

NEWBURY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



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Religious Societies in Newbury, NH, 1772 – 1840

Charles A. Kennedy

The image that most people have of religious practices in early New England is George H. Boughton's painting, "Pilgrims Going to Church." The determined band of men, women and children walk through the snowy woods on their way to church. Men at the front and rear of the procession are armed, as is a soldier wearing a helmet, presumably to protect themselves from the Indians. This painting has become iconic of the New England colonies and their desire for religious liberty.

When we look at the records of town meetings, the biographies of religious leaders and denominational histories, a different picture emerges for places such as Newbury. Here was a town outside the orbits of the major settlements on the seacoast or the Merrimac and Connecticut rivers. Until the railroad finally was completed up the hill from Bradford with the excavation of the Newbury Cut in 1871 connecting Concord and Claremont, the town by the lake was dependent on stage-coach roads for contact with the rest of the state. Settled churches (Baptist, Congregational) were gathered in New London and Newport, but not in Newbury, probably because of its smaller population.

In New England the Congregational Church was the foundation of the Standing Order, a blending of church and state that insisted on a moral basis for society provided by the church's theology and teachings that would be supported by the civil authority's right to impose taxes on the entire population to support the ministers of the Congregational Church. Only church members could vote. In a society that relied on payments "in kind," one had to own property to be part of the church-state alliance, leaving a large portion of the community without the vote. In practice, the local bailiff could appropriate property of those who did not or would not pay taxes to support the Congregational Church. Baptists had furniture taken from their houses to cover this expense. One man was accosted as he rode into town; his horse was taken, but he was allowed to walk home with his saddle.

By the time of the Revolutionary War many towns had seen this alliance challenged by Episcopalians, Baptists, Methodists and Quakers. The War had been fought on the grounds of no taxation without representation, yet the new nation was exacting taxes from its citizens to support one religious persuasion, whether or not that individual was a member or attended services there. The movement grew among the dissenting religions for better treatment in paying the tithe to a church they never attended, with the result that a compromise of sorts was reached. If a citizen were a member of a religious society, he could get a certificate from the town clerk that would exempt him from the tithe to support another. Human nature being what it is, it did not take long for some to figure out that the certificate was a tax

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Historical Society Receives Grant

The Newbury Historical Society received a Community Spirit 9/11 Mini-Grant of \$500 from Harvard Pilgrim Healthcare. Marilyn Geddes, an employee of Harvard Pilgrim and wife of Board Member Deane Geddes submitted the request on our behalf earlier this year. The purpose of their Mini-Grants is to support and enhance our community program. Just last year they distributed more than \$370,000 in Mini-Grants throughout Maine, Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Sincere thanks to Marilyn for securing these needed funds for the Society.

Newbury History Committee Digs Up Some Interesting Facts!

The Newbury History Committee continues to work on a deeds research project in the village of South Newbury.

We found some early deeds that describe the location of the first school house in South Newbury village. It seems the location is where the hearse house is today.

The hearse house is a small white one-car garage building directly on Sutton road with the side entrance to the cemetery and the highway department lot behind it.

The building was used to house the old horse-drawn hearse involved in transporting our departed citizens to their final resting places. Prior to the Hurst house (before 1853) this location is where the South Newbury school house stood.

Later this school building was "struck" and some of the materials were used to build a home on Sleepy Street. A new school was build (circa 1853) and still stands today as the "Friendship House".

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dodge and in those days of haphazard record keeping, verification was not always possible. Clearly, some better way had to be found to satisfy the justifiable complaints of the dissenting societies.

That way was apportionment. Moneys dedicated for religious purposes would be allotted on the basis of the membership of each group. In Connecticut the Legislature passed "An Act for the Support of Religion and Literature" in 1816 that divided federal money among the leading denominations proportionally to their memberships: one-third to the Congregational churches; one-seventh to the [Episcopal] Bishop's Fund; one-eighth to the Baptist Societies; one-twelfth to the Methodists societies; one-seventh to Yale [called by some that "Presbyterian manufactory"] and the remaining one-sixth to the state treasury. Note the absence in this list of Quakers, Universalists, etc. and of course, Roman Catholics, Jews and Muslims. Out of this act came the Toleration Movement that proposed to do away with any established church and allow all denominations to be self-financing with volunteer offerings from their membership. The pattern of toleration spread northward and in 1819 New Hampshire passed its own Act of Toleration, breaking the church-state connection in this state once and for all.

