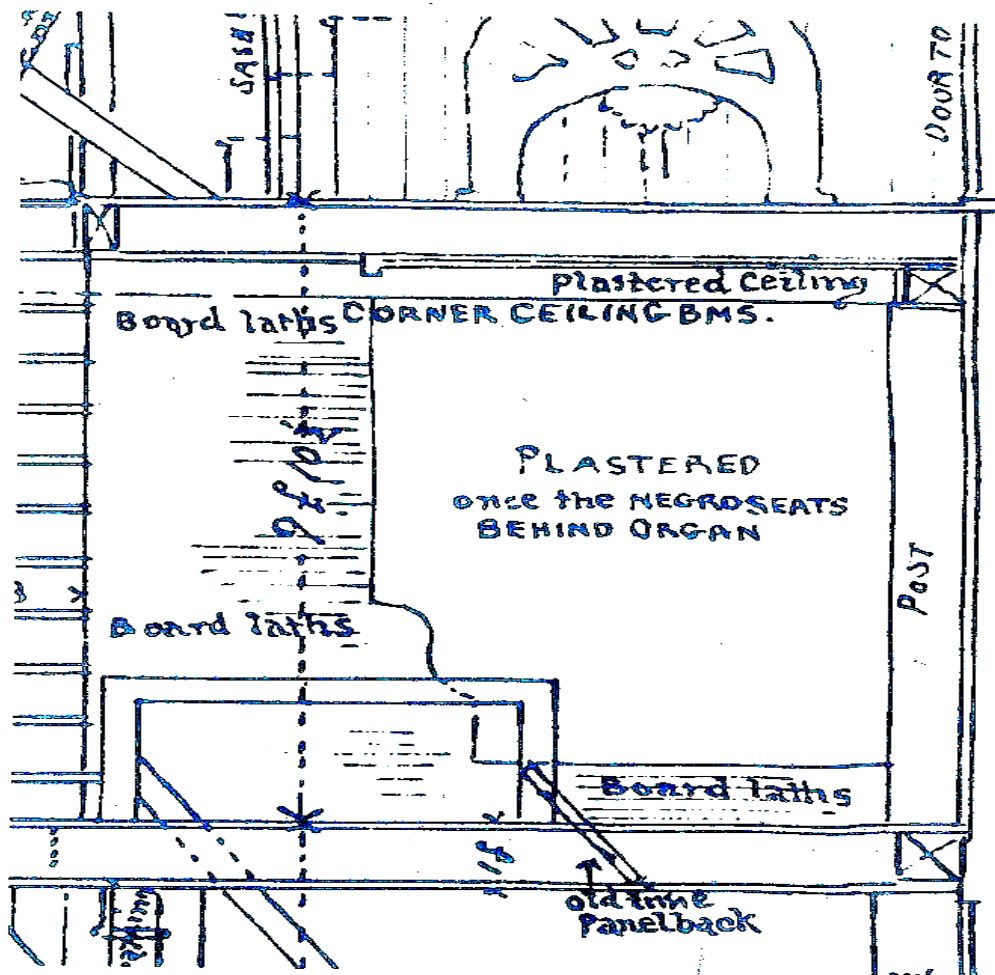


# Our Story In This Place

Sermon By  
Rev. Peter T. Richardson



**First Parish Unitarian**  
KENNEBUNK, MAINE

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As near as anyone can come to a reason for organizing this church in 1750, it seems to have been the absence of heat. What troubled people in these parts was not that there was no heat in the Wells meeting house, all Puritan worship was endured in stove-less churches. But the walk through the woods and over streams and marshes, eight or ten miles each way, meant you were cold when you arrived and not certain you could return home intact.

One minister was able to keep his hands warm by pounding the pulpit but was having trouble with his feet. He asked one of the women in the parish, famed for her knitting, to knit him a pair of mocassin liners. She refused. If his feet were too cold to preach, it was time to go home.

In the year 1743, about twenty families in this part of Wells developed the habit of meeting in each other's homes for four months in the winter and inviting Mr. Jeffords to meet with them. As it was in the middle of the colonial wars and the woods were full of hostile Indians, several men would ride over to escort the minister each way. In 1749 they began building our first meetinghouse at the landing. And finally in 1750 the Legislature in Boston permitted us to organize as the Second Congregational Parish in Wells.

