

Rev. Chas. W. Sinnett

Sketch of Chesterfield, N.H.
and History
of the
Congregational Church

1770 to 1900.

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SKETCH OF
CHESTERFIELD, N. H.
"TOWNSHIP NO. ONE"
AND HISTORY
OF THE
Congregational Church
FROM
1770 TO 1900.

BY REV. CHAS. W. SHINFIELD.

CHAS. W. SHINFIELD, PUBLISHER,
CHESTERFIELD, N. H.

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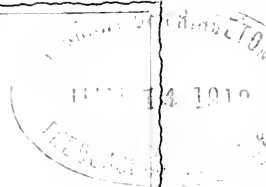
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HAVERHILL, MASS.,
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HISTORICAL SERMON OF THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF CHESTERFIELD, N. H.

It seems clear that the First Congregational Church of Chesterfield, N. H., was organized in 1771. The oldest records of the church were lost, and so the special date of that year cannot be given. It is also certain that a church building was erected before March, 1770.

It is also quite as clear that Col. Josiah Willard, the leading grantee of the town, caused the church to be built on a large and hopeful plan, and that he then presented it to the town. But, be that as it may, it is certain that the frame was covered and the building finished at the expense of the town, as is shown in the records. It would then appear that the wise plans of a friend were heartily entered into by those who felt that their new homes, even among the beauties of these hills and beside the shining river, would not be truly home-like unless the Lord's house crowned the hill, in the center of the town. That they builded well is shown by the description of the church and the examination of others like it which are still left in other New England towns. For upwards of four score years it stood, and bitter was the cry in the town when the people were rudely awakened to hear the roar of the west wind upon the hill and above it the cry of "Fire! Fire! Save the Church!" But it could not be saved; the evil hand had done its work well; already tongues of fire leaped toward

the tall spire in their mad haste. On the doomed building rested the pall of smoke; and fiercer came the gusts of wind from the cold, icy mountains of March.

The first day in March, 1851, was vividly stamped on the minds of those dwelling in the old town. Many are the times we have heard the story of the fire, which swept away that place of so many hallowed memories. But you have as clearly heard the description of the building, and of many stirring scenes within that you have been made aware that never can fire or flood destroy that which hath been builded in the name of the Lord. The frame-work may vanish in smoke and ashes but that which is of more value than many sub structures stays in the heart for its continual joy and strength.

A fine picture of this old church has recently been made from a sketch of Judge Hoyt H. Wheeler of Brattleboro, Vt. It was exhibited at our recent Old Home Week celebration. We hope that a copy of it may soon be placed in our Town Hall.

The best printed description of this sacred place is by our careful historian, Oren A. Randall. "This meeting-house, or the old meeting-house as it was called after the new one was built, was, till 1830 the only meeting-house in the town: it stood about thirty-five feet south of the present town-house and was about sixty feet long and forty-five feet wide. It was two stories high, with two rows of windows and had a projecting bell tower on the west end, originally however, as appears from the records of the town, there was a porch on the west end also, but no bell tower; for, June 2, 1815, a committee was chosen to sell 'pew ground' in the meeting-house, remove the west porch of the same, and use the proceeds to build a belfry, according to a vote passed by the town, March 10, 1807. A bell was also purchased and placed in the belfry. This bell, in accordance with

a vote of the town, passed May 12, 1816, was rung on week days at noon and at nine o'clock in the evening.

The principal entrance to the building was at the middle of the south side. From this entrance a broad aisle led to the pulpit, which was located in the middle of the north side of the building, at an elevation of several feet above the ground floor. Above the pulpit hung the sounding board, and in front of it on the ground floor was an enclosed seat called the Deacon's seat. There was also a row of square pews next to the wall extending entirely around the inside of the house, except at the entrance passages and where the pulpit stood. The other pews, below, were arranged about in the same order as they usually were in meeting-houses of the last century. In front of the outer row of pews, or wall pews as they were called, was a continuous aisle; above, there was a gallery on the east and west side ends, and south side, with rows of pews. For very many years there was no stove in the building, except the foot-stoves that some of the worshippers used to carry to church with them in cold weather, and which were replenished during the intermission, with live coals at the neighboring houses. As early as 1780 the town voted to allow horse sheds to be built on the north side of the common near the meeting-house; and in 1804, to allow certain persons to build sheds along the west side of the old graveyard. Between the east end of the meeting-house and the graveyard was a large horse block, an indispensable thing in the days when the women as well as the men used to go to church on horseback.

