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Churches in Bridgewater, 1900-1910

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Churches in Bridgewater, Massachusetts
1900-1910
(Including Some Historical Background)

Benjamin A. Spence
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An Explanation

For several years I have had the pleasure of delving into the history of Bridgewater, Massachusetts, concentrating on the first quarter of the twentieth century and providing, when appropriate, historical background to make my discussions clearer. Although my research and writing are ongoing, I have decided to make available drafts of a number of topics which I have explored at length, with the hope that the material presented will prove helpful to many readers. I would request that credit be given if my findings are used by other writers or those making oral presentations.

As my study has proceeded, many people have been helpful and, hopefully, I will be able to thank all of them during the course of my writing. At this point, let me mention just a few who have been especially supportive. Many thanks to the Trustees of Bridgewater’s Public Library for allowing me free access to the sources in the town’s library, made easier by the aid given to me by the research librarians under the competent direction of Mary O’Connell. Without the constant aid of Dr. Steven G. Young, I would have been at a loss many times in how to proceed in the use of the computer, a piece of technology indispensable to my writing. Many thanks to Sylvia B. Larson who has been willing to spend numerous hours using her fine editing skills and her probing historical mind to improve greatly these drafts, all the while sharing my great interest in the history of Bridgewater. Any errors in these pieces, of course, are solely mine. What a great joy it is to share many of my findings with S. Mabell Bates, who, as a friend, head of the special collection at Bridgewater State College Library, and member of the Bridgewater Historical Commission, has provided me with valuable historical material and has been a constant source of inspiration. Lastly, my research, particularly concerning the Bridgewater Normal School, would have been far less interesting without my many conversations with David K. Wilson, long associated with public relations and institutional research at Bridgewater State College. His willingness to share his historical knowledge of the college, videotape my tours of Bridgewater’s School Street and Central Square, begin the time-consuming task of placing some of my writings on a web-site, and put the drafts, such as this one on the churches in Bridgewater, into more permanent forms are much appreciated.

One final note concerning bibliography needs to be made. At some juncture, I will present an essay on the sources used in my study. For now, the numerous footnotes will give the reader a good idea of the research materials used in this historical account of the Town of Bridgewater.
Churches of Bridgewater, 1900

( Including Some Historical Background)

With the exception of a small society of the Church of England, the South Parish (or Precinct) of the original Bridgewater had been dominated between 1717 and 1821 by one Congregational church of Puritan-Pilgrim descent, which was simply called The First Parish. In the early 1820’s, as the old Bridgewater was dividing into four separate political entities, the South Parish unilaterally decided to retain the name of the “ancient town.” It was at this point, however, that the pre-eminence of The First Parish, now part of the “new Bridgewater,” began to be challenged. Reflecting a national trend throughout the nineteenth century toward religious sectarianism, the town by 1900 had seven Protestant churches, representing a variety of denominations. Five of them were in or near Central Square with another one in the Scotland part of the town, a few miles southwest of the village center. The Baptists had not yet erected their own place of worship, but were holding their services in the newly-built Odd Fellows Building on the western side of Central Square. Located on Centre Street, a considerable walk from town’s Common, St. Thomas Aquinas, Bridgewater’s largest and only Roman Catholic church, had grown steadily since its founding in the 1850’s as more Irish immigrants began to move into this Yankee, Protestant, and Whig-Republican town. Before the widespread use of the automobile, most of Bridgewater’s churchgoers walked to Sunday morning services or other parish events, although some reached their destination by using a horse-drawn cart or the trolley system, which was only three years old in 1900.

These eight churches played vital roles in the life of the town. Their main mission was to administer to the religious and spiritual needs of their members, but they also figured significantly in creating a vibrant civic society, a concept recently explored by some historians and political scientists. A close reading of the Bridgewater Independent, the town’s local newspaper dating back to the 1870’s, reveals clearly that the lives of many inhabitants of this small Massachusetts community were closely intertwined with the myriad of activities of their particular church and that each of these religious institutions added tremendously to the overall cultural, social, educational, and even the political life of the community. This involvement in a given church does not necessarily suggest that people in Bridgewater were more “religious” one hundred years ago. Rather, it could be related, in part, to the fact
that the activities of secular organizations were not yet vying, as least to the extent they would in later
decades, for the time and energy of those Bridgewater citizens attending Sunday morning services and
doing church work in general. Varying in membership-size, extent of property, religious beliefs and
practices, and historical background, all the eight churches appealed to some portion of the town’s
population, numbering close to six thousand at the turn of the twentieth century. (It should be kept in
mind that this figure included those “staying” at the Bridgewater State Farm.)

The origins of present-day Bridgewater and its first church are inextricably joined. With the
permission of the General Court of the Province of Massachusetts, then part of British North America, the
South Parish was organized in 1716 for church and school purposes, an action that reflected the growth
and movement of the town’s population since its founding in 1656 as Plymouth Colony’s first inland
community. A year after the establishment of the South Parish, its first meeting house, bordering on the
future School Street, was dedicated, relieving churchgoers from making the considerable journey to what
is now West Bridgewater to attend church services, where Reverend James Keith, the first minister of the
old Bridgewater, was still the pastor. During its first century, the church was served by three ministers:
Benjamin Allen, 1718-1731, John Shore, 1731-1791, and Zedikiah Sanger, 1788-1820. After enlarging its
meetinghouse in 1741, the South Parish built a new one in 1760, using some of the timber from the old
structure, a rather common practice, it seems, in eighteenth and nineteenth century Bridgewater. Before
this second meetinghouse, itself enlarged in 1810, was replaced by a new one in 1845 at the same
location, a schism between the Trinitarians and the Unitarians had split asunder the established
Puritan-Congregational churches throughout New England. When a group of parishioners left the First
Parish to form the Bridgewater Trinitarian Congregational Church in Scotland in the early 1820’s, many
with Unitarian leanings remained with the First Parish and would go on to occupy the new edifice of
1845.

1 BI, Jan. 20, 1899; I have read the weekly columns submitted each week to the Bridgewater Independent by the
various churches in the town, and, hereafter, this source will be cited as BI, along with the appropriate date; centre,
the British variation of the word, is used throughout the text since it was used in Bridgewater at the time.
2 Nahum Mitchell, History of the Early Settlement of Bridgewater, In Plymouth County, Massachusetts, Including an
Extensive Family Register (Bridgewater: Reprinted by Henry T. Pratt, 1897), pp. 45-47; Joshua E. Crane, “History of
Bridgewater,” Hurd’s History of Plymouth County (Philadelphia: The J. W. Lewis & Co., 1884), pp. 774-781; Crane
used the word Evangelicals instead of Trinitarians; I sometimes used a reprint of Crane’s history done by The
Bridgewater Historical Collectors, 1986, ed. by James William Buckley and Katherine Pratt Jordan; The Bridgewater
Book Illustrated (Taunton, Massachusetts: William S. Sullwold Publishing, Inc. 1985), pp. 19-23; published by the
Old Bridgewater Society in 1985, this work includes material from the two original books published in 1899 and 1908
At the start of the twentieth century, members of the First Parish, along with other Bridgewater inhabitants, could take pride in the simple, but beautiful, Unitarian meetinghouse on School Street. Built in the Greek revival style, as was the Town Hall of 1843, this church, with its Ionic columns, was a sturdy wooden structure topped with a tower and a graceful spire. As worshippers came out of the church on a Sunday morning, they could view with pleasure a lawn, dotted with trees and, at times, covered with snow, gently sloping downward toward Summer Street; and, looking beyond this thoroughfare, the trees and pond of Boyden Park. This view was unobstructed since the Bridgewater Normal School gymnasium had yet to be built. Across School Street stood the main building of the Normal School, the town’s most imposing brick edifice. Looking to the left on leaving the sanctuary, one saw the First Parish Cemetery, among the town’s most beautiful, serene and, indeed, historic spots. Perhaps some parishioners stopped to look at the gravestones of John and Rebecca Washburn who in 1717 gave the new parish the two acres for the building of a meetinghouse and the creation of a burial ground. Joshua E. Crane, in his 1884 history of the town, concluded that there was “no more beautiful and striking type of the ancient English churchyard than that of the old yard of Bridgewater.”

Bridgewater’s Unitarian Church, however, did not become a relic of the town’s past. Under Reverend Charles A. Allen, a Harvard graduate, who took over the ministry of the church in 1893, the society had been infused with new life, and nearly one half of its members at the beginning of the new century had joined during his pastorate. Still, there were active members with family names long associated with the parish and the town; among them were: Alden, Bates, Hooper, Hunt, Keith, Leach,
Perkins, Pratt, and Washburn. Allen’s sermons, always announced ahead of time, accounted for some of the new enthusiasm. Influenced in part by the Social Gospel movement prevalent at this time in the large cities of the Northeast, his sermons sought to apply Christianity to everyday life. “What the Sermon on the Mount means to us today,” “Some Applications of Real Christianity to Social Life,” “The True Way of Preaching Christianity in Every-Day Life,” and “What our church stands for here in Bridgewater” are titles revealing Allen’s approach to Christianity. In a more traditional sermon given at Christmas time, he talked about “How God was revealed in Jesus as nowhere else.”

Other considerations drew people to this church. Some enjoyed listening to the E. and G.G. Hook Organ, which had been installed in the sanctuary in 1852; or hearing such vocal solos as the soprano aria in Haydn’s Creation, “With Verdure Clad,” sung by Marion Leach on Easter Sunday morning in 1900. Some parents sent their children to the Sunday school under the leadership of William H. Sanderson, who was also the superintendent of the Bridgewater-Abington public schools. The church offered a broad range of educational, cultural, and social opportunities, including parish socials, a strawberry festival in June, musical and literary entertainments sponsored by the Unity Club, meetings of the women’s sewing circle, the activities of the Women’s Alliance, and lectures such as “Benjamin Franklin and the American Revolution.” All in all, then, Bridgewater’s first church in 1900, while no longer accounting for most of the town’s churchgoers or religious activities, was still functioning well after almost two hundred years at its School Street location.

At the start of the twentieth century, the Trinity Episcopal Church, at the corner of Main and Pearl Streets, had the distinction of being the other Bridgewater church tracing its origins back to the 1700’s. In 1748, about the same time Boston, the old bastion of Puritanism, was witnessing with some trepidation the construction of a more splendid Anglican church in its midst, a church of the same denomination was built along the upper reaches of Main Street in Bridgewater’s South Parish on land donated in 1747 by Samuel Edson. Members of the Edson and Perkins families, among others, were responsible for putting up the “shell” of this first Trinity Church, although the sanctuary was not

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5 BI, Feb. 9, April 6, 20, June 8, Oct. 5, Nov. 16, Dec. 14, 28, 1900; “An accounting of its history as revealed by its records,” pp. 135-143; the Hook organ is still being used by the church; HH, p. 64.
completely finished or furnished for many years, and, indeed, services were only sporadically held there
during the eighteenth century. In 1815, after a ten-year hiatus in which active worship ceased altogether
and immediately following the so-called War of 1812 between the United States and Great Britain, the
fortunes of Bridgewater’s small Episcopalian congregation brightened when its church was finished,
thoughly repaired, thanks to the work of John Edson, and incorporated as the Trinity Church on June 14, 1815. Still, decay of the original building, caused by lack of use for so many years, prompted the
parishioners to sell it at public auction in 1836 and to build a new church on the opposite side of the
church’s burial ground. Relying on the words of Crane again, the second Trinity Church was later
described as “among the finest buildings of that day…one of the most attractive objects in the rural
landscape.” By the time he wrote these words in the early 1880’s, however, this second church was
being dismantled and replaced by the third and present Trinity Church building on the corner of Pearl and
Main Streets. This location, it was hoped, would lead to an increase in membership. During the
construction of their new home, Bridgewater’s Episcopalians held services in the Town Hall in nearby
Central Square. Their third sanctuary, which includes some components of the 1836 one and seats around
200, was dedicated on September 23, 1884. 6

This third house of worship of Trinity Episcopal Parish was thus quite new in 1900. With some
elements of Stick and Gothic styles, this simple but picturesque wooden-shingled structure, which
featured a rectangular nave and corner tower, was another treasure of the village center, being just a short
walk northward from the Central Square Common. The use of the granite foundation, much of the timber,
and the bell from the 1836 church added to the historicity of this new building. Reverend George F.
Smythe was the rector at the beginning of 1900 but announced in July that, regretfully, he would be
leaving to continue his profession in an academic setting. He was replaced by J. Rockwood Jenkins, who,
like his predecessor, lived next to the church in the large 1894 Victorian rectory, with architectural

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6 “Samuel Edson to Incorporated Soc. For Ye Propagation of Ye Gospel in Foreign Parts, 1747,” copy from the
Plymouth County Registry of Deeds, Book 39, p. 72, found in the files of the Bridgewater Public Library; Mitchell, p. 50; Crane, p. 783; HH, pp. 64-65; Townscape Institute, Form 105, pp. 283-284; BI, May 31, 1907; the sources quite often interchange the words church and society, but the latter technically should be used in reference to the business organization of the parish; Nancy S. Peters, “Trinity Church, Bridgewater,” The Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts 1784-1984 A Mission to Remember, Proclaim, and Fulfill (Published by The Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, 1984), pp. 226-227.
features similar to those of the sanctuary. 7

Observing the Sabbath was taken seriously by many communicants of Bridgewater’s second oldest parish. Sunday was naturally the busiest day at the church, with Holy Communion at nine, the main morning service at ten, Sunday school at noon, and an evening service at seven-thirty for those parishioners wanting to make a full day of religious observance. Different organizations such as the Women’s Guild, the Young Men’s Club, and the Silver Shield were actively involved in the life of the church, absorbing considerable time and energy of some parishioners. Gatherings of a purely social nature were not neglected either, as shown, for example, by the annual May Day Dance. Featuring the Porter Orchestra of Brockton, the dance in 1900 was given under the auspices of the ladies of the church. Taking part in these organizations and activities were some members of well-known families in the town, whose names, it would appear, reveal a Northern Irish heritage: Burrill; Marshall, McElwain, McNeeland, and Jenkins, to cite a few examples. 8

In the early 1820’s, as the Transcontinental Treaty added to America’s domain and the Missouri Compromise portended the divisive nature of slavery (becoming known as the “peculiar institution”), the four parishes of the old Bridgewater officially separated, with the South Parish retaining the Bridgewater name. At the same time, the First Parish of the “new” town was faced with a divisive issue of its own. Mirroring the growing schism between the Trinitarians and Unitarians in the established Congregational churches across New England, two groups of parishioners of the First Parish, protesting what they considered to be the growing “laxity or deviation” from the old Congregational doctrine, left the church. They formed the Bridgewater Trinitarian Congregational Church and proceeded to build a meetinghouse in Scotland, a section of the town located a few miles southwest of Central Square. Thus came into being the third church in Bridgewater, which under Reverend Ebenezer Gay, its first pastor and a Harvard graduate, prospered from the start, showing an immediate and sizable increase in membership. But in the middle of the 1830’s, a substantial majority of the parishioners voted to move to the center of town, a more convenient location. Under Reverend Gay’s leadership, they made plans for a new church building in Central Square. Declaring love for their “Mount Zion,” thirty-two members remained in the Scotland

8 BI, May 25, July 13, April 27, Dec. 7, 1900; Peters, “Trinity Church, Bridgewater,” p.228.
church and in 1836 formed a new church organization, the Scotland Trinitarian Congregational church, creating, in effect, Bridgewater’s fifth church society. Its 1822 church building still stood on the corner of Pleasant and Prospect Streets in 1900 and, indeed, continues to so a century later.  

It is not possible to say how many passersby at the turn of the century, as they rode on the “electrics” to and from Nippenickett Park or, perhaps, as far as Taunton, paid much attention to this simple meetinghouse with its white clapboards, green shutters, belfry, and steeple. But the Scotland Trinitarian Congregational Church, later cited as one of the finest federal-style meeting houses in Southeastern Massachusetts, has a secure place in the town’s annals because it is the oldest extant house of worship in Bridgewater. The exterior of the building had not changed much in its first eight decades, and its setting, back from the main road in a fenced-off common, continued to highlight its plain beauty. According to Mary H. Leonard, who had family roots in the church and taught at Bridgewater Normal between 1868 and 1884, the meetinghouse’s original bell had a far sweeter sound than the new one of a number of years later. On the plus side, the old stoves had been replaced by a modern heating system well before 1900, making the church much more comfortable in what could be cold and long New England winters.

Reverend Ira A. Smith had been the pastor of the church since 1896, ministering to a small congregation. (The membership had numbered only sixty-six in 1879.) Some of the parishioners, who attended the Sunday morning services and were active in church affairs, could trace their family names back to the founding of the church: Bassett; Keith, Leach, and Wilbar, for examples. But there were also new members who, in varying degrees, shared a sense of the church’s heritage. Y.P.S.C.E. on Sunday evening, prayer meetings on Tuesday evening, choir rehearsals, and social gatherings were part of church life. What becomes evident in reading the Bridgewater Independence is that the Scotland church and neighborhood were almost synonymous in 1900, more so than was the case with the other town churches.

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9 Donald E. Dolan, “The Historian’s Record of Central Square Congregational Church, 1821-1971,” files in the Bridgewater Public Library; Dolan and his wife Ethel M. were responsible for coordinating the chapter on the Bridgewater churches in History Highlights; M. H. Leonard, “Built in 1822-the Scotland Meeting House,” BJ, June 1, 1900; I am much in debt to this article by Mary H. Leonard since it was written in 1900, as she recalled her early days as a member of the Scotland church; Wood, “Historical Discourse Preached at Scotland, Bridgewater,” Sept. 23, 1888; Mitchell, p. 50; Crane, pp. 781-782; HH, pp. 66-67; Bridgewater Book, pp. 22-23; Townscape Institute, Form 173, pp. 416-417; Moore, Images of America : Bridgewater, p. 29; when I wrote the description of this church in this source, I mistakenly said that it was the third-oldest church organization in Bridgewater; in reality it is the fifth oldest; the New Jerusalem Church is the fourth oldest parish in Bridgewater.

and the areas in which they were located. It was, nevertheless, not easy for the Scotland church to keep functioning as a neighborhood church, and its membership remained small, especially compared to the Congregational church in the village center.  

In the years between 1836 and 1860, while the reorganized Congregational church in Scotland labored hard to remain viable, the Bridgewater First Trinitarian Congregational Church, the original occupant of the Scotland meetinghouse, held services in its first church building in Central Square. It was described many years later by Albert G. Boyden, Principal of the Bridgewater Normal School and a longtime and important member of this Congregational church, as “a cheerless room with straight-back pews.” But this rather drab, brown-colored, and wooden meetinghouse was not to have a long history. On the Sunday morning of August 6, 1860, the church was destroyed by a disastrous fire, leaving it, in the words of a later pastor, “only a heap of smoldering ashes and a lump of melted bell metal.” In addition, the records of the parish, much to the dismay of future historians, were “presumably” lost in the conflagration. Despite severing ties with Bridgewater’s First Parish forty years earlier, this Congregational church continued to claim that by remaining true to the Trinitarian doctrine it had maintained its historical connection with the Pilgrims (Separatists) of the Plymouth colony. Indeed some parishioners of this Congregational church in Central Square knew about the Pilgrims of Scrooby, England, who had sojourned in Holland before their migration to America, where in 1620 they had founded the Plymouth colony, the second permanent English settlement in the New World. And, of course it was a source of pride for many in Bridgewater that their town had the distinction of being the first inland settlement of the early inhabitants of this parent community fifteen miles, or so, to the east.  

There seemed to be no question that a new meetinghouse would be built and would occupy the same land on the southwestern corner of Central Square as the one erected in 1836. A committee of three, headed by Joshua E. Crane, the well-known proprietor of a general store near the corner of Summer and Broad Streets, was elected to get the project started. If the original plan for the building had been carried out, a Gothic structure made of brick would have replaced the 1836 meetinghouse. Fortunately for the

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12 “Historical Sketch,” Manual of the Central Square Congregational Church-Bridgewater, Mass.-Including Its History and Membership, 1911 (Bridgewater, Mass: Arthur H. Willis, 1911), in the files of the Bridgewater Public Library; Wood, “Historical Discourse...,” pp. 11-12; BI, Oct. 12, 1900, Dec. 13, 1901; Mitchell, p. 50; Crane, pp. 782-783; Bridgewater Book, p. 22; Townscape Institute, Form 51, pp. 165-166; HH, pp. 68-69.
architectural beauty and simplicity of the village center, an Italianate-style building made of wood was erected instead. On May 18, 1862, about a year after the nation had plunged into a bloody and heart-wrenching civil war, the third home of Bridgewater’s First Trinitarian Congregational Church was dedicated. With its soaring steeple, this new house of worship stood like a sentry, guarding the southwestern part of Central Square. Under vigorous clerical and laical leadership, the church prospered in the late 1800’s and could lay claim to the largest membership among Bridgewater’s Protestant churches. While the name of the First Trinitarian Congregational Church was officially retained, the business part of the church organization took the name Central Square Society in 1864. Changes in the church building were made, including the addition of an organ loft in 1883 and improvements in the lower floor in the 1890’s. In short, the Congregational church in Central Square was a strong and well-established religious institution at the start of the twentieth century.13

By 1900, Reverend Elbert S. Porter, the ninth pastor of the church and a graduate of Columbia and the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, had served for eleven years and was ministering to an active parish of over 250 members, two-thirds of whom had joined the church during his pastorate. As was the case with the other town churches, Sunday was a busy day with worship services in the morning and evening. In between time, there was a Sunday school session under the leadership of William D. Jackson, a professor at the Normal School, and a Bible class led by Arthur C. Boyden, Normal’s vice-principal. Certainly not with his future office in mind, Professor Boyden’s topic for the Bible study of November eighteenth, entitled “The Preparation of David for His Work as King,” was rather propitious since he would succeed to the presidency of the Normal School in 1906, following the resignation of his father, Albert G. Boyden. Other Normal faculty and some students of this institution were also involved in the life of Central Square Church.14

Activities of the church were not limited to Sunday. Prayer meetings were held on Tuesday evenings, and Christian Endeavor, an organization promoted by Reverend Porter almost from the start of his pastorate, met on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The Ladies Sewing Society and the King’s Daughters did charitable works, and, at the same time, their meetings and suppers provided opportunities for congenial fellowship among the women of the parish. In the late spring, the church held a successful ice

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13 BL, Oct. 12, 1900, Dec. 13, 1901; Crane, pp. 782-783; Townscape Institute, Form 51, pp. 165-166; HH, pp. 68-69.
cream and strawberry festival, one of many that the town enjoyed at this time of year. For the children of the parish, the Christmas party, which included the decoration of the tree and the distribution of gifts, was one of highlights of the church calendar. Rachel Crocker, a member of the committee planning this event, was well-known by the parish children since she worked at the public library, a short walk from the church. (They certainly could not have known that in twenty years she would be the first Bridgewater woman to vote in a state and national election.) Another member of the Christmas committee was Caroline Sampson, who, as a trustee of the public library, was one of the few women to serve on an elective town committee. Good music was another enjoyable aspect of church life, especially for those who sang in the choir under the direction of the music director and organist Annie Crane. Selections by such composers as Beethoven and Mozart were a regular part of worship services; and, on occasion, the church sponsored organ recitals featuring guest artists. Finally, a variety of educational programs appealed to some church members. During the fall of 1900, parishioners were able, for examples, to attend a lecture on the solar eclipse, which had occurred the previous May, by Professor Frank E. Gurney of the Normal School and another on “Egypt and the Holy Land” by Mrs. Amy D. Pratt, who had recently toured the East. Those who worshiped at the End-of-the-Century Watch Service, a combined gathering of the Bridgewater Protestant churches, held in the New Jerusalem Church, heard Reverend Porter speak on the “Development of Education,” an appropriate subject for a “college” town. All in all, as the twentieth century began, the parishioners of the Central Square Church in 1900 were taking part in the life of the church in a number of ways.15

The optimism of the parish in that year was reinforced by the major repairs and improvements in a building approaching its fortieth birthday. Led by a committee of five men, C.E. Bevan, A. G. Boyden, C. P. Sinnott, F.E. Sweet, and N. F. Wilcox, all well-known in Bridgewater for their professional lives and commitment to civic duty, extensive work was done on the church’s exterior and interior. A new roof of cypress shingles, a complete painting of the exterior, repairs to the spire and windows, new maple floors and carpets in the sanctuary, and new “electroliers” all enhanced the condition and value of the church property. In a Re-dedication service on October 7, Reverend Porter blessed this work and talked about the history of the parish and the need to link the new physical improvements with the church’s spiritual

and charitable goals. He declared: “good is that endeavor which seeks to make of order and harmony, beauty, and symmetry in material things, the representation and symbol of pure thoughts, kindly designs, noble purposes; that seeks indeed to express through form and color the lovely images of the mind.”

As the parishioners left the sanctuary on that Re-dedication Sunday, they walked on a new sidewalk of long-lasting cypress towards the Common, where the trees were beginning to display their brilliant autumn colors. If they looked across to the southeastern corner of Central Square, they might have seen some friends and neighbors leaving the New Jerusalem Church, another edifice that, since 1871, had graced the center of this old New England town. The history of this church organization goes back to the 1820’s, when Artemus Stebbins, a former Methodist minister from Swansea, a small village south of Bridgewater, introduced Seth Washburn of Bridgewater to the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg, an eighteenth century Swedish philosopher and religious writer. Showing a similar interest in Swedenborgian theology, others soon joined Washburn in forming Bridgewater’s Society of the New Jerusalem, which, between 1821 and 1834, held meetings in a number of places, including the hall of the Bridgewater Academy. In 1834, the year after the New Jerusalem Church of Bridgewater was organized under the leadership of Reverend Thomas Worcester, its members began holding services in their new church building on Cedar Street. Still extant in the twenty-first century, this unpretentious meetinghouse has the distinction of being the first house of worship of this denomination built in New England. It served the Bridgewater congregation until it moved into a new sanctuary six years after the end of the American Civil War. In the 1870’s, the old meetinghouse on Cedar Street was rented and then sold to Bridgewater’s newly organized Methodist Church. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, many members of the new New Jerusalem Church hailed from families associated with the founding of the church and long familiar in the town: Alden, Bates, Benson, Broadhurst, Conant, Copeland, Cushman, Hayward, Leonard, Mitchell, Pratt, Perkins, Snow, Washburn, and Wood.

Joseph A. Hyde and Reverend Theodore F. Wright were especially instrumental in the building of a new edifice for the New Jerusalem Church in 1871. Known for the manufacturing of cotton gins in Bridgewater, Hyde gave the land on the corner of School and Bedford Streets on which the first Town

16 BL, Oct. 12, 1900.
17 Mitchell, p. 50; Crane, pp. 783-784; HH, pp. 70-72; Bridgewater Book, p. 22; Townscape Institute, Form 14, pp.
Hall still stood and contributed generously to the building fund. From the start of his twenty years pastorate in 1870, Wright was recognized for his strong pastoral leadership, his theological erudition, and his involvement in the town’s civic life. He served, for example, as the Chairman of Trustees at the time of the formation of Bridgewater’s public library and, then, donated the land on which the Memorial Library was erected in the early 1880’s. The New Church of 1871, as it was commonly called, was representative of the Carpenter Gothic architectural style. Considering its tower and steeple, slate roof, and its beautiful pointed arch windows, Joshua E. Crane was more than justified in labeling this wooden structure "an ornament to the village."

The reports given at the annual meeting of the church in May 1900 indicated that the parish with its one-hundred and sixty-two members was “flourishing” under the leadership of Reverend George S. Wheeler, its pastor since 1890, and had become a significant part of Bridgewater’s religious configuration. Mingling with sounds of other church bells in Central Square, those of the New Jerusalem Church announced each Sunday morning that the ten-thirty service was about to begin. Similar to the other churches in Bridgewater, religious activities continued on Sunday evenings for many of the parishioners of the New Church, as it was frequently called. Led by Pastor Wheeler, classes on some religious topic were conducted at six-thirty in the vestry, with those in October of 1900 geared mainly to giving the church’s young people a better understanding of the beliefs of the New Jerusalem denomination. Following these classes, the church held evening services at which the pastor usually delivered a short talk, although, on occasion, a guest speaker was invited to address the congregation. By having the ministers of the New Jerusalem churches from Brockton and Elmwood, a part of East Bridgewater, give a brief sermon on Sunday evenings, the members of the Bridgewater parish better appreciated that they were part of a larger community of faith. In another show of intra-denominational awareness, a large contingent from the Bridgewater church attended the dedication ceremonies of the new Elmwood parish house shortly before Christmas, returning to town on a special trolley very late in the evening. This concern for other parishes within the denomination also had a national dimension, when, for example, a special collection was taken in October for the benefit of the New Jerusalem Church in

84-85.
18 “Twenty Years Ago,” BI, July 15, 1910; Crane, pp. 783-784; Bridgewater Book, pp. 22, 36a; Townscape Institute, Form 14, pp. 783-786; Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, p. 32; “Wright, Theodore Francis, 1845 to
Galveston, Texas, a city that had been recently devastated by a giant hurricane and the ensuing tidal wave. This affinity for other Swedenborgian churches did not mean, however, that the New Jerusalem parish of Bridgewater stood aloof from the other Protestant churches in the town. Taking part in joint services on Thanksgiving and New Year’s was a well-established practice by 1900.  

As did other town churches in 1900, the New Church had its share of social and charitable organizations. Meeting monthly in the church parlor, the Young People’s Club enjoyed social gatherings such as the one in January planned by three important women of the parish: Miss Sarah T. Bates, a member of the church music and “standing” committees and, incidentally, also the town’s library and school committees, both elective positions; Miss Cora Thompson, treasurer of the church; and Miss Catherine Keith. Held in late June at Highland Park in Brockton, a Sunday school picnic was a special time for the children of the parish, made more fun by the trolley ride and the meeting of friends from the Baptist Sunday school who were having a similar get-together at the same time and place. Women played a key role in the life of the parish through their involvement in the Ladies Sewing Circle, founded in 1856 to aid those in need, and the Serving Circle of King’s Daughters. Mainly the work of the parish women, the annual Christmas sale and supper held on December 12 matched the success of previous years by realizing a handsome profit of 300 dollars. While most of the town’s residents spent their Christmas afternoons at home, many members of the New Church attended ceremonies which blended the religious and social aspects of the holiday.  

Three years after moving to the corner of School and Bedford Streets, the New Church rented its previous house of worship on Cedar Street to a newly formed Methodist Episcopal Society, an evangelical denomination which had already established its presence in the other towns that had once comprised the old Bridgewater. Abbie F. Lawrence of Bridgewater, who was converted to Methodism after attending a revival meeting in the neighboring town of Raynham, was the leading force behind this endeavor, joining eight other charter members in renting the old Swedenborgian meetinghouse for five dollars a week and hiring Reverend George A. Baker as the first minister. Ferdinand C. Gammons, who became associated

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1907--Minister,”  

19 BI, Jan. 26, April 13, May 11, 18, 25, June 8, Oct. 5, 12, 26, Nov. 16, Dec. 7, 21, 1900, Jan. 4, 1901.  

20 BI, Jan. 12, May 11, June 8, 29, Nov. 2, Dec. 14, 28, 1900; the best and fullest description of this annual Christmas sale and supper that I came across is the one found in the Bridgewater Independent issue of December 21, 1895: Townscape Institute, Form 14, p. 85; Carolyn Morwick and Carole Wright, “Social Life of the Community,” HH, p.
with the Eagle Cotton Gin Company in the late 1870’s (later absorbed by the Continental Gin Company) soon became a member of the Methodist organization. In November 1874, in the first recorded wedding of the new church, he married Abbie Lawrence, an event that would prove to be vitally important for the future of this new parish.  