The picture is rather romantic, a coastal New England meetinghouse beside the Kennebunk River two miles from here at "the Landing" where ships were built. Actually most of the early settlers were farmers and most traveling was by land. An early industry was lumbering with sawmills along the Kennebunk and Mousam Rivers. Small coastal vessels plyed the lumber trade between here and places like Salem and Boston. Beginning in 1755 some of these small vessels, mostly sloops, were built here. But life was mostly a carving out of scattered homesteads, trading centered at Steven Larrabee's fort, sawmills, a grist mill, hunting, joining (carpentry), selling salt, fishing and maintaining enough business for one blacksmith, one teacher, one doctor (sometimes) and one minister.



Our first minister, Daniel Little, was here for fifty years (1750-1801), meaning that we were easily one of the leading churches in the District of Maine for stability. Apparently he was a very ordinary preacher but famous for his prayers, especially their length. All the pews were box pews then with hinged seats on both sides. Everyone stood for the prayer, and even on their feet some would get drowsy. But when Mr. Little said "Amen " dozens of hinged seats would come crashing down and everyone would be totally alert for the sermon which of course would last for an hour or so.

Most people pity the people pity the people in such a situation but I pity the minister. Two sermons every Sunday with two long and two short prayers and (later) a midweek lecture. One way Little solved the problem of burn-out was to sign on as missionary to the Indians and the settlers further East every several years. His trips (at least five of them) took him on a radius from Mt. Desert to Bangor to Norridgewoc to the White Mountains. In 1774 he was absent almost three and a half months. In Blue Hill he organized a church, in Goldsboro he trained a local teacher in the Psalms, near Bangor he ordained a minister, and as Commissioner he tried to negotiate a treaty with Chief Orsong. He christened, married, buried and preached everywhere by horseback, by ship, by foot.

Somehow back home he found time to build two houses, invent a sleigh, petition the legislature and set up an iron factory, serve as one of the original trustees of Bowdoin College, and join and contribute articles to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He was known both for his practicality and his inventiveness.

Seven years after he began here his first wife died and a year later he married Sarah Coffin of Newbury. Her brother, Paul, was called to be the first minister of the church in Buxton. As Daniel Little was to preach the ordination sermon he strapped on his snowshoes and set out to walk the eighteen miles. Somewhere northwest of Lyman he lost his way. Meanwhile a man named Emery was sent out by the Buxton parish to hunt game for the reception. Later, just before the service was to begin he returned and said, "Look folks!, I found a moose and a minister!"

Sixty one years later in 1823 on his death bed Paul Coffin told his parishoners that he had always been a Unitarian and that he had never had them sing a Trinitarian doxology. It is less clear here when Daniel Little rewrote the covenant of the church, dropping all trinitarian and several other items he felt were unwarranted by a careful reading of scriptures. While some mention 1774 as a date, I suspect it may have been ten years later, when William Hazlett, an English Unitarian minister, spent a winter preaching for the merchants of Hallowell.

By 1767 it was clear that the population center of Kennebunk had moved inland to Mousam Village and the church underwent a six year controversy back and forth over whether to build the meeting house we now enjoy. Finally in 1772 the work began on land donated by Joseph Storer, (after whom Storer Street is named) owner of the sawmill. Imagine had we not moved, Kennebunk without us here where the three main streets meet! The meetinghouse was smaller than now, no steeple, with three balconies, a high pulpit, and mostly unfinished. Finally by 1803 it was all fixed up but, alas, too small. Another controversy developed. All agreed it should be enlarged but the front pew owners wanted to stay there and the back pew owners wanted to keep their's. After all, even today people come early for a back seat. So the Church was cut in two and twenty-eight feet added in the middle. The roof was turned around and the steeple was begun up to the bell and floored over for the winter.



Thomas Eaton was the contractor and went up for a last inspection of the roof. He tripped on the ridge, yelled, came sliding down, while everyone watched in horror. Just as his legs came sliding over the edge he stopped. One nail had not been driven in and caught his clothing.

