

# Treasures from the Sherman Room

*An Introduction to Brimfield History from the Library's Historical Collections*

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## Second Congregational Church

The following is a History of the SECOND CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN BRIMFIELD (1878 – 1900) written by Lester Parker from research by Ethel Spooner. (The document is not dated but most likely written in the early 1970s)

### FORWARD

The record on which this paper is based is in itself an important and interesting document. Written in ink in a plainly legible script on 32 pages of legal-sized ruled paper, the document is labeled – Extracts from Church Records in Regard to Church Government in General and forming a new church and Rev. W.K. Peirce in Particular, and signed by Walter Corbie in whose collection it was found. The signatures at the end are of William Hyde, Moderator and M.L. Richardson, Scribe and the handwriting very much resembles the latter's signature. Somebody took the pains to assemble the material from other records available, telling as completely as possible the story of the Peirce controversy. The ecclesiastical Council, which is such an important part of this story, seems to have been, and perhaps still is, a standard procedure in the organization of the Congregational Church. As an example of how this procedure functioned, the story of this particular Council may have some historical relevance.

In 1874 the First Congregational Church in Brimfield, at a meeting held for the purpose on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of February, voted unanimously to extend an invitation to the Reverend Webster K. Peirce "to settle over them in the gospel ministry". At the same time they also invited the First Parish or Congregational Society for Religious Worship of Brimfield to unite with them in their invitation. This dual religious organization of church and parish which prevailed in most New England churches for more than two centuries, was to be one of the causes of trouble in the church which eventually forced Mr. Peirce to resign and created a notorious schism involving bitter controversy between two opposing groups within the church.

It could not be said that the people of Brimfield had been hasty or negligent in their choice of a pastor. Before they extended a formal call to Mr. Peirce he was engaged as a "supply" for the winter of 1874, and his acceptance was followed by a Council of Representatives of nine churches to examine Mr. Peirce as to his theological beliefs, personal religious experience, and "call" to the ministry. Having passed this examination satisfactorily, Mr. Peirce was duly installed as a Pastor by a Unanimous vote of the Council.

The whole performance was in no way unusual but was rather a routine quite commonly followed by New England churches a hundred years ago. Doctrine was important in those days and church leaders were earnest in their endeavor to keep their doctrines pure and undefiled by dissident opinion. The history of Brimfield, as well as of most New England towns, begins with a petition requesting the privilege of organizing a new parish and promising within a reasonable time to build a church and settle an orthodox minister. A few years before Mr. Peirce came to Brimfield the church had received a handsome gift of \$5000 from Mr. Samuel Austin Hitchcock to establish a ministerial Fund with the restriction that the fund be used to help pay the salary of an Evangelical, Orthodox, Trinitarian Congregational minister. This limitation was accepted by the church with no recorded objection and probably is still technically in force. Such was the doctrinal background of Mr. Peirce's pastorate in the Brimfield Congregational Church and this was the second cause of his undoing and of the schism in the church.

About three weeks after the church society invited the Parish to join them in asking Mr. Peirce to be their minister, the Parish accepted the invitation by unanimous vote. They also voted to offer Mr. Peirce a yearly salary of one thousand five hundred dollars to be paid in equal quarterly payments with the privilege of being absent two sabbaths each year. The

agreement also provided that the connection might be dissolved at any time by either party upon giving six months notice to that effect. This cautious provision was to be an important factor in the latter controversy. Relieving the strictly business tone of their letters, the committee closed by expressing "the hope that you may find it consistent to accept this invitation and that the same may be effected as soon as may be consistent with other duties." Observing all proper formality, this letter was signed by three men as committee of the parish and two as committee of the church.

Mr. Peirce's reply was equally correct and formal, accepting the invitation to "settle in the gospel ministry over the First Congregational Church and Society in Brimfield" and expressing "the hope and trust that God will richly bless our Union as Pastor and People."

Surely the circumstances of Mr. Peirce's arrival in Brimfield promised a long and fruitful pastorate. During the four years following his appointment, Mr. Peirce was instrumental in doing away with the second preaching service on Sunday and in making the Sunday evening service more popular. Attendance at Sunday school was equal to that of previous years and the main church services were well attended.