Until the dedication of the Gammon Memorial Methodist Church in 1914, the congregation worshipped in this 1834 meeting house, the oldest church building in the center of Bridgewater. This small, wooden-framed, clapboard structure, built in the Greek Revival/Gothic Revival style and topped by a platform and, originally, a cupola, is beautifully shown in a winter setting in a 1987 pictorial history of the town. Through hard work and determination, this small parish forged ahead, buying the church building in 1879, dedicating it as The Methodist Episcopal Church in 1880, and paying off the debt in the following year. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, thanks to a legacy, a parsonage was built on Union Street, and shortly thereafter the church itself was remodeled.

Nearing the twenty-fifth anniversary of its founding, the year 1900 was a time of change and continuity for the Bridgewater Episcopal Methodist Church. Sunday morning worship service continued to be held in the small Cedar Street meetinghouse, after which the Sunday School met in the lower floor of the church. Hermann Gammons, following in the footsteps of Ferdinand C. Gammons who remained a central figure in the church, was the superintendent of this school devoted mainly to Bible study. In the tradition of the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, hymn singing was an integral and vital part of worship; at a Sunday evening service in October, some students of the Normal School joined the Reverend N. C. Alger, who had replaced Reverend W. F. Taylor in April as the pastor, in a presentation of how certain hymns were composed. For those parishioners seeking a midweek opportunity for quiet devotion, a Tuesday night prayer meeting was added to the schedule of weekly events.

Church organizations provided opportunities in 1900 for doing good works and enjoying social fellowship. Abbie F. Gammons, who could easily walk to the meetinghouse from her home next to the

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203.  
21Crane, p. 784; HH, pp. 74-75; Townscape Institute, Form 30, pp. 122-124, Form 199, pp. 469-470; Bridgewater Book, pp. 23, 40.  
22Crane, p. 784; Bridgewater Book, p. 23; HH, p. 75; Townscape Institute, Form 30, pp. 122-124, Form 199, pp. 469-470; Pictorial History of Bridgewater, Massachusetts (Printed by Dorr’s Print Shop, Bridgewater; Harry B. Harding and Sons Printers, Whitman, 1987), p. 31; Ruth Hooper Bishop, James “Mike” Bois, James W. Buckley, Martha Dorr Cossaboom, Katherine Pratt Jordan, Arthur C. Lord, Dorothy Lord Mann, and James K. Moore were the
Academy Building, opposite the Memorial Library on South Street, continued her central role in the life of the parish. Along with the other women of the church, she was active in the Ladies Aid Society which, among other events, put on a strawberry festival in May, much to the delight of church members and other residents of the town. She also played a role in the Bridgewater chapter of the Epworth League of the Methodist Episcopal Church, elected in October as the first vice-president to work with the newly-elected president, Robert Woodland. To aid in the liquidation of the parsonage debt, Woodland, an interesting speaker, planned an exhibition and talk with stereopticon slides on the subject of Colorado to be presented early in 1901, at the cost of twenty cents for adults and ten cents for children. In the meantime, the children of the parish greatly enjoyed a Christmas Eve celebration at the church which included choral singing, the decoration of the tree, and the distribution of gifts with Woodland playing the part of Santa Claus.  

For almost twenty-five years the Methodists had the distinction of having the newest church organization in Bridgewater. This changed in 1897 with the formation of the Baptist Society of Bridgewater, which held its first services in October and formally organized a church two months later. The history of the Baptists in the Titicut parish in the 1700’s and their beginnings in West Bridgewater in the middle of the 1800’s need not be related here, but the belief in adult (believer) rather than infant baptism remained a major tenet separating this Protestant sect from other Christian churches. Until they moved into their new church on Summer Street in 1902, the Bridgewater Baptists met in the hall of Odd Fellows building, a wooden-framed, three-storied, Italianate structure, erected in the late 1890’s on the western side of Central Square. This new “block” housed commercial establishments as well providing meeting space for groups such as the Masons, the Women Christian Temperance Union, the Grange, and the Baptists.  

Reverend Wesley L. Smith, a graduate of Brown University and Newton Theological Institution, became the first pastor of this new Baptist church, and, at the same time, also serve the one in West
Bridgewater. Despite a small congregation in 1900, the town’s newest church was very active, conducting Sunday morning and evening worship services, a Bible school, one of the church’s major endeavors from the start, and a prayer meeting every Tuesday evening at seven-thirty. Perhaps the most evangelical denomination in Bridgewater, the Baptists were soon known for their periodic revival meetings, featuring well-known evangelists and singers, and monthly missionary concerts under the auspices of the Men’s Missionary Class. Social gatherings were a significant part of parish life, but apparently tithing (the giving of one-tenth of one’s income to the church), rather than raising money by holding suppers and fairs, was almost exclusively the source of the church’s income. Among other enjoyable get-togethers in 1900 were the Sunday School picnic at Highland Park in June, a social in late October, and the Christmas evening exercises. Led by Harlan P. Shaw, the Superintendent of the Sunday School and a faculty member at the Normal School, this Yule-time event included entertainment and the distribution of gifts that had been placed around the Christmas tree. The regular monthly meetings of the society’s standing committee, held at the home of Pastor Smith, and quarterly business meetings of the parish members took on added meaning as Bridgewater’s Baptists began to contemplate and, then, plan for the building of their own house of worship. But, in the meantime, the church was quickly recognized as an integral part of the network of Protestant churches in town. Joining the members of the other Protestant parishes in an End-of-the Century Watch Service, the Baptists attendees were not surprised that Reverend Smith spoke about the “Development of Missions.”

Each of the Protestant parishes in the Bridgewater of 1900 had been founded, to a degree, for a particular mission, and so it was with its only Roman Catholic church. While the origins of Saint Thomas Aquinas Church on Centre Street can be traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century, it is quite probable that a few Irish Catholics resided in the South Parish of the old Bridgewater as early as the 1720’s. A small number of Acadian Catholics also arrived in this parish in the decade before the American Revolution, supposedly to a less than hearty reception. About twenty-five years after the old town broke up into four smaller ones, the devastating and heart-wrenching Irish famine sent thousands of emigrants to America, a good number of them arriving in Massachusetts, a state that was predominately made up of Yankee-English Protestants. Boston was the destination of the largest number of these Irish 26

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immigrants, but some of these newcomers went to other Bay State cities and towns, including Bridgewater, where they found jobs in the iron works, among other industries, or, in some cases, on farms. To preserve and nurture their faith, a group of Irish Catholics in this community of less than three thousand began to hold services around “make-shift” altars in private homes in Bolton Place. This area, near the Bridgewater Iron Works on High Street, was the site of small cottages built by this company to house some of its workers and was an easy walk to where they chose to erect their first church building on Centre Street, a thoroughfare on the crest of a slope northwest of the village center. 27

It was not, however, the most auspicious time to be thinking about building a Catholic church in Bridgewater. The increasing number of immigrants in late 1840’s and 1850’s, many of whom were Catholics, was seen by some Americans as a threat to an historically and traditionally Protestant nation. This anti-foreign and anti-Catholic feeling, not a new phenomenon in the nation’s history, found expression in the Know-Nothing movement of the 1840’s and 1850’s. After having the dubious distinction of electing a state government dominated by this sentiment, Massachusetts watched as its legislature proceeded, in the words of one distinguished historian, to conduct “clownish investigations of Catholic schools and convents.” The misunderstanding and, in some cases, hostility which evidently some Yankee-Protestant citizens of Bridgewater showed toward the newly arrived Irish Catholic immigrants and their determination to build a church in the town has to be seen, in part, against the background of this latest outburst of xenophobia. It is only fair, however, to point out that Bridgewater’s Town Meeting on April 4, 1853, voted to authorize the selectmen to permit the town’s Catholics to use the lower hall of the Town Hall “for religious purposes on the Sabbath” on the same terms granted to other denominations. 28

March 4, 1910; Bridgewater Book; HH, pp. 76-77.
27 BI, Nov. 18, 1898; James Stephen Sullivan, One Hundred Years of Progress: A Graphic Historical Account of the Catholic Church of New England, Archdiocese of Boston, 1895, pp. 741-742; files in the Bridgewater Public Library, which thanks to the work of Robert Wood are nicely organized; HH, pp. 73-74; Townscape Institute, Form 23, pp. 107-108, Form 34, pp. 131-132; Carolyn A. Kelley, Project Director, “Saint Thomas Aquinas Parish-150 Years of Faith,” Memorial Booklet-150th Anniversary of Saint Thomas Aquinas Parish-Bridgewater, Massachusetts-1848-1998, pp. 12-13; Kelley is generous in acknowledging (see page fifty-four) the many contributors to this project leading to this extensive historical essay; Kelley first pays tribute to Mary Jarvis, a lifelong member of St. Thomas Aquinas Church, writing that her “insights, encouragement, and direction made this project possible.”
Local opposition not notwithstanding, plans for the construction of Bridgewater’s Catholic church went forward. A group of mainly Irish Catholics, led by Reverend Aaron L. Roche, purchased a lot on Centre Street in 1853 and, by 1858, thanks to the labor of Irish workers from the nearby Bridgewater Iron Manufacturing Company, had completed the building of a small Romanesque brick church, in back of which a small burial ground was laid out. Around this time, there were probably less than 500 Catholics in all of the Bridgewaters. Nevertheless, in 1863, as the Civil War continued unabated and draft riots, involving many Irish living in “pestilential misery,” erupted in New York City, the small, but growing, congregation, composed mainly of Irish Catholics, “was designated a district parish,” with Reverend Lawrence S. McMahon serving as its first resident pastor. It has been suggested that the new church was named after St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the great scholars and teachers in the history of the Catholic Church, because of its location in a town where a Normal school was training teachers to serve in the public schools. 29

During the decade following the Civil War, physical changes were made to the church property, partly to accommodate the needs of a growing membership. When it became apparent that an additional cemetery was needed, a larger one was created on the west side of Center Street, north of Mt. Prospect Street. A small addition to the back of the church, evidently increasing its seating capacity to around four hundred, was built in the early 1870’s, a few years after Reverend John A. Conlin began a pastoral tenure of almost twenty years. Reverend Conlin also had the pleasure and privilege of being the first pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas Church to occupy its rather impressive mansard rectory built in 1874. Adjacent to the sanctuary, this dwelling, located in a neighborhood where some modest nineteenth century houses still remain, continues to serve the purpose for which it was built. In the remaining years of the nineteenth century, this Catholic church with its largely Irish congregation became more accepted in the town.

Aware that many of the communicants of this church were natives of Ireland, Crane, writing in his 1884 history, described it as an “an institution that has conferred much benefit upon the large class of adopted citizens,” and added that Reverend Conlin was “an able, scholarly preacher.” Still, only five lines was devoted in Crane’s account to Bridgewater’s Catholic church, much less than was written about the

town’s Protestant churches of that time, even the Methodist one founded in 1874.  

By 1900, many of the communicants of St. Thomas Aquinas Church would not have had much knowledge of the humble beginnings of their church and the struggle to establish a formal Catholic presence in Bridgewater. The house of worship in which the Mass was now said was an amalgamation of the old structure, 1858-1873, with some major alterations completed in 1899. From a practical point of view, the enlargement of the nave of the church, which created the largest meeting house in the town, was the most important change since it helped accommodate the fastest growing and largest congregation, estimated at over one-thousand in the 1890’s, of any single church in the town. The basic exterior features of the 1899 building are the ones still recognized in the twenty-first century: the brick façade (making it the only non-wooden church in town at the beginning of the twentieth century); the beautiful Romanesque-styled bell tower; the rearrangement of the stained glass windows over the Centre Street entrance; and the steeped exterior steps, giving evidence that the church continued to be located at the elevated site of the original building. In sum, St. Thomas Aquinas Church in 1900 was a large and handsome edifice and, while joining the other Bridgewater churches in not having to pay property taxes, its physical value, according to the town’s assessors, was greater than that of any of the Protestant churches.

At the start of the new century, Reverend William E. Kelly, who had received his training at St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore, had been the pastor of this growing parish for twelve years. The Irish, Bridgewater’s second largest group in a town where native-born English-Yankee Protestants still accounted for the largest part of the population, constituted the major portion of the communicants of St. Thomas Aquinas Church, with the number of French Canadians a distant second. Parishioners had the opportunity to attend Sunday and daily Masses, celebrated in Latin by Father Kelly or the Assistant Pastor, in which the Eucharist, Holy Communion, was central. For some, these celebratory rites were made even more meaningful, especially on certain holy days, by the sacred music played and conducted by the organist, Nellie F. Cleare. In the course of 1900, baptisms, funeral Masses and internments in the

30 BI, Nov. 18, 1898; Crane, p. 784; Sullivan, One Hundred Years of Progress, pp. 742-743; HH, p. 73; Bridgewater Book, p. 40; Townscape Institute, Form 34, pp. 131-132, Form 35, pp.133-134, Form 801, pp. 668-669; “Saint Thomas Aquinas Parish-150 years of Faith,” pp. 14-16.

31 “Report of the Assessors,” Annual Town Report, 1902, p. 39; BI, Dec. 16, 1898; Bridgewater Book; HH, p. 73; Townscape Institute, Form 34, pp. 131-132; Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, p. 27; Pictorial History, 1987,
church’s cemetery, a very active Sunday School for children, and special religious events, such as the mission for the “The Propagation of the Faith” conducted in October, made for a full religious calendar. Relations with the town’s Protestant churches appeared to be cordial, but the town’s Catholic church did not take part in the union services on Thanksgiving or New Years; and, indeed, the ecumenical movement had not made its debut. In recognition of the new year 1901, a mid-night mass was celebrated at St. Thomas Aquinas Church at which Reverend Cornelius F. Hennessey, who “had clearly identified himself” with the town, but who would soon be leaving to serve in Brockton, entitled his sermon “The Progress of the Nineteenth Century in Mechanical Arts, Literature, and Religion.”

Benevolent, social, and entertainment considerations also lengthened the list of activities of Saint Thomas Aquinas Church. There were a number of sodalities, devotional or charitable associations of the Roman Catholic laity, which were active in the church, performing good works and, at the same time, affording social fellowship to their members. In March, a minstrel show under the auspices of the church was performed in the second floor hall of the Town Hall, a site that was larger and more centrally located than Benevolent Hall on Centre Street, where other Catholic groups frequently met. In the early twentieth century, this type of entertainment was very popular in an America, which was, to say the least, far from sensitive on the race issue, and Bridgewater, being no exception, saw a number of religious and secular organizations put on this type of production. The musical director of this particular minstrel show, with its chorus of sixty voices, was Robert H. Ferguson, known in 1900 for his leadership of the Bridgewater Band and, later in the decade, as the owner of a well-stocked shoe store on Central Square. About a month after this performance, the Ladies’ Auxiliary of the Ancient Order of Hiberians held its regular meeting in Benevolent Hall, followed by refreshments and dancing. Described as “a very pleasant gathering in every way,” its long list of attendees clearly showed the numerical strength of the Irish in Bridgewater’s Catholic population at the turn of the century. Toward the end of 1900, members of the church began the long process of planning for the parish fair and bazaar to be held in the Town Hall early in the following year.
For the men of the church, the formation of the Bridgewater Council 488 of the Knights of Columbus in early 1900 was an important event, and, in the years to come, this organization would do much good work for the church and the town. Richard J. Casey, who operated a “variety store,” which included a popular ice cream parlor and a waiting room for those taking the shuttle trolley to the railroad station on the corner of Broad and Spring Streets, was the leading force behind the creation of the Bridgewater branch of this fraternal order, whose officers and rank and file members, at the beginning, were mostly Irish parishioners of St. Thomas Aquinas Church. From the outset, this civic and religious organization flourished, maintaining a very busy schedule with regular business meetings in Benevolent Hall, the election and installation of new officers, initiation of new members, sponsorship of dances, such as the one held on Thanksgiving, and, in general, the promotion of charitable activities. Of no small import, the Knights of Columbus provided opportunities for fraternal association among members of the local council and, at the same time, afforded them the opportunity of being part of the broader state and national organizations which had chapters in many cities and towns, including some of Bridgewater’s nearby neighbors.  

Churches of Bridgewater-1901-1910

(Including some Historical Background)

It would be difficult to visualize Bridgewater’s appearance and to appreciate its communal life between 1901 and 1910 without taking into account the eight churches which we have been discussing. The town’s center would have been quite different had not six of these churches occupied sanctuaries in or near Central Square, including the new one built on Summer Street to which the Baptists moved in March of 1902. In the southwestern part of the town, the Scotland Congregational Church, despite its small membership, continued to hold services in the simple, but beautiful 1823 meetinghouse on Pleasant Street. These seven Protestant churches had their doctrinal differences, but managed to co-operate in

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Bridgewater’s Leading and Up-to-Date Shoe Emporium,” Bridgewater Book; Sullivan, One Hundred Years of Progress, p. 743; Townscape Institute, Form 34, pp. 131-132.
WHERE BRIDGEWATER PEOPLE WORSHIP.

Central Square Congregational Church.

First Baptist

Methodist Episcopal

Bridgewater Book
several ways: union services were held to celebrate such holidays as Thanksgiving, New Years, and Easter; ministers met regularly to discuss religious matters and, occasionally, exchanged pulpits on a Sunday morning; and during the summer months, some of the Protestant churches held consolidated services. Concerning a meeting of the town’s Protestant ministers and lay delegates convened at the Central Square Congregational Church in December of 1903 to discuss the religious needs of the town, the Bridgewater Independent, perhaps a bit euphorically, opined “that we find today, instead of the old spirit which knew no tolerance of another creed, a gradual broadening of view, and a realization, -not perfect yet, but increasing—that the work for Christ need not be affected by points of theology.”  

Some of the older parishioners of St. Thomas Aquinas, the town’s only Roman Catholic Church, probably read these words with mixed emotions, as they remembered the initial opposition to the building of the small Catholic church on Centre Street fifty years earlier in a town dominated and controlled by English-Yankee Protestants. However, owing to the considerable influx of Irish immigrants fleeing the adverse conditions in their native land, this small parish became by the late 1800’s the one with the largest membership in Bridgewater. The growing congregation was accommodated by a major expansion of the sanctuary just before the turn of the century, adding to its uniqueness as the only brick church in Bridgewater the distinction of being its largest. In the early 1900’s, the Irish, many of them now born in Bridgewater, continued to make up by far the largest part of the congregation, but Catholics of other national origins, especially those with French-Canadian and Southern and Eastern European backgrounds had begun to join the church. Relations between the town Protestants, still the majority of the population, and Catholics were no longer marred by some of the misunderstandings and prejudices characteristic of prior times, but there were barriers that prevented fuller co-operation between the two major Christian groups. When the Bridgewater ministers met in December of 1903 to assess the religious conditions of the town, for example, the law of the Roman Catholic Church prevented the priests of St. Thomas Aquinas from attending the meeting. I hasten to add, however, that the clergy of both faiths got along well in Bridgewater, and the priests of St. Thomas Aquinas, in the words of the Independent, were “in sympathy with any movement which has for its object the arousing of interest in spiritual work.” Also, the clergy


of all the town churches agreed on one public policy--keeping Bridgewater in the no-license column when it came to the sale of alcoholic beverages. Cooperation of a different sort can be found in the unanimity in which all the churches expressed their sadness concerning such happenings as the assassination of President William McKinley in September of 1901, the devastating hurricane of the same year that destroyed Galveston, Texas, and the equally destructive San Francisco earthquake of 1906. With Samuel P. Gates acting as the local custodian of the money, all the churches contributed liberally to the San Francisco Relief Fund. Still, it should be kept in mind that despite the increasing role of the Irish Catholics in the town’s economic, social, cultural, and political life in the early 1900’s, Bridgewater remained largely dominated by English-Yankee Protestants, as it had been for over two and a half centuries.36

Whatever theological differences existed between Bridgewater churches, they all administered to the spiritual needs of their parishioners. Sunday, of course, was the busiest and most important day of the week for the town’s churches. As Dickinson Rich put it in her reminiscences: “In those days, nice people all went to one church or another.” The operative word in her statement was, of course, “nice,” and it should be noted that there were many other such people in town who did not attend church, a consideration which had prompted the ministers’ meeting in December of 1903. In any case, as she also points out, most churchgoers walked to church, making for a very quiet Sunday morning in the town’s center. Generally speaking, the Protestant churches had Sunday morning and evening services and a Sunday School session, all announced in the Bridgewater Independent on the previous Friday. Most churchgoers did not need to be reminded about their church’s Sunday schedule, but if any did forget, it was always pleasant to hear the mingling of the different sounds of church bells, especially in the village center, announcing that it was the Sabbath and that the place to be was in a house of worship. In the early 1900’s, St. Thomas Aquinas Church usually had two Sunday morning Masses, a Sunday afternoon Sunday School, followed later in the day by Vespers and Benediction. The religious aspects of church life, however, were not limited to Sunday. During the week, all of the town’s churches fostered the spiritual growth of its members by providing such activities as prayer meetings, choir rehearsals, special services or Masses, and Bible studies. The Lenten season, in particular the week preceding Easter Sunday,

36 *BI*, Dec. 18, 1903, April 27, 1906; see previous section on the Bridgewater churches in 1900.
was a busy time for all the churches of Bridgewater as they anticipated the most important day in the Christian calendar.  

While the main purpose of the Bridgewater churches was religious, they also provided a plethora of social, intellectual, and cultural activities for their members. Indeed, compared to a century later when Americans were to be inundated with options of how to use their “non-working” hours, the town’s churches in the early 1900’s, as was true in the nation as a whole, were central to the overall lives of many of Bridgewater’s six thousand or so inhabitants. Most churchgoers, moreover, probably did not separate their religious faith from their involvement in the myriad of church activities, since participation in church-related events contributed to a sense of fellowship, so important to the spiritual well-being of its parishioners and their church’s mission in the community.

Going to church suppers, sometimes served in the Town, Odd Fellows, or the Masonic Halls in Central Square or the Benevolent Hall on Center Street, a short walk from St. Thomas Aquinas, was always a special treat for many town inhabitants, since the era of eating out at a restaurant was not yet part of the lives of most Americans. Not to be missed were the strawberry festivals held by a number of the churches during the month of June. For those who sought intellectual nourishment, all the town’s churches, in varying degrees, sponsored lectures on any number of subjects. The Bridgewater churches also provided parishioners with many opportunities to use their leadership and/or organizational skills by serving on committees. Attending an annual church meeting or going to a social gathering to welcome a new minister or priest, or to say good-by to one, were events to which many church members looked forward. Others participated with enthusiasm in some church group which catered to their particular age or gender. All the churches had youth, men, and women organizations. The latter, such as the sewing circles of the New Jerusalem and Central Square Churches, the Women’s Alliance of the Unitarian Church, the Women’s Guild of Trinity Church, and the Married and Young Ladies’ Sodalities of St. Thomas Aquinas Church, served as forums in which women could express themselves in places beside the home, an important consideration in an America where women were struggling to attain equal rights.

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37 BI, June 20, 1902, Jan. 23, Sept. 18, 1903, July 29, Aug. 26, 1904, Dec. 22, 1905, July 26, 1906; Louise Dickinson Rich, *Innocence Under the Elms* (Orleans, Massachusetts: Parnassus Imprints, 1955), pp. 206-207; this source is a must for any one trying understand life in Bridgewater in the early years of the twentieth century, keeping in mind that it was written by an articulate women who, along with her sister Alice, had moved to Bridgewater in 1905 as a very young girl when her father became the editor of the *Bridgewater Independent*. 

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and opportunities. Although the churches were not the only institutions to do so, they did play a role in encouraging some of their members to take part in cultural activities such as athletics and theatrical productions. One thinks of Reverend James J. Farrelly, who, coming to Bridgewater in 1903, labored diligently and successfully to promote organized sports, music, and drama among the youth of St. Thomas Aquinas.  

Dates for the church picnics, fairs, and Christmas celebrations were the most likely ones to be noted on the calendar by church members. Usually held in June, a church had several options of where to hold its annual picnic or, as it was called in some cases, the Sunday School picnic. Having this get-together on the shore of Lake Nippenicket was a convenient choice since, beginning in the late 1890’s, this part of town could easily be reached by taking the Taunton trolley, a short trip made even more enjoyable in June when the open cars had replaced the closed winter ones. For those who enjoyed a pleasant but short walk, Carver Pond on Summer Street was another choice spot for a church picnic. Robbins Pond in East Bridgewater was sometimes the chosen destination, but horse and wagon transportation were required by those who could not or did not want to walk this far. On occasion, one of the churches might choose to hold this annual event at Highland Park in Brockton, a perfect location for those who wanted a trolley ride of some distance. Equally popular were the church annual fairs, which took place in the late spring, fall, or December, depending on the particular church. Usually, these money-raising events took place at the church itself, but not always. The fair or bazaar sponsored by the parish of St. Thomas Aquinas, as was the case for a number of its activities, was often held in the Town Hall in Central Square, perhaps because it was more easily reached by the general public than the church’s Centre Street location. In addition to their religious services, the Protestant churches of Bridgewater enjoyed yuletide festivities, centering around what was called the Christmas Tree.  

First Congregational Church--Unitarian

After this general look at the Bridgewater’s churches between 1901 and 1910, some specific

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remarks on each of them are in order, bearing in mind that they are all worthy of receiving extensive
treatment in individual historical monographs. Following chronological order, we begin with the
Unitarian Church, known historically as “The First Parish.” Some highlights of this church’s development
between 1716 and 1900, although presented in the previous section, are worth repeating. For over one
hundred years, this Congregational church, one of many in New England claiming a Puritan-Pilgrim
heritage, was known for its Trinitarian theology. Except for a Church of England society, which
sporadically held services in a small church erected on Main Street in 1748, the First Parish Meetinghouse
was where the overwhelming number of the inhabitants of Bridgewater’s South Parish worshipped.
During the 1820’s, as the old Bridgewater split into four smaller towns, the dominant position of the First
Parish Church, now part of the “new” Bridgewater, began to erode for a number of reasons. For one
thing, as the nineteenth century proceeded, churches of other Protestant denominations were being built in
the town. Secondly, as we have seen, the First Parish itself was reduced in membership by the schism in
the congregation between those adhering to Trinitarianism and those moving toward Unitarianism. And,
thirdly, the influx of immigrants, especially from famine-ravaged Ireland, had resulted in Bridgewater’s
first Catholic church, Saint Thomas Aquinas, which by the end of the nineteenth century had the largest
church building and membership of any of the town’s churches. Still, Bridgewater’s Unitarian Church in
the early 1900’s was active and proud of its distinction as the town’s oldest parish. 40

During the first decade of the twentieth century, three ministers served the Unitarian Church in
Bridgewater. At the beginning of 1901, Reverend Charles Adams Allen had filled the pulpit for almost
eight years and could take some of the credit for the fact that half of the church members at the turn of the
century had been added to the roles during his ministry. Described as “an earnest and liberal worker” who
was “indefatigable in his successful efforts to maintain a strong spirit in his church,” this Harvard
graduate of 1858 and the Meadville Theological School in Pennsylvania of 1864 took great care in
planning his sermons, something appreciated by a congregation boasting a good number of the town’s
substantial and educated citizens. In true Unitarian style, Allen’s first sermon of 1901 was about the
advancements to expect during the twentieth century, perhaps anticipating the so-called Progressive Era, a
period of social, economic, cultural, and political reform that characterized America life during the

40 See the previous section on the First Parish of Bridgewater.
following two decades. Quite early in 1901, he also announced the titles of his sermons for the next few months. But in July, much to the regret of the parishioners, with whom he had the most “friendly relations,” Allen announced that he planned to leave Bridgewater to go to a church in Waverley, Massachusetts, a location more accessible to the intellectual resources of Boston. As we shall see, Allen was not the only minister to leave Bridgewater around this time. As the Independent put it: “Another minister gone from Bridgewater. How we do lose them!” 41

In September of 1902, a year after Allen’s departure, Reverend Cicero A. Henderson commenced his pastorate at the church. Much younger than his predecessor, the new minister was only twenty-seven on his arrival in Bridgewater. After assisting his father on the family farm in Missouri and attending district schools, he went on to graduate from the Missouri State University in 1898 and, then, studied at Harvard’s Divinity School. Planned by a large committee and attended by many parishioners and other townspeople, a reception for him and his wife was held in the church parlors, which, I assume, were in the Parish House erected in 1880. His first two years of ministry must have been more than satisfactory since, in April of 1904, William H Sanderson, superintendent of the growing and “larger then ever,” Sunday School, was asked by the parish “to convey to the pastor…the appreciation of the society of his work, and their gratification at the prospects of his continued service.” Several months later, continuing the church’s stress on the social gospel, Henderson’s sermon topic was entitled “We Believe in the Brotherhood of Man.” The Normal School, across School Street, thought highly enough of him to ask him to preach the baccalaureate sermon before its graduating class of 1905. His topic, taken from the words of Isaiah, “And a man shall be a hiding place from the storm and a covert from the wind,” was certainly weighty enough for a man just turning thirty. Between 1903 and 1906, he was also actively engaged in the efforts of the town’s Protestant churches to co-operate in a number of ways. In December of 1903, speaking at the meeting held in the Central Square Church to assess the town’s religious needs, Henderson proposed a plan of holding union services on Sunday afternoons at which representatives from the different town churches would be asked to speak. Nothing came of this suggestion, but the Unitarian Church continued to support union services on certain holidays such as Thanksgiving Day. On this day in

41 BI, Jan. 4, Feb. 22, April 26, July 5, Aug. 2, Sept. 27, 1901; Bridgewater Book, p. 40; The First Parish Unitarian Church, Bridgewater, Massachusetts. “An accounting of its history as revealed by its records,” Written, Compiled and Edited by Dorothy L. Mann and Anne H. Bates, pp. 74-76, referred to subsequently as “An accounting….”
1904, for example, Henderson was asked to read the scriptures at the service conducted in the Baptist Church. Several months earlier he had exchange pulpits with Reverend Charles E. Stowe of the Central Square Church, an indication that the old split between the Trinitarians and Unitarians was no longer a festering issue between the two churches. Henderson also attended and, at times, hosted the meetings of the Bridgewater ministers. Yet, it appears that he was not completely fulfilled in his Bridgewater ministry, and in the fall of 1906 he tendered his resignation. At the urging of the church’s society, he agreed to stay on, but two years later he resigned. 42

Henderson was replaced by Reverend Harold G. Arnold, who, arriving in Bridgewater on September 1, 1908, made his home with Mr. and Mrs. Charles Perkins of South Street. Between 1908 and 1910, following in Henderson’s footsteps, he favored the Unitarian Church’s involvement in the union Thanksgiving services and delivered the Baccalaureate sermon to the 1910 graduating class of the Normal School. At the annual parish meeting in April of 1910, Arnold was pleased to note that church’s “present conditions” were most favorable. In the same week, he addressed a meeting of the Woman’s Alliance of the church on “Some Late Gleanings from the Parish Records” and, in November of the same year, spoke to the Ousamequin Club on “The Early History of Bridgewater.” His pastorate, which ended in 1913, will be discussed more fully in the next chapter. 43

While the ministers in the early 1900’s were central to the mission of Bridgewater’s Unitarian Church (mostly recently enunciated in a covenant adopted on November 3, 1895) and expected to preach sermons along “liberal lines,” showing great concern for the social gospel, the laity played a paramount role in running the church through its committees, clubs, and parish meetings, especially the annual one held in the church parlors during the month of April. At this point in my research, I do not have membership or attendance figures for this church between 1901 and 1910, but a few general points can be made. It certainly had nowhere near the membership of St. Thomas Aquinas and no longer was the largest Protestant congregation in Bridgewater, a distinction that now belonged to the Central Square Church. Not surprisingly, almost all the parishioners of the Unitarian Church, or The First Parish as it was frequently called, tended to have Yankee-English backgrounds. The membership roll included surnames

of families long established in Bridgewater, but also new ones more recent to the town. For those who have been reading this weighty tome, perhaps the following prominent names on the membership list of the First Parish in the early 1900’s are recognizable: John H. Ball, J. Gardner Bassett, Hollis M. Blackstone, Harry A. Blake, Harry W. Bragdon, Lucia Christian, Ernest L. Cook, Isaac Damon, Albert J. Elwell, George W. Folsom, A. H. Hobart, George M Hooper, Martha Keith, Flora T. Little, Dr. C. J. Mercer, Isaac A. Phinney, Henry C. Pratt, Gustavas Pratt, and William H. Sanderson. This is hardly an all-inclusive list and does not do justice to the wives of many of the men on the list. Indeed, a thorough history of the church would show that much of the work of the parish was done by women parishioners. 44

The parishioners on the preceding list and, indeed, many other church members contributed to making the First Parish a viable church organization in the early years of the twentieth century. Evolving from the tradition of the South Precinct Committee, when the South Parish was still part of the original Bridgewater, the Parish Committee of the Unitarian Church, whose members were elected at the annual meeting, carried on the business of the church, including the calling of the ministers. Varying in size over the years, it was voted in 1907 to reduce the committee’s membership from eleven to seven. In that year, two women were elected to serve—Mrs. Walter S. Little and Mrs. Isaac R. Alden. 45

The role of women in the parish, however, perhaps can be better illustrated by three organizations that contributed greatly to the success of the overall life of the church. While not as old as the Ladies’ Sewing Circle of the New Jerusalem Church, which was founded in 1856, the Unitarian Sewing Circle also dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century. If this organization fulfilled a social need for the church women, it also worked to promote the well-being of the church and its many missions, such as assisting those in need. The records of Bridgewater’s Unitarian Church indicate that its sewing circle, for example, donated one thousand dollars for the new chapel in 1880. From 1901 to 1910, this active group held meetings in homes of members and in the church parlors, as well putting on its annual sale and supper each December. An equally important organization for the woman at the First Parish was the Women’s Alliance, which was formed in 1898, the same year the Ousamequin Club of

43 “An Accounting…,” p. 76; BI, Sept. 4, 1908, Nov. 26, 1909, April 8, June 24, Nov. 11, 1910.
45 “An accounting…,” p. 23; BI, April 25, 1902, April 17, 1903, April 15, 1904, April 19, 1907.
Bridgewater was established. Affiliated with other such Alliances, the one at Bridgewater’s Unitarian Church was very active in the early 1900’s, holding regular meetings, having discussions, listening to invited speakers, and electing “benevolent,” “cheerful letter,” and “social” committees. A third women’s group at the Unitarian Church was a chapter of the King’s Daughters, an international order founded in the late nineteenth century, whose members believed that by serving others they were working to establish Christ’s Kingdom here on the earth. Officially known as Harmony Circle of King’s Daughters at the Unitarian Church, this group had some of the same members who served in the Women’s Alliance and Sewing Circle. And, like these two organizations, the Harmony Circle sponsored social events, including tea parties in the church parlors. Reports given at the annual meetings in the early 1900’s suggests that modest amounts of money were realized by the Circle’s activities. At this point, however, I need to know something about how this local chapter sought to fulfill the international organization’s motto of “Not to be ministered unto, but to minister” (Mark 10:45). In any case, we shall hear more about The King’s Daughters, since the Unitarian Church was not the only Protestant church in Bridgewater to have a local chapter of this organization in the early 1900’s.  