It's a good thing Thomas Eaton lived! That winter he had plenty of time to plan how the steeple would look and fortunately studied Asher Benjamin's Country Builder's Assistant (Benjamin was a Unitarian and member of Boston's First Church. We know exactly when this church left the frontier behind and became a first-class New England institution; it was during the winter of 1803-1804. If you look at the steeple, suddenly the primitive base ends and the elegant Federal style tower "grows up." The Paul Revere bell, cast in Boston in 1803, became only the third church bell in Maine. By now the town had become a thriving and prosperous place, and its church must become the most handsome and commodious in the District of Maine!

By now of course our second minister, Nathaniel Fletcher (after whom Fletcher Street was named), was here and Daniel Little had died two years before. There are many wonderful stories in this period. In 1815 widow Tabitha Hubbard noticed Mr. Fletcher picking a black fly out of the Communion wine. The next Sunday she brought her precious 65 year old silver spoon to be kept next to the pewter tankards for such emergencies.

Also in 1815 a Baptist evangelist named Joseph Smith came to town and announced that Samson-like he would tip the temple over. He grabbed hold of the eastern sill about midway along and prayed a fervent prayer. The meetinghouse would not budge. A wag in the crowd suggested he go try the backside of the building so as to use the steeple for leverage. The church held firm.

A controversy soon arose over our minister's Theology. By 1815 it was clear to everyone he, like his predecessor, was a Unitarian. He had been asked by the parent church in Wells to question their new minister, Jonathan Greenleaf, before they ordained him. Fletcher asked him his views of the atonement. Greenleaf said that God died on the cross. Fletcher said, "you mean, the son of God." And Greenleaf answered, "No Sir, I mean God himself." Fletcher of course did not pursue the matter further but must have been disappointed. Shortly after this private ministerial exchange Greenleaf published an anonymous letter accusing Fletcher of "duplicity", having a theology inappropriate for holding a town pulpit.

The time had come when congregation needed to declare itself. Where did it stand theologically? Did it support its minister? Was it aware of its non-orthodox covenant? Its answer was clear when it met, September 1, 1817 passing a lengthy resolution and dispatching George Wallingford, Joseph Dane (after whom Dane Street is named) and John Low to hand deliver it to Mr. Greenleaf. One paragraph left no ambiguity:

Resolved, that we highly approve the temperate, dignified and independent manner with which the Rev. Mr. Fletcher has treated the aforementioned letter; that our confidence in him remains not only unshaken and undiminished, but that in this new proof of his correctness we have much to admire and applaud.

In one fell swoop the congregation affirmed an approach to organized religion that would remain intact for another century and a half and then some: "temperate," at all costs "dignified," "independent" and Unitarian.

In less than two years (May 16, 1819) our church founded the first Sunday School in Maine. Two men whose portraits hang in the parlor, John Low and Daniel Sewell, rounded up 216 children, sat them down in pews and taught them by rote, religious principles and songs. In the first year alone the children recited 31,725 verses from the Bible. Imagine attempting to put them and their teachers through anything like that today! Wonderful records of the church school exist, chronicling practices from Catechisms in 1819 to multi media curriculum units in 1988. I hope by the time we celebrate its 175th anniversary in 1994 we can have this story written and ready to inspire us.

We began in 1750 with an absence of heat. Now all of a sudden in 1820 Maine became a state, Kennebunk became a town separate from Wells (and therefore we dropped the word "second" and became the First Parish), and most important of all, we installed two wood stoves.

Of course we did not relinquish the cold and deprivation without an ecclesiastical battle. On the first Sunday the stoves were to be operating, a very cold day, a woman on the minority side of the vote came in and sat in her pew near one of the stoves. In the middle of the sermon she muttered that she couldn't stand the heat and removed her coat, and then later, her shawl. Everyone watched the drama "unfold" with rapt anticipation. The sermon went on, and on, unheard. A neighbor finally leaned over and whispered to her that there was a missing part and the stoves were cold. No fire! No heat! Slowly the shawl crept back up and around her neck. Slowly the coat inched on to cover the numbness.

By 1823 we had chimneys to go with the stoves. And, of course, now that the New England churches had heat, the American Unitarian Association was organized in 1825 to meet the needs of churches with a warmer more humane theology.

