

Then & Now - Churches in Princeton

Intro:

For a small town, Princeton has experienced a very busy history of religious energy! This history mirrors the rises and declines of various denominations and sects here in the New World. Starting with the very formation of settlement in this region, religion was a fundamental requirement for recognition first as a District (1759) and then as a Town (1771). Organized religions have numbered seven over the past 280 years. Of course, Princeton has also hosted several other inhabitants pursuing other spiritual paths, but without benefit of an established structure and separate home. Today, the three familiar churches are “Congregational”, “Roman Catholic” and “non-denominational, Evangelical”.

First religious gathering:

It seems to have become common practice to acknowledge our indigenous forebears who inhabited the region long before the arrival of European settlers. These native “Americans” certainly practiced a sincere reverence for those greater powers that ruled the land. Unfortunately, we have little to no evidence of structures or sites within Princeton where practices and observances were conducted. We do know that Mount Wachusett itself, as a prominent landform, was an ever-present touchstone.

It was a mere 16 years from the first habitation (by Joshua Wilder; on Houghton Road near the Norco Club) until the “District of Prince Town” was “erected”. As noted, in order to obtain recognition by the General Court in Boston, petitioners were bound to reserve sufficient land for Gospel Ministry. The petition to the General Court gave as rationale the fact that the inhabitants lived “Six or Eight miles from the Nearest Place of Publick Worship” (in an adjacent town) and due to “the badness of the roads” made it near impossible in Winter to make the trek. Therefore, it is quite clear that access to organized religion was a central focus in those days. The laying of roads, erecting a meetinghouse and settling a minister all required the foundation of a chartered township.



16 Merriam Rd

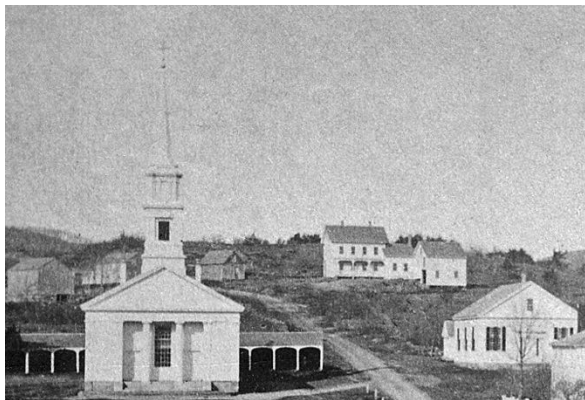
With the District established, in 1759, religious services were conducted during the seasonable months irregularly in private homes. There is printed record of a sermon preached in the Abonijah Moore tavern (the current “yellow house” at Russell’s Corner now of Deb and Charlie Carey at 16 Merriam Rd) in December 1759. Much ado resulted as Prince Town

attempted to build a meetinghouse as near to the geographic center of the District as possible. Ultimately, in 1762 a structure began to be assembled on land donated by the Mirick brothers on what is now the Camp and Grainger properties near 58 Mountain Road. Meetings of the District (equivalent to the “Annual Town Meeting” of today) were held in the structure. This building was completed in 1764 to the point that formal establishment of a “particular visible Church of Christ” was considered and acted upon. An ecclesiastical council of the established churches of Rutland, Holden and Lancaster met here that August to sanction the new religious organization. Toward the end of 1765, enough energy built to have the District of Prince Town vote to expend funds for the settlement of a minister. The first candidate refused the call and so, with the second candidate, Rev. Timothy Fuller (yes, of that famous Massachusetts Fuller clan . . .), began the long and frequently rocky saga of ministries in town.



An Artists Water Color of the First Meeting House Near 58 Mountain Rd.

It wasn't thirty years until the natives got restless for better accommodations and in 1795 the now *Town* of Princeton voted to build a new meeting house. Much different from the climate today, it was estimated that the sale of the old house and of pews in the new house to be owned by subscribing parishioners would bring in more than the cost of a new structure! In the event, the actual cost overran the estimate and the deficit was met by the town with a general tax.



The Frist Parish Church is on the Common With the Horse Carriage Sheds behind it; Across the Street to the Right was Boylston Meeting Hall; and up Mt. Rd. was the Ministers Home.

As alluded to above, dissension overtook harmony during the national “Era of Good Feeling” when the town government voted to call Rev. Samuel Clarke; with which call the Church disagreed. After three tries, the town prevailed and Rev Clarke was ordained. A group of dissenters withdrew and formed a Presbyterian church; building a modest structure across from the second Meeting House. After finding the expense of affiliation with the Newburyport Presbytery too onerous, they re-styled themselves a Congregational church in 1830;

known as the Evangelical Congregational Church.

