

ADDENDUM B

A COMMON HISTORY: OUR TOWN, OUR CHURCH AND OUR CEMETERY

(Edited transcription from remarks by Kirk Smith presented on November 6, 2016 to celebrate the listing of Wellesley Congregational Church and Cemetery on the National Register of Historic Places)

To begin at the beginning.

In nearly every sense, the earliest history and formation of the town of Wellesley and of this church are one and the same. As we look back, the beginning was marked with some controversy, strife, delays, uncertainties, periods of setbacks and periods of growth – perhaps all the usual makings of a 200+ year history. As this budding nation was working toward a new and fresh start and an identity separate and apart from England, so too was New England. And so too were those in this very area we now call Wellesley and, by extension, members of this church we call Wellesley Congregational (or Village) Church. It is a unique and compelling story. To invoke a Low County Gullah phrase, **As members of this church, it is your story. It is our story. It is His Story. It is history.**

As many are aware, this area was initially part of Needham and known as West Needham. In its OWN formation, Needham had split with Dedham in 1711 and, as was the custom, the Needham residents built a meeting house/church the following year. Called First Parish, it was the 14th church built in Massachusetts. It is important to note that, in those days, a town's meeting house and church were one and the same and members of the community were required to attend services and provide financial support for the preacher.

If there was a Simple Startup Manual for starting a town at the time, it would read: “Meet . . . discuss pros and cons of independence. . . build a meeting house.”

First Parish was located at the corner of Nehoidan and Central Avenue, just beyond North Hill, approximately 4 miles from the center of West Needham. Assuming horse and buggy transportation clipped along at an average 5-8 mph (I googled it) it would take those from West Needham approximately an hour to get to First

Parish – a journey considered way too far for the West Needham folks – unless you’re Ed and Diane Bedrosian. For this reason and perhaps others, West Needham members (essentially farmers) now wanted their own independence. Following in Needham’s footsteps and its previous split with Dedham, West Needham decided to exert this independence in 1774 after a fire destroyed much of First Parish. In a bit of controversy and lore, some from East Needham felt the West Needham residents had something to do with that.

In any event, the first steps toward an independent West Needham were made and construction on a first meeting commenced in 1775 on a half-acre lot on the north side of (present day) Church Street. [Central Avenue did not exist as the area north of us was just forest.] Timing was not ideal, however, as it took another 20 years for this building to be completed, delayed by the outbreak of the Revolutionary War.

In terms of the war, ultimately more than 300 men from Needham’s total population of 1,000 served before the war was over. 59 of the 82 men who helped build the West Needham meeting house went to fight in the Battle of Lexington. Five residents of Needham in total lost their lives in the battle, including John Bacon, one of the West Needham residents who wanted to split from the Needham church. Ultimately, the remains of 11 Revolutionary War veterans were buried in our cemetery (along with 2 Civil War veterans).

In 1778, the West Needham precinct was created as an act of the legislature, an important milestone in the direction of independence.

The locals (as we’ll call them) finally finished the 1st meeting house in 1798 – the date we use as when this church was “organized”, but not yet “established.” Can you hear Brad Harding emphasizing this point? It is the date which has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places plaques, which will be unveiled here today.

The first preacher was hired in 1799. Rev. Thomas Noyes, at age 30, a native of Acton and a Harvard graduate, went on to serve this parish well for the next 34 years, leaving the congregation in 1833 in relatively strong footing in terms of membership and financial position. He would be the first of 18 senior pastors who have served this church. His remains are interred here under the steps of the east main sanctuary entrance.

Immediately following Noyes' retirement, a 2nd meetinghouse was built, with a slightly greater resemblance to a church, albeit modest. In the same year (1834) the Boston and Worcester Railroad came through Wellesley, a factor which would contribute significantly to the development of this area and transition from strictly rural to a place where wealthy business men in Boston would build summer estates.

The 1840s were a period of some dissent and financial struggle for the congregation. Several pastors were dismissed. Sorry, I can't provide that list, but I certainly am curious. In 1847, one of those unpopular pastors led a group of 28 members, who split off this church to form the Congregational Church at Grantville or North Village as it was called at the time (now known as Wellesley Hills).

However, the remaining half of the 19th century was marked by a number of improvements and growth.

An important turning point HISTORICALLY came in 1864, when the congregation reorganized as "Wellesley Congregational Society" and as a separate corporation took direct ownership (from West Precinct of Needham) of the building and cemetery. So the building no longer served as both a church and town hall. They used scrips to effect this purchase. Looking much like a cross between a pledge card and a check, these scrips that were used in the purchase of the property can still be found in our records.

