

A Short History of First Parish Church
Unitarian Universalist of Northborough
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First Parish Church Unitarian Universalist of Northborough was organized on May 21, 1746, as The Church of Christ in Northborough, twenty years before the incorporation of the town.

Two years earlier in 1744, thirty-seven families living in the area petitioned the Massachusetts General Court to become a separate precinct with their own Meeting-house.

The area was originally part of Marlborough and later of Westborough, which was cutoff from Marlborough by an act of the General Court in 1717.

The Rev. Josiah Kent in his Northborough History published in 1921 cites one reason for the request as the inconvenient location of the Meetinghouse at the old Lyman School in Westborough. The new precinct, while still a part of Westborough, could now manage its own ecclesiastical affairs. Kent hints, however, that the petitioners had larger ambitions.

According to C. F. Jewett and Company in a History of Worcester County published in 1879,

“...no settlement was authorized to have the privileges of a township until they had made provisions for the support of a faithful minister... What the General Court was determined to secure to each town was the means of religious training for the people and their children.”

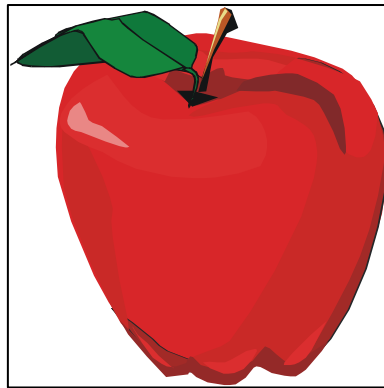
Jewett reports that by 1783 there were forty-seven towns in the county and a church was established in every town. All of these were of the Congregational order and, by the time of Jewett's writing, these original churches were all Unitarian.

On December 31, 1744, the new precinct appropriated £50 for the building of a Meeting-house. But, the locals could not agree on a location, so they put it out to arbitration inviting three men, one each from Worcester, Shrewsbury, and Sudbury to make the choice.

Kent, writing in 1921, describes the area selected, between the two roads leading down to Cold Harbor Bridge, as a beautiful meadow, but tells us that in 1744 it was a swamp and the surrounding territory mostly woodland.

The Meetinghouse was raised on April 30, 1745, but not finished for several years. It was 46 feet by 36 feet in dimensions.

Kent reports the day of the raising was rainy, but proceeded from 10 AM until 4 PM and the “people brought their provisions in great plenty”, including many barrels of cider.



In May of 1746 when the first minister was ordained, the Meetinghouse was “without pulpit, galleries or pews or even permanent floors and lighted only by openings in the un-plastered walls.”

Between April of 1745 and the summer of 1747, a number of votes were taken about the work yet to be done, but none passed.

Finally, on June 8, 1747, voters approved the sum of £150 for glazing and finishing the Meetinghouse. Over the next several years other votes were passed for the payment of pulpit, the pews, and the floor.

Eleven years after the raising, in 1756, the building was completed. Pews were allotted to the highest tax payers in order of the amount they paid. From a reading of the report on the assignment of pews, it appears that the men sat on one side and the “wimmin” on the other side of the Meeting-house.

When the new precinct was organized, the apparent intention was to have Rev. Ebenezer Parkman, the minister of the Westborough church serve the new parish. However, when he declined, expressing his desire to remain in Westborough, a committee of ministers was convened to seek a candidate for the North precinct.

Three candidates were called to preach on two Sundays each. One of the three was **John Martyn** of Harvard and Bolton. Martyn was born in Boston in 1706, the son of Captain Edward Martyn, a shipmaster. He graduated from Harvard College in 1724 and devoted his early years to secular pursuits before turning to the ministry.

The members of the North Precinct wished to call Mr. Marytn. However, the consulting ministers expressed concern because a short time before Mr. Martyn had delivered a sermon in which he expressed some theological views with which they did not agree.

Mr. Martyn agreed to modify his views and was subsequently chosen by a clear vote. He accepted in March 1746 and was ordained as the first minister of the North Precinct of Westborough on May 21, 1746. The Rev. Ebenezer Parkman preached at the ordination.

