

Pownal - A Vermont Town's Two Hundred Years and More

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Chapter 8 - A Time for Building Churches

From the time the first frame meeting house was built in 1789-1790 at Pownal Center until 1843, over half a century, that meeting house was the only church in Pownal. But suddenly, within a space of eight years, three new churches were built, and the old one was replaced with a new one. This flurry of activity could be explained by increasing prosperity, or simple convenience, or the desire of each congregation to have a house of its own. But it seems more likely that the surge in construction was caused by the pressure on the old Baptist congregation from the competition of the Methodists and Congregationalists, resulting in each of the three denominations building its own edifice.

For the first thirty or forty years of Pownal, the Baptists were the only denomination with any kind of organization. When Reverend Perkins passed through in 1789, he noted some Quakers and Presbyterians, but we have not heard of them since. When the Baptists took the lead in getting the new meeting house built at the Center for the use of all congregations, there was no other congregation to use it.

As noted earlier, the arrival in 1788 of Elder Caleb Nichols seemed to produce the energy needed to get some kind of church built. The part-time Baptist minister Elder Benjamin Gardner was occupying not only the plot reserved for the first settled minister, but also the other lands reserved to support all ministers. Gardner had never done much, and he was enjoying income which should have gone to Nichols. This in turn went back to the mistake of the Proprietors many years before of putting the two kinds of church lands together, permitting Gardner to assume he earned all the lands simply by being the first settled minister. His attitude may have been hardened by the accusations of scandal. There were people who wanted to question his right to any part of the lands, on the theory that he was never even a minister, for lack of ordination.

This bad situation continued from about 1773 to 1789, when the new meeting house was being built. It was precipitated when the Town wanted to sell some of the church lands, apparently to raise money to be used in the building of the meeting house. Gardner blocked the sale with a lawsuit. The Town then thought of compromise, and appointed a committee of seven (Abiather Angel, Abel Dimmick, Judiah Aylesworth senior and junior, Josiah Wright, David Goss and Amos Potter) to investigate. The committee found Gardner willing to compromise on certain conditions including recognition of his status as a Minister and his right to all the lands. However, the lands other than those of the first settled minister he would give back to the Town as a gift, subject to a condition that the lands be held in trust and the proceeds be distributed periodically to such ministers as each voter should designate he wanted his proportional part paid to. The wording he required was vague and confusing, and for some reason he differentiated between the east and west sides of Pownal: the lands should be held "in trust, the rents and profits to go and be disposed of for the use and support of a gospel minister, or ministers, in the eastern and western part of the town, in proportion to the number of inhabitants attending or inclined to each respective meeting."

In hindsight, it is clear the Town should have insisted that Reverend Gardner give up any claim to his lands other than a part for the first settled minister. The condition he was requiring was obviously designed to make the Town recognize his right to all the lands before he magnanimously returned the part he might never have claimed had he been bigger about it. He was also taking from the Selectmen and passing to the voters the yearly task of apportioning the income of church lands, a burden of a yearly vote carried for decades until it was suddenly stopped a few years ago as violative of the doctrine of separation of church and state. Moreover, Gardner's foolish condition was going to involve the Town of Pownal in two lawsuits, neither of them good for inter-denominational relations.

But the committee and the Town were in a mood for compromise, and so Gardner was declared to be an "ordained Elder" qualified to receive the lands reserved for the first settled minister. No questions were raised of how little he had done in the past quarter century besides farm, and so his deed with the strange conditions was accepted.

The first challenge to the Baptist monopoly came from the Methodists. There were circuit-riding Methodist ministers in Pownal by 1793, but the Methodist campaign really started about 1800. One man was outstanding in the effort: Alien Mason, who came from Rhode Island, built a cabin with floors of sand on what became Mason Hill, and made war on rattlesnakes, killing seventeen while on a Sunday stroll with his wife. Alien Mason opened his home as a base for the circuit-riders and for Methodist meetings. His neighbors, especially Halls, Barbers, and Ladds, were helpers in the effort.

There is something surprising about the hostile reception the Methodists received everywhere in our area from the established sects. Methodists were the innocent descendants of the "New Light" Congregationalists such as Samuel Robinson's pulpit-thumping, ecstasy-invoking friend Rev. George Whitefield, although they prefer to trace their foundation to the less spectacular

John Wesley. In Pownal the Methodists and the Baptists were soon trading insults. In Williamstown Methodists were jeered and pelted in the streets. A student from Williams College threw a barrel of pickles through a window into one of their meetings.

