

CHAPTER V

First Parish Sabbath School

Since there are no records of the founding of the Sabbath school of the First Church in Newbury, we are dependent upon the memories of the older members of the parish as they recall the stories of their ancestors. Probably the first record of the founding is a paper written in 1878 by Deacon Joseph Little. Miss Phoebe Harrod, then in her ninety-first year, recalled when in 1816 she and five other ladies had requested the use of the present Central Church for the instruction of the youth of the city on Sunday afternoons. This plan was ridiculed by the pastor of the church, but the school was founded in that year.

During the year 1817 the school met in the Court House on the Mall. As such buildings were not heated at that time, there were no sessions in cold weather. Lessons were taken from cards, the teacher giving to a pupil card number one which was retained until the pupil could recite the Biblical verse by heart, before the class. The card was then exchanged for number two and so forth. After the session the classes formed in lines and marched to their houses of worship.

Colonel Jeremiah Colman was one of the leaders in this Sabbath school plan and urged its adoption at the First Church. During the early part of 1818 such a school opened at the church. The new school had about thirty pupils and a few of the early teachers were Mr. and Mrs. Nathaniel Gerrish, Miss Sarah Little, Miss Catherine Sherburne, Miss Harriet Sherburne, Miss Edna Lunt and Miss Cornelia Sweetser. The sessions were held in the church following morning service. Lessons were similar to those at the school on the Mall except that James Noyes' *Shorter Catechism* was used. One lady recalls having been required to memorize the Epistle to the Ephesians, fifteen verses at a time, while still a junior in the school.

The school had no officers until 1838, when the church elected Deacon Jeremiah Colman as the first superintendent and Richard Adams as assistant superintendent. The church continued to elect the officers until 1842 when it was voted to allow the teachers of the

school to elect the superintendent, assistant superintendent, librarian, and treasurer.

Sometime previous to 1835 the school had collected a good sized library which it kept under the pulpit of the church. At one time there were over five hundred volumes in this library. An offering once a month as well as special offerings was taken for its upkeep.

The outstanding events in the history of this school were the picnics held in Mr. Richard Tenney's orchard which was located across from the head of Marlborough Street. These picnics were held on Independence Day in the years 1838, '39, '42, '43 and '57. There were speeches and music and bountiful dinners. In 1838 during the dinner hour, a great balloon was seen in the southeast. It proved to be Mr. Lariant who had traveled from Salem and landed on the Upper Green where the Union Choral Society was holding its outing.

The most notable of these picnics was held in 1843. The Newburyport Herald of July 6, 1843 has the following account of the picnic under the heading of:

The Fourth at Oldtown

"The Rev. Mr. Withington's society celebrated the anniversary of our independence in their usual way, by turning out en masse, forming a procession at the church under the escort of the Newburyport Artillery, accompanied by the Newburyport Brass Band. At the church, before the procession was formed, Mr. Nathaniel Little and Miss Edna Lunt were joined in matrimony by Mr. Withington, and received the cordial congratulations of a large collection of personal friends, some hundreds of whom had been pupils of the latter. The procession moved to the orchard of Messrs. R. and D. S. Tenney, where they were comfortably accommodated. The singing was first rate, under the direction of Mr. George W. Hale,—Mr. Bayley at the piano, and Mr. Frothingham and Mr. Savoy with their appropriate instruments.

"The oration, by Horace Plumer, Esq., was a very sensible production, which reflected much credit upon his taste and ability in its preparation, and being very distinctly pronounced, it was heard with pleasure by some two thousand persons. The morning services in the grove being ended, the company proceeded to the beautifully spread

tables, and in a prompt and energetic way discussed the viands there provided.”

Among the toasts which followed the oration were the following:

“The Revolutionary Soldiers—May their children preserve what the fathers have won.

“Mr. Daniel Adams of Pine Island, one of the only two of their class present, rose to respond. He was called to the desk, and there addressed himself to the ladies more particularly, giving them such suggestions as he deemed suitable.

“The Historian of Newbury—Our reputation is in good hands.