Women were not the only ones to establish and be involved in organizations at the Unitarian Church. The Unity Club, which included men and women of the parish, was very active in the early 1900’s, holding business meetings, sponsoring suppers and get-togethers on such holidays as Halloween, and enriching the intellectual life of the church by engaging guest speakers. For example, in November of 1907, about a year after he became the principal of the Normal School, A. C. Boyden spoke to a sizable audience in the parlors of the church about the “vast achievements of this age.” In early 1903, the young people of the church met to form a society ( I need to know more about this). Clubs for boys and men, such as the Knights of King Arthur, were also part of parish life. The men of the church liked assembling for a good supper, followed by listening to an invited speaker; the address on tuberculosis research by Doctor Coolidge of the New State Sanitarium in nearby Middleboro, on October 28, 1909, was interesting and instructive since this dreaded communicable disease was still not an easy one to cure. Even the

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children of the Sunday School, at a meeting in Reverend Arnold’s study on November 17, 1908, formed the Lend-a-Hand Club. Thus, for whatever reasons—spiritual, social, or charitable—the members of Bridgewater’s Unitarian Church in the early 1900’s, a time in which organization was becoming an important ingredient of American life, enriched their lives by participating in the many activities of their church.47

Music, both sacred and secular, and theatrical presentations were very much part of the life of the First Parish between 1901 and 1910. In 1851, six years after the present church was erected, the parish voted “to dispose” the organ given to it in 1835 by Abram Washburn and “to procure a new one…. The E. & G G. Hook organ installed in 1852 remained in use in the early 1900’s, as it continues to be in the early 2000’s. Between 1896 and 1905, Annie M. Keith was the organist (Mrs. H. P. Shaw is listed as an organist in 1907) and was assisted by vocal soloists, including Carrie Cole (later Mrs. George Barney), who also sang in the church’s quartet. On important occasions, especially at Easter and Christmas, instrumentalists, such as Robert H. Ferguson, the town’s well-known cornetist, added their talents to the worship service. A series of Vesper services on Sunday afternoons in the first part of 1904 is worth noting. Under the direction of organist Keith, the musical part of these well-attended services was of a high order, featuring anthems sung by a double quartet made up of church singers and soloists from other communities, including Boston. The congregation also came to expect fine music at Christmas, as in 1907 when one of the duets from Handel’s Messiah was rendered. These foregoing examples only touch upon the topic of music at the Unitarian Church during the early 1900’s, but they do illustrate the quality of sacred music at the First Parish. 48

Performances at the church were not limited to religious music. In February of 1902, the musical “Messmates” was presented in the church parlors, netting ninety dollars—a tidy sum in those days—for the Unitarian music fund. Members of the parish and cast undoubtedly enjoyed the dinner given to them by the ladies of the Sewing Circle a few weeks later. Some of the musical-theatrical productions put on by the church were held on the second floor of the Town Hall, which in the early 1900’s could almost be

labeled what we would later call a community center. Held at the Town Hall in October of 1902, the Brownie Ball, an operetta under the direction of the ladies of the parish, delighted the audiences with its “many dances and good singing.” Three years later, the Unitarian society, as it was often called, conducted a successful entertainment which included character sketches, vocal selections, fancy step dancing, cake walking, and a one act farce, The Rubber Boots. Perhaps the minstrel show put on by the men and the women of the church in the Town Hall in February of 1905, two years before the state forbade the use of the stage if the curtain or stage lights were used, was the Unitarian’s most elaborate production of the decade, a time in which the offensive nature of such shows, especially for America’s black community, was not yet recognized. The Bridgewater Independent commented on the success of the performance by writing: “The ladies and gentlemen of the Unitarian church made a decided hit Wednesday evening and repeated their triumph last evening, when they appeared in blackface on the stage of the town hall before very large audiences.” Not only did women make up the better part of the cast, they also filled the positions of director, interlocutor, and two of the end “men.” It might also be noted that Ferguson’s orchestra furnished music for both nights, and Annie M. Keith acted as the accompanist for the soloist and chorus.49

To fulfill religious and cultural goals, it was important for the church to maintain and improve its grounds and physical plant. The old burial ground was half of the two-acre plot of land donated in 1717 by Rebecca and John Washburn for the establishment of a house of worship in the newly established South Parish. After the creation of Mount Prospect Cemetery in 1842, the old graveyard was seldom used for burials. But, by the early 1900’s, it was recognized as one of the most important historical spots in Bridgewater, deserving of an appropriate amount of care. The town formally agreed in 1904 to maintain most of the early cemeteries by placing them under the care of the street department, headed for almost twenty years by Robert McNeeland. His annual reports from 1901 to 1910 clearly show that the burial ground of the First Parish received the most attention. In March of 1911, the sizable expenditure of four hundred dollars was approved at the town meeting for the rebuilding “with cement mortar the wall on the three sides of the cemetery near the Unitarian Church” and the repairing of the “tomb.” 50

50 “Annual Town Meeting, March 7, 1904,” Annual Town Report, 1904, p. 14; “Annual Town Meeting, March 6,
The First Parish, nevertheless, still owned the old burial ground and did its part in keeping up its good condition. After getting permission from the state in March of 1902 and from the town in March of 1903, the church, with aim of preventing flooding at the junction of Summer and Plymouth Streets, began making plans to change the line of its cemetery by moving the stone wall back from the road. Meanwhile, in August of 1903, the Bridgewater Village Improvement Society, as it was still called, began considering a plan to improve the old Unitarian grave yard and, in the following month, was more than willing to meet with a committee from the church that had the same aim. The prospects for fruitful co-operation between the two committees were more than auspicious since some of the same people were active in both the church and the improvement society, including Sanderson and Flora Little. By the middle of November, thanks to this co-operation and the help of the town, much of the needed renovation had been finished, including the moving and the rebuilding of the wall, the laying of a sidewalk on the street side, and the cutting down of several small trees, “allowing more room for healthier specimens.” Plans for the future included the planting of vines along the walls, the straightening of the gravestones, and the tearing down and rebuilding of the stone wall that would soon be facing the new gym of the Normal School on School Street. 51

As all this work was being done, the parishioners were already enjoying some of the improvements to the church itself, made possible by the money received from the state by the sale of the land in front of the church. During its first half century or so, the building had not been neglected, but had sustained severe damage on September 7, 1887, when it was struck by lightning during a fierce thunderstorm. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the church was in need of much interior and exterior work. Richmond of Brockton was hired as the contractor, and the repairs began in late July of 1902. The entire structure was painted outside, making this nineteenth century Greek Revival meetinghouse even more pleasing to passersby. Perhaps the parishioners were more taken by the changes made to the interior of the church. The upper parts of the walls and a new ceiling were painted in


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watercolors, while the lower walls were decorated in oil colors. Pale green and maroon were the general colors used. The pulpit and the organ console were re-varnished and organ pipes re-gilded. Indicative of the times, the whole edifice was wired for electric lights. Adding to these changes, which were completed in the fall of 1902, the annual meeting of the church, in April of 1903, also voted to have the church pews thoroughly repaired. At the next annual meeting, H. W. Bragdon, the church’s treasurer, and J. Gardner Bassett, the treasurer for the trustees of the parish fund, gave encouraging reports on the parish’s finances and the investment funds, which had made possible the renovations of the church building. By the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, then, the Unitarian Church of Bridgewater, if no longer boasting the largest church membership in Bridgewater, had a refurbished sanctuary, a solid financial position, and was making an important religious and cultural contribution not only to the lives of its members, but also to the Bridgewater community in general. Fortunately, a fire in April of 1910 was discovered before it became a major calamity for the church, although damages, totaling about a thousand dollars, were sustained when the dining room and chapel were deluged with water.  

Trinity Episcopal Church

Bridgewater’s Trinity Episcopal Church on the corner of Pearl and Main Streets, a location quickly reached from the northern end of the Common, could in the early 1900’s, along with the First Parish, point to its eighteenth century origins, although its existence for many years had been far more tenuous than that of Bridgewater’s oldest church. As briefly discussed in the previous section, this small Anglican-Episcopal organization, housed in a small and somewhat unfinished building on the upper reaches of Main Street, struggled to keep going from its founding in the late 1740’s until the close of the War of 1812. Prospects for the town’s Episcopal society brightened, however, after the Trinity Church was incorporated on June 14, 1815. Between 1836 and 1884, a period of both “adversity and prosperity” for the church, parishioners worshipped in their second Main Street building, which Joshua E. Crane, the town’s unofficial historian, extolled as one of “the finest buildings of that day” found in the town’s “rural

52 BL, July 4, 25, Sept. 26, 1902, April 17, 1903, April 8, 1910; “An accounting…,” p. 114; HH, pp. 64,181.
landscape.” Then, the third house of worship, a picturesque wooden structure, was erected in the early 1880’s, where the town’s Episcopalians still worship in the early years of the twenty-first century. 53

The years between 1901 and 1910 were generally good ones for the Trinity Church. During the course of the decade, this Protestant Episcopal parish had three well-liked and able ministers (rectors). Its congregation was relatively small, but had a solid number of very active members, some from families long affiliated with the parish, some who had more recently moved into Bridgewater. Whatever their backgrounds, the communicants of Trinity found much of their Christian faith expressed in the liturgy of solemn and formal worship services, which frequently included the celebration of Holy Communion. This did not mean, however, that good sermons, even those expressing the message of the social gospel, and fine music were not appreciated by those attending Sunday morning and evening services, which, by the way, became even brighter moments in the lives of the parishioners after the church was wired for electricity in August of 1903. For the laity of this church, there were plenty of opportunities in these years to be actively involved in the overall life of the parish, whether by serving in its governing structure or taking part in one of the many clubs formed to enrich the lives of their participants and, in some cases, to extend a helping hand to others outside the church community. 54

Usually, the churches of Bridgewater, a small community of several thousand inhabitants in the early 1900’s, were able to attract well-qualified pastors, but retaining them for long periods of time proved to be problematic. This was so with the Trinity Episcopal Church. In November of 1900, Reverend J. Rockwood Jenkins, a graduate of Harvard and of the Cambridge Theological School, became the rector of Trinity, after serving two churches in Ohio. From the outset of his pastorate, this young minister was well-liked and active in church and community affairs. His main work naturally centered around his religious duties--conducting the Sunday morning and evening services, preaching sermons, teaching a Bible class, and presiding at baptisms, weddings and funerals. An especially rewarding task was to prepare a class of usually around ten young people for their confirmation as members of the church, which was formally done by The Right Reverend William Lawrence, D. D., Bishop of Eastern Massachusetts, in April of each year at a service held in the church. On occasions, Jenkins also preached

53 Crane, p. 783; Townscape Institute, Form 105, pp. 283-284; HII, pp. 64-65; Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, pp. 25-26, includes two excellent pictures; Peters, “Trinity Church, Bridgewater,” p. 226; see previous section on Trinity Church.
in places outside the parish such as the Bridgewater State Farm, St. Paul’s Church in Brockton, and Odd Fellows, where he gave the Thanksgiving sermon at a Union Service in 1901, less than a year after arriving in Bridgewater. Always willing to do more than his share to promote the many activities of the church, he not only attended many of the meetings of the various parish organizations, but at some of them gave illustrated talks on a number of topics. On top of all of this, Jenkins was concerned with the betterment of his adopted town, acting, for example, as the chairman of the committee in 1901 that drew up the constitution for the newly created Village Improvement Society, which in 1904 would change its name to the Bridgewater Improvement Association.\footnote{BI, March 28, Aug. 21, September 18, 1903, July 29, 1904.}

It was with some surprise, therefore, that as early as November of 1903, he spoke to his parishioners of his desires to sometime in the future “take up mission work in some of the western states.” This desire became a reality in early 1905, when Jenkins announced his resignation in order to fulfill his next professional goal. The members of the Trinity vestry, the church’s elected ruling body, passed a resolution expressing its appreciation of the able and willing way in which he had “always exercised …his duties as the Rector of our church…”\footnote{BI, Nov. 1, 1903, Jan. 27, Feb. 3, 10, 24, 1905.}

When Jenkins left Trinity on March 1, 1905, the members of the vestry moved with dispatch to seek a replacement. By the end of the month, it looked as if they had succeeded. Samuel McComb, a native of Scotland, a graduate of Oxford University, and, for a short time, a professor at the Presbyterian University in Canada, showed a strong interest in the position. The vestry, however, could only offer him the job of lay reader since he was still studying for the Episcopal ministry at the Harvard Theological School in Cambridge and would not be ordained for another year. In the end, McComb did not accept the offer to lead Trinity Church in Bridgewater since, evidently, he was wanted by “one of the big churches in Boston.” Along with Henry T. Burrill, who was the clerk of the church, and several guest preachers, McComb did his part to keep the church going during the next several months by filling the pulpit during the Sundays of August.\footnote{“First Meeting of the Bridgewater Improvement Society, April 29, 1901,” Volume One-through March 23, 1948, pp. 5-6, 11-14 of this unpublished record.; BI, Jan 11, May 3, Sept. 27, Nov. 22, Dec. 20, 1901, March 28, April 4, Oct. 24, Dec. 19, 1902. Jan. 23, April 13, Sept. 18, Nov. 1, Dec. 25, 1903, March 18, Dec. 2, 30, 1904, Feb. 24, 1905.}

In the meantime, Reverend William R. Scarritt, D. D., of Cambridge, had agreed to become the
next rector of Trinity. Before his arrival on September first, the church and the rectory underwent “a thorough overhauling and repairing…. “ About a week after preaching his first sermon at Trinity, the Independent “congratulated” the church for choosing a new rector “whose attainments are of a high order.” Born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri, Scarritt was educated at Yale, Amherst, and the Union Theological Seminary in New York. After his ordination, he served churches in Iowa, and in the cities of Chicago, New York, and St. Louis. In the two years before coming to Bridgewater, he had not been a pastor, but had resided in Cambridge with his family, including a son who was attending Harvard. 58

During Scarritt’s pastorate at Trinity, which only lasted about three years, things seemed to go well. Early in 1906, the treasurer of the church was able to report that the financial condition of the parish was “very favorable.” The music, whether at the services or at special concerts, became an even more notable part of the church’s appeal, not only to its members but to other people in the town. Dr. Scarritt’s main work centered around his religious leadership at Trinity, but some of his time was taken up by other commitments. In June of 1906, for example he preached the baccalaureate sermon at Trinity to the last graduating class of the Normal School under the principalship of Albert Gardner Boyden. In a very traditional statement of Christian theology, he told the assembly of graduates: “All culture has no power to satisfy; aside from the preaching of Jesus Christ, only through the gospel can man be satisfied and saved.” It would appear, however, that Scarritt did not speak as often as Jenkins had at the meetings of the various church organizations. Nor does it seem that he was particularly involved with the other clergy in town or active in the civic life of Bridgewater. One event of significant historical note during Scarritt’s pastorate occurred in May of 1907, namely the celebration of the 160th anniversary of the church’s founding, making it the third oldest parish in the diocese. Indeed, the Trinity Church of Bridgewater was “the mother church from which many others in this vicinity” had sprung. 59

Dr. Scarritt, most likely not contemplating a long tenure at Trinity, was succeeded in 1908 by Reverend Joseph R. Eames, who, as it turned out, would remain as the rector of the church until March of

57 BI, March 31, April 28, May 5, June 30, July 28, 1905.
58 BI, July 28, Aug. 11, Sept. 8, 1905.
59 BI, Dec. 22, 1905, Jan. 6, March 2, June 22, 29, July 26, 1906, May 24, 1907; during the 160th anniversary service, the tune of Lenox was sung, which was written in 1782 by Lewis Edson, one of the wardens of this struggling Church of England society and whose ancestor, Samuel Edson, had given fourteen acres of land in 1747 for the building of the first church; see Albert Christ-Janer, Charles W. Hughes, and Carleton Sprague Smith. American Hymns-Old and New (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 218.
1917. At the end of his eight-year ministry, Eames’s relatively long pastorate placed him as the senior member of Bridgewater’s Protestant clergymen. It was during his pastorate that Trinity, in September of 1909, celebrated the 25th anniversary of the dedication of its third church building. In a sermon on the history of the church, Eames appropriately based his talk on these words from the gospel of John: “Others have labored and ye are entered into their labors.” Perhaps to remind parishioners of the importance of the second half of this verse, he preached a sermon around a month later about their church obligations and the need not to be disheartened when spiritual goals are not attained immediately. Not long before Christmas of 1909, Eames must have been pleased by an invitation from Bishop Lawrence to all the clergy of the diocese to celebrate Holy Communion at St. Paul’s Church in Boston. A luncheon and social time that followed at the Bishop’s residence on Commonwealth Avenue proved to be “a delightful occasion” and most likely was a brief respite from the many duties Eames had to perform as the spiritual leader of Bridgewater’s second oldest church. In any case, we will have more to say about him in the next chapter.  

At this point in my research, I do not have specific membership figures for the church, but the figure of about one hundred, I suspect, would not be too far off. What is clear is that the administering of the temporal affairs of the parish was in the hands of a vestry composed of the rector and a group of elected parishioners, the latter being chosen at the meeting of the Trinity Church Corporation in April of each year. New members of the church were also formally admitted at these annual meetings. During the years from 1901 to 1910, the vestry consisted of nine members, including a senior warden, a junior warden, a clerk, and a treasurer. Two things are apparent about the members of the vestry at this time. They were all male, in contrast to the make-up of the governing body of the Unitarian church, and most all of them hailed from a small group of well-known Bridgewater families, with the Burrill, Johnson, Marshall, McNeeland, and Wilbar names most prevalent. Most likely, Henry T. Burrill, the sole proprietor of the town’s second oldest store after 1902, Robert J. McNeeland, Bridgewater’s superintendent of streets, and Charles A. Wilbar, the town’s postmaster, were the most familiar names to Trinity’s parishioners and, indeed, to other inhabitants of the town.  

At their monthly and special meetings, usually in the rectory, the vestry met with the rector to

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discuss and take action on a host of matters concerning the church’s finances, the maintenance of the sanctuary and rectory, and, as we have seen, choosing a new rector when the need arose. Some members of the vestry were also elected at the annual meeting to represent the parish at the yearly diocesan convention. Not all the tasks of the vestry, however, were of such weighty importance. On January 9, 1901, perhaps to get the new year and century off to a good start, the vestry sponsored a turkey supper and a social for all the parishioners, including the young people of high school age. Held in the Masonic Hall in Central Square, around seventy-five attendees enjoyed the repast and the entertainment that followed, which included the reading of the *Madness of Philip* by Myrtie Snow, the popular English teacher at Bridgewater’s high school. I am not sure who cooked and served this supper, but usually this type of work was left to the women of church. Maybe this time was an exception.  

Whether by choice, rules, or tradition, women did not serve on Trinity’s vestry between 1901 and 1910. Yet, the church would not have been a going concern without their dedication and hard work during these years, a fact that is so apparent when reading the weekly accounts in the *Independent* of the doings at Trinity. And, unlike the small and tightly-knit group of men holding seats in the vestry, it appears that a very high percentage of the church women, including the wives of vestry members, were active participants in the women’s organizations of the church, including the Altar Guild, the Women’s Heart Society (Trinity’s local branch of the King’s Daughters), and, especially, the all-important Women’s Guild. It was under the auspices of this latter group that important annual social events took place, which raised money for the church, with some of it going toward missionary work. At regular, special, and annual meetings, often held at some member’s home, the well-organized Women’s Guild planned their yearly events--the Easter sale and supper, the May Dance, and the Christmas Sale. Since the church did not have the facilities to accommodate these gatherings, the Guild used the Town and Odd Fellows Halls in Central Square, locations well-suited for luring not only church members but also other townspeople, who liked buying things and sitting down to a good homemade meal. These social events were highlights in the church calendar, with perhaps some more noteworthy than others. The annual Christmas sale and supper in 1903 proved especially lucrative, adding $150 to the church treasury; and, as

61 BI, April 12, Dec. 27, 1901, April 4, Aug. 15, 1902, April 8, 1904, June 30, 1905, April 20, 1906, April 1, 1910.  
part of the Easter sale in April of 1904, about two hundred people sat down to the supper in Odd Fellows Hall. In the following month the yearly May dance, which featured music by Dunphe’s orchestra, was averred to be “the greatest success of any the organization has given.” Just as important as the amount of money raised at these annual suppers, sales and dances, was the fellowship they afforded to those women who worked so hard to make them successful and to other parish members and outsiders who looked forward to these church get-togethers.63

The Women’s Guild, in addition to sponsoring these fundraising and social events, showed considerable interest in missionary work, although almost no denomination, including the Protestant Episcopal, at this time ordained women to the ministry. In May of 1902, for instance, considerable missionary work was planned in a meeting held at the South Street home of Mrs. Calvin Pratt, wife of one of Bridgewater’s prominent doctors. In another meeting at Pratt’s house in September, “sewing was begun for a missionary barrel to be sent south” that winter. Most of the guild’s missionary endeavors were done in affiliation with the Massachusetts Branch of the Women’s Auxiliary to the Board of Missions of the Episcopal Church. Trinity was represented in this organization by a delegate sent to its monthly meetings held at St. Paul’s Chapel in Boston. Trinity’s delegations also attended annual conferences of this organization specifically convened for the Episcopal churches in southeastern Massachusetts. In November of 1902, this gathering took place at Trinity Church in Bridgewater. After hearing a missionary address by Reverend L. B. Ridgely of Wuchang, China, over one hundred delegates, perhaps noticing the noise produced by the trolleys as they turned the corner near Simmon’s meat market, made their way to Odd Fellows in Central Square for a luncheon prepared by the women of the Bridgewater Guild. An even larger conference was held six years later in Bridgewater, where two hundred women from Episcopal churches in southeastern Massachusetts, after enjoying a noonday meal served under the direction of the Trinity Guild, returned to the church (this time taking note of the increasing number of automobiles along Main Street perhaps) to hear comments from three women on missionary work in China, Mexico, and Alaska. In a community of about seven thousand inhabitants, this gathering near the center of the town

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could hardly have gone unnoticed. 64

Women’s groups were not the only organizations at Trinity during the early 1900’s. The Young Men’s Club of the parish was especially active between 1901 and 1902, owing in good measure to Reverend Jenkins’s interest and support. Among the more involved members of this group was Frederick McNeeland, son of vestryman Robert J. In his early twenties and not yet married, the younger McNeeland, who would establish the Bridgewater Ice and Coal Company in 1909, was poised in the early 1900’s to follow in his father’s shoe steps and become a leading member of the Trinity parish. Usually holding its regular meetings in the rectory, this young men’s group, which was formally organized, was particularly concerned with current events, historical topics, and town issues. In an age before the advent of radio, television, or computers, it is understandable that young men of the parish, who probably read the newspapers, carefully listened to and then spiritedly discussed a “capital” paper on “Current Events,” read by Ernest Burrill at the meeting of January 2, 1901. Given the Anglican background of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States, it is also not surprising that the club devoted its meeting of February 19 to exploring the life and rule of Queen Victoria, whose death a month earlier had ended a reign of over sixty years. The Young Men’s Club was also fortunate in securing speakers from the town and, especially, the Normal School. Principal Boyden and Professor William D. Jackson addressed the club about Bridgewater and the need of its young men to be aware of their civic duties. Henry W. Bragdon, associated with the Bridgewater Savings Bank since the 1880’s, was invited to one meeting and gave a talk on the workings of the cotton gin and, specifically, the history of the factory on Pearl Street, which, at this time, was part of a national conglomeration known at the Continental Gin Company.

Interest in the club appears to have waned after 1902, or, at least, its activities, if any, ceased to be reported in the Bridgewater Independent. 65

Four other clubs at Trinity during the early 1900’s deserve at least a word or two. Most of the boys of the parish were enrolled in The Silver Shield Club, an organization that, as in the case of the young men’s group, relied heavily on the guidance of Rector Jenkins. Among its major activities was the


fielding of a baseball team, which played games on the old Fair Grounds off of Broad Street against such competitors as the Boys Club of St. Paul’s Church in Brockton and the East Bridgewater “Reds.” It also participated in the parish fair in April of 1901, sponsored by the Women’s Guild, by providing a table and shooting gallery. Several months later, its members boarded a special trolley car and headed for a picnic at Brockton’s Highland Park, which, by the way, was at times the site of Trinity’s Sunday School picnics. There was no men’s organization per se at this time, but some Trinity men were involved in Bridgewater’s “branch” of the Roger Wolcott Club of Good Citizens. Meeting in the Masonic Hall in Central Square, this club elected officers, admitted new members, and invited men of the town to give informal talks on different historical and general subjects. Among other speakers were Reverends Charles E. Stowe of Central Square Church; Jenkins, who gave a short illustrated lecture on Washington, D. C., in January of 1903; and George A. Turner, who represented Bridgewater in the state legislature. Another indication of Reverend Jenkins’s energetic leadership at Trinity Church was the formation in October of 1904 of a social club, which drew up a constitution and included members of both genders. The first president was Rector Jenkins, but women held the other offices and were equally represented on the executive board. Known as the Trinity Club, one of its first monthly meetings was a Halloween party held at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Robert J. McNeeland on Union Street. Around forty guests enjoyed the novelty of wearing grotesque costumes and masks and, without a doubt, the refreshments that were served. 66

On a more aesthetic and, certainly, more religious “note,” this discussion of Bridgewater’s Trinity Parish between 1901 and 1910, as brief as it is, needs to include a few words about the important role of music at the church. Partly because of the liturgical nature of the Episcopal religious services, the singing of the choir at Trinity was a more integral part of formal worship than was the case in the other Bridgewater Protestant churches. While anthems and solos were certainly rendered, many parts of the Sunday services, such as the Te Deum and Kyrie, were sung, with the choir leading the congregation. For some parishioners in the early 1900’s, participation in the church choir was not only an important aspect of their religious lives, but also a venue for their musical talents. Most of the choir members also enjoyed

Bridgewater,” p. 228.
the sociability of attending a weekly choir rehearsal, especially in an era when the array of secular activities was somewhat limited in a small town like Bridgewater.  