The bickering in Pownal was carried on from the pulpit of the meeting house in adolescent terms, if we can believe T.E. Brownell, who always seemed amused at troubles of sects other than his own. He tells of Elder Bennett putting the "crude" Methodist ministers in their proper places by comparing them to a cider barrel: the more empty they are, the more noise they make. This didn't cool the fires of Alien Mason and the Methodist ministers to any noticeable degree.

The poor relationship between the Baptists and Methodists is demonstrated by the lawsuits which grew out of Benjamin Gardner's trouble-making deed. It seems that about ten years after the deed was given, the Town had another opportunity to sell the church lands which were the subject of the deed. They might then lend out the money and use the interest for the same purposes as the Gardner deed required. Perhaps there would even be an increase in the proceeds. Gardner himself was favorable to the idea. He was both a Selectman and a member of the committee appointed to consider the matter, and so the sale was made in 1797.

For thirty years afterwards the buyers occupied the land with no problems. Then something happened, apparently a decision to build a new road through the Center in 1840. This road was probably a relocation of the old "low road" to Bennington, passing through the lands in question, then owned by Joseph and Daniel Myers. It's apparent that the old "low road" was the Mann Hill Road, and the new road was the one further west which is now "old" Route Seven. The Myers objected to the amount of compensation they were awarded and went to court over it. Putting the story together from bits and pieces, it appears to us that the Selectmen may have tried to pressure the Myers by threatening to take back the church land they had sold thirty years earlier, on the theory that the sale was void from the beginning because it violated the Gardner deed. Probably this was the brainstorm of lawyer Pierrepont Isham, who was practicing in Pownal in those days, before he became a Judge in Bennington. It was half-baked, and the Vermont Supreme Court was sure to find for the Myers one way or another, and it did.

The other lawsuit arose about 1837 with the arrival in Pownal of a new Baptist minister, Thomas S. Rogers. He was ordained while here, and left after one year. While here, however, he read the vague language of Gardner's deed and interpreted it to mean that he should receive all the proceeds of the church land fund, because when Gardner gave the deed there was no congregation except the Baptists, and among the Baptists, there was now no other Baptist minister but himself. Despite the language's vagueness, it took a rather jaundiced eye to arrive at this interpretation. Presumably the Selectmen sincerely regretted the day their predecessors ever accepted Gardner's compromise!

The Selectmen (David Gardner, Blackman Brownell, and Noel Barber) decided on a legal action in interpleader, which means they held the funds with willingness to pay to the proper parties, if they only knew who to pay, and would the court please advise them? The Court did, rejecting Rev. Rogers reading of the deed.

Getting down to specifics, the Court declared the Selectmen must pay Rogers the proportionate part the voters had directed, as also the Methodist minister, Rev. Elijah Pratt, and also the Reformed Methodist minister, Sherman Ladd, but nothing to Rev. Elihu Dutcher, as he had stopped ministering some years before. (Dutcher apparently was the successor to Elder Bennett with the Baptist congregation on the west side of town, which went out of existence about 1810). One wonders what the law suits accomplished? Certainly not Baptist-Methodist harmony.

In 1840, a surprised world heard that it would all end on October 22, 1843, when the Second Coming would take place. This was the message of William Miller, the former captain who had been advised by Pownal's Attorney Danforth to insist on broadswords, not pistols. Miller advised everyone to dispose of all worldly goods and prepare for the Event. There must have been some in Pownal who took him seriously, although we have no specific information. In other places, however, people put on white robes and spent the day waiting on rooftops, haystacks, and hilltops. We are not criticizing Adventist beliefs, only the silliness of announcing a specific date, especially when it turns out wrong.

Our only indication that there were Millerites in Pownal comes from lawyer-historian T.E. Brownell, who claims they were all Baptists:

In the autumn of 1840 Miller, the evangelist [Adventist?] visited Bennington, and from the pulpit of the Baptist Church in that place proclaimed the startling prophecy that in 1843 the world was to come to an end and time be no more. Everybody was excited, and while some ridiculed, many thought it possible, although this period of 1843, like the year 1000, which history tells was the occasion of a similar prophecy, passed by without the world having experienced any extraordinary convulsion. The effect of Miller's preaching was to disseminate among the Pownal church such a heresy that the association of Baptist Churches of this vicinity saw fit a few years later to exclude it from their body. Not many years ago it was restored to membership, but its orthodoxy is reduced by the "Second Advent" tendencies of some members.

What are we to make of the fact that the Baptists built their new church the same year that Miller chose for the world to end? The majority, at least, did not take him seriously. It is our theory that Miller had little effect, and that the Baptists built their new church out of a spirit of competition with the Methodists, perhaps even an unwillingness to share the same church building with them any longer. For their part, the Methodists also decided to have their own church building, probably for the same reasons as the Baptists. The Methodist church was built in 1844, shortly after the Baptists', also in Pownal village.