“Mr. Joshua Coffin, who is preparing for the press a history of ‘Our Ould Newbury’ took the desk and entertained the audience at some length with remarks concerning ancient matters and things in the venerable town, exhibited some time-worn manuscripts, and read from them a variety of curious things which gave assurance that our history is indeed in good hands.

“The Orator and President of the Day—the latter happily illustrates by his practice what the former has defended in his address—the advantage of public instruction.

“Mr. Plumer made a few remarks in response, excusing himself from speaking longer on the ground that he occupied the time in the morning.

“Mr. Page also responded to this sentiment. He spoke of the influence education among the whole people from the first, had exerted in bringing about the Declaration of Independence, the anniversary which we celebrate. He spoke of the great step our fathers took in advance of the age in which they lived—in advance of all ages—in first proclaiming the doctrine of educating the whole mass at the public expense.

“The exercises were closed with the singing of ‘Old Hundred’ by the whole assembly, and the party broke up well pleased with the day and its exercises, intending, we presume, to meet again on the same spot—a spot indeed now almost patriotic ground—where, it is admitted by all, the Oldtowners have very pleasant meetings.”

The first secretary’s book was not started until 1851. The records show that the school hour was divided into a study and a devotional period. The devotions consisted of the singing of a hymn, the reading of the scripture and prayer. Uniform lessons were used and the teach-

ers met once a week to study the lesson together. Once a month the school held a concert at which there was more music and Biblical questions were asked. The questions were after the style of "What news did the first carrier pigeon bring?" At one such concert this curious "Scripture Enigma" was offered: "They left their little ones at home, and whither went they did not know. They went straight forward on the road with all the wicked full in view. For the church's sake did roam, and lost their lives in doing so. They lived to man, they died to God, yet nothing of religion knew."

From 1851 the records were complete with the exception of a few brief periods. The two books covering the years to 1910 were destroyed by fire during the preparation of this paper. The destruction of these records is a distinct loss for much of the information they contained could not be obtained from any other source. Only through them could the development of the school into departments be traced. The names of the officers other than the superintendents have been lost.

In 1880 the school held a service in commemoration of the founding of the school. Deacon Joseph Little read his paper, written two years earlier, on the founding of the school. The suggestion was made to hold such meetings frequently but none such were held until the centenary on February 24, 1918. At that time papers were read relating to recollections of early Sunday School days.¹

One of the outstanding undertakings of the school was a Student Council. This council was organized in 1921 to direct the social activities and the altruistic work of the school. It consisted of one representative from each class of the Junior, Intermediate and Senior departments and three members appointed by the superintendent. This organization did invaluable work in visiting shut-ins and institutions. It sponsored many socials and plays as well as directed the classes in conducting the devotional services one Sunday a month.

The School has sent donations to various charitable and missionary societies almost from its beginning. At one time the school sent money to support a native boy in an Indian school. At the same time it helped maintain a girl in a southern school and a Sunday School in the West. Later the missionary work was divided among the various boards of the Congregational Church.

¹ As the papers were published in the Daily News, they are available at all times.

The school has had many very capable and conscientious workers both among teachers and officers. The roll of its officers, teachers and pupils has been destroyed and only a list of its superintendents is available. The list of superintendents is as follows: Deacon Joseph Little, Richard Adams, John Hubbard, William Thurston, Daniel Colman, Nathaniel Little, Deacon Jeremiah Colman, Deacon Joseph Little, Edmund Jaques, Elisha Bean, Jr., Deacon Joseph Little, Elisha Bean, Jr., David Smith, Deacon George Danforth, Deacon Edward Perkins, Charles Parkhurst, Deacon John Rolfe, Deacon William Humphreys, Deacon Edward Perkins, Deacon William Humphreys, Roland Woodwell, Worthen Taylor, Charles Noyes, Russell Jackson, Worthen Taylor.

One can not fail to pause a moment in commemoration of two superintendents who have served the school so faithfully for many years. Deacon William T. Humphreys was made superintendent on January 11, 1888, and served as such, excepting for a brief interval, until 1926. Mrs. Grace T. Holton has for thirty years served as superintendent of the primary department. The character of their students is their finest memorial.

