

# Town's churches have early beginnings

By George A. Parkhurst

Chelmsford was settled by deeply religious people, as were the other towns in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Within six months of the incorporation of the Town, they organized a church (Nov. 13, 1655) and invited the Rev. John Fiske of Wenham, Mass. to be their minister.

Theologically, their beliefs were those of the Puritans that had settled Boston in the name of freedom of religion — that is, freedom of religion for them but not for those with different beliefs.

That first church is today the First Parish Church (with the Town Clock) in Central Square. The present church building is the fourth on that site, having been erected in 1842.

As early as 1713, there "began the long struggle for the separation of the west part of Chelmsford into a precinct or parish" because of the inconvenience of attending services in the Center.

However, the town meeting that year, "Voted, that the town doth not esteme those petitioners that did petition to be a separate precinct capable at present" — that is, capable of supporting a meeting house, a parsonage, and a minister.

In 1724, a complaint to the General Court resulted in permission to form a separate religious society in the "West Precinct of Chelmsford."

The construction of a meeting house was begun but it was not until 1727 that it was completed and the church organized. The building was the predecessor of the present white church on Westford Common.

## The way it was



About 1740, several residents of the South Chelmsford area began welcoming Baptist lay preachers to conduct services in their homes. In 1771, the First Baptist Society was organized and the first meeting house erected near the Heart Pond Cemetery. The building had been purchased from the church in Westford which, by this time, had built a replacement. It had been disassembled and hauled on sleds cross country to South Chelmsford. The present church on Maple Road was built in 1836.

The people of Middlesex Village, like those in the West Precinct, found it inconvenient to attend services in the Center and asked permission to form a new church. It was granted and the meeting house was dedicated in 1822, approximately where Alexander's Market stands on Middlesex Street.

A split in the congregation occurred in 1830 with the Unitarian faction remaining and the Congregationalists moving to Wood's Hall, establishing the present North Chelmsford Congregational Church.

Three years later, the Unitarians disbanded and the building stood empty until 1860, when it was purchased by the Roman Catholics who moved it to the corner of Mid-

dlesex and Church Streets. It was the home of the parish of St. John the Evangelist until their present church was erected.

The first Episcopal church in Chelmsford was St. Anne's, built by the Merrimack Manufacturing Company for its employees. The church was organized in 1824 and the stone edifice on Merrimack Street in Lowell (then East Chelmsford) opposite City Hall was consecrated March 16, 1825. The Town of Lowell was incorporated the following year.

The Central Baptist Church on Academy Street was organized in February 1847. For 20 years, services were held in the academy building which was located where their parsonage stands today. Then, in 1868, the present church was built on the corner of Westford and Academy Streets.

The last Chelmsford religious organization to come into being during the first two centuries of our town's history was the West Chelmsford Union Church with its meeting house built in 1848.

At first it belonged to no particular denomination, but gradually the Methodists came to be in the majority and, in 1870, a new Methodist Episcopal church was formed, replacing the Union Church.

These were the first ones but there have been many churches added to this list since Chelmsford's bicentennial in 1855.

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