Rev. Peirce

Mr. Peirce made himself at home in the community and as a young and personable bachelor it may be assumed that he was socially acceptable. He was born in Winterport, Maine in 1842 so he was 32 years old when he came to Brimfield. Nothing is known of his education except that he graduated from Bangor Theological Seminary, and there is no record of previous pastorates. During the year following his arrival on June 1, 1875 he married Miss Etta F. Lincoln, youngest daughter of Captain and Mrs. R. D. Lincoln, and became a member of one of Brimfield's first families.

During the second year of Mr. Peirce's pastorate, the clerk of the church recorded that "owing to some feeling of jealousy or some other cause not publicly known, the labours of the pastor have been hindered and an unchristian spirit prevails to the extent that some have absented themselves from the communion services." The cause of this trouble may never be fully known but it is certain that his liberal interpretations of some items of church doctrine were a factor.

It is impossible within the limits of this paper to relate in detail what happened in the Brimfield church during the last year of Mr. Peirce's pastorate. When at a church meeting on January 18, 1878, a committee submitted a majority report implying that the trouble could be settled only by dissolving the connection between the church and the pastor, the minority "most earnestly entreated the church to unite with the pastor in accomplishing the great work which he has so earnestly undertaken." When the matter was put to a vote only 29 voted in favor of dismissing Mr. Peirce and 57 voted against the motion. It seemed that the matter was settled in Mr. Peirce's favor.

But this was not the end. Four months later, May 4, 1878, the church received a letter from the Parish clerk stating that a vote had been passed by the Society resolving "that it is expedient and advisable for the Parish to terminate the connection"

(with the Pastor – Rev. Peirce). Taking advantage of the cancellation clause in their contract, and overriding the vote of the church in the Pastor’s favor, the Parish exercised what was assumed to be its legal rights.

Quoting from the church record – May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1878 – “The Reverend Webster K. Peirce preached his farewell sermon in the first Congregational church this morning.”

And under the date October 5, 1878 “Resignation of Reverend W. K. Peirce received and accepted; voted to call on ecclesiastical Council for this purpose; nominated committee of five to act with the Parish committee and Mr. Peirce to this end.” It appears that the church was unwilling to accept the action of the Parish and so the matter was to be submitted to an Ecclesiastical Council for settlement of the controversy.

Three weeks later 49 members of the church requested letter of dismissal: “in order that the above named parties may be formed into a new church to be called the Second Congregational Church of Brimfield.” Voted that these requests be granted and recommended to an Ecclesiastical Council called for confirmation. And so for the second time in its history the Brimfield Church became the scene of an Ecclesiastical Council called for the purpose of settling a controversy which the members of the church and parish could not settle for themselves.

The pastor and one lay delegate from each of the following churches were in attendance at the Council held on November 7, 1878- Ware, Brookfield, Palmer, Warren, Southbridge, Sturbridge, Holland, Monson. Including some two or three additional persons who took part in the Council, the total visiting personnel was 18 or 20 with members of the clergy and laity about equally divided. Also members of the Council were a committee of four representing the church, a committee of three representing the Parish, and of course the central figure in this strange drama, the Reverend Webster K. Peirce.

Recalling that all this happened in the so-called “horse and buggy” days, one can imagine the ministers and delegates driving from all directions toward Brimfield, a distance varying from three to 12 miles; starting in time to arrive at their destination by 10 o’clock. It is recorded that the Council took time out from 1:50 to 2:30 p.m., and it may be hoped that the good women of the church provided a generous lunch for the visiting dignitaries.

The proceedings of the Council, as reported in detail by the Scribe, were an honest attempt “to learn all the facts connected with this trouble and commotion” and to give a fair hearing to representatives of all points of view. It was revealed for the first time that a minority of the church did not have confidence in Mr. Peirce’s theological beliefs and doctrine and a number of extracts from the Pastor’s sermons, sayings, and prayers were quoted as “deviations from orthodoxy”. The supporters of Mr. Peirce presented a testimonial bearing 180 signatures, 70 of which were of members of the church, expressing the loyalty, respect and even affection in which he was held by all who signed. Several members of the Council made statements in support of Mr. Peirce after which the Council voted to continue their deliberations in private and appointed a committee to “draw a minute giving the results of the Council”.

