs. Cass mentions "the graveyard" in back of the church. It is interesting to learn that this "graveyard" or "burying place" as the early records spoke of it, - and what now for many years we have known as the McClary Cemetery, had

its beginnings the very same year that the Congregational Society started at Center Hill. Along from 1906 to 1910 a man names John M. Moses made considerable study of records, deeds and vital statistics of early Epsom. Mr. Moses seemed to have become quite convinced and came to the conclusion that the first person buried in the old part of the McClary Cemetery ('the burying place') was William Blazo Sr.. He was a first settler of Epsom. He died August 14, 1761 – (the same date that the settlers gave Mr. Tucke his 2<sup>nd</sup> call to come to Epsom). Blazo, a Frenchman, was highway surveyor in Epsom in 1756 and a 1757 deed called him a "cooper." Blazo lived, I believe, just east of the Deinhardt's home. Soon

after his death his sons sold out to Andrew McClary (probably the 2<sup>nd</sup> Andrew, the Major who was killed at Bunker Hill).

In one of Mr. Moses' articles in 1910 I found the following:

“A memorial stone marks the site of the first church. The cemetery in the rear contains many hundred graves. At least two hundred and fifty may be counted that are marked with only common field stones, uninscribed. The oldest inscribed stone, on which only a few letters are now traceable, is among the McClary graves near the south wall and is probably that of the first Andrew McClary.” The first Andrew died in Epsom between Sept 13, 1764 and October 15, 1765. One cannot now count 250 graves marked only with fieldstones because along about 1920, when the south wall was taken down and replaced with the iron fence given in the will of Mary A. Evans, the cemetery trustees removed a great many of the uninscribed fieldstones. This was done to make the mowing and general care of the old part of the cemetery easier. Still, if I had been on the board of Cemetery Trustees at the time, I would probably have been against the removal of the stones. Being uninscribed there was no way to tell the names of the persons in the graves; yet the stones had meant something to certain people in the earlier days. Almost all the graves before 1800 were marked with uninscribed field stones, and likely quite a lot of those who died after 1800.

Besides the first Andrew McClary and William Blazo (already mentioned), the grave of another first settler, Samuel Blake, is also in the old part of the McClary Cemetery. Blake's grave, and that of his wife Sarah, have inscribed stones. Samuel Blake died August 19, 1801. He was Mrs. Nutter's ancestor. Charles McCoy, Epsom's earliest land owner sold out to the Sanborn's and left town. Among the early graves in McClary Cemetery there are nine of Revolutionary Soldiers, three of four of the War of 1812, and 20 of the Civil War.

I will read just a few of the names on the earliest inscribed stones.

A seven year old daughter of McClary died in 1789

Eliphalet Sanborn, Revolutionary War, died 1794, age 64

Capt. James Gray, died 1822

Two of his children 1814 & 1815, his wife 1826

William McCrillis died 1813

John H. McClary 1810

John McClary Esq. died 1801

Elizabeth McClary, died 1807 age 85

Jonathan Chase 1815

Nancy French died 1807, age 21

John Cate died 1829

Samuel P. Chase 1847

General Michael McClary died 1824

Rev. Ebenezer Hazeltine died 1813

Lieut Jonathan Curtis died 1826 age 78, might have been the minister's father. We do not know where Rev. J. Curtis is buried, his wife buried in Pittsfield.

Nathan Libbey died 1814

Dr. John Proctor died 1837

John Babb died 1831

Hannah Libbey died 1802 age 7

John Chesley 1841

Frederick Sanborn died 1881



In 1845 the Congregational Society built another meeting house down on the main road, located where I know live. The old meeting house here on this beautiful hill, over-looking Kearsarge Mountain; the meetinghouse that had played such a big part in the development and growth of the town and in molding the lives of the people, during a period of eighty-five years, was now sold and moved to Concord. I sometimes wonder if any part of the old building is still

inexistence. We are ever grateful of course to the Center Historic Club for erecting the monument permanently marking the side of Epsom's first meeting house.

The meetinghouse that was built down on the main road was as large, or possibly a little larger, than the original building. It had a broad open platform across the whole front, with a lot of steps leading down to the lawn. There were two front doors, a steeple, and inside a hall-way with stairs at either end leading up into quite a sizeable gallery which, I believe, was where the choir used to be. The auditorium of the Church has white-painted pews and a platform at the far end where the minister's desk, or pulpit, was. The Congregational Society used this second building for about forty years. The first half or two-thirds of this time, the Church was a very active and thriving organization. The Rev. Fifield was the first minister and Rev. Rufus M. Putnam was the second minister there on the main road, and the Rev. E.C. Cogsell was, I think, one of the last to preach there. For quite a while they used to have meetings both morning and afternoon. It is said that Prescott Locke (of Locke Hill) used to lead the singing in the meeting house. He used to walk down in the morning (from the next house above where Neil Reid now lives) and after the morning service he would walk back home, take care of a barn full of cattle, and get back down to the meeting house in time to lead the singing in the afternoon service. I do not know too much about the decline in connection of the second meeting house. It was not another "storm", but after 1870 a lot of other churches had sprung up in the surrounding territory and towns. Many of the older members had passed away and a lot of the young people had moved and so there was a gradual dwindling of membership and less of interest. I remember when I was a boy of hearing an elderly person say that there had been some misappropriation of church funds; that someone had used some of the Church funds to pay off personal indebtedness. That may or may not have been true. We do know that the situation became so acute that the members could no longer support a minister and the meetinghouse was closed. The last few years they held meetings only in summer. My aunt remembers of the building being used for a singing school when she was a little girl; then someone else thinks it was used a few times for political rallies. When I was a small boy the meeting house was still standing, although in a very dilapidated condition. I used to play on the steps and because the roof had partially collapsed, was cautioned not to go inside. I sometimes did venture in with other boys and I have a very good mental picture of the way the inside looked.

In 1908 Mrs. Eudora Johnson, a lady who had spent a number of summers in Epsom, bought up the various shares of the meeting house property there on the main road, had the building taken down, and built the house where I know live. Incidentally, Mrs. Johnson had a distinguished brother in Massachusetts – the late Judge John W. Hammond of the Massachusetts Supreme Court. The old judge used to take great delight when introducing his sister to his guests telling them "believe it or not, but my sister has been up to New Hampshire and torn down a meeting house!"

Meantime the Congregational Society had moved their headquarters over to New Rye. I am glad that they have prospered, and are prospering, and I am sure that under the present able leadership the future ahead is a most promising one.

Two Hundred years have passed since Mr. Tucke began his ministry here on the hill. We hope that one hundred years hence there will be another celebration.