All we hear about the Methodist decision to build is that one of the Mason sons, Christopher, was not well and insisted to his brothers and brothers-in-law that the new church must be built quickly lest he never see it. But his father Allen Mason was still alive, and probable played a part. We are told the Hall family donated the timbers, and the men supplied the labor in "bees." An axe used to shape the timbers is exhibited at the building. But above all, the Methodist Church is the design and work of Noel Barber, his best in a life spent as local architect and builder. Perhaps the Oak Hill Seminary would have done him greater credit had it not been changed, but at least the Methodist Church is substantially unchanged where it counts.

The building of the Baptist Church of 1849 is largely unknown. That building was not the present one, but a frame predecessor which burned in 1911, to be replaced by the present edifice.

The departure of the Baptists and Methodists from the old 1789 meeting house at Pownal Center might have left no one but the Selectmen to support it. The building was now (1849) sixty years old and probably in very bad shape for lack of care. We know it was replaced with a new building, and it is difficult to see how in the circumstances this was accomplished. One factor may have been that there were a certain number of people of the northern half of Pownal who did not want to travel to the new churches in Pownal village. It also seems the Baptist and Methodist ministers were willing to make the trip to Pownal Center to care for smaller congregations there. The Baptists may have taken the lead in obtaining a new interdenominational church in the Center and if so, it was a nice gesture to make when they were occupied with their own new church. The Selectmen paid for the construction of a meeting place for the Town in the lower level. We are told that when the funds ran short, there was a house-to-house campaign that raised \$400 to complete the building, and so it was built as we see it today. Incidentally, in the past few years there has been an interdenominational congregation led by female ministers, first Reverend Isabelle King and more recently by Reverend Mary Burton-Beinecke.

And so by 1849 there were two new church buildings in the village of Pownal and one new meeting house at Pownal Center. But there was a demand for a church in North Pownal, too. The Baptists thought the North Pownal Church was going to be a subsidiary congregation of theirs, if not another Baptist congregation. But then the persons who built it gave everyone a tremendous surprise by voting that it should be a Congregational Church.

How this strange state of affairs came to be is worthy of some attention. T.E. Brownell thought it extraordinary that what began as a Baptist effort could suddenly choose to be Congregationalist, in view of the differences of doctrine. His explanation for the event is first, the "free-thought" tradition of Pownal, and second, the quietly effective contacts the teachers and students of Williams College had maintained with Pownal through the years. Therefore, he argues, given the "selfishness" of the Baptists, it needed only "a suggestion" to bring about the change. He admits that these events did not happen "so quietly and without incident" as his brief statement implies. He leaves us asking, how noisy? And what incidents?

Happily we have another source of information, which makes it appear that Attorney Brownell was playing the role of advocate against the Baptists. The other source is a booklet prepared by the Congregational Church of North Pownal in 1958 when the locality was being declared a historic site because of the early presence of Chester Arthur and James Garfield as teachers. It seems that the project to build an academy and a church in North Pownal was organized in 1849 under the leadership of Andrew Whipple. There were many subscribers, and Whipple donated the land. The ground floor of the building, which was built for the academy, was completed about 1851 and the school got into operation under the future president, Chester A. Arthur. However, no more funds were available to build the second story for the church. A resident of Williamstown named O.F. Nutting, a former Williams College student, raised \$1000 to build the "Sanctuary" of a Congregational Church. This was accepted, and so the building was completed as a Congregational Church. The well-known educator Mark Hopkins, President of Williams College, preached the sermon of dedication on May, 1851, and that fall, a Williams graduate, Elihu Loomis, became the first minister.

This is a different story from Mr. Brownell's, which makes no mention of the Nutting money, and implies the building was completely built before the decision to change from Baptist to Congregationalist was made on March 3, 1851. Can it be that the "suggestion" for the change came from Mark Hopkins, the power behind the scenes? Can it be that Brownell's unexplained charge of "selfishness" against the Baptists was based on a refusal of the Baptists to match the Nutting offer? We do not know, but we can imagine that Brownell's remarks must have caused some consternation when they were published in 1889.

Incidentally, the Academy was later moved into a separate building nearby, leaving the ground floor for Sunday School and other uses. The smaller building came to be called the Academy, and naturally became involved in the misunderstandings about the place where Garfield and Arthur taught. The church building burned in 1911, and was replaced with the present church.

If Pownal had ever been the place for people with no religion, it was not such any longer. By 1831, one could choose from three Protestant denominations in four new church buildings. Of course, the Roman Catholics were still unrepresented, but they too would arrive in time, completing the four denominations and five church buildings we know today.