

Separation of church and state;

# Over 100 years old and still in the making

By George A. Parkhurst

Christmas celebrations in the public schools were never questioned a century ago.

This was not due to a lack of sensitivity, but rather because the parents of the children, with very few, if any, exceptions, had been brought up in the Christian tradition and looked upon Christmas celebrations as part of their lives.

Separation of church and state was not given much thought.

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## The way it was

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It had been the law of the land since the passage of the Bill of Rights, but several years passed before the principle was put into practice in New England towns. Thus, the voters were quite willing to continue the close association of church and town business, even to their town meetings.

When Chelmsford was settled in 1653-54, there was no church and no settled ministry.

However, Massachusetts Bay Colony law required that a minister be called and a church established when the population reached twenty or more families.

So, in 1655, Rev. John Fiske was invited to come here from Wenham with the members of his church. Fiske accepted and came

with the majority of his flock — six men and their families.

A Meeting House was soon erected where the First Parish Church stands today. Unfortunately, we have no information on this building. Both religious services and town business meetings were held here, a practice that continued in the second Meeting House (1712-1792) and the third Meeting House (1792-1842).

In the meantime, two new churches had been organized in town.

The First Baptist Society had been established in South Chelmsford in 1771 and St. Anne's Episcopal Church in East Chelmsford (now Lowell) in 1825. (St. Anne's stone church still stands on Merrimack Street in Lowell City Hall.)

The Baptists were taxed, as were all other residents, for the support of the church in the Center but, in time, the injustice of the situation became apparent and part of the Baptists' taxes were abated.

The final and complete separation of the town and the First Parish Church occurred in 1830, when it was voted that the money granted by the town for the support of the ministry was to be assessed on members of the church only. Until that time, the Town Meeting had included church business, even to the hiring of the minister.

The third Meeting House burned in 1842 and plans were immediately made to erect the present white structure, in which the town clock was installed many years later.

The town constructed the brick basement as a Town Hall, while the church building above was built by a group organized especially for the project and was known as the Proprietors of the Chelmsford Centre Meeting House.

The two areas were considered entirely separate, although they were both under the same roof. Dances were held in the Town Hall while dancing would never have been permitted in the church.

As the town grew, the hall became too small, especially when controversial issues were debated. In these cases the meetings were adjourned to the Common across the street. Those voting "aye" gathered at one end of the Common and the "nays" went to the opposite end.

As a result of these crowded conditions, the new Town Hall was built across the street on North Road in 1879 and the basement of the Meeting House was sold to the First Parish.

However, through oversight, title to the land on which the church stands remained with the town until it was conveyed to the First Parish by a vote of the March 14, 1955 Town Meeting.

The separation of church and state has advanced over the years, but may not be complete, even today.

Times have changed.

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