Two of the individuals who contributed significantly to this upward trend were Henry Durant, a successful lawyer in Boston, and Charles Dana, a retired trader with the East India Trading Company. Both had by then established estates in Wellesley and were active church members during this time period. Together, they would facilitate the construction of this congregation's 3rd church, which was completed in 1872.

With Durant on the Building Committee, this third church was built with the help of an architect [H. and J.E. Billings] – which means it would look more like a church (which is consistent with previous establishment of the Society, the purchase by the members of the church property from the West Needham precinct and the intended use as only a church). It faced north, whereas the previous two buildings faced south and east, respectively. This northward facing building was as a nod to the importance of the railroad to the community, as the station stop was located a mere 100 yards away, essentially where it is today.

A brief side note on Durant and Dana, an interesting story in and of itself.

Henry Durant, and his wife, Pauline, experienced a sort of religious awakening following the death of their only son at the tender age of 8. As part of this, Henry and Pauline established Wellesley College, which had its first classes in 1875, shortly after the completion of our 3rd church.

Now one may assume that Charles Dana started Dana School, but that is not correct. It was Henry Durant who started Dana School as a preparatory school for Wellesley College. If you could pass the requirements at Dana you were (at least then) guaranteed to be accepted at Wellesley College.

So what DID Charles Dana do? The answer to this begins with the second (not the third) church. Now Charles Dana provided direct financial support for the construction of the 3rd church, but he also purchased the (old) 2nd church building. He paid \$1,000 for it and had it moved to the north part of his estate on Grove Street where he converted the building into a boarding house. A decade later, he would convert the building again, essentially giving it to Durant for use in Durant's preparatory school for Wellesley College. It became the central building of what was to become Dana Hall School (until it was torn down in 1970s).

Coincidentally, the same year Dana Hall School opened in 1881, the precinct known as West Needham was incorporated as the independent community of Wellesley, a town of about 2,000. So the groundwork laid in 1775 (that fateful meeting following the burning of First Church) by the West Needham residents had finally officially come to pass – some 106 years later. When you enter Wellesley today, the signs will be marked 1881. But you now know “the rest of the story.”

Progress continued. The church was growing and the cemetery was developing as well:

- In the 1850s the cemetery was expanded by the purchase of 13,000 sq. ft. of land west of the cemetery
- With contributions from the Betsey Brown trust major improvements were made to the cemetery, which was filling up and had deteriorated.
- In 1877, to alleviate the scarcity of space in the cemetery, the church acquired land on Brook St., which later became Woodlawn Cemetery and since then has served this town as its main, non-sectarian cemetery.

- In 1879, the cemetery closed to all burials except for private plots, which comprised nearly all of the western section of the grounds.
- In 1881, the first by-laws for the church were established (Mike Kellogg and Alice Polley)
- In 1891, the old Wellesley Congregational Society was reorganized as Wellesley Congregational Church. The Society had fulfilled its objective and was no longer needed.
- In 1893, approximately 140 remains, including 67 people from the Bullard, Parker and Smith tombs, were transferred from the old burying ground to Woodlawn Cemetery to make space for the new addition on the southwest corner of the church where the tombs had previously been located.
- In 1897, construction of a new parish house extension was completed
- In 1898 the church celebrated its centennial, reinforcing the date on the Register plaques of 1798.

Then, fatefully, in 1916 the third church was destroyed by fire. Undaunted, the members immediately undertook a rebuilding effort with the assistance of a design firm, Carrere and Hastings. In 1918, a parish house and chapel (present administrative offices and chapel) were completed as the first phase. Construction of the sanctuary itself, postponed because of World War I, was completed in 1922/23 timeframe. The cornerstone of the church structure was laid October 12, 1922, and the building was completed and dedicated on October 21, 1923.

To add further texture to this event and our recognition of this building and cemetery today, it seems appropriate to give witness to some of those who were involved in the building of this great structure. By sharing these thoughts, some background of the design firm and, indeed, the design itself, I hope to convey how, once again, this congregation sought to give honor to its rich history, while leaning with great expectations into the future.

First, a “Statement of the Building Committee,” written as the design of the church was nearing completion, reported that it was . . . [and I quote]

“not uncommon to see over 400 people crowded into our Chapel....and we believe that the time has come to complete our plant by erecting an adequate Church edifice.”

“Our architects, Carrere and Hastings of New York, hold first rank among the architects of America, and the building they are designing for us is pronounced to be the firm’s masterpiece in Church architecture. This commanding structure will add character and tone to the Town, increase the value of real estate, and generally strengthen the commercial integrity of the Community. Irrespective of religious affiliation, every man and woman, every boy and girl, may point with just pride to the edifice of the Wellesley Congregational Church....While earlier buildings of the congregation had been referred to as meeting house, the new project was envisioned as a House of Worship.”