The new church adopted a covenant, based on a similarly worded covenant from 1744 of the nearby Sterling Meeting. It contained seven points of agreement for members in covenant with God and one another:

- Fear and cleave to the Lord Jehovah as our God
- Bring up our children and servants with the knowledge and fear of God using orthodox catechisms to maintain the true religion
- Keep close to the truth of Christ to defend it against all opposers, and to use the Holy Scriptures as our platform, not the new-found inventions of man
- Engage in careful inspection of our own hearts for the mortification of our sinful passions and disordered affections whereby we may be withdrawn from the living God

- Oblige ourselves in the faithful improvement of our abilities and opportunities to give reverent attention to the word of God to pray unto him to sing his praises and to hold communion with each other in the seals of the Covenant: Baptism and the Lord's Supper
- Peaceably submit unto the holy disciple appointed by Christ in his church for offenders, obeying them that rule over us in the Lord
- Bind ourselves to walk in love towards one another, endeavoring our mutual edification, visiting, exhorting and comforting as occasion serveth and warning any brother or sister who offends, not divulging private offences irregularly, but heedfully following the several precepts laid down by Christ, willingly forgiving all that manifest unto the judgment of charity, that they truly repent of their miscarriages...

A hand written copy of the covenant is with the First Parish historic documents at the Antiquarian Society.

There is also a hand written confession and request for reinstatement for offending.

In 1767,
a year after
Northborough
officially
became a
town,
Rev Martyn
died,
following
20 years
of service.



The next minister, Peter Whitney was 23 when he was called as the minister. Whitney was born September 6, 1774 in Petersham, Massachusetts, the son of Rev. Aaron Whitney, the first minister of Petersham. He graduated from Harvard College in 1762. After teaching school in Lexington for a while, he studied theology at Cambridge.

He was ordained at Northborough, November 4, 1767. He served for 48 years, leading his congregation through the Revolutionary War and the building of a new Meetinghouse in 1809.

On the annual Fast Day of April 26, 1780, Rev. Whitney was preaching the Sunday morning sermon, when someone stepped up to the pulpit and handed him a note saying, "Your house is on Fire." It is said that he read the note, laid it aside and went on with the service.

When the service was over, he and his family were homeless. The house-raising for a new parsonage took place on May 29th. Rev. Parkman of Westborough, who was among the guests that day, wrote in his diary, "An Excellent Frame & a great Company."

The Peter Whitney Parsonage, now a private residence, still stands on Whitney Street and has been lovingly restored.

By 1794 the Meetinghouse was in need of repair. A committee was appointed to investigate its condition and reported that "the back side of said house wants new clapboarding, that the windows throughout the house want repairing, that the plastering needs considerable repairs, especially overhead, that the back side of the roof is not sufficiently secured to defend the plastering from suffering injuries by driving snow-storms, etc."

The members of the parish voted to make repairs and included a request for porches, a tower, and a subscription to buy a bell. But, none of this work ever went forward.

In 1797 a petition was put before the town to build a new Meetinghouse. It was defeated.

After several more attempts, on November 17, 1806, a plan for the new building was accepted.

The new building was to be 56 feet square, with a projection adjoining the south end 34 feet in length and 15 feet in width. The frame of the new building was raised on June 6, 1808..

On June 7 the tower was raised and on June 8 the lantern. The final report of the building committee, made at the April 1809 meeting, includes mention of the **bell cast at the foundry of Paul Revere**, which bears his name and the date, **1809**.

In his history, Kent describes four periods or styles of Meetinghouses. The first were crude, barn-like structures. Later a cupola was added, then a bell tower, followed by a dome or spire. All of these early Meetinghouses served as both church and town hall.

Kent writes of the new Northborough Meetinghouse, “The Northborough church is as fine a specimen of the fourth style as can be found in New England. It must be set down to the everlasting credit of those who built this edifice that their artistic taste was so cultivated that they produced what is really an unsurpassed example of Georgian architecture.”

Rev. Dr. Joseph Allen, who followed Whitney as minister of First Parish, mentions in his sermon at the half century mark in 1844 that the meetinghouse was built by Col. Eames of Buckland and Capt. Brooks of Princeton.

Eames built many churches in western Massachusetts including the *Unitarian church in Marlborough*, the *Congregational Church in Southborough* and the *steeple of the Congregational Church in Shrewsbury*.

The old Meetinghouse was sold at public auction to Timothy Underwood, who took it down, moved it to his place, set it up, and made it into a barn. According to First Parish member Arthur Phelps, it was brought down in the 1938 hurricane.

In colonial New England and in the early years of the republic, ministers were employed by the town and held their position for life.