Such was the place to which the fathers and mothers and the little ones came from the scattered farms and log houses in the villages and on the hills, for all must go to church in those days; even those who were somewhat feeble there was made a Sabbath pathway to the church.

It had been well planned that the tall tower of the church should catch the eyes of all from near and far. The tone of the big bell was so clear that even deaf ears were loth to give an excuse that it was too late for church, for they had not heard the first bell ring. I have looked over the subscription paper which was used in securing money for the bell, and it clearly indicates that the strongest descriptions which we have heard of its powers were not in the least overdrawn. So much was it loved that some of its metal must be placed in the bell now upon the town house. The first name on the subscription paper was that of Col. Oliver Brown, brave in service and truth.

As we speak of this faithful bell which hung in the tower of Chesterfield's first church we need to remember that besides the calling of the people together on Sundays it had other duties to perform which carried sorrowful notes across the hills and far beyond the river, and that sometimes these notes were many: I refer to the custom of tolling the bell whenever any one died in the town. This was never omitted. There was a stroke of the bell for each year of the deceased person's life; this custom prevails still in some of our New England towns. It was last heeded here on the death of one of our aged citizens in 1892. Many deplore the discontinuance of this custom, especially the old people. They say pathetically, or in a tone in which there is a hint of rebuke, "The people are so careless that often a person has been buried a week before I have even heard of it! In the old days we heard of this to the far limits of the town, and it was thought the decent thing then to go to the funerals of old neighbors." I have said that there were many strokes some days which rang out on the air, and you know well how long some of the fathers and mothers came up this hill to listen to the word of God, and yet one who carefully looks over our old cemetery

will be surprised to see how many little ones were called up to the shining hills. There was a strong hand laid on the bell rope. Far away rolled two or three clear notes. But how fast the tears of the mother fell! it was to her as if the bell struck a hundred peals, and often she heard them in the bright days and still summer nights Ond—two—three!

As we turn to inspect more carefully the work of this old Congregational Church and Society it would appear that services were held as soon as the church building could be used, perhaps before the walls were fully covered, for this often happened in the early days, for other things the hearts of the fathers and mothers away from the old home scenes could wait; but for the church and voice of praise and prayer they could not delay. It may be, too, that the first meetings in the town where a few men and women knelt together to ask God to help them. We find, however, that John Eliot was on probation in Chesterfield soon after the erection of the first church building. The people liked him, as well they might, with such a name as that of John Eliot. But for some reason which is wholly unknown to us at this far day he at once declined their invitation to be their pastor. The message was given in the clear, decisive language of those times, and the people knew that after that they need not stop to parley with him. Down through the mighty trees he rode, but no shade of discouragement rested on the faces or hearts of the first settlers here. It may perhaps be well for us to pause and read this first ministerial letter in the history of our church and of our town. Since it is directed to the officers of the town, there may have been as yet no formal organization of a church: this is the letter bearing the inscription: "Chesterfield, 20th January, 1772.

To the Selectmen of Chesterfield in the Province

of New Hampshire:

Gentlemen:

I have received a call from the inhabitants of Chesterfield to settle among them, in the Gospel ministry, and having taken the same into most serious consideration, for various and most important reasons that have their residence in my breast, you receive an answer to said call in the negative; so, wishing that all the dealings of Divine Providence might be sanctified to you and the people of this place, I rest yours in the fellowship of the Gospel,

John Eliot."