The concluding statement begins with a criticism of the contract under which Mr. Peirce was settled and records a protest against the use of that system “as having a tendency to secularize the office of Christian Ministry.”

The Council further voiced its disapproval of the action of the Parish in taking precedence of the church by availing itself of its legal power to terminate its relations with Mr. Peirce. “In view of actions previously had by both Church and Parish,” the Council recognized the fact that Mr. Peirce “was no longer legally their Pastor” and declared “The ecclesiastical relation to be hereby dissolved.”

As to Mr. Peirce’s “soundness in doctrine” and Christian Character the Council states that “from evidences before us today and especially from his own solemn declaration, we believe him to be in substantial accord with the doctrinal standards of our denomination. Further we are happy to bear cordial testimony to his undisputed integrity and purity of life and to his Christian character.”

The fifth point in the Council’s “minute” sounded a hopeful note, “We earnestly deprecate the steps already taken , threatening a permanent division of the Church and Congregation, and we believe that with a due spirit of mutual concession and forbearance, the division need not be consummated. As a means of promoting this result, we recommend that the two Congregations now worshipping apart, unite under the ministrations of Mr. Peirce in this house for one year from this date.”

(Unfortunately, this recommendation seems to have been ignored by both sides, and one cannot help wondering what would have happened if it had been followed. Since the majority of the church members had declared themselves openly in support of Mr. Peirce, it seems possible that the final break might have been avoided.)

The record ends with an earnest prayer for God’s blessing and guidance in the restoration of harmony in the Brimfield church. And so having done their duty conscientiously with conclusions generally favorable to the Reverend Peirce, the pastors and church delegates returned to their neighboring homes no doubt realizing that they had not succeeded in preventing a permanent division in the Brimfield church.

And now in November 1878, six months after Mr. Peirce had preached his farewell sermon, the report of the Ecclesiastical Council served to confirm the separation rather to promote reunion. In fact the new Second Church was already in operation and on August 4, 1878 this notice was read from the pulpit and posted at the Post Office – “Religious Service at Munroe’s Hall next Sabbath Day August 11<sup>th</sup> at 10:45 a.m. by rev. W. K. Peirce. All are invited to attend.”

Several services had been held in private homes, especially the home of Mrs. Samuel Brown (formerly the residence of General William Eaton) but this is the first record of the use of the Hotel Ballroom by the Second Congregational Church. This arrangement continued until the new Town hall became available. This date is uncertain but a newspaper clipping reports under date of June 7, 1881 – “The Church worshipping in Brimfield Town Hall organized as a Parish Saturday, to be known as the second Congregational Society of Brimfield.”

So far as is known whatever official records of the Second Congregational Church were kept have long since been lost or destroyed. It is to be hoped that they may sometime come to light as many other precious documents have, but in the meantime we can only piece together items found in the records of the First Church, newspaper clippings, and other sources.

In the annual report of 1878 dated January 17, 1879 a very touching and revealing comment appears – “Whereas now we are a divided church living and worshipping apart, having the appearance of two distinct congregations, but we are as yet all members of the same church having failed in attempts at separation and as such we should not only respect but reverence such connection. Yet we are today maintaining two Communion Tables, a part having forsaken their Mother Church and formed into an assembly of themselves. Their reason being that they could not accept the resignation of Mr. Peirce and unite under the ministrations of another pastor” (follows a description of Mr. Peirce’s work and a review of the controversy). “We believe that the feeling of jealousy referred to was not jealousy at all but a determination on the part of the minority to defend the church from the inflowing tide of liberalism and Unitarianism of which this church was in great danger through the teachings and influence of Mr. Peirce.”