Several choirmaster-organists served the church from 1901 to 1910, accounting, I suspect, for some variation in the size and the quality of Trinity’s choir. In early 1901, it was reported that “the choir is improving steadily under the direction of the new choir master Mr. Howard O. Wood.” In the spring of that year, the “young ladies from Howard Seminary” contributed their earnings from their table at Trinity’s Easter Sale to the church’s music fund, an indication, however minor, that music was taken seriously at the town’s Episcopal church. Easter and Christmas services would not have been as keenly appreciated by parishioners had it not been for the special music presented on these important days of the church calendar. It must have been impressive, indeed, to have seen and heard the new vested choir of about thirty-five members, aided by a soloist from Boston’s Emanuel Church, in its first appearance on December 24, 1905. At this point, Trinity’s choir was under the direction of John B. Heber, who in the fall of the following year would become the Supervisor of Music in Bridgewater’s public schools, a position he held only for a short time, however. In the early months of 1906, the parish’s music program was broadened under him to include two concerts given in the Town Hall for the benefit of Trinity’s choir, one featuring a variety of musical talents, the other consisting of choral pieces sung by the “young ladies” of Howard Seminary Glee Club, who “came down from West Bridgewater in a special car….”

Heber did not stay long at Trinity, and during the last three years of the decade the church employed several other organist-choir directors, with Mrs. A. G. Locke, whose husband was the proprietor of a men’s clothing store in Odd Fellows building, remaining at the post the longest. In the fall of 1909, the appointment of H. O. Wetherell of Middleboro, “a musician of well known ability,” as Trinity’s organist and choir master and the rebuilding of the organ, which improved its “quality and volume of tone,” augured well for the future quality of music at the church. A year later, perhaps trying to imitate the sound of boy choirs in larger communities or in preparatory schools, Trinity’s was “greatly augmented and strengthened by the introduction into it of seven boys, all possessing voices of unusual

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67 BI, Dec. 20, 1901, June 13, Dec. 19, 1902, April 1, 8, Dec. 23, 1904, April 28, 1905, April 26, 1906, March 29, 1907, Dec. 23, 1910; two of the soloists often cited in the early 1900’s were Marion Leach and Edward M. Alden; Peters, “Trinity Church, Bridgewater,” p. 228.

Scotland Congregational Church

While the First Parish and Trinity had the distinction of tracing their organizations back to the eighteenth century, the parishioners of the Scotland Trinitarian Congregational Church could boast in 1901 that their simple meetinghouse, built in 1822, on Pleasant Street in the southwestern part of the town, was the oldest extant house of worship in Bridgewater. Since the nineteenth century history of this church is briefly discussed in the previous section, only a few points of review need be made here. Originally known as the Trinitarian Congregational Church of Bridgewater, this new parish in Scotland flourished under the leadership of Reverend Ebenezer Gay. It became apparent in the 1830’s, however, that the great majority of the congregation wanted to erect a new sanctuary in the village center. When this was done, about thirty parishioners decided to remain at the original meeting house, forming a new church organization on July 3, 1836, with “Scotland” as part of its name. Compared to the Trinitarian Congregational Church in Central Square, the one in Scotland struggled during the nineteenth century to maintain an acceptable level of membership. Nonetheless, it continued to be an essential part of this section of Bridgewater. In the fall of 1891, this small parish of less than one hundred members was able not only to improve their building with new “frescoing, painting and carpeting,” but also planned other changes when “sufficient means” could be secured. At the beginning of the new century, Mary H. Leonard, who had been part of this church community in her earlier life, and who had gone on to teach at Bridgewater Normal and write books and short poems, perhaps best expressed the hopes of the Scotland congregation when she wrote: “May the day never come when the light of a gospel ministry that was lighted here eighty years ago shall be extinguished in the little meeting-house that stands on Scotland Hill!” During the first decade of the twentieth century, this small group of Trinitarian Congregationalist continued to keep their church going, a task that proved to be not always an easy one.  

69 BI, Dec. 27, 1907, Jan. 24, Feb. 7, April 17, 24, May 8, 1908, Oct. 1, 1909, April 1, June 24, Dec. 23, 1910; it might be noted that in 1915 a new organ was installed in the sanctuary.  
70 BI, Oct. 10, 1891, June 1, 1901, Nov. 25, 1921; Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater; this source has a beautiful photograph of the Scotland Trinitarian Church, but the explanation with this picture, which I wrote, has an error; the organization of the Scotland Trinitarian Church, as this text indicates, was July 3, 1836; Townscape
Keeping a minister for a reasonable length of time was the greatest challenge facing this parish during the early 1900’s. As the new century began, the Scotland Church was pleased that Reverend Ira A. Smith had been its pastor since 1896, and that he had joined with other Bridgewater ministers in leading a Union Watch Service at the New Jerusalem Church to give “thanks for the blessings of the dying century” and “to await the incoming of a new 100 years.” By the summer of 1901, as repairs were being made to the church, however, Smith had resigned as pastor, and the search for a replacement had begun. It would be the spring of 1903 before the church would have a regular minister. 

Of the several pastors who served the church during the rest of the decade, perhaps Reverend Bernard Copping is best remembered. Arriving in the late winter of 1903, he had the unenviable task of leading the congregation out of the church on March fifteenth, when an overheated furnace produced flames that threatened the old meetinghouse. Fortunately, little damage was done, and Copping was able to join the worshippers in giving thanks that the building had been saved. (This would not be the last time that fire would menace this wooden sanctuary). The sparing of the sanctuary and having a fulltime minister again must have made the observance of Easter a month later an especially joyful time, even more so because of an evening concert given by twenty-five children before an audience of about one hundred parents and friends. With Reverend Charles Edward Stowe of Bridgewater’s Central Square Church acting as the moderator, Copping was formally installed on May 27, before a large congregation which included a number of ministers from the surrounding towns. The singing of Mozart’s Twelfth Mass Gloria by the choir under the direction of Mrs. Franklin A. Bowdoin, the church organist, added to the solemnity of the ceremony. All in all, it was quite a day for a country meetinghouse in a small New England town. 

For the next two years, the Scotland Church under Copping’s leadership evidenced a renewed vitality, after its spell without a resident pastor. The new minister, in addition to his Sunday morning preaching, took a special interest in the Christian Endeavor Society and the Sunday School, helping to

Institute. Form 173, pp. 416-417; HH, pp. 66-67; Arthur C. Boyden, Albert Gardner Boyden and the Bridgewater State Normal School-A Memorial Volume (Bridgewater, Mass. : Arthur H. Willis, Printer, 1919), pp. 143, 153; subsequently, this last source will be cited as Memorial Volume; a collection of Mary Hall Leonard’s papers was deposited in Memorial Hall, the home of the Old Bridgewater Historical Society in West Bridgewater, in October of 1924.

72 BI, March 20, April 16, May 29, 1903.
plan the 1903 picnic of the latter at Lakeside (the Nip), easily reached from the church. Copping also played an active role in Bridgewater’s Protestant community in general. Among other things, he exchanged pulpits with Stowe, took part in the Union Thanksgiving services, hosted some of the Bridgewater Ministers’ meetings, joined his fellow pastors in supporting the Temperance League, and spoke at the Central Square Church in December of 1903 at a conference convened to assess Bridgewater’s spiritual needs and prospects. Copping’s stay in Scotland was not to last very long, however. A headline of the Independent on March 31, 1905, read: “Rev. Bernard Copping Preaches for Last Time in Scotland.” At a service that matched the ecclesiastical importance of his installation service two years previous, his pastorate was dissolved. A week later, Copping began preaching in his new church in Stratham, New Hampshire. 73

The rest of the decade was not the easiest time for the Scotland Parish, as it sought to hire and retain a full-time minister. In late March of 1905, Reverend W. S. A. Miller of the Union Church in East Bridgewater was engaged for the next four months on a part-time basis, which meant that the main Sunday service would have to be held in the afternoon, a practice that would be repeated in the latter part of the next decade. For the next three years, he continued to administer to this small congregation, but in April of 1908, to “a large outflowing of the people of Scotland,” he delivered his farewell sermon. For a short time after Miller’s pastorate, Reverend H. C. Cooley, who had come East from Michigan to study theology at Boston and Harvard Universities, served the church, but in September of 1909, he returned West where he had previously been in the ministry. Hopefully more research will tell me more about these two men. It is interesting, however, that the brief history of Scotland Trinitarian Congregational Church found in the History Highlights says nothing about the parish between 1879 and 1921, except to note that in 1914, the church was lighted with electricity and that a number of funds were received. 74

Despite its small membership and the problem of not retaining a minister for very long, the Scotland Church continued to remain open from 1901 and 1910, thanks to the hard work and dedication of a relatively few parishioners. Emblematic of this conclusion is the Independent’s brief account of the annual church meeting of 1904: “The annual meeting of the Congregational Church was held on Monday evening [March 21], with about a dozen members present. W. H. H. Andrews was chosen moderator, and

73 BL, June 26, Aug. 21, Oct. 23, Nov. 27, Dec. 18, 1903, Feb. 12, March 25, April 1, Nov. 18, 1904, March 31, 1905.
the officers for the year were elected as follows: Standing committee, Stillman O. Keith, Franklin A. Bowdoin, and Theodore C. Wilbar; clerk, E. E. Keith; auditor, W. H. H. Andrews; collector, Henry A. Barker; treasurer, E. E. Keith.” These men were among the stalwarts of this small parish in the early 1900’s who labored to promote its religious and social activities. At this same meeting, it was voted “to adopt the envelop system for collecting contributions.” 75

If the commitment of these men to maintaining the viability of the Scotland parish during this decade was all-important, it is also apparent that the church would not have remained opened without the active participation of other members, especially a number of devoted women. It appears that they were not elected to governing positions of the church, but in May of 1901, Mrs. T. C. Wilbar and Mrs. S. O. Keith and others did represent the parish at the Norfolk Conference of Congregational churches held in the nearby town of Easton. In the early 1900’s, Edwin E. Keith was chosen superintendent of the Sunday School and Henry A. Barker as the assistant superintendent. But much of the work of this school was done by Sara E. Wilbur, secretary and treasurer, and Carrie E. Keith, librarian. 76

As in other Bridgewater parishes, the line between religious and social activities at the Scotland Church was not always clearly drawn since they all contributed to the overall mission of promoting Christian fellowship and good works. The women of the church were especially aware of this symbiotic relationship. We can be sure that Mrs. E. E. Keith did a lot of the preparation for the Sunday School tree (Christmas party) held at the Keith house on Pleasant Street on December 24, 1901. Among the women’s organizations in the parish that were concerned with doing good works as well as well holding social events were the Sewing Circle, the Ladies Circle, and the Starlight Group. Especially active in these endeavors were women whose husbands played the paramount role in governing the church. For examples, in late October of 1902, Mrs. Theodore C. Wilbar hosted a bean supper (a very popular church get-together in the first half of the twentieth century) for the Starlight Group at her home, and a few weeks later the sewing circle gathered at the home of Mrs. Henry A. Barker. On occasion, Christian Endeavor sponsored social events such as a Valentine party in 1903 and a sociable in Dyer Hall in April of 1904. When the town financed the rebuilding of the Scotland school (Dyer School) in 1903, the agreement was

74 BI, March 31, June 30, 1905, Jan. 3, April 24, May 8, 15, 1908, Aug. 20, 1909; HH, pp. 66-68.  
75 BI, Sept. 19, Oct. 10, 24, Nov. 7, 1902, March 25, April 1, 1904.  
76 BI, May 10, 1901, March 25, April 22, 1904.
that the second floor in the central part of the building could be used as a community center, providing that the people of Scotland finish and furnish the interior. Since the parish was such an important part of this community and would benefit from the use of the hall, it was not surprising that in November of 1903, Edwin E Keith, the church treasurer and, for a time, its choir master, asked for subscriptions to complete the work. About five months later, there was a brief meeting of the Dyer Hall committee of the church at which it was voted “that the ladies of the committee be directed to use $50.00 of the funds on hand to buy dishes for the hall.” Evidently, the issue of the separation of church and state was not such a vexing one at this time, at least not in the small community of the Scotland section of Bridgewater.

One gala event that was pure entertainment, although its proceeds went to the church, was an Old Folks Concert, given in the meetinghouse on New Year’s night of 1903. Before an audience of two-hundred and fifty, perhaps the largest gathering at the Scotland Church in a decade, a chorus of about twenty-five, mostly members of the parish, and Franklin Bowdoin and E. M. Alden, who were featured as soloists and members of a quartet that also included Mrs. Alden and Mrs. H. K. Aldrich, put a show on, which, according to the Independent, made “Scotland…one of the few places on the map last night….” If this was a rather hyperbolic evaluation, it must have been, nevertheless, quite a sight to see all “the members of the chorus…attired in old fashioned garments,” many of which “were very handsome and valuable.” Every number of the program was “heartily applauded,” but none more so than “Minerva’s Disappointment,” and “When Samuel Led the Singing,” recitations rendered by Mrs. Nellie Crapo of Brockton. The whole performance was further enhanced by Effie Keith, the pianist, Mrs. Franklin Bowdoin, the organist, and Arthur P. Tinkham who “was active as tithing man, carrying a rod with a feather on the end.” Many in the audience felt that the concert was so good that its “repetition…in the town hall would be well received.” In any event, the evening must have given a boost to a parish still awaiting a full-time pastor.

New Jerusalem Church--Swedenborgian

77 BI, May 10, Dec. 27, 1901, Oct. 24, Nov. 7, 1902, Feb. 20, Nov. 20, 1903, April 22, 1904; see the discussion of the rebuilding of the Scotland schoolhouse in the section on education in Bridgewater between 1900 and 1910.
Had the show been repeated, most likely some of the parishioners of the New Jerusalem Church would have been in the audience, given the close proximity of their house of worship to the Town Hall. One of three Bridgewater churches to trace its origins to the 1820’s, a time when the South Parish was becoming the Bridgewater we know today, the congregation of this Protestant denomination could look with satisfaction in 1901 at its steady growth during previous eighty years. With over one-hundred and sixty members as the new century began, this church on the corner of School and Bedford Streets had become an established part of the town’s religious and social life and had among its ranks some well-known citizens, including: Sarah T. Bates, an elected member of the town’s library and school committees; Samuel P. Gates, one of Bridgewater’s leading civic and financial leaders; and Arthur H. Willis, widely known for his printing business, which, among other things, produced copies of the annual town report. Surely some parishioners in the early 1900’s were familiar with Crane’s 1884 history of the town and could wholeheartedly agree with his assertion that their house of worship, dedicated in 1871, was “an ornament to the village.” Some were also aware that their original meeting house on Cedar Street, built in 1834, but occupied by the town’s Methodists beginning in 1874, was the first New Jerusalem Church built in New England. And, hopefully, all parishioners knew that their Christian outlook had been shaped by the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg, 1688-1772, a Swedish philosopher and religious writer of the eighteenth century. 79

Among the reasons for the church’s vitality in the last quarter or so of the nineteenth century was undoubtedly the long pastorate, 1869-1889, of Reverend Theodore F. Wright, who, along with Joseph A. Hyde, the head of the cotton gin factory on Pearl Street, was the leading force behind the building of the new sanctuary in 1871. Under Reverend George S. Wheeler’s leadership, the parish continued to thrive between 1890 and 1901, as evidenced by an increase in membership, the activities of church-related organizations, and a growing Sunday School. Not long after hosting the Union Watch Service on the evening of December 31, 1900, to usher in the New Year, Wheeler decided to leave Bridgewater for a pastorate in Providence, Rhode Island. In recognition of his ten years of service, the Sewing Circle and the Young People’s Society, perhaps the two most active organizations at Bridgewater’s New Jerusalem

79 “Willis, The Printer and the Bridgewater Advertiser,” Bridgewater Book; HH, pp. 70-71; curiously enough, this historical account of the New Jerusalem Church does not specifically mention the building of the present-day church in 1871; see the previous section on the New Jerusalem Church in Bridgewater.
Church, each presented “a very handsome present” to him in March of 1901. This church had not seen the last of this well-liked minister, however; as an indication of the esteem in which he was held, the Bridgewater parish asked him to return as pastor in July of 1909, a call to which he responded favorably. But in the spring of 1901, the church faced the task of securing a new minister, prompting, in part, the Independent’s comment on September 27 of the same year: “Another minister gone from Bridgewater. How we do lose them!”  

It would be December 1, 1901, before a new pastor took charge of the church. On that Sunday, Reverend Emanuel Fedor Goerwitz preached his first sermon to the congregation of the New Jerusalem Church in Bridgewater. How many of the parishioners at this point knew the details of his background is difficult to say. What was apparent, however, was that their new minister was a handsome young man with an impressive sounding name. Only twenty-eight on his arrival in Bridgewater, Goerwitz had already had an interesting life. He was born in Brooklyn, New York, attending school there before moving to Germany, where his German-born father had accepted the call of a New Jerusalem Church in Stuttgart. In 1883, the elder Goerwitz decided to accept the pastorate of a church in Zurich, Switzerland, and it was here that his son, after graduating from the “gymnasium,” attended the University of Zurich for two years. Following in his father’s footsteps, Goerwitz began his study of theology and biblical criticism while at this university. His life took another turn in 1898, when the family’s return to the United States afforded him the opportunity of enrolling at the New Church Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Graduating in 1899, Goerwitz was serving as assistant minister in the Boston New Jerusalem Society when he received the call from the Bridgewater church. One wonders if he knew that the town in which he was about to reside could boast of having the first New Jerusalem Church building erected in New England, even though it was now being used as a Methodist church. 

The new pastor began his tenure at a busy time for the parish. Less than two weeks after delivering his first sermon, the annual sale and supper of the new Church Society was held, not only earning the church the sizable amount of three hundred dollars, but also giving the new minister and the

80 BI, Jan. 4, March 22, Sept. 27, 1901, July 9, 1909; “Wright, Theodore Francis, 1845-1907-Minister,” HH, p. 280; See also Representative Men and Old Families of Southeastern Massachusetts, V. I, pp. 94-95; Bridgewater Book, p. 40; see previous section on the New Jerusalem Church in Bridgewater; Wright is not mentioned in the account of this church found in History Highlights.

81 BI, Dec. 6, 1901.
active members of the congregation a chance to better know one another. In what was an innovation for the New Church, the parish had a service on Christmas morning which included special music and Goerwitz’s sermon on “How we should celebrate Christmas.” To round out his initial welcoming by the parish, a reception for the young pastor took place in the church parlors on New Year’s night. The public acknowledgment of Goerwitz’s pastorate came in an installation on May 4, 1902, an event made even more impressive by the participation of Reverends Wright and Wheeler, two former pastors of Bridgewater’s New Jerusalem Church, whose service to the church totaled over thirty years. J. Rockwood Jenkins, the new rector of Trinity Church in Bridgewater, also extended “The Right Hand of Fellowship” to the town’s latest member of the clergy.  

Goerwitz soon endeared himself to the members of the Bridgewater parish, and there were hopes that his tenure would be a considerably long one. The new pastor was soon involved in a plethora of ministerial duties. Conscious of the need to remind the congregation of its Swedenborgian heritage, he invited Reverend A. F. Frost, of Cambridge, to lecture on “Swedenborg, and the Books He Wrote” on Sunday evening, February 16, 1902. Adding to the significance of this event was the exhibition of many of Swedenborg’s books “in their original editions.” Goerwitz, of course, was kept busy writing his own weekly sermons, including special ones at Easter and Christmas. In March of 1902, in what would be the only Easter sermon he preached in the Bridgewater church, he spoke on the traditional New Testament text: “I am the resurrection and the life.” In his second Christmas at the church, Goerwitz chose to preach on “The Lord’s Peace.”  

Administering Holy Communion, baptizing babies, conducting marriages, taking a pastoral interest in the Sunday School, and presiding at funerals, usually of older parishioners, also demanded some of his time. In officiating at the funerals of Mrs. Corinna B. Washburn and Mrs. Pratt Casindania Washburn in 1902, the young pastor might have known that Seth Washburn had been instrumental in the founding of the church in the 1820’s. Perhaps Goerwitz’s knowledge of the church and the town was increased when he conducted the funeral services of Marie Rodman, the wife of Th. Rodman, pastor of Bridgewater’s New Jerusalem Church between 1844 and 1863, and that of Mrs. Phebe Jane Leonard, who served as the matron of the State Almshouse in Bridgewater (later known as the State Workhouse and,

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82 BI, Dec. 20, 27, 1901. May 2, 9, 1902.
Then, the State Farm) when her husband Capt. Nahum Leonard Jr. was appointed superintendent of this institution in 1870. 84

That the young Emanuel F. Goerwitz had found a home in Bridgewater’s New Jerusalem Church was evident in his first report to the parish, writing that he felt “as if I was one of your boys come home.” Following the practice of his predecessors, he became part of the town’s larger Protestant community by participating, for example, in the annual union Thanksgiving service in 1902, which took place at the Trinity Church. While only a small number of parishioners attended the watch service celebrating the coming of the new year, the members present listened to a short sermon by their young minister and wished each other a “Happy New Year,” as the sound of their church’s bells mingled with those of other churches in and around the Common. For some parishioners at the service, it might have been one of their last happy memories of Reverend Goerwitz. In February of 1903, the congregation and, indeed, many other citizens of Bridgewater, were shocked and deeply saddened by his premature death. About two months later, Arthur H. Willis printed a memorial booklet on the life of the late minister, which included the resolutions passed by the church following their young pastor’s death. Speaking to the New Church sewing society in the spring of 1904, Mrs. Theodore F. Wright told of how she and her husband had visited Zurich and personally conveyed their sympathy to Goerwitz’s family. It must have been an especially poignant moment for the elder Goerwitz who had received a promise from his son that he would return to Switzerland to continue his father’s work when the older man became too infirm to carry on his ministry. 85

The task of securing a new minister was not an easy one and took longer than expected. At the end of May, the New Church society voted to extend a call to John W. Stockwell, Jr., a student at the New Church Theological School in Cambridge, who had been supplying the Bridgewater pulpit since the death of Goerwitz. When this appointment failed to materialize, the Bridgewater parish, in August 1903, was fortunate in securing the services of Reverend Herbert C. Small, a thirty-one year old native of Maine. His background was quite different from that of his predecessor, but interesting, nonetheless. His father, Dr.

84 BI, March 28, April 4, May 2, July 11, Nov. 14, 1902; Bridgewater Book, p. 40; Crane pp. 784, 806; Edwin F. Kingsley, Jr. “The State Almshouse,” The History of the Massachusetts Correctional Institution, Bridgewater, pp. 1-3; copies of this unpublished work can be found in the Bridgewater Public Library.
Reuben D. Small, a physician, had become a sincere believer in the ideas of Emanuel Swedenborg, although he was not formally affiliated with any New Jerusalem church. The Methodist leanings of Herbert’s mother and the theology of the Free Baptists, which was introduced to him by a young preacher, also had an impact on Small’s faith journey. Earlier in his life, he had shown a propensity for mathematics and bookkeeping, but working on the family’s farm in West Gardiner, Massachusetts, where the Smalls had moved to around 1880, reduced some of his time at the district schools, especially in the summer. Still, he was able to work his way through three years of preparatory education, followed by four years at Bates College in Maine, where he was known for his scholarship, especially in chemistry. After a stint of high school teaching in the same state, Small entered the New Church Theological School in Cambridge in 1899, and for the next three years read a great deal of Swedenborgian theology, deciding that this Protestant denomination directed him towards the truths of Christianity. After graduating in 1899, and being ordained into the ministry of the New Jerusalem Church in Boston, Reverend Small headed west to take charge of a New Church in Olney, Illinois. It was here that after only a few months he received an invitation from the Bridgewater church.

While the new pastor started his ministry in September, he was formally introduced to his parishioners at a reception in the New Church parlor on November 18. Evidently, Small was not married at this time and was aided in receiving about one hundred people by Mrs. Emily Sprague, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur H. Willis and Mr. Austin Turner, active and prominent members of the church. A short musical program and ice cream and cake added to the occasion. At this point, he was still the acting minister, but this changed in September of 1904, when a unanimous vote of the society called him to be the permanent pastor. Two months later, before a large congregation that “filled the building to the doors…,” he was formally installed pastor of the New Jerusalem Church of Bridgewater in a service in which several clergymen from nearby communities and Boston took part. Guests included Dr. Theodore F. Wright whose presence must have evoked many wonderful memories, especially among the older parishioners, some of whom were members at the time he came to the Bridgewater church in 1869. In May of 1905, there was another reception, but this time it was for Reverend and Mrs. Herbert C. Small. The pastor’s

86 BI, May 29, Aug. 21, 1903; HH, p. 71.
new wife was to play an active role in the church during the next few years. 87

For almost six years, Small faithfully served the New Jerusalem Church and, at the same time, co-operated with other Bridgewater clergymen in promoting the spiritual well-being of the town. At the start of his ministry, he came to know other pastors by participating in the Union Thanksgiving service at the Unitarian Church and, about a week later, by doing his share at the religious conference organized by Reverend Charles Edward Stowe to discuss “The Religious Needs of Bridgewater.” Joining the other Protestant clergymen and about 175 laymen at the Central Square Church on December 11, 1903, the new minister of the New Jerusalem Church added his insights on the subject under discussion. After admitting that his brief residence in the town limited his ability to “accurately” feel “the spiritual pulse of Bridgewater…,” Small, nonetheless, made some eloquent remarks, first indicating that he had “no faith in pretending a unity” that did not exist. “We shall not seriously suffer from our intellectual differences,” he went on to say, “even if they are fundamental, unless we sever the bonds of charity.” Given his early home life in which church and Sunday-school attendance and home devotions were “rigorously demanded of all the family,” his following words are not surprising: “Speaking directly of the religious needs of Bridgewater, let me emphasize its need of homes. Our young men smoke, chew, swear, loaf about the streets, and in company with our girls roam about all night. The cause and cure is largely in the home. We need fathers and mothers and Christian homes.” “Many boys and girls are spiritual orphans,” he averred, suggesting that this state of affairs could be blamed on past generations as well as the present one. Perhaps not all at the meeting, and surely not all in the town, were in complete accord with this dire evaluation of the Bridgewater’s youth, but most could agree on the importance of a value-oriented family life. Small ended his comments by asserting that “all spiritual life is a slow growth, and whatever is accomplished in Bridgewater we may not hope to reach at a bound, but through gradual enlightenment and improvement.” This conference must have been exhilarating for this young pastor, but, in the meantime, his ministerial duties, both large and small, awaited him in his own church, a short walk across the Common. 88

One of Small’s major tasks was the preparation of the Sunday sermons, the titles of which were often announced in the Bridgewater Independent on Fridays. I have not read any of them, but some of the

87 BI, Nov. 20, 1903, Sept. 23, Nov. 11, 1904, May 26, 1905.

Small’s presentations were not limited to Sunday morning sermons, however. On the Sunday evening of November 15, 1904, he gave a lecture on “The Divine Origin of the Church and Heaven,” an event made more memorable by the use of the overhead electric lights for the first time at the New Jerusalem Church. To cite another example, on Easter night, April 3, 1904, he gave a stereopticon talk on the last week of Christ’s life. After attending the national convention of the New Jerusalem Church in Washington, D. C. two months later, Small, along with Miss Lizzie Leonard and Mrs. A. E. Brown, spoke about the meeting to a sizable gathering in the New Church vestry. Going to committee meetings, baptizing babies, administering holy communion, and officiating at funerals were also among Small’s ministerial duties. In February of 1905, he presided at the funeral of Sara T. Bates, whose death was a great loss to the New Jerusalem Church as well as to the Town of Bridgewater. But in 1909, after a six year pastorate, Small decided to leave the Bridgewater parish. The church again faced the task of securing a new minister. 

After consulting with Reverend George S. Wheeler, who had served the parish between 1890 and 1901, a meeting of the New Church unanimously voted to ask him to return to Bridgewater. Agreeing to accept the call, he began his second stay in October of 1909. During the eight years away from the church and town he loved and knew well, Wheeler, along with his wife and five sons, had moved two times.

After passing six years as pastor of the New Jerusalem Church in Providence, Rhode, Island, he dropped out of the active ministry for two and half years to do institutional work in Waltham, Massachusetts. We will say more about his second tenure at New Church in the next chapter, but it might be noted that it was reported that a congregation of three hundred attended Easter services in 1910. The Independent in June of 1912, referring with some trepidation to the possibility that he was about to return to the Providence church, wrote: “His work has prospered and he has interested himself in things looking to general moral betterment of the community. It would be a loss to have him go. 