It would seem that at once the people set about finding a minister for their church, for soon we find among these hills a young man of 24 years, from Sudbury, Mass., the place from which some of the early settlers no doubt came hither. This is the Rev. Abram Wood, who tarried here as sole pastor of the church for half a century. On the 12th of October, 1772, he was invited by the town to the pastorate of the church and on the 17th of the following November 1772, he wrote his letter of acceptance. It is rather too long to be quoted here, but you may find it in the history of the town, and it will be well for you to study its earnest spirit of dependence of the leadings of the Divine Spirit. Not till he had entered upon the fifty-first year of his ministry did he have any assistance in his labors. Having become, a few months before his death, unable to attend to his pastoral duties, Rev. John Walker was installed as colleague pastor April 30, 1823.

Mr. Wood, however, retained his ministry until his death, which took place October 18, of that same year, 1823. During his pastorate 324 persons united with this church, either by profession of faith or by letter, including those members when he was ordained. Of

this number 131 were males and 193 were females. The number of persons baptised was 765. The largest number baptised in one year was 64. This was the year 1819, and shows plainly how the work of this good man went on with increasing power. His locks were now thin and white, but no one says he has crossed that line where he ceases to be useful. His helpfulness is seen still more clearly if we remember that in that same year of 1819, 47 persons were admitted to the church, which was the largest number ever admitted in one year of its then shining history. At the time of Mr. Wood's death the church had 113 members, and 8 more were admitted during the year.

For the first nineteen years of his ministry Mr. Wood received an annual salary of sixty-five pounds. At the annual town meeting in March, 1792, it was voted to make the salary eighty pounds. From 1800 to 1812 the average sum was raised yearly by taxation, for the support of preaching was about \$275.

As we meet here to day with grateful hearts before the Father of all mercies we cannot but feel, as we review the history of this church since this building was first planned, that, though its erection and continual work have meant so much of care and burden, we have still great reason to feel that the labor has been richly rewarded in the faithfulness of those who before this altar have sincerely confessed their faith in their Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. All such have steadily grown in grace and in usefulness in the Master's vineyard. Some of these we have seen enter triumphantly into the eternal rest. Some have gone to work in larger fields in this and other states, but their words of cheer and their gifts remind us how dear was this home church to them and that so it will ever continue to be. Others are still with us to whom we never turn without finding them

ready to assist in all that is for the true upbuilding of the church. And the signs of cheer which we find in these is, and ever has been, well exemplified in those who have united with the church by letter. Many of these came from large churches, but helped here with a cheer which meant much in the face of the many difficulties which they found in the presence of the few, though very bright, encouragements. Such have not only kept their faith aglow but have kindled faith in other hearts in a manner that gave assurance that it would burn steadily.

The struggles which preceded the building and dedication of this, the second church building in Chesterfield were many. Happily the traces of most of these have been entirely erased in the fleeting years. But one proof of this remains in the very meagre bit of land on which the church stands. This admitted the erection of a house upon the south side of it in such a close proximity that it shut out the light in large measure and led to much annoyance during the services from time to time. Plainly this way should not have been left open for a man to express his hatred of the church. From this house the church has been more than once endangered by fire.

This church was finally completed and occupied for the first time in Nov., 1834. Not a month had passed away before the resignation of the pastor was read. He was the Rev. Elihu Smith, and had been installed on the 23d of May, 1832. Following him came Josiah Ballard who was ordained on the 5th of August, 1835, but whose pastoral relations with the church were dissolved in the spring of 1836. From this date till 1842 preaching services were conducted more or less regularly by Rev. Hosea Beckley, On August 31, 1842, Rev. Benjamin E. Hale was ordained as pastor. His work began in a very encouraging manner, but was soon opposed by some