A third denomination poked its head into town affairs as early as 1770 when a Baptist petitioned to be relieved of the “church tax”. By 1817, some 61 Princeton Baptists

formed the “Baptist Society in Princeton”; and in 1822 organized as a “Church of Christ”. After years of meeting in private homes or schoolhouses, a brick structure was built in 1828 at 114 Mirick Road near retired Police Chief Schmohl’s home. John Mirick shared this oral history of the location.

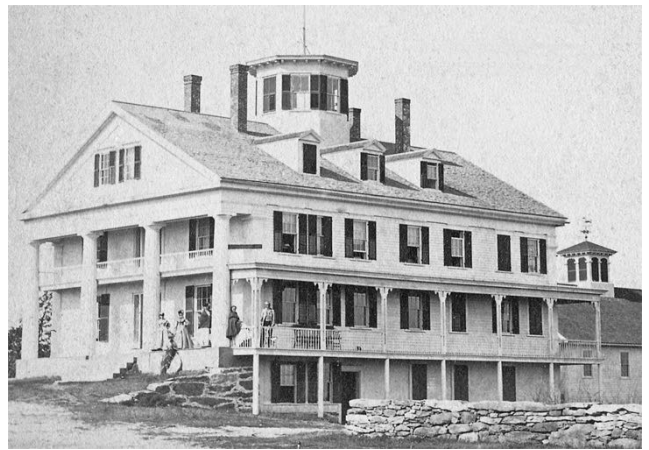
“Across from the Schmohls’ house there is a small pond perhaps 100 feet into the woods. There is a low, rock and earth dam. Our family always referred to it as “the baptismal pool” for the long-gone Baptist Church.”

Then, in 1836, a second structure was built. It occupied the space (8 Mountain Rd.) between the Ollila house (to the right of the Congo Church) and the Borges home (to the left of the Old Post Office: the Yellow Bldg). Anti-slavery agitation, Millerism, anti-Sabbatarianism and temperance stoked enough angst that by 1851 interest petered out and Baptist worship ceased. In the 1860s, the existing church structure was sold and remodeled into the Prospect House hotel. Of note, the Baptist Church in Princeton spawned branches in Westminster, Fitchburg and Leominster.

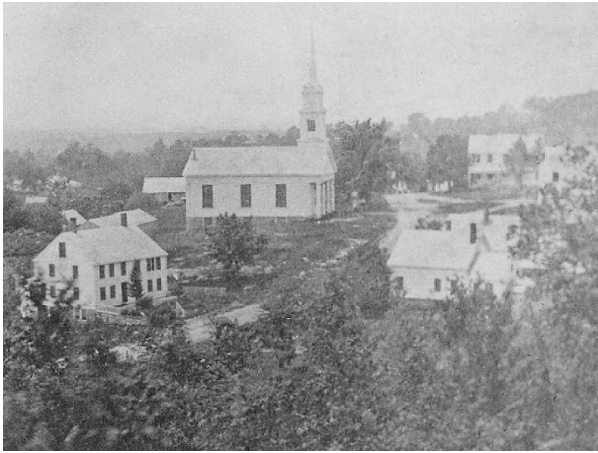
Separation of Church and State:

With the passage of Amendment XI to the Massachusetts Constitution in 1833, the Commonwealth became the last state to separate from the church: municipal government no longer taxed to provide support to a religious organization. The matter of the town taxing ALL residents to support the original Congregational Church rankled not only the Baptists (who won relief from the tax) but also the Presbyterians, who did NOT gain relief. They in turn refused to pay up, whereupon land and livestock were seized and auctioned. After a second plea was refused, the individuals who did not pay were taken into custody. However, on route to the county jailhouse in Worcester, all but one had a change of heart and paid.

This “separation of church and state” had consequences in Princeton: first and foremost, with the three denominations now on their own internal financial footing, energy for controversy could focus on the religious teachings being preached. Thus, the personalities and beliefs of the settled ministers drove the evolution of churches in town. Baptist, Calvinist, Unitarian, Universalist . . . were all in play . . . and were each ultimately unsustainable as separate churches. With the departure of Rev. Clarke, the Presbyterians sought to reunite with the original church, while a Baptist parishioner and a Congregationalist embarked on establishing a Methodist-Episcopal church. After meeting first in the 2nd Meetinghouse, a dedicated structure was built and began use in



The Remodeled Baptist Church, Which Became Prospect House at 8 Mountain Rd.



*The Methodist Church 43 Hubbardston Rd.
1840-1892*

1840. This church stood on the property now occupied by Bill Catlow at 43 Hubbardston Road (next to the empty lot on the corner of Radford). It burned to the ground in June 1892, after a lightning strike set the steeple afire and ignited and exploded a can of kerosene in the basement. Thereafter, the Methodist-Episcopal's worshipped at the First Parish until ultimately melding into that congregation.