In Jewett's History of Worcester County, we read, *"The great body of the people of the county, from the beginning till after the Revolution, belonged to the Congregational denomination."*

In the early part of the nineteenth century this began to change. According to Jewett, "In some places, the parish or town had drifted away from the strict faith of the fathers, while the church adhered to the ancient symbols. All continued to be Congregationalists in the matter of church organization and government. The number of churches that were separated from the main body, on account of a change of belief, was about twelve."

In Northborough, a group of parishioners left the church in 1827 to form the local Baptist Church. Then, in 1832 New England Congregationalists split into two groups: the more conservative Evangelical or Orthodox Congregationalists and the liberal Unitarians.

The liberals, who were in the majority, retained possession of the Northborough Meetinghouse and the church communion silver, which is now kept at the Worcester Art Museum.

Thus, the Northborough Meetinghouse became the Unitarian Church.

The Unitarians rejected the doctrine of Christ's supreme divinity and the doctrine of atonement. Jewett writes of them,

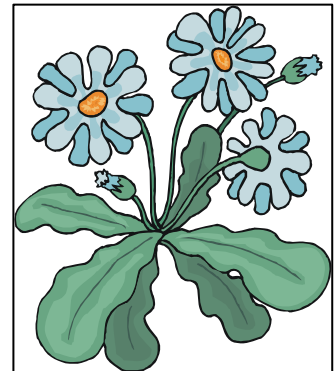
“that, while holding to the body of Christian truth, they are not shackled by creeds, or liturgy, or ritual, or forms. Thus they enjoy great freedom in regard to church polity and Biblical doctrine.

In the matter of government, they have made no essential departure from the Congregational form in which they had their origin.”

The Northborough church was incorporated under the General Laws of the Commonwealth as The First Congregational Unitarian Church of Northborough on December 4, 1911. In 1961 Unitarians and Universalist joined together to become one religious association.

Rev. Dr. Joseph Allen served as the town minister from 1816-1832 and as the Unitarian Minister from 1832-1873, a total of 57 years. Allen was born in Medfield, Massachusetts, August 15, 1790. He graduated from Harvard College in 1811 and was ordained in Northborough on October 31, 1816.

It is said that he knew every child in town by name and that he furnished text books to many children at his own expense in order that they might remain in school. He was elected a member of the town's first school committee, and he was re-elected every year for fifty years, all of which time he served as chairman. He had a great interest in botany and horticulture, was known for his wonderful flower gardens, and was responsible for the planting of shade trees on the town streets.