who had been adverse to the building of the church, and was dismissed at his own request on Nov. 11, 1847. In the five years which followed the church had no regular pastor, but the work was kept up by the efforts of heroic few. The next regular pastor was the Rev. Ebenezer Newhall who, however, resigned in less than two years. Then, for nearly four years, the work went on much as it had before Mr. Newhall came, several of the members attending the Methodist church, and some of these feeling that the town could only sustain the one service. Nearly all of these however, returned to this church when, in April, 1858, Rev. Jeffries Hall began work as pastor. His sermons were of a very direct and searching character, and those he guided to the truth were of stalwart Christian growth indeed. He graduated at Amherst College in 1829, at Andover, Mass., Theological Seminary in 1832, and ordained at Hopkinton, Mass., in 1833. He resigned his position as pastor in 1866, but still resided in the town until his death. He is buried in the Old South Church Cemetery at Andover, Mass. Before Mr. Hall's resignation the services were sustained only by great effort, after his work closed the church entered upon a long period of shadow in which the building itself was much neglected and only a very few were left of the membership. These constantly believed that the Lord would again revive his work, though many triumphant scoffers said, we knew this building was not of the Lord, and it will crumble to the ground. Some offered to buy it as a shop or store house. This was sturdily refused. The wisdom of this course was seen in the fall of 1883 when the Rev. Albert E. Hall began work as pastor.

Mr. Hall's work was preceded by three months' work by Mr. Shaw, a student of Andover, Mass. Seminary. This was the first preaching which had been in

the church in many years. There were at this date but five members of the church left, and only two of these could attend services by reason of old age, and by living remote from the place of meeting. The enterprise of establishing the worship of God in the house of the fathers originated in the hearts of a few courageous folk most of whom were women, who believed that the Lord would help those who tried to help themselves, and who were determined to do their best. In justice to many more in the town of Chesterfield it may be said that, when the enterprise was fairly inaugurated and it was seen that it might succeed, willing hands were reached forth and the owners of them worked with their might. Through the efforts of the Ladies' Society the church was rescued from dilapidation, was newly shingled, the outside painted, and otherwise repaired. During the spring of 1883 the ladies began work upon the interior of the church, repairing the windows, painting the seats and walls, and carpeting the aisles. Just at this time, the organ, which is still used in the church, was presented to it by friends in Hinsdale, N. H., who had formerly been residents in Chesterfield. Mr. John B. Fiske had much to do in securing this very helpful gift. Later, there was given to the church, apparatus for properly lighting the church and lamps for use in the vestibule. Steadily and hopefully this work went forward from day to day. Best of all was the spirit of harmony which prevailed among the workers for the Master, and which seemed constantly giving it light and cheer throughout the town. The attendance at church grew in a very happy manner, the Sabbath School became a source of great power, and the prayer meetings were very helpful in all ways. On the 12th of December, 1883, the pastor Rev. Mr. Hall, wrote, "It is evident that the Lord is in this work, and the promise for the future of this church

is decidedly encouraging.”

Mr. Hall's work in the church had begun Nov. 1, 1883, and the signs of hope which he saw were realized in the months which followed in a very glorious manner. At the communion service Dec. 2nd, 1883, ten members were received into church membership, half of these on confession of faith. Several of these became workers for the Master whose light was never dim; Mrs. Hannah Atherton Goodrich was one of these and in sickness and trial her faith was ever strong. Mrs. Martha Saulisbury was another whose helpfulness will never be forgotten. Another was Mrs. Celissa M. Stoddard, who was received by letter from the Congregational Church at Walpole, N. H., and her good works have been of precious help in all forms of church work. She has lived to see her children become devoted members of the church, and she is seldom absent from our services, though the journey to church is no slight one.

On January 6, 1884, nine more friends were admitted to church membership, one of them, Mrs. Otis Safford, was, until just before her death, one of the most faithful Bible scholars and attentive listeners in the church.

The church continued to grow in a very encouraging manner, and the Sabbath School was a source of joy to all. On Sunday evening, July 5th, the School gave a Concert Exercise, “Jesus, the Light of the World,” which was finely presented to a large audience. The clerk of the church writes at this time, “The School has received a new impulse from monthly concerts, and is increased in members and effectiveness.”