In 1827 our third minister was ordained. With the first two, ministers from surrounding towns had participated in the ceremonies but this time the religion of the ordainee was not to be left in doubt. Dr. Kirkland, president of Harvard, gave the prayer. Charles Lowell of the Old West Church (father of the poet, J.R. Lowell) gave the sermon and three other Boston ministers, Nathaniel L. Frothingham of the First Church, Samuel Barrett, and George Ripley, the Transcendentalist, participated and of course Icabod Nichols of the First Parish in Portland and Nathan Parker of the South Church in Portsmouth. Our church would be a showcase for Unitarianism in Maine!

George Wadsworth Wells was very popular but he only stayed eleven years. He put the church school on a new basis, dropping learning by catechizing. During his ministry the Baptists and orthodox Congregationalists organized their own churches here. After more than nine years Wells was preached out and arranged a six month pulpit exchange with the Unitarian minister in Savannah, Georgia, to see if the arrangement could save his health. It didn't. The church gave him a six month trip to Europe. While he was gone the present room was created (exactly 150 years ago) by flooring the church in half and bringing worship upstairs to the gallery level. It was thought this would make it easier for Wells to speak and be heard. He tried but had to resign.

The period 1825 to about 1875 was the most prosperous in the church's history. Congregations were large (75 or so a Sunday) and fundraising was effortless. There were three outstanding ministers. The most exciting was William Tenney who embroiled the church in controversy over the war with Mexico. One Sunday in 1847 he refused to read the Governor's Thanksgiving Pro-



clamation and substituted instead that of the Governor of Massachusetts, who opposed the war. Portland Newspapers, The Eastern Argus and The Advertiser, carried on a lively debate over whether he should have spoken. Finally a congregational meeting was called "To take into consideration the slander recently published in the Eastern Argus." They voted two resolutions:

"Voted that the pulpit of this parish is free and unshackled..."

"Voted that the slander contained in the Eastern Argus is deemed unworthy of notice."

He was also supported by the "Women of Kennebunk" who petitioned the Senate "to put an immediate end to the aggressive war now waged by this country against the Republic of Mexico."

In 1875 Edward E. Bourne, for many years Moderator of the Parish, wrote this about a slave owned by a citizen of Kennebunk:

We of Kennebunk well remember him in the house of God,  
separated from his fellow men in his lone seat, though  
far above all other worshippers, emblematical, perhaps in  
the wisdom of God, though not so designed by the pride  
of man, of his more exalted seat in the mansions of the  
blest.

In other words where our pipe organ is now there was once an archway behind which was a gallery for black slaves and servants (which can still be seen in the steeple).

It was the task of Joshua Swan, minister from 1850 to 1869, to bring us away from this heritage and to the point where we opposed the institution of slavery and the fugitive slave law. This happened without a ripple of controversy.

It was also in 1857 that we set up and decorated the first Christmas tree in Kennebunk. Swan wrote a Christmas hymn for this and several later occasions. In his nineteen years Swan brought us calmly and gently through a difficult period in American history.

If Swan calmed us his successor put us to sleep. During the 21 year ministry of Charles Vinal 10 people joined the membership. After him Elvin Prescott was here for 5 years and no one joined. He was followed by Powers, Lewis and Wilson, who together served 18 years and added 10 new members. Is it any wonder that in 1900 the Congregation voted not to officially celebrate the sesquicentennial so that it would not cost the Parish any money?! Perhaps the parish growth strategy at the turn of the century should have centered on the Women's Alliance. In October 1900 Elizabeth Kimball reported to the Alliance:

By the way, with tracts taken from the vestibule of the church I have converted a good Episcopalian to a pretty good Unitarian. If I live till next Summer will make a finish of her.

Jesse Powers, our ninth minister, when he was a student, attended a revival meeting in Boston. The audience wasn't responding so the Evangelist upped the ante by proclaiming that even his own grandmother was in Hell. About then Powers and his friend rose to leave and the Evangelist pointed to them in the aisle and said, "and there go two more to the same place." Powers turned and asked him, "Is there any message you wish to send to your grandmother?"

In the 1890's the groundwork for the twentieth century was established. In 1893 women attended and voted in a Congregational meeting for the first time! In 1891 the first kitchen was added and two years later, running water. In 1896 the practice of "assessing" the pew owners to finance the church ended and voluntary pledging began. It was not until 1927 that the pew deeds were all called in and the church bought the pews from the pew owners so that we can sit anywhere. Several of our members today sit in pews that once upon a time their ancestors owned, just as you would own a house or a summer cottage.