As with other Protestant churches in Bridgewater, the laity of the New Jerusalem Church was

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88 BL, Aug. 21, Dec. 18, 1903.
89 BL, April 8, June 10, 1904, May 4, 1906, Nov. 29, 1907, Jan. 17, April 17, Nov. 20, 1908; see previous sections on education in Bridgewater from 1900 to 1910 and Bridgewater Churches in 1900.
central to the running of the parish, an especially important consideration during the interims between ministers. In the spring of each year, the Society held its annual meeting to hear the reports of the various committees, to elect a clerk, auditor, treasurer, and a Church Committee, and to take action on important matters such as the calling of a new pastor or making major repairs to the church premise. In 1907, for example, the Society decided to have the church painted, to make some major repairs, and, as a sign of the times, to tear down the old horse sheds at the rear of the property and replace them with a new fence, most likely separating the church property from the Richard W. Wilbur House, which in the early 1900’s was owned by the Zebulon Pratt estate. Usually men were elected officers of the society, but not always. Cora Thompson, to cite one exception, was chosen the treasurer in 1901. Women of the church were also to be found on the Church, Finance, and Music Committees in fairly good numbers and were significantly represented in the Bridgewater delegations to the annual New Church conventions held in Boston. Of the seven elected delegates in 1904, four were women--Mrs. A. Brown, Mrs. Saba Sprague, Miss Sarah T. Bates, and Miss Catherine Keith. This is not to suggest that the men of the church were not central to the running of the church during this decade. Among the names that frequently appear in the reports of church’s activities were ones that many Bridgewater citizens recognized. A representative, but certainly not definitive, list would include: Harry K. Aldrich, Paul O. and Harry A. Clark, Samuel P. Gates, Avery and George M. Hooper, Edwin and Sumner Keith, Charles R. Smith, Austin Turner, and Arthur H. Willis.91

Helping to make the New Jerusalem Church in Bridgewater such a vibrant one in the early 1900’s were the many church-related organizations engaged in outreach and social activities. Of all of them, none perhaps had a longer history than the Ladies’ Sewing Circle (sometimes the word Society has been used), which was organized on December 17, 1856, to assist those in need. The regular and annual meetings of this group were usually held at members’ homes, although in 1910 about seventy of the ladies gathered at the impressive house of Samuel P. Gates, a very short walk down School Street from the church. A thorough history of this group would cite a number of women who provided leadership for this

all-important parish organization during the early twentieth century. In this brief account, Mrs. Saba Sprague of School Street warrants special mentioning since she served as the Society’s president for several years, including 1907, when the Circle celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. The work of the sewing circle was varied, including small and large endeavors. Sending a barrel of clothing in July of 1901 to Alabama’s Tuskegee Institute to be distributed to those in need by Mrs. Booker T. Washington and holding a Valentine’s sale of “fancy articles, socks and aprons” in the church parlors in February of 1903 for the benefit of the town’s Visiting Nurse Association are examples of specific outreach activities of this women’s group. Its most important contribution to charity and the life of the parish was the sponsorship of an annual Christmas sale and supper, an event that had gone on since 1881, and one that was greatly anticipated by the church and the town. In addition to helping out the church financially, the proceeds of this event also contributed to maintaining a “Bridgewater ward” in the New England Hospital in Boston.92

Another “very active and enthusiastic” group at the New Church was the Young People’s Club, an organization, although not as old as the Sewing Circle, that existed a good number of years before 1900. Sometimes it was labeled a “Society” and others times a “League,” with this latter nomenclature most likely indicating its affiliation with similar clubs existing in other New Jerusalem Churches in the region. Whatever name was used, the activities of this group were central to the life of the parish, especially in a social sense. While I am not aware of the age requirements to join the club, the following list of officers and delegates chosen at the 1905 annual meeting in April illustrates some obvious things about the makeup of its membership: “President, Arthur D. Benson; vice president, Philip Prophett; treasurer, Nathan Benson; auditor, Henry Keough; executive committee, Mrs. A. E. Brown, Miss Hester Perkins, Miss Lilla Wing; delegates to the June conference, N. Elliot Willis, Miss Clara Hooper, and A. D. Benson.” The executive committee also included the club’s four officers and was responsible for planning the organization’s yearly schedule of events. A sampling of the social get-togethers sponsored under the auspices of the Young People’s Club during this decade would include: Hallowe’en, house, and whist parties; social evenings in the church parlors; lectures; dramatic presentations; and dances, mostly

notably the annual New Year’s one held in the Town Hall. Sometimes the meetings of the club had a more serious purpose. On December 9, 1904, to cite one example, a union service of the young people’s clubs of the New Churches of Bridgewater, Brockton, Abington, and Elmwood took place at the Bridgewater church where the subject of “Individual Responsibility” was discussed. Perhaps a more interesting meeting to some was the one of October 13, 1910, at which the Reverend Wheeler gave a talk on “The World of Spirits.” 93

The Sewing Circle and the Young People’s Club, as prominent as they were, were not the only organizations active in the life of Bridgewater’s New Jerusalem Church during the first decade of the twentieth century. Along with other Protestant churches in town, a chapter of the King’s Daughters, a Christian international order founded in the late nineteenth century to promote good works, was established in the New Church in 1888. Until 1909, this local branch was known as the Lookout Circle of the King’s Daughters, but changed its name to the Serving Circle in 1909. It is not easy to separate the social work of this circle, which held its meetings in the homes of its members, from that of the larger Sewing Society since a number of church women belonged to both groups. (It seems to the present writer that the outreach endeavors of Serving Circle became more focused when it supported the work of the American Red Cross during the years of America’s involvement in what later was called World War One.) 94

Further research on my part would be needed to discuss more thoroughly additional organizations of the New Jerusalem parish between 1901 and 1910, but even a brief survey illustrates a couple of points. First of all, this small church made an effort to provide meaningful religious, social, and civic activities for all age groups, and, secondly, the lives of its parishioners were very much intertwined with church-related happenings, as was the case with the other seven churches in Bridgewater and, most likely, to a greater degree than a century later. Although not a club exclusively associated with the New Church, Reverend Goerwitz, during his short tenure, was elected an honorary member of the Roger Wolcott Club of Good Citizens, an organization named after a former governor of Massachusetts. At

various times in the decade, the weekly newspaper reports on the church calendar cite the doings of the following groups: the Young Men’s Club; the Boy’s Athletic Association; the Girls’ Society; the Women’s Alliance; the Step-by-Step Club; and the Beta Chapter of Sons of the New Jerusalem. In 1905, a new organization was formed known as the New Church Alliance. With Arthur Willis as its first president and an executive committee of nine, including Reverend Small and three women, this alliance was soon playing an important role in promoting church social activities. 

During the early 1900’s, one of the most anticipated social gatherings was the annual picnic held under the auspices of the Sunday School. On June 26, 1901, “a hay-cart with straw spread on the bottom conveyed the young folks from the church” to Carver Pond where, at six o’clock, “supper was served on the bank of the pond and after enjoying the cool evening there, they were brought back to their homes.” A year later, Lake Nippenickett was the chosen destination, also an accessible spot since a special trolley was employed to carry the picnickers there. Despite the less than perfect weather, this outing proved to be quite enjoyable, made especially so by Ferguson’s three piece orchestra. In June of 1905, however, the annual picnic was replaced by an annual lawn party, with members of the New Church Society and the Sunday School joining together to celebrate this early summer social occasion, which for several years would conveniently take place on the grounds of the residence of Samuel P. Gates, a short walk from the church. The Bridgewater Independent captured the flavor of these parties in its description of the 1907 gathering: “Many colored lanterns were strung all about the grounds, and added to the brilliancy of the gathering. The afternoon was devoted entirely to the children, and they had the time of their lives, playing games, and listening to graphophone selections. In the early hours of the evening, the little ones enjoyed dancing in the spacious barn, but at 8 the floor was turned over to the older members of the church and their friends. Supper was served under the trees on the lawn.” Although the account did not suggest this, one wonders if some passersby, taking note of the festivities, considered “crashing” the party.

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**Central Square Congregational Church**

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96 *BI*, June 28, 1901, June 27, July 4, 1902, June 23, 30, 1905, June 28, 1907, July 17, 1910; *Townscape Institute*. 59
As parishioners of the New Jerusalem Church exited the front doors of their sanctuary on a Sunday morning, they could look across the southern end of Central Square and see what was commonly called by the early 1900’s, the Central Square Congregational Church. The history of this church through 1900 was touched upon in the first section and for the most part need not detain us here. A review of a few points, nevertheless, might be helpful in understanding the history of this parish between 1901 and 1910. The church edifice occupied in the early twentieth century had been built around the beginning of the Civil War, making it ten years older than the New Jerusalem Church building. Between 1821 and 1864, the “First Trinitarian Congregational Church of Bridgewater” was the official name of this parish. Then on January 5, 1864, by an Act of the Legislature of Massachusetts, the organization that conducted the business of the church, took the name Central Square Society in Bridgewater and was officially known as this until May 23, 1904. Whatever nomenclature was used, three things about this Congregational church at the start of the twentieth century should be noted. It was located in Central Square, was Trinitarian in its theology, and had the largest membership among the seven Protestant churches in Bridgewater. As was the case with other Bridgewater churches, this parish would witness ministerial changes between 1901 and 1910. 97

That the Central Square Church was in a strong position at the beginning of 1901 was due in good measure to the strong leadership which Reverend Elbert S. Porter, a 1883 graduate of the Union Theological Seminary in New York, had shown since arriving in Bridgewater twelve years earlier. With around two-hundred and fifty members and an edifice which had undergone major repairs and improvements during the previous year, the future looked bright for this church as its parishioners joined those of other Protestant churches in celebrating the coming of a new century in a Union Watch Service at the New Jerusalem Church. Each minister who spoke at this gathering was allowed ten minutes, and it was not surprising that Porter spoke about the founding of the Christian Endeavor Society and its efforts to develop the spiritual life of young people, since he had promoted the work of this movement at Central

97 “Central Square Congregational Church, 1821-1956,” Celebration of the 135th Anniversary (1821-1956) in connection with Tercentenary of the Town of Bridgewater, files in the Bridgewater Public Library; “Historical Sketch,” Manual of the Central Square Congregational Church, Bridgewater, Mass.-Including its History and Membership, 1911(Bridgewater, Mass: Arthur H. Willis, Printer, 1911), pp. 5-6, 20; Townscape Institute, Form 51, pp. 165-166; HII, pp. 68-69.
In what would proved to be his last year at Central Square Church, Porter, as he had done for
over a decade, kept a busy schedule, not only performing his pastoral duties, but also taking an active
interest in the affairs of the town and co-operating with other ministers in promoting certain interfaith
gatherings among the town’s Protestant churches. Early in the year, he was chosen moderator at the
church’s annual meeting, a rather unusual practice, I suspect, for a Congregational church. A few weeks
later, a series of Union evangelistic services with the backing of the town’s Methodists, Baptists, and
Congregationalists and their pastors were held at the Central Square Church under the auspices of the
Women’s Christian Temperance Union. Further co-operation among these Protestant denominations was
evident in an evening Union Easter service held at the Methodist Church on April 5. Shortly thereafter, in
an event that must have been gratifying to Porter, the tenth anniversary of the Bridgewater Union of
Christian Endeavor was celebrated at the Central Square Church. A long line of special trolleys brought
many young people from the surrounding communities to Central Square, and the sanctuary was soon
filled “to its capacity.” After preaching an “appropriate” sermon on Children’s Day in early June, Porter’s
pastoral duties were somewhat lessened during the summer months, but only in a relative way. In one of
his June sermons, he strongly favored the town doing more for its young men by “placing a gymnasium
and baths in the Town Hall or High School.” In this discourse, which evidently aroused much favorable
comment, he reminded parents to keep young people home at night and to set “a good example in morals
and religion.” In the middle of July, at a religious gathering of a different nature, a colored (a descriptive
word used at this time) male quartet of Atlanta University gave a concert of “old time, spiritual and sacred
songs” to a large congregation “admirers of music.” 99

With the coming of September, the pace of activities at Central Square Church quickened, as it
did in all Bridgewater churches. But in 1901, this usual course of events was initially overshadowed by a
national tragedy—the assassination of William McKinley, the twenty-fifth president of the United States.
While attending a Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo, New York, the President, who had been re-elected
the previous year, was shot by an anarchist, Leon Czolgosz, on September 6. Joining the rest of the town,

98 BI, Jan. 4, Dec. 13, 1901; “Ten Years Ago,” BI, July 1, 1910; Bridgewater Book, p. 40; see the previous section
on the Central Church in 1900.
99 BI, Jan. 4, 11, Feb. 1, 8, 15, April 5, June 7, 21, July 5, 12, 1901.
indeed the whole nation, in condemning this dastardly act, the parishioners of the Central Square Church attended a service on the evening of September 8 to pray for the recovery of their President. In his comments on this occasion, Reverend Porter decried the “foul and treacherous crime” that sought to snuff out life of a “man of gentle spirit, of upright life, the servant of the people” who was “anxious to do their will…..” He went on to say that the “law must be invoked to suppress lawlessness…, but that we “must patiently pursue the old pathway, overcoming evil with good, and trying by our example to set forth the spirit of Him who being without sin became the victim of human lawlessness.” On September 14, six days after these words were spoken, President McKinley, who had hovered between life and death, succumbed to the wounds from the shot inflicted by the assassin’s gun. On that Saturday morning, many Bridgewater citizens in the center of the town were awakened “by the deep-tongued, sorrowful tolling of the bell of the Central Square Church….” Its minister was undoubtedly preparing to deliver one of the most important sermons of his career.  

On Sunday morning, the sanctuary was crowded, as the parishioners assembled to seek “comfort in their great loss.” The service resembled “that of the funeral of a dear and close friend,” with a Beethoven march, sounding from the organ and setting a somber tone for this sad occasion. “Lead Kindly Light,” “Nearer My God to Thee,” and “Rock of Ages,” hymns loved by the late president and well-known by the congregation, were sung. From a pulpit draped in black and the national colors, Reverend Porter “preached an excellent sermon appropriate to the sad events” of the previous week. Taking as his text the words of Psalms 130, “Out of the depths I cried unto Thee, O Lord,” he recalled the range of emotions all had felt during the eight days after the events in Buffalo. “I hardly know how to speak to you,” he confessed to his listeners. “When one is himself weak,” he asked, “how can he strengthen others?” It was reported, however, that many in the congregation “were visibly affected” by his words, notably when he averred that God could be trusted to guide all of them “in the storm,” and that “with the dying president, as he sank deeper and deeper beneath the waves, we may say, ‘Nearer My God to Thee, Nearer to Thee.’” This sermon did not end Reverend Porter’s work that day. In evening, he led a meeting of the church’s men, at which several parish leaders, including A. G. Boyden, C. P. Sinnott, F. E. Sweet, Brenelle Hunt, A. C. Boyden, and W. D. Jackson commented on some aspect of the tragedy which  

100 BL Sept. 13, 20, 1901.
had befallen the nation. There is nothing to suggest that the women of the church were invited to this gathering or had one of their own.\footnote{BL Sept, 20, 27, 1901.}

After this time of mourning, the fall schedule of activities resumed at the Central Square Church, and Porter found himself involved in all the work that went with being the pastor of an active parish. Most likely, in late September, he attended the Norfolk Conference of Congregationalists at the Union Church in East Bridgewater, at which his church was represented by at least eight prominent married women. He must have been pleased to take note of the successful church fair in November, an event at which each table represented one of the church organizations. As he had done in the past, Porter took part in the Union Thanksgiving Service which, somewhat surprisingly, was conducted that year at Odd Fellows Hall in Central Square, although it should be kept in mind that, at this juncture, the Baptist worshipped here since they had not yet moved to a new sanctuary on Summer Street. As had been the case for over a decade, Porter’s days were taken up with preparing sermons, visiting parishioners, officiating at weddings and funerals, baptizing infants, and taking an interest in the progress of the Sunday School and Christian Endeavor and in the myriad of activities of the other church-related organizations. Early in December, however, Porter let it be known that he had received a call from two churches and had “practically” decided to accept the one from the Congregational Church in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. His letter of official resignation was read by church’s clerk after the Sunday morning service on December 8. \footnote{BL Sept, 20, 27, 1901.}

Addressed to the members of the Central Square Church and Society, Porter set the tone of the letter in his opening sentences, writing: “Nothing can be harder for a pastor than to write the words which shall separate him from his people.--But here we have no continuing city.--The modern minister can have no permanent earthly home, but must always confess that he is a pilgrim and a sojourner.” In beautiful prose, the rest of the epistle built upon this theme, thanking the parishioners for the wonderful thirteen years at the Central Square Church, but feeling the time had “come in the wise Providence of God,” when it seemed best to return to them the “trust conferred” upon him. On the following Tuesday evening, meetings of the church and society passed a series of complimentary resolutions praising Porter’s ministry in Bridgewater. Two nights later, a farewell reception for him and his family was widely attended by parishioners and members of other denominations, including several of the town’s ministers. Not
surprisingly, Principal Boyden of the Normal School was asked to make the presentation speech as a number of gifts, including a purse of gold, were given to Reverend Porter and his family. About a week later, the household belongings of the Porters were shipped to Stockbridge. The Central Square Church now had to face the task of choosing a new pastor, a not uncommon occurrence among the Bridgewater churches in the early 1900’s.  

The selection of a minister was not to be taken likely and involved the difficult job of considering the future compatibility between a parish and a new pastor. In the Congregational tradition, a committee of church members was chosen to find a new minister, a process which involved listening to possible candidates preach at the Central Square Church or, in some cases, at other churches. No women served on this committee of ten, and four of its members, A. G. Boyden, W. D. Jackson, C. P. Sinnott, and F. E. Gurney were members of the Normal School faculty. The other six, T. W. Crocker, C. E. Bevan, J. M. Stetson, L. A. Merritt, C. P. Johnson, and E. H. Whitehill, were prominent in church affairs and were well-known in the town. After hearing Reverend Charles E. Stowe deliver two sermons in June at the Central Square Church, this committee asked the church society to agree on calling him to Bridgewater, which was done on June 30. Stowe accepted the invitation and began his pastorate in early September.

For a relatively small church in a town of less than seven thousand, the Central Square Church of Bridgewater was fortunate in securing a pastor of Stowe’s intellectual background and achievements. He was the youngest son of Harriet Beecher Stowe, famed author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a book that reopened the slavery issue in the 1850’s and contributed, in its own way, to the coming of the Civil War. The young Stowe spent his youth in Andover, Massachusetts, where his father was a professor in the theological seminary, and in Hartford, Connecticut, to which the family moved after the elder Stowe retired from teaching. Charles prepared for college at the Edward’s Place School in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and then went on to graduate from Harvard in 1875. He received his theological training at Yale University and the University of Bonn, Germany. Between 1879 and 1899, he served three parishes, one in Maine, the other two in Connecticut. In 1899, he resigned his third church to spend an extended period of travel and study in Europe. Before coming to Bridgewater, Stowe had written numerous

102 *BI*, Sept. 27, Nov. 22, 29, Dec. 6, 13, 1901.
103 *BI*, Dec. 20, 27, 1901, April 20, 1906; Porter was not to have a long life following his departure from Bridgewater, passing away in April of 1906, having contracting typhoid fever at Hampton, Virginia.
magazine articles and a biography of his mother. 105

By the time he accepted the call from Central Square Church, he had been married twenty-three years to the former Susan Mitchell, daughter of Deacon Charles Munroe of Cambridge. The Stowes had two children, Lyman, a junior at Harvard, and Hilda, a young daughter, who would make her stage debut in 1909. Most likely, the family decision to come to Bridgewater was in part based upon the railway connection with the Boston area, allowing them to more easily keep in touch with family members there. Given Stowe’s scholarly propensities, perhaps knowing that several administrators and faculty of the Normal School were prominent members of the Central Square Church was another factor in his accepting the position. Initially, the Stowes lived on Mount Prospect Street, a short and pleasant walk to the Church, in a house “apparently owned” by Albert G. Boyden “as an investment property.” Within a year or so, the new pastor bought a house on newly-named Park Terrace, where his family resided until 1908. 106

Reverend Charles E. Stowe was formally installed as pastor of the church on the evening of October 23. On the afternoon of that day, a council of Congregational ministers, with Reverend E. S. Porter serving as the moderator, listened to a statement of the candidate’s religious beliefs. After voting to accept him as pastor of the Central Square Church, these ministers and other guests were served supper; and, shortly thereafter, the heavily attended installation ceremony began, with the playing of a prelude by Annie H. Crane, the church organist and choir director. At least seven ministers took part in the impressive service, which also included singing by the congregation and the church choir. Following the sermon by Rev. Dr. Alexander McKenzie of Cambridge, Rev. Porter, surely remembering his fruitful years at Central Square Church, delivered the charge to the parishioners, reminding them “of the need of sympathy between the church and the pastor.” The service ended with the pronouncing of the benediction by the newly installed minister. 107

Before looking briefly at Stowe’s unique qualities, which he brought to his ministerial work in

104 BI, May 16, June 13, 20, July 4, Sept. 5, 1902.
106 BI, July 4, 1902, March 18, 1904, July 9, 1909; Townscape Institute, Form 138, p. 349; although I need to do further research, it appears that the Stowe house on Park Terrance occupied the site on which the building of the Alumni Association of Bridgewater State College now stands.
Bridgewater between 1902 and 1908, two happenings early in his pastorate, both of which give evidence of his leadership abilities, need special mentioning. In December of 1903, only a year after arrival in the town, Stowe organized a conference of the town’s clergymen and laymen of the various churches to discuss Bridgewater’s religious needs. On the Friday evening of December 11, 1903, seven pastors and about 175 men of the laity gathered in the vestry of the Central Square Church in a meeting presided over by Stowe. He opened the conference by expressing his regret that St. Thomas Aquinas, Bridgewater’s only Roman Catholic and largest church, was not represented, because of the principle “extra ecclesia nulla sallus,” which in effect said that there was no salvation outside the Catholic church and that the church, therefore, did not recognize the validity of the orders of the Protestant ministers. Adding to his regret over this lack of participation was Stowe’s belief that the Catholic Church was “the mother of all churches” and that he honored the men who headed it. Most likely Stowe agreed with the Independent’s comments, that the priests of St. Thomas Aquinas were surely “in sympathy with any movement which has for its object the arousing of interest in spiritual work.” His own introductory words at the meeting certainly coincided with this paper’s assertion “that the work for Christ need not be affected by points of theology.” The comments of the other ministers at the conference are briefly discussed elsewhere in this chapter and will not repeated here. Nor will the present writer hazard an answer to the Independent’s question, following the meeting: “Has a Seed Been Planted?” Still, the coming together of seven churches might be seen as an early sign of ecumenism, a movement that would come into its own later in the century.\(^{108}\)

While it is not easy to point to immediate results from this gathering, such is not the case with a second effort in which Stowe took the leadership, namely to simplify the covenant and organization of the Central Square Church. Three weeks after the conference on the religious needs of Bridgewater, Stowe addressed a meeting of his own parish at which he suggested that the time had come to revise its expression of faith, ridding it of obsolete metaphysical language. “I do not mean to lead this church away from the Lord Jesus Christ,” he said in conclusion, but only desire “to tear down man-made, barbed-wire, theological fences that past ages have built up between Christ and the soul.” The reaction to his comments was positive, and the meeting gave him the right to select a committee to aid him in revising the covenant.

\(^{107}\) BL, Oct. 3, 10, 17, 24, 1902
and the rules for the church. He chose Arthur C. Boyden, Charles P. Sinnott, Wales Hayward, and Harrison D. Packard. About two weeks later, the new covenant was ready and presented at the annual church meeting on January 12, 1904. Stowe averred that it contained “no startling” doctrinal changes, but was “simpler in form and more scriptural.” After a brief discussion in which new covenant was supported by Albert G. Boyden, Frank E. Gurney, and Thomas W. Crocker, it was adopted unanimously by the 200 members in attendance. The committee of four which assisted the pastor in preparing the new expression of faith was continued and given the authority to rewrite the church manual. 109

Another important process was started at this meeting, namely the combining of the three bodies, each of which was responsible for some aspect of church affairs. As was the wont of other Congregational churches in New England, the work of the parish had long been divided between the ecclesiastical church, which dealt with religious matters, the corporate church, which held the property, and the church society, which conducted the business of the church. To facilitate this consolidation, C. P. Sinnott, William D. Jackson, and Albert G. Boyden, all part of the Normal School and all of whom served as a clerk of one of these church organizations, were made a committee to look into the matter. There appears to have been little, if any, opposition to streamlining the running of the church, although the untangling of duties of three organizations and merging them into one took a number of meetings and action by the state legislature. Signed by the Governor of the Commonwealth on March 24, 1904, an Act of the Legislature approved the changing of the name from The Trinitarian Congregational Church in Bridgewater to The Central Square Congregational Church in Bridgewater. At a church meeting on May 23, 1904, revised By-Laws were adopted for the new organization and, by early June, the three bodies, which had administered different functions of the church, no longer existed. Old nomenclatures do not die easily, however, and this Central Square Church continued to be referred to in a number of ways. 110

From the very beginning of Stowe’s pastorate, it was apparent that the church had acquired a man of considerable intellectual and literary abilities. To be sure, much of his time during his six years in Bridgewater was spent in performing all those important duties that went along with being the pastor of

108 BI, December 18, 1903.
109 BI, Jan. 1, 25, 1904; the new covenant was printed in this newspaper and included in the 1911 Manual of the Central Square Congregational Church.
110 BI, Jan. 15, 29, May 27, June 10, 17, 1904; “Historical Sketch,” Church Manual, 1911, pp. 5-6; HH, p. 69; Townscape Institute, Form, 51, pp. 51-52.
the town’s largest Protestant church. But it was soon apparent that Stowe’s unique contribution to the life of the Central Square Church and, indeed, the town, was the scholarly bent evidenced in the religious leadership of his church and in his participation in the civic life of the Bridgewater community at large. A list of his Sunday morning and evening sermons and talks would reveal a broad range of topics, dealing with spiritual matters, concerns of everyday living, and historical subjects. Aware and tolerant of some theological differences among the Protestant denominations, Stowe’s basic view of Christianity was clearly expressed in the Easter sermon of 1904, in which he asserted that the “resurrection of Jesus Christ is the best attested fact of human history, and it is impossible to account for the existence of the Christian Church if it is denied.” “Everyday Religion” and “Courage for the New Year” were among the sermons aimed at helping his parishioners cope with the daily vicissitudes of life. Church members inclined toward historical topics must have appreciated Stowe’s addresses on “Luther and the Diet of Worms,” “The Burning of the Ship ‘Mary Ann,’” and “John Greenleaf Whittier, Philanthropist and Poet,” a talk of special interest because of Stowe’s personal acquaintance with the New England poet of “Snowbound.” During the Christmas service of 1904, the children of the parish were treated to a story written by their minister entitled “Tommy Law’s Christmas.” For a Thanksgiving service three years later, Stowe used his poetic gift in penning the words of a Thanksgiving hymn. 111

The congregation of Central Square Church was not the only audience in Bridgewater for Stowe’s religious and literary writings and talks. He was a regular attendee at the monthly meetings of the town’s ministers, some of which were held at his homes on Mount Prospect Street and, then, on Park Terrace. In 1903, he spoke ably to this group on the subject of the “Higher Criticism,” and in the following year delivered a paper on “Kant and His Philosophy.” He also preached sermons in other churches in Bridgewater and in surrounding communities, when ministers agreed to exchange pulpits. As noted in the section on education between 1900 and 1910, he was much in demand as a speaker at Bridgewater Normal, the town’s high school, and the Howard School in West Bridgewater, especially during graduation seasons. Perhaps more people in the town got to know something about his literary abilities by reading a series of poems written exclusively for the Bridgewater Independent in 1905-1906. Influenced by his religious views and love of nature, these poems ranged from the playful ones like

111 BI, Nov. 28, Dec. 12, 26, 1902, April 8, Dec. 23, 1904, Nov. 15, 29, 1907; Stowe’s mother had also written the
“Pretty Girl on Her Way To School,” to the more serious ones like “Christ” Love,” and “The Common Man.” 112

Stowe wore his scholarship lightly and was well-liked and respected by the parishioners of Central Square Church. Even when he admonished them, as he did in 1907 over their lack of interest in the mid-week prayer meeting, he did so “in his usual happy manner.” On September 24, 1905, a large crowd, bursting with pride, gathered in the church to witness the conferring upon their minister the degree of Ph.D. of Christ’s College of Baltimore, Maryland. Recalling that Stowe’s mother had authored Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the resolution presented to her son read, in part, that the Rev. Charles Edward Stowe “has distinguished himself as a champion of the cause of humanity, and especially that of the negro race…."

Some in the audience most likely had heard his lecture on the poet Whittier in 1904 and that it was given for the benefit of charity work in Liberia. At the end of his fifth year in Bridgewater, Stowe was much “pleased” by the “purse of gold” presented to him at the annual “Christmas Tree,” especially by the sentiment that “dictated the gift….” His days at the Central Square Church were not to continue too much longer, however. Although he did attend the New England Congregational Congress in Worcester in early March of 1908 and made it the subject of his Sunday sermon, Stowe informed his parishioners in the fall of 1908 of his intention to resign, but denied a report in the Boston papers that he planned to be ordained a priest in the Episcopal church. While admitting that several considerations might have moved him in this direction, he said that preaching, which was central to Congregationalism, was “his peculiar gift,” rather than performing priestly rituals, as important as they were. Stowe was officially “dismissed” on December 2. He did not remain in Bridgewater, but did not sell his house on Park Terrace until three years later. 113

The process of choosing a replacement for Stowe proved to be a protracted one. During the long interim between permanent pastors, the congregation had the novel experience, I suspect, of having a female minister occupy the pulpit when Reverend Sarah Dickson, a graduate of Bridgewater Normal and a former assistant pastor in a Lowell Church, preached for two Sundays in the summer. Whether or not she was a candidate for the position I do not know, but, in any event, the Reverend Walter B. Williams

words of a hymn, which was set to the music of Felix Mendelssohn.
112 BI, June 19, July 24, 1903, Jan. 29, March 18, 1904, Jan. 5, Feb. 3, 1905, Jan. 5, 19, 26, Feb. 16, March 2, 9, 16, 1906, July 5, Nov. 15, 29, 1907; someone might wish to collect all of Stowe’s writings and have them published. 113 Church Manual…, 1911, p. 21; BI, Jan. 1, 22, 1904, Sept. 29, 1905, Jan. 11, Dec. 27, 1907, March 6, Oct. 30, 1908, Oct. 13, 1911.
was chosen to be the new minister and installed on November 16, 1909. It was not an easy task to follow Stowe, whose special intellectual skills have been pointed out, but each pastor usually brings some unique talent to a church. As his eight-year tenure at the Central Square Church enfolded, Williams’s abilities as an organizer and his diligent support of all phases of church life became so evident that when he left Bridgewater in 1917, one source declared: “Mr. William’s pastorate has been one of the most successful in the history of the church and he will leave it in a most efficiently organized condition.”

At the annual church meeting in January of 1910, the new minister professed being encouraged by the work of the church and thanked its members for their co-operation. While most of this eight-year tenure will be discussed in the next chapter, some indications of the energy he applied to his pastoral work was evident in his first year. Presaging a revival of the Christian Endeavor Society, which had been one of Porter’s special concerns, a consecration service for this organization was conducted in early March, and a month later seventeen children met in the vestry to form a Junior Christian Endeavor Society. Around the same time, Williams was one of the initiators and strong supporters of a new Men’s Club and advocated an outdoor gymnasium to promote the physical well-being of its members. In a move that promoted interdenominational co-operation, a union service on the general subject of “Freedom,” was held at the Central Square Church on the Sunday evening of April 24, with Williams making the introductory remarks. Signs of greater evangelical concern and interest in missionary work, which would become even more pronounced after 1910, began to surface this year. After being away during August, the not-so new pastor renewed his busy schedule with the observance of Rally Day in the Sunday School, an event that annually marked a new beginning in the life of Central Square Church. In addition to preparing sermons, officiating at weddings, funerals, and baptisms, and keeping abreast of the numerous church organizations, Williams, accompanied by his wife, who was actively involved in parish work, found time in the fall to attend the Norfolk conference and the National Council of Congregational Churches in Boston. Services at Thanksgiving and Christmas were important ones at the church, requiring special attention. His sermon on “World Peace,” given on Sunday December 25, was not only apropos of the season, but also of a time when events, especially in Europe, were unsettling to many who kept abreast of

114 BI, July 30, 1909, March 2, 1917.
The Central Square Church was fortunate in the first decade of the twentieth century in having three excellent ministers. But the laity also figured highly in the vibrant life of the parish, especially in its governance and in the work of the many organizations promoting the church’s religious, educational, and social objectives. Similar to other Protestant churches in Bridgewater, the congregation of the Central Square Church relied on elected officers to run the church, including the calling of a minister, subject to the vote of the membership on important matters. A review of the annual meetings of the parish, before and after the merging of the three church bodies in 1904, clearly shows the dominant role of men in the governing structure, although this was realized by an elective process which included female members. The offices of Deacon, Moderator, Superintendent of Sunday School, Clerk, Treasurer, Collector, and Auditor were all filled by prominent men of the church. To a great extent, as already suggested, these positions were held by men associated with the Normal School. Prior to the 1904 re-organization, Albert G. Boyden had served as the clerk of the Central Square Society for forty-four years, and with the merging of the three bodies in that year, his son, Arthur C., was chosen the moderator of the Central Square Congregational Church. Charles P. Sinnott, William D. Jackson, and Frank E. Gurney, all Normal School faculty, also held important elected church positions. This is not to suggest that men not associated with this school were absent from the parish’s leadership. One thinks of the contributions of Richard W. Wilber, Robert Williamson, and William F. Leonard, all of whom weredeacons in this decade, and of men like Thomas W. Crocker and Frank E. Sweet, among others, who were prominent members of the church and well-known in the town for real estate and legal work, respectively.