At the end of the 18th century in New Hampshire ministers were still being chosen by vote of the town meeting and paid for with tax money. In Newbury in 1797, now that the Town House on Bly Hill was built, the town voted to hire Rev. Abisha Crossman half time for one year, "providing that he shall Provide such writing as shall satisfy the town at large respecting his Character." Ministers had their own reputations, good and bad, as we shall see.

In the early 1800s a religious revival movement swept across the nation, called the Second Great Awakening. People were drawn to camp meetings held in fields, not churches. The preaching and singing of hymns attracted the unchurched and encouraged the formation of religious societies that would fill in the geographic spaces between settled churches. There were Baptist churches in New London and Newport, but not Newbury, Bradford or Sutton. There were fields awaiting the harvest everywhere.

One product of the Second Great Awakening in New Hampshire was the conversion of Benjamin Randall who dissented from the Calvinist Congregationalists and Calvinist Baptists to form a Free-Will Baptist denomination. He insisted on no belief in predestination that stifled the work of the Holy Spirit, no prayer books to confine the Spirit, and no connection between church and state. Infant baptism would be rejected in favor of adult (believer) baptism by immersion.

Randall conducted preaching missions across the state, establishing house churches in many towns. Every three months he insisted on a regional Quarterly Meeting to bring local societies together for mutual support. (When asked how these tiny independent societies would survive, the laconic answer was "by free-will offerings!")

The Newbury society was formed in 1801 and became the site for the Quarterly Meeting the following year: "The Quarterly Meeting was held for the first time at Newbury, in August [1802] and proved a very great blessing to that feeble church which had separated from the Calvinistic Baptists the year before." Timothy Morse moved to Fishersfield from Weare, N. H., and was ordained as a Free-Will Baptist preacher in 1805. Ten years later he served in the State Legislature and eventually became an itinerant preacher ranging west into Vermont and south to Rhode Island. He died in Fishersfield on Oct. 30, 1832.

The year 1805 was a crucial one for the Free-Will Baptist Society. The "feeble church" would have a substantial boost to its life when the Rev. William S. Babcock of Springfield, Vermont. came east on a preaching tour.

Babcock had been sent to Yale to prevent his being drafted in the Revolutionary army, but while in New Haven it was noted that "prodigal habits led him into dissipation, and corrupting influences of college life led him into infidelity." Returning to Springfield, he had a conversion experience and started preaching around the area, but old habits die hard: in 1802 in the midst of preaching, he "stopped and walked to the opposite side of the room & kissed a woman....' His excuse: "I told them the woman desired it and [I] felt it [my] duty to gratify her." Attendance fell off after that.

In July, 1805, he was preaching in Newbury and met Betsy Merrill, 20 years his junior, and a woman who was the focus of the "Angel Delusion." I. D. Stewart summarized the phenomenon that put Newbury on the spiritual map:

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About 1809, or a little before, a young woman in Newbury, N.H., of fair standing and approved piety, would occasionally yield to overpowering emotions, and become utterly prostrated in her physical energies. In this state of apparent insensibility, she would lie for a time, and then, coming to herself again, she claimed to have been in communion with angels, and declared the messages that had been thus received direct from Heaven. Mysterious things were said and done, and the excitement became intense....

One of the ministers [Babcock] devised an interview with angels himself, and earnestly prayed for it; but a revelation soon came to him, through the principal medium [Betsy], that this could not be; but, by *marrying her* (which was the will of the Lord), all the advantages of such interviews would be secured. "The will of the Lord be done," said he, and the marriage ceremony was at once performed.

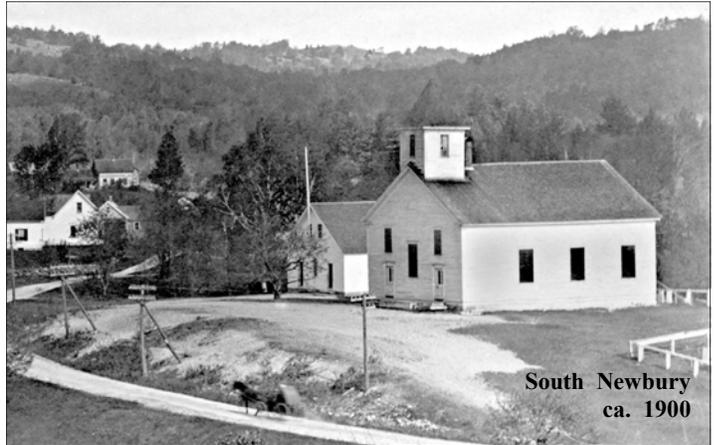
They were married on January 8, 1809 and she moved to Springfield. Babcock now records over 200 appearances of the angel to Betsy in a 5-year period. Two other women emerged as "spiritual virtuosos" to rival Betsy and for the next year both Springfield and Newbury were captivated by the visions of these women.

