



June 1818 – The History of the Raising of The First Church in Belfast 200 Years Ago

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adapted from Kate's articles for TheMessenger

based in large part on Joseph Williamson's *The History of the City of Belfast*

There are multiple factors that went into the raising of our beautiful and historic church building and how it came to be what it is today. What is especially wonderful are the parallels that one can see from 200 years ago to our present time. First and foremost, our church may never have been built without the early settlers **love for education**.

In 1816, a young minister from Harvard preached a sermon at the Belfast Academy. This learning institution was created for the purpose of “promoting piety, morality, and religion, and for the education of youth in such languages and such liberal arts and sciences as the trustees shall from time to time direct.” (Joseph Williamson, *The History of the City of Belfast*, 1877, p. 330) The preacher was the **Reverend William Frothingham**. The last settled pastor, the Reverend Alfred Johnson, who left his position in 1813 because the church could not pay his salary, still remained as one of the founding trustees of the Academy. Since his departure, the people were not supplied with regular preaching, thus the Rev. Frothingham was invited to come and fill the pulpit often. Rev Frothingham also became **preceptor** of the Academy from 1817-1818.

Reverend Frothingham was called to the pastorate at The First Church in Belfast in 1818. With this call, there was a new spirit among the congregation and the need was felt for an adequate Meeting House to house their worship and other activities. On February 2, 1818, it was voted to build a meeting house “provided the sale of pews on paper shall amount to a sufficient sum.” (Williamson, p. 259) A committee was formed to begin the planning and seek a location and a plan was submitted for a church “sixty-seven feet long

by fifty in width, containing sixty-four pews.” (Williamson, 259) The estimated cost of erecting such a building was approximately \$6,000.

Now...where to build? It is interesting to note that the building stands where it does in part due to a crime in Belfast's past. A former town tax collector, Abel Baker, had absconded with a large amount of money in 1807. One of the sureties on Baker's official bond was Robert Miller. So “by a levy upon the real estate of Miller, the town acquired a lot of land adjoining the garden of Judge Crosby...” When a location was sought for the building in 1818, the town voted to sell this lot to the church “provided said Parish will purchase of Robert Miller one hundred and twenty-six rods of land in a suitable location, and will erect a meeting-house thereon, and will appropriate one-fourth part of the galleries of said house to the use of the town on Sabbath days, and will permit the inhabitants of the town to build a town-house thereon in such a situation as not to incommode said meeting-house...and will further permit said inhabitants to erect such other buildings thereon as the town and Parish shall mutually determine to erect, and shall lay open the residue of said lot to be enjoyed in common by said town and Parish as a Town Common.” (Williamson, 140)

Another parallel to today, I think. This church's history has always been intricately involved in the needs of the wider community of Belfast. The fact that our location was meant to be used as a Town Common gives us some food for thought. **Public space...open to all.**

And so, ready to go, the pews were auctioned off to secure the funding for building. Thomas

Cunningham, Jr. took the task of auctioneer and raised the funds required. The least expensive went for \$91, and the most, pew #62, went for \$201. Now for those who are wondering, the most expensive were not the pews in the back, the most desired pews today! When the Rev. Douglas Showalter was here a few weeks ago, he gave a presentation of the history of congregational churches in Maine and Massachusetts entitled: "You're Sitting in my Pew!" Perhaps today that line would be rather rude and unwelcoming, but in our past it would be appropriate. The pew truly belonged to the purchaser!

The day was set to erect the frame: **June 13, 1818.** Folks from the surrounding towns were invited to come and lend a hand. The parish committee provided a "barrel of punch" for the occasion. No, I do not know what was in it, but Vicki Keller does, so ask her! Samuel French was the master builder and William Frederick was a workman. Judge Crosby, whose property bordered the church lot, was invited to say a few words. The plan for the church was a modified design of a church in Augusta which has since burned down and cannot be seen today.

The day of the raising "must have been a memorable one," according to Hester Pierce Brown in her book *Historic Churches and Homes in Maine*. "The church had many windows, with long rectangular panes of clear glass; and so far as the oldest inhabitant can say, the building was always painted white. Inside were high pews with doors, and above were wide, well-lighted galleries supported by wooden pillars." (p. 29)

Clearly the building has undergone some renovations in its 200 year history. Having sat in some of those high pews with doors in other churches, I can assure you that we sit in a bit more comfort today. Also, there was no heat in the completed building. The preacher often wore mittens! I'd like to quote at length Caroline Field Dunton who wrote a detailed summary of our

history for the 150th anniversary of the church: "On the outside it was structurally as we see it today, and standing as it did, lofty and alone, and in the stark simplicity of its wide boards, unrelieved by clapboards, paint or blinds, it must have been an arresting object. The ground around it, only partially cleared of tree stumps, gave evidence of a small forest sacrificed to afford a setting where nothing should detract from its symmetry of proportion, and simple dignity of line; and from granite foundation to lofty spire, it must have given immeasurable satisfaction to those who had labored and sacrificed that it might be..."

Of course not everything was completed on the day of raising. The pews were installed in the following year, 1819, as well as the Paul Revere bell, the first church bell in town. The bell "bears the makers' names, cast into it. On the old stock-book of Paul Revere and Son this bell is number 219 and its weight is given as 1260 pounds." (Hester Prince Brown) There is a story told that when delivered the members thought it a bit lighter than promised and since the bells were priced by weight this raised a concern. But the vote was taken to receive the bell and it has been heard in our fair town ever since.

The clock was placed later. Built by Phineas P. Quimby and Timothy Chase, and installed in 1836, it belongs to the town of Belfast who had requested it be placed in the church's spire. The works were built at a machine shop at the Head of the Tide.

The story of this fine building is rich and intriguing. I would direct you to Williamson's book *The History of the City of Belfast* as well as *Historic Churches and Homes of Maine* if you would like to do a little more research. The Belfast Historical Museum is another great resource. As its current stewards, we need to ask ourselves how would we like to be remembered in **our time** as church together here? For now we are all an important part of this church's history. Let us make our ancestors and our children proud!