Action taken at the annual meeting of the Central Square Church in January of 1908 illustrates some important points about the role of women in the parish during the early 1900’s. While not holding any top executive positions in overall parish governance, they were represented on or made up the total membership of some committees. Out of a total of thirty-nine parishioners elected to church committees,

\[115\] BI, Dec. 10, 1909, Jan. 7, March 4, April 1, 8, 22, 29, May 20, June 10, Sept. 30, Oct. 14, Nov. 18, Dec. 23, 1910; with hindsight, we now know that turmoil in the Balkan Peninsula was about to erupt into three little conflicts, which in the words of historians Walter P. Hall and William S. Davis, “were destined to become three little curtain raisers for the tragedy of 1914-1918.” As we shall see in a later chapter, the great war of these years was to have a profound impact even on the small community of Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

including the minister, Charles E. Stowe, twenty were women, although several served on more than one committee. Four of them, Mesdames Arthur C. Boyden, Fred C. Pratt, William Bassett, and Louise B. Washburn, constituted the committee of lady visitors. (Evidently paying calls on church members who were sick or in need was considered women’s work.) Three others, Mrs. L. A. Merritt, Miss Ellen M. Wentworth, and Mrs. Edward Churchill joined five men on the very important standing committee. Two women were elected to serve the Sunday School—Emma Maguire as secretary and M. H. Copeland as one of three members of the Sunday School committee. These nine women made valuable contributions to the church, but their positions at the Central Square parish generally did not place them at the center of church governance. 117

Still, three women’s organizations enriched the social and religious life of the parish and, at the same time, were responsible for many of the outreach activities of the Central Square Church. One of many such groups in Bridgewater, the Ladies’ Sewing Circle of this church met monthly at the home of one of its members. For a number of years in the early 1900’s, Mrs. Frank N. Churchill, whose husband owned an important dry-goods store in Central Square, served as the group’s president and occasionally hosted the gathering at her home on Broad Street. In the words of Louise Dickinson Rich, whose mother joined the group immediately after the family arrived in Bridgewater in 1905, “the Sewing Circle ‘devoted’ its time and efforts to sewing for charity, raising money for the church, and other high-minded projects.” At a meeting in October of 1907, for example, “bedding, warm underwear, and three fur caps” were “solicited” for a box to be sent to a missionary family in North Dakota. In November of 1910, forty-two women of the circle packed and forwarded a missionary barrel “to a minister’s family in the West.” Sewing Circle day was also a social event, a time for the women of the church to enjoy each other’s company and to catch up on the “latest” parish “news,” although, as Dickinson’s delightful account of her mother’s turn to host the gathering makes clear, a lot of thorough house cleaning preceded these meetings. Fortunately, the hostess was not faced with task of providing the entire luncheon since “each person brought some pre-designated comestible, such as a casserole of scalloped potatoes, a bowl of coleslaw, or some baked ham…. ” Perhaps the good food was one of the minor reasons that this

W. D. Jackson, “Bridgewater Book; in its short biographies of the two Boydens and Sinnott, History Highlights does not mention their roles in the Central Square Church.

worthwhile organization would be in existence long after 1910.  118

Many women of the sewing circle also belonged to two other outreach groups of the church. At the beginning of the decade, the Women’s Missionary Society was headed by Mary J. Porter and had an enrollment of thirty-two and “a balance in the treasury.” The second Mrs. Albert G. Boyd was elected in June of 1901 to serve as the group’s secretary and treasurer. Along with the other organizations of the church, this society had a table at the annual fall fair and supper and, at least through 1907, presented a report at the annual church meeting. Through 1908, the group continued to hold meetings at homes of its members, but after this, the weekly reports of the parish’s doings say nothing about this society. Nonetheless, concern for missions continued as evidenced by a “missionary meeting” on the Sunday evening of October 2, 1910. At this church gathering, a number of speakers addressed some aspect of missionary work; the comments of Mrs. A. G. Locke, whose husband operated a men’s clothing store in Odd Fellows Building, on “Bridgewater Women and Missions…” and the talk by William D. Jackson on the contributions of his church to the worldwide missionary movement were probably the most interesting to those women who had once been members of the Women’s Missionary Society at the Central Square Church.  119

The third important women’s group at this church was a branch or circle of the King’s Daughters, an international organization founded in 1886 in the New York City home of Margaret Bottome, the wife of a Methodist minister. The organizers of what became a worldwide group sought to promote the “development of spiritual life and the stimulation of Christian activities,” but it was left to each local branch “to choose any work that involved doing good in His Name.” It appears that the circle at Central Square Church was formed in the middle of the 1890’s, by which time branches of this international organization existed in twenty-six states and in many other parts of the world, including nearly every country in Europe. For over a decade, Mrs. Theodore Washburn was elected the “leader” (this is was the title used) of this local branch and more than once hosted its meetings at her home on Bedford Street. At the annual meeting in May of 1908, Clara C. Prince, a teacher of mathematics and music at the Normal School, praised Washburn for her twelve years of faithful service to the King’s

Daughters circle at Central Square Church. Some of its gatherings, such as the supper served to their male relatives on January 27, 1904, were of a social nature. But as the decade ended, the organization had not forgotten its main function. In June of 1910, it started a drive to collect “old linen and cotton rags” to be used by the Boston Floating Hospital in its work to assist the children of that city.  

These three women’s groups were not the only church-related organizations at Central Square church between 1901 and 1910. Active during the second half of the decade, the Girls’ Club elected officers every year, held regular meetings, sponsored social events, and did its bit to contribute to the well-being of the church by spending some time at its weekly gatherings in the fall making articles for the parish’s annual fair. Among its more successful social endeavors was a chafing-dish supper in the vestry of the church on April 14, 1908, described as a “sort of leap-year affair” since members of the club invited “their young gentlemen friends to be present....” Evidently it took little prodding. At least half of the forty or so young people sitting down to supper were invitees. Most likely, some of the young people attending this “most successful social” also participated in a George Washington masquerade party arranged by the Girls’ Club in February of 1910.

Considering the dominant role played by a relatively small number of men in governing the Central Square Church in the early 1900’s, it is rather surprising that a Men’s Club was not formed until the end of the decade. “Amid much enthusiasm,” however, an organization for the men of the parish was launched on the evening of February 4, 1910. Before getting to the business at hand, those attending the meeting sat down to a clam chowder supper prepared by a kitchen staff headed by A. I. Simmons, well-known for his meat market, located not far from the church. With Reverend Williams presiding, the group then moved quickly to accept a constitution and by-laws presented to them by a committee headed by A. C. Boyden. Elected the organization’s first president, George B. Tobey was to be aided by sixteen other members, all prominent in church and town affairs, who were chosen to do the executive and committee work of this new men’s club. The first purpose of the organization, best enunciated by W. D.

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120 A. C. Boyden, Memorial Volume, p. 101; Dickenson Rich, Innocence..., p. 210; Sue Buck, “A Brief History of the Order of the King’s Daughters and Sons,” http://www.iokds.org/history.html; the name of this organization was changed in 1887, since some man and boys sought admission, although this was not the case at Central Square Church; I am most indebted to Buck for helping me to place this church-related organization at Central Square Church in a broader context; BI, May 3, Nov. 22, 29, Dec. 20, 1901, Jan. 25, 1904, Jan. 11, Nov. 15, 1907, Jan. 17, 24, April 24, May 15, 1908, April 29, June 10, Oct. 14, Nov. 18, 1910.
121 BI, April 7, 1905, Nov. 1, 22, Dec. 6, 13, 1907, Jan. 3, 17, April 17, 24, May 15, 1908, Dec. 10, 1909, Feb. 4.
Jackson, was to “promote the intellectual welfare of its members.” C. P. Sinnott also thought it important to “promote the social welfare” of the club’s members by having “frequent meetings and banquets…” In its first year, the Men’s Club of Central Square Church fulfilled these two aims. At its meetings, usually beginning with supper, speakers enlightened the members on a numbers of current topics, including vocational training, tuberculosis, and the modern newspaper.  

One of the strongest church-related organizations of the Central Square parish was its Sunday School. At the annual church meeting in January of 1904, it was reported that the school during the previous year had had an enrollment of 162 pupils and an average weekly attendance of 99, making it the largest school among the seven Protestant churches in Bridgewater. Most of these Sunday “scholars” were not yet church members and did not, as a rule, attend the ten-thirty worship service, but when their numbers were added to church membership of 250, or so, it becomes clearer that the Central Square Church was indeed the largest Protestant church in town. This was hardly a source of pride for Louise Dickinson who later wrote: “Nobody had to go to both church and Sunday School, except us! (I assume her sister Alice shared these sentiments.) This lament assuredly did not reach the ears of two Sunday School Superintendents, William D. Jackson, 1886-1904, and Charles P. Sinnott, 1904-1911. To have two Normal School faculty, with recognized pedagogical skills and scholarly achievements, serve in this capacity for a total of twenty-five years accounts in good measure for the school’s viability during the early 1900’s. That the church in general was interested in the continued success of its Sunday School was evidenced by a meeting on April 17, 1908, called to discuss the topic: “The Sunday school of the Central Square Church; what is it doing, what it might do; what the church owes to the school, and what the school owes to the church.” Hearing the recitations and musical presentations on the annual Children’s Day in June was one way for parishioners to know first-hand something about Christian education at the church. Undoubtedly, the Sunday School pupils were proud to present the fruits of their studies to friends, family, and other church members. But one suspects that thoughts of the upcoming Sunday School picnic had begun to enter their minds. Whether it was held at the “Nip” or Hooper’s Grove in Bridgewater or Robbins’ Pond in East Bridgewater, this social gathering was a much anticipated event.

123 “Church Manual…,” 1911, p. 21; Dickinson Rich, Innocence…, p. 214; BI, Jan. 11, June 7, 1901, Jan. 16, July
Another organization at the Central Square Church between 1901 and 1910 was a branch of the International Society of Christian Endeavor, an interdenominational association of Protestant youth in the United States, Mexico, and Canada, who pledged to serve their individual churches in some useful way. Originally called the United Society of Christian Endeavor, the parent organization was founded in 1881 by Francis Edward Clark, a writer and a Congregational minister in Portland, Maine. While a local society was established and flourished at the Central Square Church during Porter’s pastorate, 1889-1901, its participation in parish life diminished somewhat during Stowe’s ministry, 1902-1908, or, at least, the weekly reports of the church’s doings would suggest this. After Williams became the pastor of Central Square Church in late 1909, its Christian Endeavor society took on new life. At its semi-annual meeting in March of 1910, officers, including William B. Holmes as president and Helen Williams as vice-president, were elected, as were members of the two committees, one to promote missions, the other to plan social activities. Led by Edmund W. Sinnott, the subject for the Christian Endeavor Sunday evening service on April 24 was “Christ Winning the World,” a topic that would have certainly been especially appealing to the more evangelical members of the society. One suspects also that some members of Christian Endeavor found the banquet, which preceded the business meeting on May 20, equally pleasing, although on a more mundane level. 124

Before leaving this discussion of Central Square Church in the early 1900’s, a few words about the contribution of music to its religious and social life are in order. In a general way, the musical components of church worship were overseen by a committee appointed at the annual meeting. A number of dedicated parishioners showed a willingness to serve the church in this capacity, including Annie Crane, Daisy Churchill, and Clara C. Prince, who made up the committee in 1904. Crane was also the church’s organist and choir director during the early 1900’s and was kept busy preparing organ pieces and choir anthems not only for regular Sunday mornings, but also for more elaborate services on Christmas, Easter, and such special occasions as the installation of Reverend Stowe in the fall of 1902. Although the organ used during Crane’s time dated to the early 1870’s and was not to be thoroughly overhauled until

10, 1903, Jan. 15, 1904, Jan. 11, June 14, Dec. 27, 1907, April 7, 1908, July 15, Sept. 30, 1910.
1912, it was evidently adequate for special musical programs. In late February of 1902, for example, an organ recital under the auspices of the Normal Club was very well attended. Described by the Independent as “A Musical Treat,” an even more memorable concert in the form of an even-song service took place on the Sunday afternoon of March 20, 1904, when the Beethoven Quartette of Boston sang beautifully before an overflowing crowd which included people of many different beliefs. For many parishioners of Central Square Church, I suspect, the singing of favorite hymns during the Sunday morning and evening services was the musical highlight of their week. Dickenson Rich, not enamored by these services as a young girl, nonetheless later wrote that “we really loved some of the hymns” which “gratified some feeling deep within.” For those church members who enjoyed more spirited and evangelical music, including hymn singing by the congregation, attending Sunday evening services was most rewarding, perhaps even more so after the adoption of the new Alexander hymn book in April of 1910. On a number of occasions during this decade, these evening “praise” services were rendered particularly moving by the singing of Frank A. Bowdoin, who hailed from the Scotland part of Bridgewater, and whose wife succeeded Crane as the organist of Central Square Church. 125

St. Thomas Aquinas Church--Roman Catholic

If this Congregational parish in Central Square could lay claim to having the largest Protestant congregation in Bridgewater in the early 1900’s, St. Thomas Aquinas Church, located on Centre Street, could cite its own unique position in at least three ways: it was the town’s sole Catholic church, had a much larger membership than any of the seven Protestant churches, and had the greatest seating capacity of any building in Bridgewater. From its humble beginnings in the 1850’s, St. Thomas Aquinas, thanks mainly to the great influx of Irish immigrants, had increased its membership to over fifteen hundred members by the early twentieth century, a sizable portion of Bridgewater’s total population of about six thousand. Fortunately, the enlargement of the sanctuary in the late 1890’s, thanks to the architectural

125 BI, Jan 4, Feb. 1, May 3, 1901, March 25, Oct. 17, 1902, Jan. 15, 29, March 25, April 8, Oct. 7, Dec. 23, 1904, July 26, Dec. 13, 27, 1907, April 7, 1908, Feb. 4, March 4, April 1, 8, 22, May 20, Sept. 30, Nov.18, 1910, July 19, 1912; Dickinson Rich, Innocence ..., p. 212; HH, p. 69; the old pipe organ was replaced on December 9, 1935, by a Hammond organ, a gift of the Jenkins family.
plans of P. W. Ford of Boston, made it possible to accommodate over six hundred parishioners at a single Mass. This physical expansion, which created the church we still recognize in the twentieth-first century, and the growth of membership meant that Bridgewater’s only Catholic church began to play an increasingly larger role in the religious, civic and social life of a town that had been dominated by its Protestant-English-Yankee population since the founding of the South Parish in the early eighteenth century. At the same time, the Irish-dominated parish of St. Thomas Aquinas began to witness its own internal changes as Catholic immigrants other than the Irish began to settle in the town and become members of the church; although, as we shall see later, some French Canadians in Bridgewater sought unsuccessfully to establish a second Catholic parish in Bridgewater. Nevertheless, even though Catholics continued to occupy only one of the town’s churches between 1901 and 1910, one suspects that if Joshua E. Crane had lived to add to his history of Bridgewater, he would have included far more than the five lines he devoted to St. Thomas Aquinas Church in his 1884 account. 126

Around the time that Crane’s history was being published, as part of Hurd’s History of Plymouth County, Reverend William E. Kelly came to Bridgewater to serve as the assistant pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas Church. Little did this thirty-eight year old curate suspect that within four years he would be appointed by the Archbishop of Boston to be the parish’s pastor, following the death of Reverend John A. Conlin, whose pastorate, 1869-88, had witnessed the building of the impressive mansard rectory next to the sanctuary. That Kelly would remain in this position until the time of his death in 1920 must have been even less contemplated. As the twentieth century began, Kelly could take pride in the physical enlargement of the church, which had been completed in 1899, and that, by this time, he had faithfully served as the parish’s pastor for over a decade. But boasting about such achievements was not Kelly’s style. Rather, it was said by those familiar with his charities that “Father Kelly would give away the shirt on his back.” “Parishioners,” according to the church’s Memorial Booklet 1998, “remembered this beloved priest… riding his horse Kitty, his muffler flowing in the wind, as he rode to his flock, scattered among the increasing number of farms in growing agricultural Bridgewater….” In addition to his duties at St. Thomas’s, he was instrumental in the building of a new church in East Bridgewater after a fire destroyed the old one and continued to minister to the Catholics in that community until 1903, at which

126 BI, Nov. 18, 1898; Crane, p. 784; HH, p. 73; Townscape Institute, Form 34, pp. 131-132; “Saint Thomas Aquinas
time a separate parish was created. 127

Despite the vigor Kelly displayed in the early years of his pastorate, there were times after 1900 when his physical condition necessitated that many tasks associated with running a good-sized parish be turned over to the assistant pastors, some of whom remained in Bridgewater only a short time. Still, he continued to do his share of pastoral duties such as conducting Sunday and weekly masses and officiating at funerals and weddings, especially, one suspects, for parishioners whom he had long known. Assisting the bishop in administering the rites of confirmation each year to a class of boys and girls was one particular exercise which gave Pastor Kelly great joy. Commenting on the 1907 ceremony at which 103 children of the parish were confirmed, the Independent wrote: “The little girls made a very pretty picture in their costumes of snow white. Each girl wore a long veil and white gloves. The boys were dressed in the conventional black and wore white gloves.” That all the children who were confirmed on that Tuesday morning agreed to abstain from intoxicating liquors until the age of twenty-five must have pleased many in the parish. A visitation from the Archbishop, Most Reverend William H. O’Connell, to the Parochial residence next to the church was another highlight of that day for Kelly, who was nearing his twentieth year as pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas Church. A less enjoyable, but required, task for Rector Kelly was the preparation of the annual report on the financial status of the parish, something, by the way, that was done by the laity in the town’s Protestant churches. In his 1901 statement, Kelly reminded his flock that $8600 was still owed on the renovation project of the late 1890’s. (This debt was paid off later on in his tenure as pastor.) Perhaps as he prepared these reports and carried out other administrative duties of running a large parish, Reverend Kelly thought of his earlier days at the church when, among other things, he had the physical stamina to take “horseback rides to administer the last rites” to a parishioner who lay dying. He was fortunate, however, in having several younger assistant pastors during the first two decades of the twentieth century, who helped him in a plethora of tasks demanded by a growing and changing parish. 128

From January of 1901 to August of 1903, however, it must not have been easy for Kelly and,
indeed, the parish to witness five different priests appointed by the Archbishop of Boston to serve as St. Thomas’s assistant pastor, even though each brought special talents to the position. This revolving door policy came to an end in August of 1903, when Reverent James J. Farrelly became the latest assistant pastor, replacing Reverend James T. Landrigan, who, in his short term as curate, had had the privilege of giving a short address at a memorial service in honor of the late Pope Leo XIII. Born in Ireland, Reverend Farrelly came to the United States at the age of fourteen and studied for the priesthood at Mt. St. Mary’s College in Maryland. He graduated from that institution in 1897 and, then, for the next six years was engaged at the Working Boys Home and Industrial School at Newton Highlands, Massachusetts, north of Bridgewater. While being Irish and having the experience of dealing with young men of the working class were obvious assets for any new priest coming to Bridgewater, the parishioners of St. Thomas Aquinas Church most likely were not prepared for the many talents which this young curate was bringing to his new position.  

From the start, Father Farrelly did his share of the weekly Masses, officiated at some of the funerals, delivered sermons, and, in general, helped relieve some of the heavy burdens placed upon Rector Kelly. But it was not long before the new curate gave evidence of abilities in several other areas. In December of 1903, he organized a Christmas festival, the main feature of which was a minstrel show, not an uncommon form of entertainment in the first half of the twentieth century when many Americans were not yet sensitive to the racial stereotyping found in such a production. With Matthew Devine as the stage manager, Farrelly “organized the show, …trained the boys and girls, and even planned the costumes.” At this point, I have little idea how the new curate came to these skills and, I suspect, neither did the 300 people who packed into the lower floor of the church to see the 150 boys and girls put on a “highly creditable performance.” In any case, the event brought to the attention of many parishioners the musical, theatrical, and organizational competencies of their not-so-new assistant pastor. 

During the rest of the decade, there was hardly an important religious or social activity at St. Thomas Aquinas Church in which Farrelly was not involved. With the great majority of the parish being

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129 BI, Jan. 4, 11, Feb. 1, May 31, Sept. 27, Nov. 8, Dec. 27, 1901, July 24, 31, Aug. 7, 14, 1903; “Saint Thomas Aquinas Parish--150 years of Faith,” p.18; evidently Landrigan was transferred to the same institution at which Farrelly had served.

130 BI, Dec. 25, 1903, Jan. 1, 22, April 8, 1904, April 7, 1905, Jan. 3, 1908; “Saint Thomas Aquinas Parish--150 years of Faith,” p.18
Irish in the early 1900’s, the celebration of St. Patrick’s Day in March was an important and, indeed, poignant annual event. From the start of his twelve year tenure in Bridgewater, Farrelly figured highly in this joyous occasion, which was held annually in the Town Hall. Most likely, more than Irish parishioners were among the 450 people who crowded into this public place on March 17, 1904, to see the children of the church present “a comic opera and minstrel show,” prepared particularly by Farrelly, who had spent “weeks drilling the choruses and preparing the show for production.” Having had some experience in forming and directing an orchestra in his previous work at the Working Boys Home, he further enriched the cultural life of the parish by organizing a young people’s orchestra of thirty-five pieces in November of 1904. By the time of the church’s bazaar in the following May, this assemble was ready for its debut and would continue to perform on a number of public occasions in the following years with Maestro Farrelly wheeling the baton. 131

Rector Kelly, no longer a young man, worked very closely with his youthful and energetic assistant and was content in having him play a leading part in many of church’s endeavors. Farrelly was particularly adept as a master of ceremonies at the annual confirmation celebrations. He played the same role on other special occasions such as the gatherings on the evening of December 6, 1908, at which the Holy Name Society and the Ladies Sodality of St. Thomas Aquinas Church, both formed in the 1890’s through the efforts of Kelly, added ninety and fifteen members respectively to their ranks and the first public graduation of the St. Thomas Aquinas Sunday School on the Sunday afternoon of June 26, 1910. Farrelly also might have been given the title of treasurer-in-residence for the parish, since he not only planned the entertainment for many of its social gatherings, but also acted as the treasurer for the general committee that was in charge of a particular event. Among other happenings, the combination “Country Circus” and field day in the summer of 1906 and the church’s lawn party, a year later, would not have been so successful without the organizational, musical, and financial skills of Reverend Farrelly. Despite these weighty responsibilities, the young curate found the time to enjoy some lighter moments at the church. On June 28, 1905, he joined friends and parishioners in the basement of the church at a strawberry festival sponsored by the Young Ladies Sodality as a testimonial to their hardworking curate.

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Perhaps the strawberries were made even sweeter by the purse of fifty dollar given to him on this occasion. A few weeks later, along with some of the Sunday School teachers, Father Farrelly accompanied about fifty students as they headed to Robbins’ Pond in East Bridgewater for an outing which included a luncheon under the trees surrounding the shore.  

In later years, some undoubtedly remembered Father Farrelly for his the support and leadership in the church’s athletic program. Not quite a year after his arrival in Bridgewater in August of 1903, the Independent could assert: “The national game, baseball, took hold hard in Bridgewater Saturday and Monday, and within the last week no less than seven games have been played by teams from Bridgewater.” But at this point there was no St. Thomas Aquinas nine, surprisingly so, since this parish was the largest organization in the town. By late January of 1908, when this newspaper enthusiastically wrote that baseball “matters are warming up,” it was aware that a team had been formed by Bridgewater’s largest parish the previous April, thanks to Farrelly, who had agreed to act as the manager. But his contribution to the church’s sports program was not limited to this role. Shortly after the baseball team was fielded, he was instrumental in the formation of an Athletic Association at St. Thomas Aquinas Church, whose first president was James F. Charnock, well-known for his undertaking and embalming business in the Willis Building on Main Street. Farrelly, playing a familiar role, agreed to be the treasurer of the new organization, which would have a membership of over one hundred by early 1908. The respected and well-liked curate and, indeed, the whole parish must have been thrilled to witness the meteoric rise of the St. Thomas Aquinas baseball team at the end of the decade. In the opening game of the 1908 season, it defeated the team of St. John’s Church of East Bridgewater on the Center Street grounds before one of the largest crowds ever assembled up to that time at a Bridgewater ball field. Under its headline on October 2, 1909, declaring that St. Thomas Aquinas’s team was the “Strongest in Plymouth County, the Independent commented on Farrelly’s leadership and includes a photograph of him sitting with the church’s nine. The team’s victory over an East Bridgewater team on July 4, 1910, was declared by the same newspaper to be the “most exciting” of all the local games played on this national

Both Father Kelley and Father Farrelly were especially supportive of several laic organizations, which were integral parts of, or closely allied to, the parish of St. Thomas Aquinas. While the facilities of the church and the Town Hall were available for certain of their activities, it was fortunate that not far from the church on Centre Street stood “one of the most public halls” in Bridgewater. Commonly known in the early 1900’s as Benevolent Hall, this building, which no longer exists, served as a meeting place for such diverse groups as the Knights of Columbus and the Boot & Shoe Workers’ Union and was the scene of many social, political, musical, and theatrical events, enjoyed by a broad spectrum of the town’s inhabitants. The early history of the hall is associated with the founding of the Young Men’s Benevolent Society around 1880. Originally composed of about thirty-five of the young Catholic men in Bridgewater, the objects of this club were social and beneficial. Not long after being formed, the society held a big fair and bazaar in the Town Hall, an event so successful that about $1400 was added to the money appropriated by the society for the erection of Benevolent Society Hall (sometimes called the Hibernian Hall), a project completed around 1885. Numbering close to 200 members at its height, this Young Men’s Benevolent Society used the hall as a meeting place, but was more than willing to have other organizations make it their headquarters also. Owing to “deaths, withdrawals, and removals,” membership in the society itself had been reduced to negligible numbers by the turn of the century. But, fortunately, the few remaining members who owned the building continued to allow its use by several organizations, some with ties to St. Thomas Aquinas Church. Until 1921, at which time the building was converted into a small factory for the manufacture of leather shoe parts, it remained an important place for church-related gatherings and public meetings, none of which, it is said, ever required a police officer in attendance.

If the members of St. Thomas Aquinas had very little input into church governance, certainly several laic organizations were able to take much of the credit for the vitality of this parish during the early 1900’s; indeed, a full historical account would need to say more about their many religious and

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133 BI, June 3, 1904, April 12, May 3, Sept. 20, 1907, Feb. 7, April 3, June 5, 1908, June 25, Oct. 2, 1909, June 24, July 8, 1910; Pictorial History, 1994, p. 36; “Saint Thomas Aquinas Parish--150 Years of Faith,” pp. 18-19; Reverend Farrelly is not mentioned in the chapter on sports in History Highlights since this essay says nothing about Bridgewater sports before 1910.

134 BI, Oct. 31, 1902, Nov. 20, 1903, Jan. 23, 1914, Sept. 2, 9, 1921; “Saint Thomas Aquinas Parish--150 Years of Faith,” p. 19; further research on my part is needed on this important meeting place, which was torn down in the late 1940’s and replaced by a private home.
social activities. Defined as “devotional or charitable associations of Roman Catholic laity,” sodalities
figured highly in the life of Bridgewater’s largest and only Catholic parish. Due in part to the efforts of
Rector Kelly, the Ladies’ Sodality (sometimes referred to as the Married Ladies’ Sodality) was founded in
1892. A large organization with, perhaps, over two hundred members by 1910, its makeup, reflecting
that of the church itself, was overwhelming Irish in the early years of the century. In addition to
conducting regular meetings, some of its activities included holding strawberry festivals, sponsoring
lectures, and attending musical vesper services as a body. It must have been impressive sight on
December 10, 1908, seeing 160 members of this organization attend Sunday evening service at which
fifteen new members joined its ranks. By this time, it appears that single women were being admitted to
this sodality since the account of this occasion makes it clear that the new members were young and
unmarried. Most likely these young women had been members of the Young Ladies’ Sodality, the other
important organization of this type at St. Thomas Aquinas Church. This group of young ladies, like the
one of older women, contributed greatly to parish life by being actively involved in the late spring fairs of
the church, sponsoring suppers and entertainments, sometimes taking place at Benevolent Hall, and by
adding to the long list of Bridgewater’s strawberry festivals. The activities of both sodalities contributed
to the treasury of the church, helping it to fulfill its religious, charitable, and social objectives. 135

Another laic group of St. Thomas Aquinas Church in the early 1900’s was a branch of the
Society of the Holy Name, a men’s spiritual and fraternal organization with origins dating back to the
thirteenth century. Through the efforts of Pastor Kelly, the Bridgewater society was organized in the
middle 1890’s, about the same time that a decree by Pope Leo XIII made it much easier for branches to be
formed. The Holy Name Society of St. Thomas Aquinas held monthly meetings on Wednesday evening,
annually elected officers, including a president, treasurer, and secretary, and, by the fall of 1908, could
boast a membership of over one hundred. Conducting yearly public processions to profess the name of
Jesus Christ and receiving Holy Communion in a body were two important rituals central to the religious
life of this organization. In the fall of 1908, for instance, the one hundred members of the Bridgewater
society were organized into four divisions, led by Thomas Tinsley, John E. Flynn, Richard Pickett, and M.