The Free-Will Baptists were not the only society in Newbury attracting new members during this time. By 1837 five other congregations were functioning in the area. That year the "Parsonage money" (i.e., the Minister's salary) voted by the Town Meeting totaled \$26.85 and was apportioned among six denominations. The percentages reveal the relative sizes of these societies.

Universalists	\$8.67	32%
Christian	\$7.60	28%
Freewill Baptist	\$6.66	25%
Baptist	\$2.20	8%
Methodists	\$1.72	6%

The Universalists, or to use their proper name, the Newbury Universalist Restoration Society, is the best attested of this group. Their basic teaching was that salvation was for all, that God would never create a person to be damned eternally as the Calvinists insisted, but even the Universalists reserved the right to withhold the right hand of fellowship from backsliders.

The Christian group mentioned is probably the denomination also known as the Christian Connection or the Christian Conference. Elder Elias Smith, like Randall, a New Hampshire resident, broke with the



Standing Order and formed a simple "Christian" society with the Bible as his only guide for faith and morals. The Christian Conference would eventually merge with the Congregational Churches in 1931.

Finally we note that for all the attention given to Betsy Merrill Babcock and her angel visitor, the Spiritualists are missing from this list. They do not arrive at Blodgett Landing until 1876 in the wake of the séances made famous by the Fox sisters of New York state in the 1840s. Spiritualism was another manifestation of the "Angel Delusion" of Sister Betsy that still survives in the Spiritualist Church in America.

The Act of Toleration (1819) brought an end to the Standing Order in New Hampshire but not an end to the competing claims of churches and denominations. Subsequent migrations would bring new people and new faiths, but the adaptability that small towns had shown with the different house churches was now extended to the newcomers, as a cursory review of the "church page" in any Saturday newspaper will show. Now churches, synagogues and mosques peacefully coexist in this state and the words of Micah are being fulfilled: "They shall sit each man under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make them afraid". (Mic. 4:4)

The Fishersfield/Newbury Town House sheltered different religious societies and town meetings during its 35 year lifespan and its successor, the Center Meeting House, has welcomed even more over the last 170 years. We can look forward to future years in this place where the citizens of Newbury can come together for their mutual benefit in religious, civic or cultural gatherings.

This article is a revision of a lecture delivered at the Center Meeting House, Newbury, New Hampshire, as the inaugural program in the series "All About Newbury" on June 2, 2012. Thanks to William Weiler for opening the archives of the Newbury Historical Society, to the late Ernest Sherman who collected much of the early history of the town for its Bicentennial Celebration in 1978, and to the Rev. Craig Cowing for helpful comments on the original presentation.



Newbury Historical Society

P. O. Box 176



Ginnie Patsos, a resident of Idlehurst, received our most recent Historic House Marker from Committee Co-chair Gay Sheary.

**NHS Dates/Events
Newbury Town Office unless otherwise noted**

Board Meetings, 7:00 PM: Jan. 10, March 14 & May 9.

Annual Meeting Program: Program & date TBA.

E-mail: info@newburyhistorical.org

Website: www.newburyhistorical.org

(History Committee Continued)

Paula Falkowski recently found the location of a blacksmith shop and tavern in South Newbury village. These were among the early forms of commerce in our town.

Anyone interested in uncovering Newbury's history is welcome to join our monthly meeting held on the second Tuesday of every month, 9:30 am at the town office.

We are looking for old photographs of Newbury. Should anyone have any to share we have a process where we scan, document and return, unscathed, to the owner.

I'd be pleased to answer any questions you may have on our project.

Deane Geddes, History Committee Chair, 763-5104

Thank you to our Business Members.

Please join us in expressing your appreciation through your support.

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