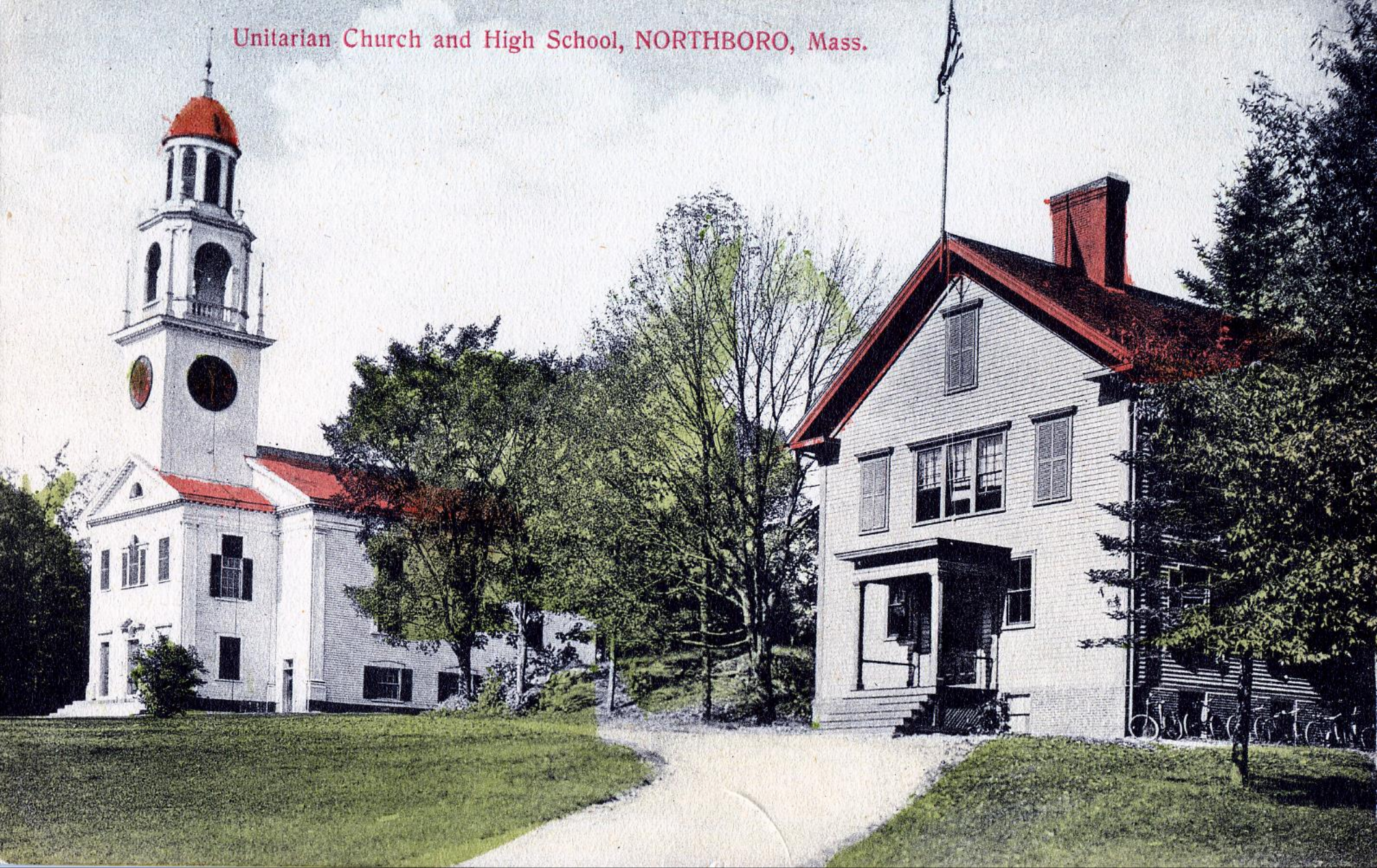
In the fall of 1826 the Worcester Association of Ministers was meeting in the Allen Parsonage to discuss, “The Growing Evil of Intemperance.” Allen’s wife **Lucy Clark Ware** suggested that a bank be established where men could save part of their wages.

The result was the founding of the **Worcester County Institution for Savings**, incorporated in 1828, one of the earliest savings banks in the country.

In 1823 the first Town Hall was built to the east of the Meetinghouse (now the church parking area off Whitney Street). It was the first in the area built for secular use.

Here in 1827 Rev. Allen gave a series of lectures on astronomy. These lectures marked the beginning of the Northborough Lyceum, an institution that brought many of the country’s best orators to Northborough, among them former slave **Frederick Douglas**, women’s rights advocate **Elizabeth Oak-Smith**, orator **Wendell Phillips**, and educator **Horace Mann**. **John Gough** from Boylston, one of the world’s most famous Temperance advocates delivered his first speech here.

Unitarian Church and High School, NORTHBORO, Mass.