During this time services had been carried on in a very encouraging manner at Factory Village, now Spofford, N. H. In January, 1886, the clerk writes, “Prayer meetings are held in both villages each week, and both

Sunday Schools are prosperous and interesting. Feeling grateful for the blessings which have been bestowed upon us as a church; and as individuals, we would pray to the giver of all good that these may continue through the coming year."

On January, 1887, the clerk writes, "The church has prospered well during the past year. All the church services have been well remembered, still there seemed to be a feeling of dissatisfaction on the part of some toward the minister, but the Society extended a call to him, which was ratified by the church."

In the last of these words is the first note of discord which is found in the church records during the work of one of the Master's most faithful servants. Those who had been displeased with the work which was, preaching to every farm on the hills finding they could influence one here and there, kept upon the work until the grieved pastor, whose labors had been so incessant read his resignation at the this, the Center Church. He however, preached at the Factory some time longer, and there received some very useful members to the church.

Many a year has since slipped by, but no one can visit among the people in either village, or upon the farms east or west, without finding the proofs of the good work wrought by Mr. Hall, who had been truly guided of God in his work. In this time of service 31 members were added to the church, and the hope in God planted in many others who later on came to confess Him before the altar. There are those here who still remember their old pastor with the deepest gratitude.

On the 8th of May, 1888, Rev. John W. Barron was called to the pastorate of the church and his letter of acceptance was dated May 15, 1888. He was ordained and installed as pastor of the church on the 29th of June following. On September 26, 1889, Mr. Barron's letter

of resignation was read and duly accepted on the 8th of the following October. During the time of Mr. Barron's labor some very helpful members were added to the church. Mrs. Elvira Puffer and Mrs. Rose Safford being of that number and every ready to help in all things for the good of the church. Mrs. Puffer has now passed to her eternal reward, but is warmly and tenderly remembered by all who knew of her faith and hope. Mrs. Safford has been our organist for many years, and of great help in the Sunday School work.

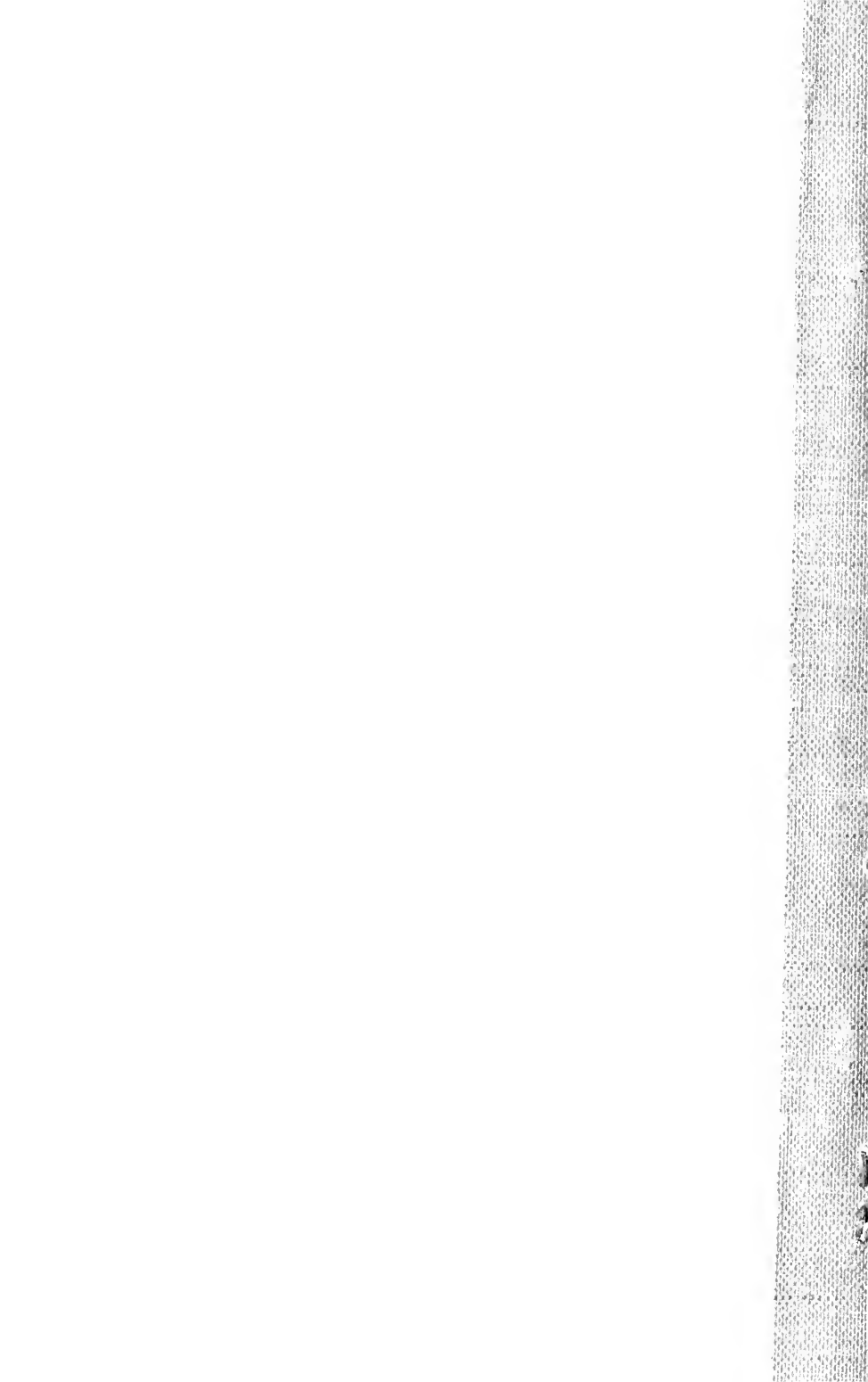
During this pastorate a parsonage was purchased at Factory Village by the generosity of friends here and in other towns. This was indeed a great step in advance.