A Universalist Society was another breakaway sect that formed a separate and more liberal worship group in 1833. Meetings were held in the "town-house" roughly one week in three and then petered out after but a few years.

The Unitarian perspective seems to have been woven into the Congregational Church and never manifested as a separately organized church.

So, we can see that after a period of unrest in the 19th century, the last organized church left on the field was the First Parish. Significant events for this Congregational Church include:

- A steeple bell cast by Paul Revere & Sons first hung in the second meetinghouse (ca 1810) and was moved to the third edifice in 1838 where it is rung each Sunday as a call to worship (See end of article)
- The round window now in the pediment of the current church was first mounted on the front of the first meetinghouse across from Meeting House Cemetery.
- A chandelier (presumed to have come from the Maverick Church in East Boston) was donated by John Lane Boylston and remains in use today. (See end of article)



*First Meeting House Window on
First Congregational Church*

- The building was moved across Church Street (today called Mountain Rd.), and turned 90 degrees to face the street, after town benefactor Edward Goodnow came to dislike the prospect of his new library facing the rear of the church. An interesting bargain with the town and church was arranged whereby Mr. Goodnow purchased land for a new town hall, land for the church, and donated further funds for the move, necessary construction, and grading of the grounds.



Notice the Horse Carriage Sheds Behind the Church on the Left, as Well as the Prospect House Barn to the Right

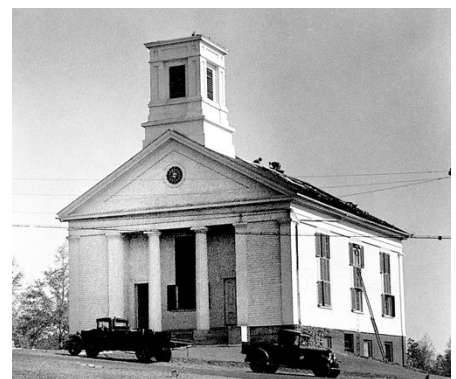


The First Congregational Church Minister Would Hold Two Services, The First in the Center of Town and the Second at This Chapel.

- A Congregational chapel was constructed in East Princeton and used for many years. It is now a private home.
- In 1899, the First Parish was granted a corporation charter by the Commonwealth and has been The First Congregational Church of Princeton ever since.
- In 1910, a Cole pipe organ was installed in the church and remains in melodious service today. (See end of article)
- Subsequent affiliation with national denominations progressed from the first National Council of Congregational

churches in 1871, to merger with the Christian Church in 1931 (itself a glue up of dissidents from the Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian denominations) to the combination of this Congregational Christian Church with the Evangelical and Reformed Church forming the United Church of Christ we know today.

- Church damaged in most destructive and powerful hurricane on September 21, 1938.



20th Century:



The Catholic church in Princeton began with services in the upper school classroom of the Library. A more permanent presence became a reality with the construction in 1963 of the church building at the corner of Worcester Road and Gregory Hill Road on land purchased by the Worcester Diocese in 1955. The Prince of Peace Parish was founded in 1993. It is commonly understood that the hired help of the various hotels during the “resort” period of Princeton would likely have been Irish Catholic and thus formed the foundation for that

religious tradition in Princeton.

The conservative evangelical movement took root in Princeton in 2000 with the first meeting of the Heritage Bible Chapel in space at the Princeton Center (former Center School on Boylston Avenue). The founding pastor was the Rev. Eric Hartlen at that time also working as Vice President for Human Resources of the Jamesbury Corporation (now Metso) in Worcester. By 2003, the congregation had grown to the point where a permanent dedicated structure was warranted and a new building was constructed at



182 Brooks Station Road just up hill from Ball Hill Road. A major addition was built as the sanctuary in 2007 and the church thrives today with the largest attendance of any Princeton religious organization.

Today:

It is quite evident that organized religion has been a part of the fabric of this place we call Princeton throughout its entire history. Indeed, Princeton could not have taken life as a recognized municipal entity without providing support for a “minister of the Gospel”. The active period of division and dissension in the early 19th century was perhaps the most active time for diverse worship in town. Today, three churches are active in town; even as most of America is now “unchurched”.

The research and composition of this issue of Then & Now was done by Harry Pape in 2024 with images supplied from the Princeton Historical Society collection.



Still In Use Revere & Son Bell in the Congregational Church Tower



Revere & Son Bell Inscription



Choir Loft and Cole Pipe Organ



Chandelier donated by John Lane Boylston