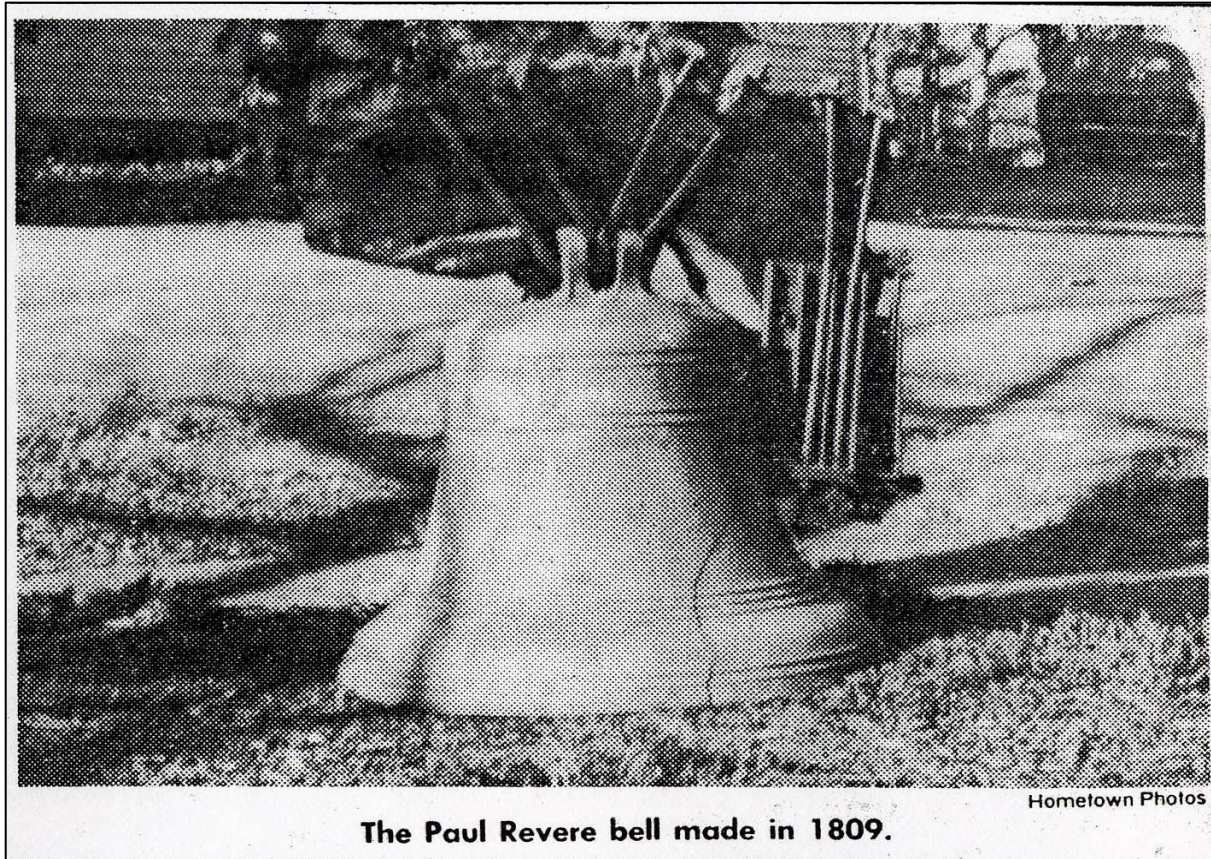


A New Town Hall was built in 1867 and the Old Town Hall was renovated to become the town's first high school. In 1870 the schoolhouse burned down due to "faulty furnace placement." It was replaced, but set further back so as to be on a line with the front of the church. In 1878 Berlin sent students to attend. It was still in use in the 1920's.

At 2:30 on the morning of December 22, 1945, a motorist driving on Route 20 saw flames leaping from the church windows and called the fire department. When they arrived the flames were out of control. Dana Martin, an amateur photographer and church member who lived across the street, took a picture as the fire reached the belfry. By dawn the church was a pile of ashes.



Only the **Paul Revere bell** that had *tolled the death of every president since George Washington* survived. Today it sits in a memorial garden just to the east of the front steps.



The next day was Sunday, and the congregation held their Christmas service in the Northborough Grange Hall. Under the leadership of the Rev. Andrew Rosenberger, the church members committed to restoring the Meetinghouse as it was originally built in 1808, but on a somewhat reduced scale. Over the next four years parishioners worked to realize

They sponsored over 50 church suppers, concerts, dances, plays, auctions, a circus, and an ice carnival.

Services continued to be held in the grange hall. After two years, the parish bought a surplus army chapel from the government and moved it from Bradley Field, Connecticut, to the church property in Northborough, where it was erected and served as a temporary meeting place.

On June 27, 1948, the parish hall building was dedicated, and on the same day the cornerstone of the third Meetinghouse was laid on the site of the second.

Two master carpenters were employed to work on the new building; all the rest was done by the men and women of First Parish including the minister.



The third Meetinghouse was dedicated on May 14, 1950. Homer Darling, founder and owner of the Juniper Hill Golf Club, donated grass turf for the dedication.

In October 1950, the story of the rebuilding effort, along with photos of the fire, the events and activities contributing to the rebuilding, and the dedication ceremony appeared in Life Magazine.

Moved by the photographs, Tom Watson, founder of IBM, donated a new steeple clock. The original clock donated by Jonas Ball, and installed on the steeple in 1845, had long been known as the “town clock.”



Sources

History of Worcester County, Massachusetts, C.F. Jewett and Company, 1879, Wright and Potter Printing Company, 9 Milk Street, Boston.

History of the Worcester Association, Joseph Allen, 1868, Nichols and Noyes, Boston.

Northborough History, Josiah Coleman Kent, 1921, Garden City Press, Inc., Printers, Newton, Mass.