11, 1908; the newspaper accounts do not make it clear who was able to join the Ladies Sodality, especially whether or
not older single women could be members; Townscape Institute, Form 34, p. 132; “Saint Thomas Aquinas
H. McFadden and began out-door drills on the ball field near the church in preparation for a parade of the Holy Name Society which was to take place in Boston on the first Sunday of November. About a month after this gathering in the State’s capital city, 160 members of the local branch marched into St. Thomas Aquinas Church “to the strains of music played by church organist Miss Nellie Cleare” to celebrate Mass and the admittance of ninety new members, “pretty near being the record” in the annals of the Bridgewater branch of the Holy Name Society. The Irish accounted for most of the new members, but several French and Portuguese names were a sign that the ethnic make-up of the St. Thomas parish and the town were slowly beginning to change in the first decade of the twentieth century. 136

There were three other organizations that were closely tied to the town’s Catholic Church, although they were not officially parts of the parish. One of them was Bridgewater Council 488 of the Knights of Columbus, which, thanks to the efforts of Richard J. Casey, who was becoming one of the town’s leading retailers, was formed in 1900, nineteen years after the parent fraternal organization was started by Father Michael J. McGivney in New Haven, Connecticut. Beginning with forty-four charter members, the Bridgewater branch of this Catholic fraternal benefit society steadily grew in numbers between 1901 and 1910 and was soon recognized as one of town’s leading civic and religious organizations, committed to “charity, unity, fraternity and patriotism.” 137

Its ties to St. Thomas Aquinas Church were obvious in several ways. Almost all Bridgewater “knights,” were communicants of this church and, not surprisingly, given the ethnic makeup of the parish, hailed from Irish backgrounds. Among them were Casey, Thomas Kelley, Thomas Gorman, Edward Brown, Samuel Kingston, and Bartholomew Flynn, all of whom served as the Grand Knight during the early 1900’s. Some of the activities of Council 488, including bazaars, dances, and Ladies’ Nights, were held in the Town Hall, and, starting in March of 1904, the organization rented club rooms on the second floor of the Simmons Block on Main Street. But it was in Benevolent Hall where the regular business meetings, the installments of officers and new members, and some social gatherings took place. The

proximity of this hall to St. Thomas Aquinas Church was particularly advantageous to the Knights on certain occasions. Each October twelfth, the Knights of Council 488 would gather at this hall and, then, march in a body to the church to hold a special vesper service in commemoration of the landing of Christopher Columbus, whom they credited with bringing Christianity to the New World. Both Fathers Kelly and Farrelly were strong backers of the Knights of Columbus, and, on the Ladies’ Night in November of 1906, the latter spoke “of the excellent work being done by the order for the Catholic religion ….” A vital part of this faith was helping those in need, a goal that the Knights of Bridgewater sought to achieve through its many charitable endeavors. While not pronouncing on the merits of Fall River textile strike of 1905, it was Council 488 that was credited for collecting, packing, and shipping of clothes to help the poor of that city as its main industry was brought to a halt. 138

Another active organization in Bridgewater between 1901 and 1910 was a local branch of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, a Catholic, Irish-American fraternal association founded in New York City in 1836. Considering the growth of the town’s Irish Catholic population in the second half of the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that a local order, known as Division 4, was established in 1893. From its beginnings, the Bridgewater branch of the A. O. H. was aided by a Ladies’ Auxiliary, which maintained a degree of organizational independence. Along with the other ten or so orders in Plymouth County, Division 4, whose members were communicants of St. Thomas Aquinas Church, contributed money to charity, provided financial assistance to its members to help defray sickness and funeral expenses, and worked to promote and preserve Irish cultural heritage in the United States. The regular business meetings and installation ceremonies for newly elected officers and members were held in Benevolent Hall, as were the many social gatherings sponsored by this organization. Bazaars, baked bean suppers, pool and card tournaments, dances, ladies nights, and theatrical productions were not only enjoyed by the members of the order, but, in some instances, by other citizens of the town. Indicative of the order’s close ties to the parish of St. Thomas Aquinas was the fact that the church’s Christmas tree (party) in 1901 took place in Benevolent Hall under the auspices of the Ladies’ Auxiliary of the order. On

p. 74; see previous section on Saint Thomas Aquinas Church.

the evening of March 18, 1912, Division 4, A. O. H., could take pride in celebrating its twentieth anniversary, an occasion made even more special by a short address given by Reverend William E. Kelly, the beloved and longtime pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas Church. 139

The Massachusetts Catholic Order of Foresters and the Catholic Order of Foresters were two interrelated organizations that had branches, or “courts”, as they were called, in Bridgewater during the first decade of the twentieth century. Founded in Boston in 1879, the state order was used as a model for the creation of the national one in Chicago four years later. Adhering to the principles of ‘Faith, Hope, and Charity,” the main purpose of the Foresters was “to provide fraternal insurance benefits to its members.” As the century opened, Bridgewater had two courts, Unity for men and St. Beatrice for women, both identified as parts of the Massachusetts Catholic Order of Foresters, M. C. O. F., and whose membership consisted almost exclusively of Irish Catholics communicants of St. Thomas Aquinas Church. Referred to as “relief associations,” both courts made great use of Benevolent Hall for their business meetings, many social get-togethers, and a variety of entertainments, although the women of St. Beatrice Court also used the third floor hall of the Bank Building in Central Square for some of its activities. One particularly active member of this court was Annie Devine, who was elected Chief Ranger several times. At times, the two courts jointly sponsored a social event such the salad supper served in Benevolent Hall on March 31, 1902, where 250 people not only enjoyed the evening’s fare, but also the music of Ferguson’s orchestra. 140

Two other courts with direct connections to the Order of Foresters of America (at some point this organization became known as the Catholic Foresters of America) were formed in Bridgewater during the early 1900’s. After a lot of preliminary work, Court Bridgewater, No. 181, A. O. F., was instituted in October 1900, with an initial enrollment of thirty-four members. During impressive ceremonies at meetings conducted in Benevolent Hall, this figure grew to seventy by the summer of 1901, with the hope that the number of charter members would reach one hundred by the end of the year, an increase reflective

of the great expansion of the order throughout Massachusetts. Given the demographics of Bridgewater at this time, most of the early members were Irish Catholics, including Michael Whalen, M. Wallace Monroe, John B. Jarvis, and Philip McGinn, all of whom were elected to serve as the Chief Ranger of this court. From its beginnings, Court 181 was concerned about the well-being of its members. When Christian H. Frederickson was seriously injured at the Bridgewater Iron Works (not yet officially called the Stanley Works) in late 1900, for instance, Court Bridgewater put on an entertainment at the Town Hall for his benefit, tickets for which could be secured at Cole’s and Wilcox’s drug stores. Each fall, the same hall was the setting for the court’s annual concert and ball, an event that raised money and was a much anticipated social gathering for upwards of two hundred town inhabitants. Perhaps even greater crowds attended the spring bazaars put on by the Forester’s in the Town Hall. Describing the one in 1903, the Independent noted that “a very large crowd” enjoyed both the entertainment and the dancing of this affair, the proceeds of which amounted to nearly $800. Not surprisingly, this Catholic laic organization was supportive of some of the social activities of St. Thomas Aquinas Church. On the occasion of this parish’s first field day on September 3, 1906, Court 181 of the Foresters of America, along with other organizations, town businesses, and individuals, sported a float carrying some of its members.  

As was the case with other fraternal societies in Bridgewater, it was not long before a women’s auxiliary to the Foresters was formed. In late March of 1904, the Independent, in a short piece entitled “The Gentle Foresters,” reported that a meeting in Benevolent Hall had been held in the interests of establishing an order of Companions of the Forests. While the twenty present at this meeting hoped that such an organization could be instituted almost immediately, it was not until the fall that this happened. Known as the Christabel Circle of Companions of the Forest, this women’s auxiliary was officially launched on October 11, when, at a meeting in Benevolent Hall, Mrs. Lizzie Johnson was elected to head this group. The members, at this point, hailed from the Bridgewater’s Irish Catholic community and its sole Catholic church. From the outset, this “circle” enlivened the social season of the town by holding dances, suppers, and sales in Benevolent Hall.  


142 BL, March 25, April 1, Sept. 23, 30, Nov. 25, 1904, May 12, Sept. 22, 1905.
Unlike some of the larger communities in Southeastern Massachusetts, Bridgewater has never had full-time parochial schooling on any level. One organization, however, that was an integral part of St. Thomas Aquinas Church between 1901 and 1910 was its Sunday School. Under the supervision of the assistant pastor, the classes and lay teachers of this school met on Sunday afternoons in the church basement, a space that was thoroughly renovated by James Neville in the late summer of 1902, making it into one large room for the holding of low Masses and sessions of the Sunday School. The main purpose of this school, of course, was to instruct the young people of the parish in the doctrines and history of the Roman Catholic faith and in the ways of Christian living. The Sunday School choir, most notably during Reverend Farrelly’s tenure as assistant pastor, provided music at Sunday evenings services, especially during the Easter and Christmas seasons. Undoubtedly, the children of the parish took religious instruction very seriously, but likely they equally enjoyed the social aspects of getting together on Sunday afternoons as well as joining their classmates at the annual picnic, following the end of classes in June. The communicants of St. Thomas Aquinas Church certainly found the Mass for the Feast of Corpus Christi in June of 1903 even more celebratory thanks to the Sunday School children who attended it “in a body dressed in white and carrying flowers.” Some indication of the important place of the Sunday School in the life of the parish was made clear on June 26, 1910, when the graduating students were honored in the first public ceremony held by the school, with Father Farrelly in charge of the program. Most of the teachers, graduates, and other students on the Honor List were Irish, but several students with Portuguese, Italian or French names could be found on the same list, another indication of the changing ethnic make-up of the church and the town. As the decade ended, there were over two hundred and fifty students enrolled in the Church’s Sunday School, making it the largest one in Bridgewater.143

Another important component of religious life at St. Thomas Aquinas Church was the music played and sung at the Sunday Masses and on a variety of other occasions. Under the direction of organist and choir director Miss Nellie Cleare, the senior choir had a busy schedule from September through the end of June. Besides singing regularly at the high Mass at ten-thirty on Sunday mornings, the choir participated in other services on such occasions as confirmations, the feasts of Corpus Christi, services

held under the auspices of the Knights of Columbus, mid-night Masses ushering in the New Year, and occasionally funerals. Music for Christmas and Easter Masses took extra preparation, as did the High Mass of Requiem in honor of the late Pope Leo XIII on July 26, 1903, when the music of the Gregorian mass was used. At this point in my research, I know nothing about the quality of the church’s organ, but will say more later about a new organ that was installed in the sanctuary in early 1913. As pointed out earlier, a children’s choir occasionally sang for Sunday evening services, most notably on religious holidays. Not all the music sung by the senior choir was of a religious nature, however. At the St. Patrick’s entertainment in the Town Hall on March 17, 1902, for instance, the choir opened the program with a selection entitled “Twilight on the Sea,” which, according to one reporter, “was heartedly applauded.” All in all, then, the choir at St. Thomas Aquinas church added significantly to the religious and social life of the parish and, along with other church choirs in Bridgewater, provided some parishioners an opportunity to use their musical talents as a way of expressing their religious convictions.

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**Methodist Episcopal Church**

About twenty years after the Catholics of Bridgewater began erecting their unpretentious sanctuary on Center Street, the Methodist Episcopal Society was formed in the town. In studying the history of Methodism in Bridgewater between 1874 and 1913-14, it is important to remember that the present stone building on the corner of School and Cedar Streets, known for many years as the Gammons Memorial Methodist Church, had not yet been erected. The members of this Protestant denomination, unlike the Irish Catholics in Bridgewater, did not build a house of worship for many years, but rather made use of the white meetinghouse on Cedar Street, formerly the home of the New Jerusalem Church. Beginning services on May 3, 1874, the Methodists rented this building, which is still extant, for five dollars a week. Five years later they purchased it from the New Jerusalem parish for nine hundred dollars, and in the following year it was dedicated as The Methodist Episcopal Church. During the remaining

Parish--150 Years of Faith,” pp. 17, 19.
144 *BI*, Jan. 4, May 31, Nov. 8, 1901, March 14, June 13, 20, July 11, Oct. 10, Dec. 19, 1902, June 19, July 3, 17, 1903, April 1, 8, June 17, Sept. 2, Dec. 23, 30, 1904, April 28, 1905, March 29, Dec. 27, 1907, April 17, 24, July 3,
years of the nineteenth century, thanks in no small measure to the continuous commitment of Mr. and Mrs. Ferdinand C. Gammons, this small Methodist church paid off its mortgage, increased its membership, made extensive improvements in the church property, including the installation of stain glass windows, and built a parsonage on Union Street, using a legacy of two thousand dollars bequeathed by Miss Cordelia B. Jones.¹⁴⁵

The first decade of the twentieth century was a transitional time for the Methodist Episcopal Church of Bridgewater. Its congregation remained small, especially compared to that of the Central Square or St. Thomas Aquinas Churches, but did register some modest increases. The activities of the many church committees and church-related organizations, including the Ladies’ Aid Society, the Sunday School and the Epworth League, all contributed to the parish’s vibrant social and religious life. The establishment of the Home Missionary Society in 1902, the retiring of the mortgage on the parsonage in the same year, and the extensive church renovations of 1907 were among the significant events marking this decade in the church’s history. Bridgewater’s Methodist Episcopal parish also experienced changes in religious leadership during these years, not an uncommon occurrence, as we have noted, among the town’s seven other churches. At least in one respect, however, the Methodist Church differed from the other in Bridgewater. After the Baptists occupied their new house of worship on Summer Street in March of 1902, the Methodists alone did not occupy a sanctuary which they had built. The Gammons, by 1910, had begun contemplating the construction of a new church building, but were unable, at this time, to purchase the Bates property on the corner of School and Cedar Streets. Given the use of the Masonic and Odd Fellows Halls in Central Square for some of the church’s social gatherings, other parishioners likely saw the need for better and larger facilities to represent Methodism in Bridgewater. None of the three ministers who served the church between 1901 and 1910, however, appear to have spearheaded any organized effort to move from the small meetinghouse on Cedar Street to a modern and more substantial

¹⁴⁵ BI, June 5, 1914, Feb. 18, 1916, May 2, 1924; HH, pp. 74-75; Townscape Institute, Form 199, pp. 469-470; this source mistakenly calls Abbie Lawrence, the future wife of Ferdinand C. Gammons, Annie Lawrence; Pictorial History, 1987, p. 31; Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, p. 31; the description in this source, under the picture, was written by Benjamin A. Spence; Bridgewater Book, p. 23; Crane, p. 784; see the previous section on this church; the Bridgewater Methodist Episcopal Church was united with the Cochesett, 1899, and the East Bridgewater, 1890, Methodist churches, before being restored to independence in 1890.
By January of 1901, Reverend N. C. Alger had served the Methodist Church for about nine months and would continue to do so until April of 1903. Parishioners, who particularly looked forward to the sermon on Sunday morning, must have been pleased that Pastor Alger would cite his topic in the Independent on the previous Friday. “The Power of the Gospel,” “The Prayer on the Cross,” “The Healing Touch,” and “A Prayer for Revival” were titles indicative of the scriptural and evangelistic nature of Alger’s preaching and of the Methodist approach to Christianity. Sunday evening services were especially devoted to an evangelistic approach which sought to win or revive an individual’s commitment to Christ.

Now and then, a guest evangelist was asked to preach at these services. For example, Miss Elizabeth S. Tobey of Boston, who was a friend of Mrs. F. C. Gammons, conducted services in July 1901 and 1902. Hymn singing, also a hallmark of Methodism, was another feature sometimes highlighted in these gatherings, and, on one occasion, some of the young people of the church read selections on the authorship of hymns.

Besides preaching, there were other aspects of Alger’s work as the minister of Bridgewater’s Methodist Church. Performing weddings, sometimes in the parsonage on Union Street, baptizing children, visiting the sick, and officiating at twenty-two funerals during his three years as pastor occupied some of his time. While many of the parish’s activities were planned and executed by laic committees, Alger was naturally interested in the endeavors of all of them, paying particular attention to the organization of the Home Missionary Society in 1902 and the ongoing work of the Epworth League, which held meetings and services on Sunday evenings. He also deserves some of the credit for the erasing of the debt on the parsonage. After a member of the church agreed to pay one-half of the $670 still owed on this house, if the rest could be raised by April 1, 1902, Alger and several church members took up the challenge. The parsonage mortgage was soon “reduced to ashes.” Sometimes his ministry extended beyond his own church. Early in 1901, he joined with the pastors of the Congregational and Methodist Churches in conducting a series of union services and, like other ministers in Bridgewater, he occasionally exchanged pulpits on a Sunday morning. Alger was fortunate in having a wife who shared his commitment to the work of the parish by, among other things, serving as a third vice-president of the Epworth League and

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attending, with Mrs. F. C. Gammons, the Women’s Foreign Missionary Convention in Providence, Rhode Island, in October of 1902.  

After a three year pastorate, which saw the addition of fifty-one names to the roll of church membership, Alger decided to seek another “charge,” while at the same time expressing “his deep gratitude “for the many friends” he had made in Bridgewater. At the quarterly conference of the church in early February of 1903, he informed his parishioners that he had made the request to the Methodist district superintendent who then submitted it to the bishop for final approval. On April 5, Alger preached his last sermon in Bridgewater. Within a few days, the New England Southern Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, meeting in Brockton, announced assignments for all the churches in the district, including Bridgewater. On the afternoon of April 10, Reverend Lewis Bates Codding, his wife and four children moved into the parsonage on Union Street. His five-year pastorate would prove to be an important one in the history of this church.  

Born in Taunton, Massachusetts, in 1857, at a time when events like the Dred Scott case presaged the coming of a bloody civil war in the United States, Codding attended the local high school and then went on to study for the ministry at Wesleyan University, from which he graduated in 1882. For the next twenty years, he successfully served churches in Massachusetts, Maine, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. Highly recommended as a preacher and parish worker, Codding’s last pastorate before coming to Bridgewater was in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, between 1899 and 1903.  

Codding’s years at the Methodist Church were busy for him, his family, and the parish. In the Methodist tradition of good preaching, preparing sermons for Sunday mornings and evenings occupied much of new pastor’s time. His first Easter at the church was especially joyful as he spoke about “Immortality” to “an usually large congregation.” The old meetinghouse was tastefully decorated with palms and lilies; and the choir, assisted by several new voices and a new organ (replaced the one purchased in 1878 when C. H. Morgan was the pastor) added to the beauty of the service. A couple of months later, the church observed Wesley Day, affording Codding the opportunity to talk about the founder of Methodism at both Sunday services and the Sunday School. Almost from the start of his

147 BI, April 6, 1900, June 21, July 5, Dec. 20, 1901, Jan. 24, May 2, July 4, 18, Aug. 1, 29, Sept. 12, 1902.  
148 BI, Jan. 4, 1901, March 14, May 9, July 18, Oct. 3, 1902, Jan. 10, Feb. 6, April 3, 1903; HH, p. 75.  
149 BI, Feb. 6, April 3, 10, 1903, June 5, 1914.
ministry in Bridgewater, Codding contributed his share to the efforts by the town’s Protestant churches to hold union services on special occasions. In November of 1903, he preached at the Unitarian Church, where five of the churches held a Union Thanksgiving service. Continuing his support for co-operation among Bridgewater’s Protestant churches, Codding joined a December conference organized by Reverend Stowe to revitalize the town’s spiritual life and, a few weeks later with Reverend W. L. Smith of the Baptist Church, held a Watch Service on New Year’s Eve at the Methodist Church. Codding’s preaching also extended beyond his and other Bridgewater churches. When Pliny Jewell, the editor of the Bridgewater Independent, invited the clergymen of the town to address the newspaper’s readers in a weekly column on Religion and Politics, the Methodist pastor began the series on October 28, 1904, by writing on the subject of “God and Caesar.” The following summer, Codding delivered the baccalaureate sermon at his church to the graduating class of Bridgewater High School, telling his young listeners “that the educated man should think righteously.” Reflective of the social concerns of the Methodist denomination, Codding, on occasion, conducted services at the State Farm in the southern part of the town. Some folks in nearby towns such as North Easton, Middleboro, and East Braintree also got the benefits of his preaching when pulpit exchanges were made.151

The most visible achievement of the Codding years was the extensive improvement of the old Cedar Street meetinghouse, made during the summer and fall of 1907. While much of the credit for this undertaking was rightfully given to the pastor, it would not have gone forward had it not been for the generous offer of F. C. Gammons to finance one-half of the project. The remainder of the funds was soon secured, and the work was begun in June with the hope that all the changes would be completed by September in time for quickening pace of church activities. This deadline was not quite met, but the remodeled Methodist Episcopal Church of Bridgewater was ready for re-opening services by the middle of November. At the cost of almost seventeen hundred dollars, a considerable amount in those days for a small church, “much needed improvements” were made to the old church building that previously had “scarcely any conveniences at all…” Much of the money was spent on finishing off a vestry in the basement of the building, an area to be used for suppers and entertainment and the Sunday School, and in

150 BI, April 10, 1903.  
renovating the interior of the sanctuary upstairs, including the installation of new pews. The exterior and interior of the building were painted, and, following the example of other churches in town, the oldest house of worship in the town’s center was wired for electricity. At the same time, the town helped to improve the appearance of the church by lowering the grade of Cedar Street, something which also afforded the Methodist parishioners a better view of Samuel P. Gates’s well-kept estate across the street. All in all, the old 1834 meeting house, with its Gothicized cupola atop a platform still in place, was in good shape by the fall of 1907.152

The second weekend of November was set aside for celebrating the reopening of the remodeled Bridgewater Methodist Episcopal Church. On Friday night, following a supper served in the new vestry to a capacity crowd of one-hundred, an elaborate program was presented, which included the reading of letters from several former pastors and brief remarks by local clergy and “men of standing in the denomination from abroad.” Three services on Sunday continued the festivities, with Reverend W. I. Ward, Presiding Elder of the New Bedford District, delivering a sermon entitled “The Luminous Power of the Life of Jesus,” at the morning service, and Reverend L. B. Bates, D. D., a resident of Boston and father of an Ex-Governor of Massachusetts, preaching at the afternoon service on the subject “The Christian Church, God’s Human Agency for the Salvation of the Race.” At the evening praise service, Reverend Stowe of the Central Square Church, a well-known speaker in the town, gave the sermon, and Reverend W. L. Smith, the pastor of Bridgewater’s Baptist Church, led the devotional exercises. All in all, the church’s reopening committee, consisting of F. C. Gammons, T. F. Emerson, Alexander Cameron, S. E. Lord and Pastor Codding and, indeed, all the members of this small church must have been pleased with the attention given to the rededication of their small meetinghouse on Cedar Street in Bridgewater. Not many, if any, would have predicted that in seven years a larger stone edifice would be dedicated as the Methodist church in town. Of more immediate concern was the announcement at the February 1908 annual business meeting of the church that Reverend Codding would be appointed to another church in April, ending his five year tenure in Bridgewater. 153

At this same meeting, F. C. Gammon was selected to confer with the district’s presiding elder

152 BI, June 21, Oct. 11, 25, Nov. 1, 8, 15, 1907, June 5, 1914; Townscape Institute, Form 30, pp. 122-124; HH, p. 75. 
concerning a new pastor for the coming conference year. In April, Reverend C. W. Ruoff was appointed Codding’s successor, beginning a three-year stay at Bridgewater’s Methodist Church. While nothing as dramatic as the church renovations of 1907 occurred during Ruoff’s pastorate, the church moved ahead under his ministry. Described as “a forceful preacher and energetic worker,” the new minister was soon involved in an array of ministerial work. In addition to his regular Sunday sermons, he also did his share of preaching in the chapel at the State Farm on Sunday afternoons, with inmate attendance and interest showing a steady increase. At the monthly meeting of Methodists ministers in the greater Brockton area in November of 1908, Ruoff’s “suggestive paper” on “The Book of Ester as a Homiletic Field,” was well-received by his fellow clergymen. Closer to home, he was more than willing to participate in Thanksgiving and New Years’ Eve union services held by Bridgewater’s Protestant churches. Reflecting the position of the Methodist denomination, Ruoff, who was joined by the other town clergy, attended meetings in the Town Hall at which he strongly advocated the strict enforcement of Bridgewater’s policy of no-license for selling alcoholic beverages. Perhaps a bit naively, he confidently predicted in one sermon that “the liquor business will pass with many another inhuman and barbarous relic of the past.”

Appreciating Ruoff’s contributions to the life of the parish, the congregation successfully requested his reappointment for the conference years of 1909 and 1910. One practice that endeared him to “his people” was the making of calls on New Year’s Day, leaving behind a printed greeting wishing each family happiness and peace during the coming year. Reportedly, he made 103 stops on that day in 1910, no mean achievement, if he did not own an automobile, a relatively new form of transportation. During Ruoff’s stay in Bridgewater, especially in 1910, the Methodist Sunday School showed a marked increase in attendance, a sign of an even greater expansion that was to take place over the following several years. Another strength of his pastorate was the support he gave to the auxiliary organizations of the church, including the Ladies’ Aid Society and the Epworth League, the latter numbering almost sixty by early 1911. For those who cherished the hymn singing tradition of Methodism, the appointment in early 1910 of Mr. E. B. Gurney of Brockton to conduct the choir and direct the congregation’s singing at the Sunday evening services was a welcomed step, one that was sure to promote “bright, hearty singing.” Other church members took note of Ruoff’s leading role in Bridgewater’s church baseball league in the

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154 BI, Feb. 7, 14, Oct. 6, Nov. 6, 1908, Dec. 31, 1909, Jan. 7, 14, Feb. 25, March 4, May 6, June 10, Sept. 23, 1910,
summer of 1910 and his willingness to serve as the manager of a team fielded by the Gammons Baraca class, an organization of young men formed at the Methodist Church in 1909. Despite his successful pastorate, Ruoff decided in early 1911 to ask the conference to transfer him to another church, confident that he would be leaving the Bridgewater church in “good condition.”  

Other than not having the final say on who would be their pastor in a given conference year, the members of Bridgewater’s Methodist Episcopal Church, through committees and auxiliary organizations, planned and executed most of the major activities of this small parish. Each February, at the annual church meeting, church officers were appointed, as were members of the working committees, some of which dealt with issues of particular concern to American Episcopal Methodists. A Board of Trustees, consisting of five men, topped the church’s organizational structure. No better indication of the paramount role of F. C. Gammons in the life of the parish is the fact that in the years between 1901 and 1910 he headed this board, something he had done since its establishment in the late 1870’s. Around a dozen church members were appointed Stewards, with women, including Mrs. F. C. Gammons, Mrs. Edna Lord, and Miss S. E. Welch, making up at least half of each annual list. Other committees were appointed to deal with foreign and home missions, music, education, and the Sunday School. Not surprisingly for a Methodist church in the early 1900’s, a temperance committee was chosen to address the liquor issue, making sure the church did its part in keeping Bridgewater a no-license town. By having a small committee on Freedman’s Aid, Bridgewater’s Methodists continued to show their concern for the welfare of the former Southern slaves, not an easy task in the early twentieth century when some of the gains made by Afro-Americans, attained in the so-called Reconstruction Era between 1865 and 1877, were being eroded in the South without much challenge from the Northern states. The parsonage committee, composed of five or so women, had the job of overseeing the maintenance of the rather new Methodist parsonage on Union Street. Perhaps not the most lofty assignment, this committee was deemed important enough to attract to its membership some of the parish’s leading women, including Mrs. Gammons and Mrs. E. F. LeBaron. Although at this point I have not consulted the records of the church, it should be noted that a committee on church records was chosen annually with S. E. Lord serving as one
During the first decade of the twentieth century, two of the most active organizations of Bridgewater’s Episcopal Methodist Church were the Ladies’ Aid Society and Epworth League. Holding regular meetings at the church and electing officers at an annual business meeting in the spring, the work of the Ladies’ Aid Society was an essential component of parish life. Among other events sponsored by this group of twenty or so church women were a Christmas sale and supper, a summer lawn party, a fall Harvest Dinner, and food sales. Before the end of 1907, some of the larger get-togethers had to be held in the Masonic Hall in Central Square, but, after the church renovations in that year, the downstairs vestry accommodated most gatherings. In February of 1911, Mrs. Edith Churchill could report at the church’s annual meeting that the “work of the Ladies’ Aid society had been well done.”

The Epworth League of Bridgewater’s Methodist Episcopal Church was one of many such leagues established after the General Conference of that denomination in 1890 authorized the creation of these organizations to aid young church members in developing their religious lives and “to provide them training in churchmanship.” These leagues were aptly called since Epworth was the “boyhood home in England of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement.” Organized on December 31, 1892, the one in Bridgewater started with thirty members, with Miss Sarah E. Welch serving as its first president. Throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, the local league was an important and integral part of Bridgewater’s Methodist church and, by the end of the decade, had close to sixty members, a sizable number for rather a small church. A thorough history of Bridgewater’s Methodist Church would need to mention church members who played leading roles in this organization during the early 1900’s. Certainly of note would be Mr. and Mrs. S. E. Lord, he as one of the League’s presidents and she as one of its vice-presidents and social planners during the first half of the decade. After the league met on Sunday evening, many of its members attended the church service and, at times, took charge of it. While the main purpose of the Epworth League was religious, it also added to the social life of the parish by holding socials, lawn parties, and suppers. By attending meetings of other Epworth Leagues in nearby communities such as Brockton and Whitman, the members of the Bridgewater society also found their

157 BI, Nov. 14, Dec. 11, 1902, July 10, 1903, April 8, May 13, Dec. 9, 1904, April 7, 1905, Nov. 22, 29, 1907, Jan. 7, May 6, Sept. 23, 1910, Feb. 3, 1911, April 23, 1915; in 1915, the membership of the Ladies’ Aid Society was
own lives enriched, socially and religiously. At the church’s annual meeting in early 1911, George N. Gammons, who was elected president of the Epworth League of Bridgewater’s Episcopal Methodist Church in May of 1910, was able to report that the organization had done well in the previous twelve months. The work of this group, as we shall see, would continue to promote the mission of Methodism in Bridgewater for many years to come. 158

Although some of them will be discussed more fully in the next chapter, several female or male church organizations that were created in the early 1900’s need at least some brief mention at this point. At a meeting on April 5, 1904, two years after the Home Missionary Society was organized at Bridgewater’s Methodist church, a branch Auxiliary of the Methodist Episcopal Women’s Foreign Mission Society was formed, with Mrs. Clinton Gammons, president, Miss Sarah E. Welch, treasurer, Mrs. S. E. Lord, secretary, and Mrs. Frank LeBarron, corresponding secretary. Perhaps the women who attended this gathering had been inspired to take this action when an invited speaker stressed “the heroism of the Chinese Christians in the Boxer Rebellion.” A Girls’ Circle was another organization which did its part to enrich the social life of the parish, throwing a lawn party, for instance, in the summer of 1905. At the end of the decade, the Philathea class, which was associated with an ecumenical movement established in the early 1890’s in Syracuse, New York, to promote “adult evangelism through Bible study,” was started under the leadership of Mrs. Edward Churchill of Bedford Street, who was both president and teacher of the class. This group of young women was part of the church’s Sunday School, held regular business meetings, and sponsored socials and entertainments. As was a common practice among other women groups in the town’s churches, the Methodist Philathea class raised a bit of money by having food sales, sometimes at a well-known retail business in Central Square, such as the one it conducted on June 17, 1910, at Scotton & Tyler’s dry goods store in Central Square. 159

Not to be outdone, the men of the parish, some of whom served individually as church officers and members of parish committees, formed their own association during this decade. Even before the
establishment of an official club, the men of the Methodist Church occasionally sponsored a social event. At the Masonic Hall in Central Square on March 26, 1903, for instance, they served a supper of oyster stew, “concocted by S. Clinton Gammons and W. C. Ashley,” to 200 people, a number of whom, one suspects, were not members of the small Methodist Church of Bridgewater. At a meeting in the parsonage on Union Street about a year later, the men’s club was formally established, with Fred L. Emerson, president, S. C. Gammons, vice-president, and E. Frank LeBaron, secretary. At the first public meeting of this group on May 12, 1904, A. G. Boyden, principal of the nearby Normal School, spoke on “The Making of a Man.” In a lighter vein, his son, Professor A. C. Boyden, addressed the club several months later on “The Romance of American History,” a subject which had interested him for many years.  

The male counterpart of the Philathea class at the church was the Gammons Baraca class. Organized in 1909, this group of young men used as its model the original Baraca class established at the First Baptist Church in Syracuse, New York, in 1890. F. C. Gammons took great pride and interest in this class named in his honor and, during the 1909 Christmas season, presented a gold Baraca pin to each of its members. Early in the new year, he and his wife hosted a reception for the class at their South Street home, located next to the rear of the Bridgewater Academy building. In 1910, the Baraca class played an active role in the church’s Sunday School, held business meetings, sponsored entertainments and socials, including a ladies’ night to which the young women of the Philathea class were invited, fielded a baseball team, and continued its one-year tradition of having an annual banquet in October.  