There appears to be an extended period of time, sixty to seventy years long, when most of the members wondered how long the church could survive. A large share of the membership lived out of town. To the words, "Unitarian," "temperate", "dignified," and "independent" were added the words "frugal" and "loyal". And somehow it worked.

The earliest stories that were told to me by present members who were there themselves were about Robert Doremus, minister from 1916 to 1924. Apparently he wheeled his baby carriage in one door of the Post Office, picked up his mail and left by the other door, leaving his baby behind. He was also seen running from his burning house, in panic, clutching his sugar bowl. Actually he was extremely popular and forty-five people joined the church.

In 1930 the mural downstairs of Palestinian scenes was painted in memory of Anne B. Day who died while John Day was minister. In the same year he celebrated his fiftieth year in ministry!

In the 1940's the church was famous for its square dances and box lunch auctions. In 1916, 1947 and 1962 there were discussions with the Congregationalists with the idea of federating the two churches but fortunately they federated with the Methodists instead. In 1935 the only instance I know of occurred where a minister was called with a minority vote! Fourteen wanted Mr. Shoenfeldt, 10 wanted Mr. Riley and 8 wanted Mr. Clark. Mr. Shoenfeldt stayed 10 years! In 1940 The Evening Alliance was organized for working women. In 1946 a cookbook was published. In 1949 an extremely successful Open House Tour of Kennebunk was held and in the same year we installed our first oil furnace. In October, 1947 Kennebunk was surrounded by forest fires and our church was the Red Cross command center.

The 1960's was the decade of the Church School and the Happy Heretic Coffee House, a major Religious Arts Festival, The Passamoquoddy Project, and the first sermon talkbacks. In 1960 also the Church voted against merger of the Unitarians and Universalists!

In 1973 perhaps the most important change in the century took place. Coffee hour was changed from once a month to every Sunday! Membership began to grow to 106 active members in 1976. From that time to this 201 people have joined the church so that at present our active membership is 169 persons. And we have restored the steeple, the organ, this room, added a new roof, put on storm windows and added an exciting new addition.

In 1977 we began the Third Friday Discussion Group and in February 1982 the Kennebunk Forum began its work. The Alliances merged, after eight years the Third Friday group faded and Food For Thought emerged on second Fridays. Religious Education Committees have given devoted service, we sponsored a Vietnamese family, The Nguyen's, and Buckminster Fuller spoke for an hour and a half from this pulpit to a congregation of 500. Our work has been greatly enhanced since 1976 with the addition of a church secretary to our staff.

Imagine our church as a person walking through time, 238 years of joy and struggle, crisis, prosperity, bleak times, fulfilling times. Imagine this person in the wilderness, deep forests, cold, Indians waiting for scalps, determined to start a church. Picture the Herculean tasks: building a meetinghouse, finding a minister, knitting thirty families together. Picture not only the struggle but the adventure, the network of wider relationships reaching from Mt. Desert to Boston! Imagine the process of the mind, tilling the soil, building ships and evolving to a Unitarian Theology.

Then imagine the great age of the clipper ships, built and sailed from Kennebunk, the cosmopolitan attitude of mind which understood not only the China Trade, the East and West Indies, Tripoli and Liverpool, but set about to explore and support an enlightened religion. We became not only "temperate" but "dignified," "independent" and Unitarian. We put forth into the center of this town beauty, symmetry, song, reason, social concern, reform, freedom.

But times changed, manufacturing and professions drew particularly our people away to centers of finance and culture. To sustain ourselves there was a yearly appeal to "our Boston friends." We were still the First Parish, the first Sunday School, with the first Christmas tree. We added "frugality" and "loyalty" to our identity, and there were good times and good people.

We are now embarked in a cycle of rebirth and transformation. Everything we have been and are is in the mix but we sail in uncharted waters. What is our story in this place that is First Parish 1750, 1800, 1825, 1900, 1975, 1988? There appears to be a remarkable continuity and yet what do we see, what side of the face, what expressions of unique personality, what anticipations in the thoughts? There are people here now who have joined us this year. What do they see? What can they tell us about ourselves as we journey together? They have joined the future we share. Together we form the next cycle of our future, the part in which we now journey in each other's company.