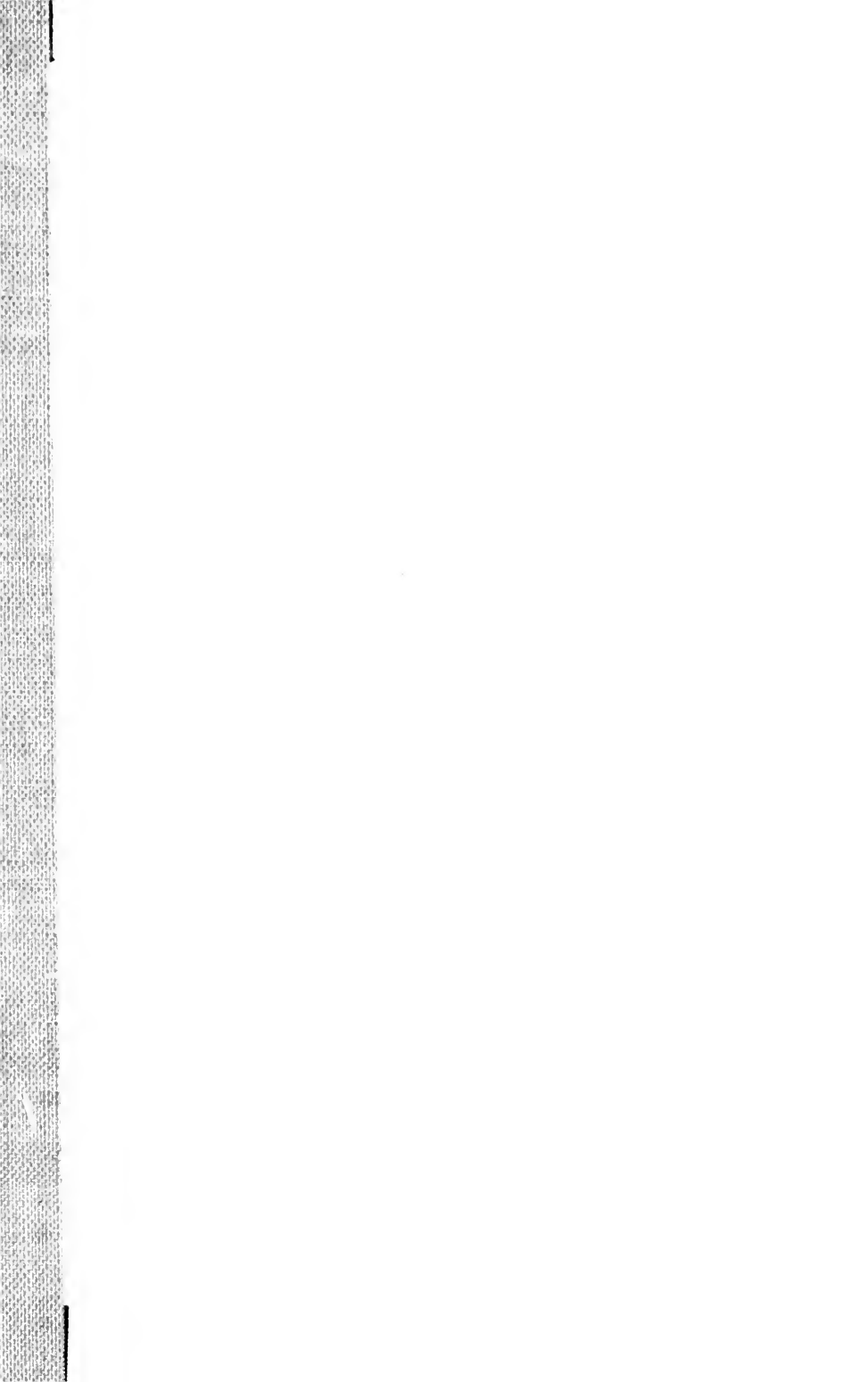
The next record which follows the dismissal of Mr. Barron from the pastorate of the church is as follows: "The church was without services from October 1889, to January, 1890, when Rev. A. T. Hillman supplied the church for two Sabbaths, after which, arrangements were made with Rev. George W. Ruland of Westmoreland, N. H., to preach at the Factory Village Sabbath afternoons, Mr. Ruland also preached in the church from time to time, At the close of his labors Rev. Mr. B. W. Pennock was acting pastor of the church for some nine months. The outlook seemed very discouraging to him, owing to the removal to Keene, N. H., of much of the business at the Factory. Several members moved away, or were planning to leave. Some services by Seminary students were conducted from time to time as they had been at the close of other pastorates. This continued until the present pastor Rev. Mr. Chas. N. Sinnet was sent to take the place by Rev. Mr. Hillman, Secretary of the N. H. Home Missionary Society.

The pastor remembers well the dark 4th of June,

1891, when he met here a little handful of people and listened to their discouraging reports in regard to keeping open the church beyond the month of September following. There had been no Sunday School for some time, the prayer meetings had been abandoned and it seemed difficult to secure money for the benefit of the church. But it was found that there were those of the same stamp as the heroic few of 1883, out of whose labors had grown such a wonderful harvest. The congregation increased, the Sunday School was inaugurated with hope which has never deceived us, and many are the good prayer meetings which have been held.

It was thought best to continue the services for three months after September, 1891, and then the limit of work was extended to one year, and it has thus continued to the present date, when we find the old church painted by the generosity of friends who gathered here Old Home Day, and papered and beautified by the generosity of other friends; the leader in this work being our ever valient and faithful Mrs. Mary C. Smith. During this period, new pew cushions have been purchased of the Walpole, N. H. church, new Hymn Books given by the First Congregational Church in Keene, and many other tokens of progress seen. The work has been reorganized at Spofford, with the largest Sunday School ever gathered there, and an Endeavor Society organized which promises much help for the church in coming days. Thirteen new members have been added to the church, and some of these are of the sturdiest type of Christianity.





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Sketch of Chesterfield, N.H. Township

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