Although some brief references have already been made to the Sunday School of Bridgewater’s Methodist Episcopal Church between 1901 and 1910, a few more comments are in order because of its essential role in the life of the parish. All appointed at the annual church meeting, three committees (Sunday School, Education, and Tracts) and a superintendent were responsible for the policy and operation of the church school. Among the men and women who served in these capacities during this decade were prominent church members, including Mr. and Mrs. Gammons, Mrs. Edna Lord, Miss Addie Sprague, Mrs. E. F. LeBaron, Mrs. Homer Wilcox, Mrs. John Cole, and Mabel Handy, to mention only a

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the back cover of this work for a short historical sketch of this movement; Scotton and Tyler was shortly to become Scotton’s.  
160 BI, March 27, 1903, May 6, 13, Nov. 11, 1904.  
few. The school itself was mainly for the benefit of the children of the parish, but not entirely so, especially toward the end of the decade when the Philathea and Baraca classes were formed. Classes were held after the Sunday morning service in the vestry of the church, made more comfortable and accommodating in the fall of 1907, thanks to extensive renovations. Beginning with the fall Rally Day, the young people of the school, in addition to attending Sunday morning bible classes, were engaged in a series of events throughout the church year. In December, a Christmas tree (party) for the members of the school was a much anticipated event as was the annual Christmas concert given by the “scholars” on a Sunday evening. The young people also presented a concert on the night of Easter Sunday; the one in 1908, entitled “Easter Victory,” was sung with “good tone and with much enthusiasm.” With other Protestant churches in Bridgewater, one of the Sundays in June was celebrated as Children’s Day and was usually capped with a children’s concert in the evening. For some in the Sunday School, perhaps boarding a special trolley and heading to Lake Nippenicket or Lakeside Park in nearby Lakeville for the annual summer picnic was a cherished reward for learning their Sunday School lessons so well. We shall say more about the Methodist Sunday School in the next chapter, but with hindsight it is apparent that 1910, which witnessed the largest increase in membership up to that time, was just the beginning of an expansion that would continue well into the next decade. 162

First Baptist Church

Bridgewater’s Methodist Church lost the distinction of being the town’s newest church organization when, in the late summer of 1897, a few resident Baptists began a series of meetings resulting in the formation of the First Baptist Church of Bridgewater. The first service of this group was held on October 3, 1897, in the Masonic Hall in Central Square, even before the church was formally organized on November 19, with a membership of twenty-two. By the time a council of the area’s Baptist churches recognized the new church on December 15, the small congregation was holding services in Odd

Fellow Hall, part of a new wooden-framed building, also situated in Central Square. Incorporated under the laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts on January 31, 1898, the new church continued to hold services in this hall until March of 1902. At this time, it moved into its new building on Summer Street, which still remains the home of Bridgewater’s Baptists.  

From the founding of the church until 1909, Reverend Wesley L. Smith was the church’s pastor. Born in Charlestown, Massachusetts, on December 28, 1855, a time in which slavery was emerging as the main moral and political issue of the day, Smith graduated from Malden High School and Brown University during the tumultuous reconstruction period following the country’s bloody Civil War. He then continued his education at the Newton Theological Institution, from which he graduated in 1883, although he was first licensed to preach in 1879. Before beginning his dual pastorate of the Baptist churches in Bridgewater and West Bridgewater in 1897, he had served in several churches in Rhode Island and his native state.

Commenting in 1902 about the first few years of the Bridgewater church, Smith wrote: “The attendance has been good from the beginning. It has never fallen so low as to give ground for discouragement, nor has it ever risen so high as to immoderately elate us. At the beginning it was about fifty.” Despite a small congregation and lack of its own building, Bridgewater’s Baptist Church at the turn of the century had begun to function well, especially emphasizing certain practices and concerns associated with this denomination. The lack of a water receptacle in Odd Fellows Hall for adult baptism, a basic practice of the Baptists, was solved by using the facilities of the Baptist churches in West Bridgewater or Brockton. Sunday morning and evening services, Tuesday evening prayer meetings, periodic revival meetings, a “promising Bible School,” the work of Women’s Mission Circle, and monthly concerts under the auspices of the Men’s Missionary Class kept the church and its pastor more than occupied during these early years. Nor was the social life of the parish ignored. Like the other church goers in town, the Baptists enjoyed their annual Christmas Trees, socials, and Sunday School picnics, in particular the one in the summer of 1900 which required a special trolley to transport the “revelers” to

163 BI, March 7, Nov. 28, 1902, Oct. 8, 1909; HH, pp. 76-77; Townscape Institute, Form 45, p. 154, Form 245, pp. 565-566; Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, p.31; the description in this last source was written by Benjamin A. Spence; see the previous section on the First Baptist Church in 1900.

164 BI, March 7, 1902; Bridgewater Book, pp. 39-40; HH, p. 76.
Highland Park in nearby Brockton.\textsuperscript{165}

With the growth in membership, albeit at a slow pace, and the increasing religious and social activities of the church, it was apparent almost from the beginning that a permanent home for this new church was needed if it hoped to continue expanding its religious mission in Bridgewater. With this in mind, a building committee, headed by Harlan P. Shaw, a faculty member of Bridgewater Normal and an early stalwart of the church, began the process of looking for suitable site on which to erect a house of worship. In 1899, the fledgling Baptist society purchased a substantial portion of the Latham place on the eastern side of Summer Street, but could not afford the western part of the lot on which the Latham House itself stood. The eastern part of the property had the advantage of being close to Central Square, but was not a completely ideal location since the slope of the land descended rather quickly from the street. There were lingering hopes that another suitable building site could be found, although this would have entailed selling the lot acquired in 1899. One opponent of placing the new church building so close to the edge of Summer Street later suggested that Shaw had not pursued at least one offer to buy the land from the Baptists.\textsuperscript{166}

In any case, a decision was made in 1901 to erect the Baptist house of worship on Summer Street on the land purchased two years earlier between the Latham House, which had since changed ownership, and the impressive dwelling of J. Gardner Bassett, who was just beginning to establish the Bridgewater Brick Company along the Town River, off Broad Street. Plans for the new church were drawn by Kendall, Taylor and Stevens of Boston, although the ground plan had first been outlined by Shaw. McNeeland Bros., a well-known outfit in Bridgewater, was hired to do the excavation and masonry work, and A. P. Poole of Brockton was the building contractor. Ground was broken on June 6, and, at first, the work appeared to move along smoothly with the \textit{Independent} reporting a week later that the “cellar for the church …has been dug out and the foundation has been begun.” At this point, however, a controversy over the placing of the church so close to the edge of Summer Street became the subject of public debate.\textsuperscript{167}

\textsuperscript{165} \textit{BI}, Jan. 4, March 22, May 3, June 21, July 12, Sept. 27, Dec. 20, 1901; see previous section on the First Baptist Church.
\textsuperscript{167} \textit{BI}, May 25, 1900, June 7, 14, 28, July 5, 19, 1901, Nov. 28, 1902; \textit{Townscape Institute}, Form 246, pp. 567-568.
With J. Gardner Bassett taking the lead, a petition was circulated, requesting the Baptist Building Committee to locate the front of the church “so that it will be in the same general line with the other buildings on the same street.” Before long, over fifty “representative citizens of Bridgewater” went on record opposing the location so close to the street. In their view, it would be unfair to have the new church building overshadow the adjacent properties, thus compromising the integrity of Summer Street, which, in the words of the *Independent*, “is a thoroughfare of which Bridgewater should be, and is proud.” Faced with this substantial public outcry, the Building Committee met and agreed to place the church five additional feet back from the street if the petitioners would “bear the extra expense of so doing….”

Shaw, in an interview, defended the committee’s action, arguing that the church had limited resources and, thus, for “pecuniary reason” had to place the church “near the street.” Besides, he argued, had not the New Jerusalem Church and the public library both been built very close to their respective streets. In a communication to the Editor of the *Independent*, Bassett, while factually rebutting Shaw’s points, did not question “the legal right of the Baptist Society to place its church where it pleases, but,” he argued, “there is a moral obligation resting upon the society to heed the wishes of the community.” Pliny Jewell, the editor of the *Independent*, employed an even more moralistic tone, writing that it would defy the golden rule “to erect the building in a position where it would be a serious damage to adjoining property and a source of complaint from those only indirectly interested.” 168

At this point in my research, I am not able to say for sure what the final outcome of this locational dispute was. It would appear that the front of the new Baptist Church was erected closer to Summer Street than the Latham, Bassett, and Sanford Houses, all of which considerably predate the church building. No longer extant, the Orin B. Cole House (which replaced one built by Abram Washburn) and the Artemus Hale House (which by 1901 was owned by Mrs. Jesse Ford, a daughter of Calvin Estes) were west of the Latham House and much more in line with the Baptist Church. Perhaps, with the perspective of time, the exact location of the church is less important than the issue of public regulation of “how and where,” in the words of Bassett, “new buildings should be erected.” During the controversy, he and others argued that a Town By-Law should be adopted, which would refer such matters to town officers. How this jibed with his statement that no “one questions the legal right of the

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168 *BI*, June 12, 28, 1901.
Baptist Society to place the church where it pleases...” illustrates a dilemma all American communities faced before the New York City zoning law of 1916 started the long and tortuous trend toward asserting some public control “over the use, height, and area of urban land and construction.” The Bridgewater town meeting in March of 1902 did create a committee to revise the town’s by-laws, and its initial report proposed some general building regulations. But the By-Laws, approved by the town on March 30, 1903, did not include the article dealing with building regulations, even though state legislation would have allowed the town to do so. This would not be the last time we hear of the issues of zoning, building codes, and public regulation of private property in Bridgewater. 

Notwithstanding the public debate in the summer of 1901, the building of the Baptist Church on Summer Street went apace. Before its completion, the congregation continued to meet for its regular services in Odd Fellows Hall, although, in the words of Pastor Smith, it was “unsuitable and inadequate for devotional meetings and the Bible School; and inadequate for the enlargement of our work, because often times are unavailable for extra occasions.” Members of the parish and other Bridgewater inhabitants must have enjoyed moseying down Summer Street to see how the building of the town’s latest house of worship was coming along. Perhaps some were a little surprised when it was announced that February 23, 1902, would be last time the congregation would meet in its rented quarters in Central Square, and that in March the new church would be formally dedicated.

Built at a cost of $8,507, this unpretentious frame building, sheathed in wooden shingles and set upon a high foundation of rubblestone, became the sixth Protestant church to grace the center of Bridgewater. Representative in some ways of the Queen Anne style of architecture prevalent in late nineteenth century America, Bridgewater’s Baptist Church was succinctly described eighty years later in the **Townscape Institute**’s study as follows: “It is composed of a rectangular, east-west nave and a corner tower crowned by a pyramidal roof. Projecting from its main façade is an enclosed porch with two symmetrical gables. The front doors feature diamond-shaped panes in a narrow, multilane transom.” For about one hundred years, parishioners leaving the sanctuary by these doors would have seen across

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Summer Street two impressive Federal-style houses associated with the Washburn family, which long played an important role in Bridgewater’s history. Alas, this early nineteenth century scene no longer exists. Both dwellings were demolished in 2004, and a modern retail store now occupies the site. 171

The celebration and the formal dedication of the new Baptist Church, the first house of worship to be erected in Bridgewater in the twentieth century, took place during the first week of March 1902. Preaching at the premier service on Sunday morning, March 2, Pastor Smith, using the church at Antioch as his model, praised a congregation that was made up of a “regenerate,” “conservative,” and “benevolent” people, who were “sound in their faith,” and believed in a “missionary church.” At this service, the “hand of fellowship was extended to five new members…,” after which the Lord’s Supper was celebrated. Especially poignant was that part of the service in which Reverend Smith administered the ordinance of baptism to two candidates, heralding the coming of age not only for them, but also for Bridgewater’s Baptist Church itself. Many who attended church that morning probably returned that evening to hear Reverend John A. McElwain of Boston’s Clarendon Street Baptist Church preach “interestingly and instructively upon the power of a vision of the unseen God upon human life and service.” Although not members of the church, it is not unlikely that his two sons, William Howe and James Franklin, whose rather new shoe factory on Perkins Street was Bridgewater’s largest employer in the early 1900’s, sat in the audience that evening to hear their father speak. Nor is it unlikely that others in the congregation earned their livings by laboring in the McElwain mill. 172

The celebratory activities continued on March 5, with the actual dedication of the church taking place that evening. Despite a severe storm, which considerably cut down attendance, the program for the afternoon went as planned and included, not surprisingly, talks on evangelization, spiritual upbuilding, and Sunday School work. Braving the inclement weather, about one hundred attendees then made the short walk to Odd Fellows Hall for supper, since the facilities of the church’s lower floor, where banquets and sessions of the Bible School would be held in the future, had not yet been finished, owing to lack of


172 BJ, Feb. 21, March 7, Nov. 28, 1902; “McElwain, James Franklin, 1874 to 1957—Manufacturer,” HH, p. 271; “McElwain, William Howe, 1867 to 1908—Manufacturer,” HH, pp. 271-272; HH, p. 77; Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, p. 31; the description in this last source was contributed by Benjamin A. Spence.
funds. The continuation of bad weather in the evening prevented the scheduled speakers from reaching Bridgewater, but fortunately Reverend C. H. Spaulding of Boston was able to fill in, “preaching a very powerful discourse from the text: “I knew a man in Christ.” Pastor Alger of the town’s Methodist Church and Reverend McElwain also took part in the service, offering the opening and dedicatory prayers, respectively. On a more practical note, Shaw gave the report of the building committee, and, following an appeal for funds by Spaulding, almost an additional one thousand dollars was pledged, mainly by church members. A week of celebration was rounded out by a Friday night service to which the people of Bridgewater were invited. It is not possible to say how many accepted, but it must have been gratifying to Shaw’s committee that an additional $250 was subscribed to help pay off the church debt. This important layman of the church must also have been particularly pleased that his brother, the Reverend A. A. Shaw of Brookline, made one of the addresses at this final service to celebrate the fact that Bridgewater’s Baptists now had a new and permanent home.  

Considering the fact that Smith served the Baptist congregation seven more years after the completion of the Summer Street meetinghouse, making him the senior Protestant minister in Bridgewater, any full history of this church would need to devote considerable space to his pastorate. Only a few highlights of these years can be touch upon in these pages, however. While showing some fluctuations, the membership hovered around one-hundred during Smith’s watch. The church finances remained in good order, despite the conscious decision of the pastor and parishioners “to provide,” in the words of Smith, “all the money for the support of the church by the direct offerings of the people…and not to seek money…by entertainments, sales and suppers.” More important than these two considerations, however, were certain guiding principles enunciated by Reverend Smith as he sought to define the type of Christian community he wished the First Baptist Church of Bridgewater to be. He envisioned a church of “converted and spiritual” members who were committed to teaching and preaching “the pure gospel” and who would heed the Lord’s command: “Go ye into the world and preach the Gospel to every creature;” in other words a church that was evangelistic and mission-oriented in its outreach to the local community and world beyond. The centrality of this vision was evident in Smith’s regular Sunday morning and evening sermons, the Tuesday prayer and testimony services, periodic revival  

173 BI, March 7, 14, Nov. 28, 1902: HH, p. 77.
meetings, and in the steadfast commitment to the church’s Bible School. 174

Throughout his twelve-year pastorate, Smith retained the loyalty of almost all of his parishioners, worked to promote the unity and interests of the Baptist churches in Plymouth County, co-operated with other churches in Bridgewater, and became a respected figure in the life of the town. When he declined a call from the Avon Baptist Church in September of 1905, the Independent commented that it was “much to the gratification of the members of the local society and the citizens of the town in general. During the seven years which Rev. Mr. Smith has spent in the town he has made himself universally popular, and the local church has grown under his care.” Following “a little discord among the members of the church,” however, Smith announced in February of 1907 that it was his intention to conclude his pastorate in October. Whatever the cause of the problem, it was “wiped out,” and Smith, again to the great satisfaction of the church and town, decided to remain at his post and, with his parishioners, looked forward to celebrating the church’s tenth anniversary. During those ten years, one of Smith’s tasks was to help represent his congregation at the gatherings of churches which made up the Old Colony Baptist Association. He and his congregation must have been delighted to host the 82nd annual meeting of this organization in October of 1904, not only to let the other Baptists in Plymouth County know that the Bridgewater church was up and running, but that it was worshipping in an almost-new meeting house. Other people came to know Smith in Bridgewater and the surrounding towns (keep in mind that he also served for a time the Baptists in West Bridgewater in their church built in 1889) when he occasionally exchanged pulpits on a Sunday morning, took part in union services on Thanksgiving and New Year’s Eve, or spoke at special gatherings, such as the one called by Reverend Stowe in December of 1903 to assess and revive the spiritual well-being of Bridgewater. 175

After leading the Baptist Church in Bridgewater for twelve years, Smith decided in the spring of 1909 to accept a pastorate in the Town of Merrimac, Massachusetts. For the first time in its short history, the congregation had to replace its minister, a task that proved to be problematic for about two years. After Smith’s departure, Reverend Charles R. Powers supplied the pulpit for part of the time until October, at which point he agreed to be what we would call today an interim pastor for one year, making

it clear, however, that he would continue to live in Randolph, Massachusetts and commute to Bridgewater (by trolley, train or automobile?). Educated at Colgate University, Powers had had a successful career in the ministry, which included the founding of the Emanuel Baptist Church in Dorchester, Massachusetts, in 1894. Evidently this task had endangered his health and accounted for his decision never to accept another permanent ministry. Powers, nevertheless, enthusiastically began his Bridgewater ministry in the fall of 1909. He and his wife were warmly received at a reception given in the church parlors on December 8, with Reverend Williams of the Central Square Church, newly installed himself, welcoming “the new comer into the ranks of Bridgewater’s ministry.” 176

While Powers would adhere to his position of remaining for only one year, Bridgewater’s Baptist Church under his leadership went forward in the last year or so of the decade, adding eighteen new members for a total membership of 153. The commitment to evangelism and missions continued to be the paramount concerns of the church. On November 19, 1909, for example, the Reverend Stedman, a missionary to Japan, and, reportedly, the first American missionary to go to Korea, the so-called Hermit Kingdom, spoke at an evening service, dwelling on the hardships faced by those engaged in missionary work. In addition to preaching twice on Sundays, Powers occasionally spoke at the chapel in Darlington, which had been built in 1905 to accommodate Baptists living in that eastern part of Bridgewater. Residing in Randolph did not seem to limit his work in Bridgewater to weekends; in the spring of 1910, for instance, he conducted a series of “Disciples Classes” for those beginning the Christian life. Sometimes Powers’s pastoral duties took him beyond Bridgewater. Accompanied by six members of the church, he attended a denominational rally in the newly-built First Baptist Church in Brockton. (The congregation of this church no longer worships in this edifice on corner of West Elm Street and Warren Avenue, but gathers in a much smaller house of worship on Bouve Avenue in that city.) In late May, about two months before reaffirming his plan to stay only one year, it must have been with considerable emotion that Pastor Powers in the presence of a large audience at the Bridgewater church administered to twelve candidates the ordinance of baptism, a crucial ceremony of this Protestant denomination. In any event, living many miles from Bridgewater and experiencing the great sadness of losing his father, son, and a


176 BI, Oct. 8, 22, Nov. 19, Dec. 10, 1909, Dec. 5, 1913; Reverend Smith died in Roxbury, Massachusetts, on Nov. 28, 1913.
grandson during the past year prompted him to announce his resignation early in August, to take effect on November 1. It would not be until early in the 1911 that the church extended an invitation to Reverend Lemuel E. Ackland to be its third pastor. More about this later. 177

That the members of the Baptist society assembled to vote on the calling of a new minister is indicative of the important role played by the laity in the governing process from the beginning of the church in 1897. As the first and only pastor for twelve years, it was not surprising that Reverend Smith loomed large in the affairs of Bridgewater’s newly-founded Baptist Church. But had he not had the support, indeed its admiration and love, the church membership might have sought another pastor. For most of these years, the society held its annual meeting in October to choose its leaders and committee members as well as to hear reports on the spiritual and financial status of the church. Central to the running of the parish were the deacons, clerk, treasurer, and financial secretary. Among the deacons who served the society during these early years were David Bentley, William S. Gordon, Shaw, George B. Morse, A. M. Davis, and Howard L. Chadwick. The day had not yet come when women were elected to be deacons or, in fact, to the other positions just mentioned, but they were part of the society’s important standing committee. Men and women also served on the missionary and baptismal committees, both of which dealt with core beliefs of the Baptist denomination. Yet, the policy of this small church during the early 1900’s was “to seek” in the words of Pastor Smith, a “simplicity of organization,” allowing it to concentrate on evangelistic and missionary endeavors. Indeed, compared to other town churches at this time, committees of this small Baptist Church were kept to a minimum. It should be noted, nonetheless, that as the decade progressed such organizations as the sewing society of the young girls, the Women’s Mission and Aid Society, which in 1910 was headed by Mrs. Charles R. Powers, the Men’s Missionary Class, and the Junior and Senior Baptist Young Peoples Union (B. Y. P. U.) began to contribute to the religious and social life of the parish. 178

The major exception to limiting auxiliary organizations at the church during the early 1900’s was the Bible School or, as it was soon called, the Sunday School. On October 24, 1897, three weeks after the

first service of this still unofficial church, the Bible School was organized, with William W. Main of Boston, Secretary of the Massachusetts Baptist Sunday School Association, in attendance. Ten years later, Pastor Smith put it succinctly when he wrote that the “Sunday School …was instituted …early in our work, on the principle that the children are the hope of the church.” For the first five years, Harlan P. Shaw, already known for his teaching at the Normal School, served “efficiently” and “faithfully” as the Superintendent of the Bible School, watching the membership grow from eighteen in 1897 to 129 in 1902, not counting seventy-nine members in the Home Department and a Cradle-roll of twenty-eight. Before Shaw was again called to fill the position in 1910, the Sunday School was fortunate in having George B. Morse, 1902-1908, and Alwood A. Voorhees, 1908-1910, provide leadership as superintendents. As the decade progressed, the membership increased to over 150 by 1910, with an average Sunday attendance of around 100. The facilities provided by the new church building were particularly helpful in promoting the work of the Sunday School. For example, the church was able to report in October of 1904: “Our Bible school has had a prosperous year and our primary department now has very comfortable quarters in the basement which has been fitted up for their use.”

The weekly newspaper reports on the activities of the church lend some credence to an observation made by Smith in 1902 that the Baptist Sunday School “is more closely identified with the church than is the case with any school with which we are acquainted.” And, although the pattern of events was similar to the other Sunday schools in Bridgewater’s Protestant churches, it does appear that the town’s Baptists committed more of their time and energy to this aspect of church work than did perhaps the other denominations. The official Sunday School year at the Baptist Church usually began in late September with the observance of Rally Day. (A tradition that continues to be observed in the twenty-first century in some of the town’s churches.) With the teachers and students taking part, special exercises were held on this Sunday after the main worship service, thus allowing all “the friends of the school” to attend. On some Rally Sundays a special children’s concert would be presented at the evening service. In the ensuing weeks, Bible classes, divided into age groups, were conducted for about one hour, which allowed the “scholars” to return home in time for the traditional Sunday dinner, a family gathering, that alas is fast fading from the American scene. The next Sunday School celebration came in December

with a presentation of a Christmas musical program and the long awaited annual Christmas Tree of the society. For those who attended these gatherings, perhaps the one in 1907 was among those best remembered. The weekly newspaper account on December 19, 1902, described the upcoming event as follows: “At the Baptist Church the Bible School will lead in the celebration, the festival coming on Wednesday, Christmas Eve, at 7:30. Supt. George B. Morse will make an address of welcome and there will be singing by the whole school and by individuals. A chimney of candy boxes will be constructed, with the presents arranged around it. Everyone enrolled…will be remembered.”  

The second half of the year was equally busy for the students, teachers, and administrators of the Baptist Sunday School. In spite of the cold and snowy New England winters, classes continued in January and did not end until June, when Summer Street and, indeed, much of Bridgewater was clothed in a mantle of greenery from the variety of trees, including flowering ones, of which the town was justly proud. As Easter approached, the children of the Sunday School usually prepared a program to be given on the evening of that holy day. Presented in the church sanctuary beautifully adorned with artificial boughs of apple blossoms and freshly cut evergreens and flowers, the exercises in 1905, which included recitations and vocal selections, were especially elaborate. “Children’s Day” observances in June marked the end of classes and, sometimes, included a concert by the Sunday School students. The purpose of these presentations was to show parents and other members and friends of the church something about the accomplishments of the Sunday School during the past year. One event that never failed to materialize was the annual summer picnic. With no lack of places for this outing, the town’s Baptists tried most of them. In 1902, the chosen spot was Carver’s Pond, not only within easy walking distance from the church but also offering the additional attractions of hiring Captain Stevens’s boats and using Swift’s Grove to play games. Led by Pastor Smith and Superintendent Morse the following year, the children boarded horse-drawn “barges” and headed for Robbins’ Pond in East Bridgewater. When Lake Nippenicket was the chosen destination, as it was 1910, the added attraction for some of the one hundred attendees were the trolley rides between Central Square and Pilgrim Park.  

All these activities would not have been possible without a group of dedicated church members.

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181 BI, July 4, 1902, July 10, 1903, July 4, 1904, April 28, 1905, Jan. 3, 1908, May 20, June 3, 10, July 1, 8, 1910.
who devoted their time and talents in helping the Superintendent of the Sunday School carry on the work of this important auxiliary organization of the Baptist Church. Perhaps the most essential contributions were made by the men and women who, week after week, taught the Bible classes. We might cite Mrs. Hattie Smith, who was in charge of the primary department in the early 1900’s, and Mrs. A. T. Keith, who was elected to be the superintendent of the same department in 1910, as representative of the many devoted teachers of the Sunday School during the course of the decade. Other church members showed their interest in the Sunday School by serving as delegates to the annual meetings of the Old Colony Baptist Bible School Association. In June of 1910, for example, Mrs. Harlan P. Shore, the Sunday School organist, was part of a delegation of nine women and men elected to attend the fifty-first gathering of this organization, which was held at the First Baptist Church of Brockton. In appreciation of the pivotal role played by the Sunday School in furthering the essential objectives of the church, a committee of fifteen was also appointed around this same time “to make all arrangements for a supper and social to be held in the church vestry...for the Sunday school workers.”

Before leaving this admittedly condensed account of Bridgewater’s Baptist Church between 1901 and 1910, we need to say a word or two about the society’s decision in 1903 to set up Sunday Schools in both the Flagg Street and Darlington areas, two rural sections in the eastern part of the town. In the early years of the new century, it was not easy for inhabitants of these outlying regions to reach the town’s center other than by horse and buggy, since automobiles were not yet widely used and the trolley system had not been extended that far. Prompted by these pragmatic considerations and, of course, the desire to fulfill its mission of spreading the gospel, the First Baptist Church established these satellite schools, quite an undertaking for a society that was only six years old and had about one hundred members. Fortunately for families in the Flagg Street area, Bridgewater’s School Committee permitted the small schoolhouse, Number Six, which had been remodeled in 1899, to be used on Sunday afternoons and evenings as a school and chapel by the town’s Baptist Society. Located on the corner of Auburn (continues where Flagg Street ends) and Summer Streets, this building, which had neither electricity nor inside plumbing until the 1930’s, was hardly a grand edifice; but it was an adequate facility in which to establish a Baptist presence in this part of town, although the Sunday School and chapel were open to

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inhabitants of any denomination. As far as I can tell, the town did not charge for the use of this building, but most likely the wood used to heat this small structure on cold Sundays was provided by the Baptist Society. In any case, the Flagg Street Sunday School, under the direction of Superintendent John S. Burrill, flourished. When he decided to step down from this post in November of 1904, over sixty pupils were enrolled. Reflecting practices at the center’s church, the students enjoyed their Christmas Tree gatherings and summer picnics. Sunday evening services were also held regularly, with speakers, including Pastors Smith and Powers, leading the worship. After eight years of serving this part of Bridgewater, however, the Baptist Society discontinued its activities at the Flagg Street School since the majority of attendees indicated a desire to worship and study at the church in the village center.\footnote{BI, July 1, Oct. 21, Nov. 11, Dec. 23, 1904, Dec. 20, 1907, March 13, July 24, Oct. 9, 23, Nov. 20, 27, 1908, Nov. 4, 1910, April 21, May 5, 1911.}

At the instigation of some residents of Darlington, a northeastern section of Bridgewater, the other Sunday School promoted by the Baptist Society was opened in June of 1903, making use of the small East Schoolhouse, Number Four, at the intersection of High, Plymouth and Pond Streets. Under Superintendent George B. Morse and Mrs. R. W. Bowditch, principal of the primary department, this school, conducted along nonsectarian lines, expanded its enrollment from eighteen to seventy-five students in the first year. Classes met on Sunday afternoons, and, in the evenings, the schoolroom was used as a chapel, fulfilling “a long felt want in the community where attendance at religious services” had “been almost impossible.” Prompted by the initial success of this undertaking, some Darlington residents soon began to subscribe to a building fund for the erection of new quarters to accommodate bible classes and worship services. This project was given a boost when a plot of land, near the East School, was donated by Alexander Cameron Ricks, the assistant superintendent of the new Sunday School. At a joint meeting in July of 1904, a delegation from the Massachusetts Baptist Sunday School Association, headed by W. W. Main, and the Darlington building committee, which included Morse, Ricks, J. Harry Harding, the secretary of the Darlington Sunday School, and Pastor Smith, it was agreed that the state organization would help finance the erection of the Sunday School-chapel facility in Darlington.\footnote{BI, July 22, 1904, June 9, 1905; Robert D. MacCurdy, “Education,” HH, pp. 103-104.}

Before and after the work on the new accommodations began in the early spring of 1905, classes and services continued to be held in the East School, although in the 1904 Christmas season this meeting
place was temporarily closed due to scarlet fever in the neighborhood. The spirits of those anticipating the new quarters were raised, nevertheless, when Main’s association promised to provide all the furnishings of the yet-to-be-built facility. Once construction began, things moved along rapidly. By early May of 1905, the basic structure, soon to be known as Bethel Chapel, measuring 26’ by 30’ and costing about six hundred dollars, was almost finished and “ready for the plasterers.” With officials of the Massachusetts Baptist Sunday School Association, Morse and Reverend Smith taking part, a large audience, which included some members of the center church who traveled to Darlington on a special “barge,” took part in a dedicatory service on June 11, 1905. For the rest of the decade, Sunday School classes and evening worship services, led by lay leaders or Baptist preachers, continued to be held at this chapel. Unlike the Flagg Street Sunday School, Bethel Chapel remained opened well into the next decade. But, as we shall see later, the relationship between it and the First Baptist Church in Bridgewater’s center began to change in late 1910.185

About the Author

Benjamin A. Spence, a native of Fall River, Massachusetts, a city about twenty miles south of Bridgewater, began his education in the public schools of that community. He attended Bridgewater State College between 1955 and 1959, earning his undergraduate degree in secondary education and history. After teaching social studies at the junior-senior high school level in Somerset, Massachusetts, for two years, he went on to receive his MS, 1962, and PhD, 1971, in history from the University of Wisconsin. Almost all of Dr. Spence’s teaching career was spent at Bridgewater State. Following his retirement in 1995, he began to do historical research on the Town of Bridgewater, concentrating mainly on the first quarter of the twentieth century, a period of American history in which he specialized.