Carrere and Hastings, was indeed a world-renowned architectural firm. Known for Beaux-Arts masterpieces, a short list of their work tells the story:

- The New York Public Library
- The Frick House (now The Frick Collection) in New York
- Renovations on the U.S. Capitol, the Senate Office Building, the House Office Building and the Carnegie Institute in Washington D.C.
- Locally, At Elm Bank, the Alice Cheney Baltzell House was built in 1907. Similar to the church, it was designed in the Georgian Revival style. And in fact, the Baltzell House, built a decade or so before the Wellesley Congregational Church complex was started, may have led the church building committee to Carrere and Hastings.

A quote from Thomas Hastings, principal architect at Carrere and Hastings, described his intent for the church:

“In determining upon the general style and character of the proposed Wellesley Congregational Church and after several interviews with the Building Committee, it was agreed that for a New England town unusual results might be obtained by building a Colonial or what approximates a Georgian 18th century edifice. Such a building, in our opinion, will be a real contribution to the character of the town in its civic improvement on the part of the members of this church, - indeed so much so that we believe that all the people, even those who do not attend the church but are interested in the welfare of the town of Wellesley should gladly be willing to contribute to make this church a real success.”

In referring to the past in his design for the church complex, Hastings recalled the earliest history of this congregation dating back to the late 18th century and brought Wellesley into the early 20th century with the use of the Georgian Revival architecture of this building.

Whether seen in the symmetry and balance of the Colonial Revival architecture or the Georgian and Federal design features (such as the use of columns, impediments, porticos, etc.) it is clear that much of this noble structure still exists - which brings us to the building we are celebrating today.

The sanctuary, while expanded and made accessible in the 2002 renovation, would be clearly recognizable by those who were present after its initial construction. Renovations to the present Burt Chapel were relatively minor. The changes in 2002 were primarily designed to add efficiency to the entire building, upgrade the common facilities and Church School rooms and make the entire building accessible.

The cemetery, also dating back to the earliest years of the town had its own journey and is another example of the church's rich history, even to the casual observer.

As you walk west from Village Common, one first is aware of the older headstones lined up essentially in rows in this older, eastern portion of the cemetery. Changes and upgrades to the cemetery in the latter half of the 1800s were mentioned earlier. In the 1930s the cemetery came into disrepair again due to foot traffic and neglect, prompting the tall outer wall to be built. In 1946, a cedar fence on the cemetery's east side (abutting the church property) was erected. Perhaps the most important change to occur was during the 2002 renovation when the cemetery and church became intricately connected. The cemetery and church were previously separated by a road, set below-grade to that of the cemetery. If you could make it up the incline after walking across the road toward the cemetery, you then had to climb over the cedar fence. With the 2002 refurbishment, the Village Common was added leading into the western portico and the ground between the church and cemetery was made to grade, the cedar fence was removed and the cemetery was fully opened up and accessible to its members.

In response to some wishes that were expressed during the 2002 renovation and the discernment process which preceded that, a group was formed to re-open the cemetery. In 2007, "Memorial Path" was consecrated with the opening of a 150 ft.

by 10.5 ft. path (former carriage path) for the interment of cremated remains and the installation of 3 shared headstones. In 2015, five more headstones were installed.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, as we began, we end with the statement that the earliest history of Wellesley and of this church are one and the same.

And in retrospect, it certainly didn't seem easy. Construction of two of the 4 structures built in this very property were delayed by war. This building we celebrate today (the 4th) is the response to the 1916 fire which destroyed the third such structure. There were sacrifices made as evidenced in the 11 Revolutionary War and 2 Civil War veterans whose remains lay in the hallowed ground of our own cemetery. Yet one can imagine the excitement that seemed to sweep over this area, this congregation and this town in the mid to late 1800s:

- A transformation of Wellesley from a rural town to a more affluent Boston suburb
- The Boston & Worcester railroad coming through, connecting Wellesley to other communities
- The church community taking full ownership of the building and cemetery, becoming a church only and no longer a meeting house
- Significant connections with Wellesley College and Dana Hall

This wave of growth and enthusiasm seemed to lay the groundwork for the immediate and incredible response that followed the 1916 fire, despite WWI. They didn't just replace the former building. They sought to design a building, worthy of this church's place in the rich history of Wellesley and of Wellesley Congregational Church. In the design chosen, an expressed intent was to reach back to capture the "splendor of our forefathers" but make a statement for future generations.

Today, we celebrate the placement of this church and cemetery on the National Register of Historic Places. But perhaps, more importantly, we pause to honor those who have come before us and made it possible for this celebration to even occur.