At no previous point in the church record during the Peirce controversy had there been such a frank statement of the real reason for the whole episode. And it is especially significant that the church was at long last admitting that division had been brought about by the anti-liberal minority of the members. The record goes on to state that 48 members had been given letters of dismission to the new Second Congregational Church and the membership stood as follows – 1879 – 1880 members: 33 m, 97 f. “Deduct those who went out from us to found a new church and we have 82, our present number.” No further mention is made of the second church in the first church records until 1884 when the following item appeared: “At the beginning of the year a proposition was made by the Pastor of this church to the people worshipping at the Town Hall that union meetings be held during the Week of Prayer, which was accepted. Six evening meetings were held – three with us and three with the Hall. These meetings were largely attended and quite generally endorsed and enjoyed by the Community. At the last of these meetings the pastor of this church read a printed sermon setting forth the desirability and the possibility of reuniting the two bodies. But certain members of the hall church were outspoken in opposition because of difference in the views of faith.”

Thirteen years passed with no mention of the Second Church in the First Church records. Then on May 1, 1897 this item appears: “Invitation extended to Church and Congregation over which the late Rev. W. K. Peirce has formerly been Pastor --- do hereby invite and cordially welcome you all to unite with us in worshipping at the church.” No record has been found of action taken by the second church in response to this invitation. Mr. Peirce had died on March 18<sup>th</sup>, 1897 and so far as is known no one was ever appointed to replace him. The treasurer’s account of the Ladies Charitable Union ends on May 11, 1900 and that date may be considered the end of the Second Congregational Church in Brimfield. And since the date of its first public meeting in Monroe’s Hall, August 4, 1878, may be considered its beginning, the Second Church may be said to have existed during the 22 years from 1878 to 1900.

Again the loss or destruction of its records leaves many unanswered questions about the Second Congregational Church, some of which can be answered in part by a few people now living (1971). It is probable that since the church had no leadership after the death of its only pastor in 1897, no formal action by its membership as a group to return to the mother church was ever taken, and since the process of dismission was never completed in most cases, it may be that the process of returning to membership was equally informal. In any case, time eventually healed the wounds of separation and families and individuals drifted back to the First Church, even occupying the same old pews they had held before the separation. The late Miss Lydia Hitchcock was probably the last survivor of the Second Church membership and her death in 1967 marked the end of a dramatic chapter in the history of the Brimfield Church.

A final foot-note to the Peirce story may now be added. The Historical Address delivered by Rev. Charles M. Hyde on October 11<sup>th</sup> 1876, which has come to be known as the History of Brimfield, was written while the Reverend Peirce was pastor of the Congregational Church and before his troubles began. For this reason Hyde’s history makes only the briefest mention of Mr. Peirce as the then current Pastor of the church, and gives no hint of the struggle which was to come. But the Reverend Hyde gives a full account of an earlier controversy of a similar nature involving another young preacher named Clark Brown who came to Brimfield about 1798, married Tabitha Moffat, daughter of Dr. Joseph Moffat, and for five years until he left in 1803 kept the church and the town in a state of turmoil and trouble. This story had already been written in various forms and has been mentioned here only as a reminder that the struggle between Liberalism and Orthodoxy, even in Brimfield, was going on almost a century before it finally brought about the schism in the church which has now been fully related for the first time.

Following the death of Reverend Webster K. Peirce, the Second Congregational Church and Society issued the following resolutions.

At a meeting of the Second Congregational Church and Society, the following resolutions were adopted:

God, in his providence, having removed from the church its pastor, Reverend Webster K. Peirce, the church and society unite in an expression of the loss which is sustained in his death and of sympathy for his bereaved family.

In the death of our beloved pastor and friend, we mourn the loss of a preacher of universal power, a pastor faithful and loving, a friend full of kindness and sympathy, and a man who exemplified in rare measure the spirit of Christ.

While our hearts are filled with sorrow and we feel stricken by our great loss, we remember with sympathy the family still more deeply bereaved by the loss of husband and father.

Yet in this our common affliction, we would recognize the hand of a merciful Father, whose purposes, though they may be wiled in mystery, are purposes of wisdom and love. And in accordance with that faith whereby our departed pastor brought consolation and cheer to his people in the hours of bereavement, we rejoice that he has gone to us only to enter upon a larger and more blessed life, with its wider knowledge, and its fuller revelation of Christ and the riches of Divine Love.

Com. of | M. Anna Tarbell  
Church | Lizzie W. Noyes  
| G. M. Hitchcock

Com. | Charles L. Tarbell  
of | Edward Bliss  
Society | Elijah Allen