

**THE FIRST CHURCH IN
EXETER, NEW HAMPSHIRE:
1638-1888, 1698-1898**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649543519

The First Church in Exeter, New Hampshire: 1638-1888, 1698-1898 by John Taylor Perry

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JOHN TAYLOR PERRY

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The First Church in Exeter,

NEW HAMPSHIRE.

1638-1888——1698-1898.

EXETER:

CHRISTMAS, 1898.

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THE NEWS-LETTER PRESS,
KATONAH, N. H.

MAY 12 1944

PREFACE.

ON the 13th and 14th of November, 1898, the First Church and Parish in Exeter celebrated the two hundredth anniversary of the reorganization of the church, and the one hundredth of the house of worship still in use. The true bicentennial dates, and the ones originally designed for observance, were October 2nd and 3rd, nearly or quite corresponding with the old style reckoning of the proceedings in September, 1698. A delay of about six weeks was rendered necessary by extensive repairs and improvements on the church building.

The present volume includes, besides a brief account of the general exercises, first a sermon delivered June 3, 1888, by the late Rev. Swift Byington, then pastor, as the church's contribution to the quadro-millennial celebration of the town, held on June 7th. The discourse was much appreciated at the time of its delivery, and as it dwells almost exclusively on the first organized church and its founder, John Wheelwright, may be regarded as a suitable introduction to the demonstrations ten years later. Mr. Byington, it will be observed, merely repeats the ancient historical statements, without submitting them to a critical analysis. He denies, however, that there is satisfactory evidence of the claim that the church of 1638 died, saying the evidence for that assertion is too negative. His discourse is in itself an assertion of 250 years of existence for our church.

Secondly, the sermon, delivered November 13th last by the present pastor, the Rev. Wilbert L. Anderson, in its subject, "New England Theology as Related to Life and Character," gives to the local observances a more general bearing, and will enable persons, not familiar with the past, better to appreciate the spiritual conflicts of our ancestors.

Thirdly, the address by the Rev. Burton W. Lockhart, D. D., of Manchester, with which the celebration closed, in its eloquent

portrayal of the "Relations of the Church to the Modern World," supplies practical enforcements to the lessons made prominent in a backward look over more than two centuries of conflict and conquest.

Fourthly, the historical paper, while tracing the general progress of the church during 260 years, has for its most important features, first the continuity and virtual identity of the first organized church with its successor. Secondly, a detailed history of the great Whitefieldian secession of 1743, an event, which, although neither side was faultless, was really a heavy blow struck at the union of church and state.

In conclusion it is hoped that the present publication may induce other churches not only to study their past, but to keep their records with systematic care. Through neglect, many important events, when not totally forgotten, are only matters of confused tradition. Through carelessness many church and parish books have fallen into private hands, only to be lost. Such things were perhaps unavoidable a hundred years ago, but it will be unpardonable if they are repeated in the twentieth century.

W. L. ANDERSON,
J. T. PERRY,
G. A. WENYORTH,
C. H. KNIGHT,
SPERRY FRENCH,

Publication Committee.

QUADRO-MILLENNIAL SERMON.

Delivered June 3, 1888.

BY THE REV. SWIFT BYINGTON.

“Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations; ask thy father, and he will show thee, thy elders, and they will tell thee, for the Lord's portion is this people. He found them in a desert land, in a waste howling wilderness; He led them about, and He instructed them. He kept them as the apple of his eye.”—*Deuteronomy, 32nd Chapter, 7th, 9th and 10th Verses.*

THE celebration of the 250th anniversary of the planting of the town of Exeter, in which the planting of the Congregational church was neglected, would be like a play of Hamlet with Hamlet left out; it would be a neglecting of the prominent reason for which New England was settled. Exeter was a religious settlement as truly as Plymouth was. If the Pilgrims were forced by their steadfast religious convictions to find a new home at Plymouth, so was John Wheelwright forced by his steadfast convictions to plant the town of Exeter, and at the same time, the First church, of which you are the representatives.

And, first, of some of the circumstances which led to the founding of this town and church, I wish to speak. Eight or ten years after the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth, who were persons of humble position and small possessions, a new colony of Puritans landed at Salem and established themselves, more ambitious than the Pilgrims at Plymouth, many of them persons of education and wealth, bent on founding a commonwealth in the wilderness in which Puritan conceptions of religion should be all controlling.

This colony soon came to include Charlestown and Boston and the regions adjacent, under the name of Massachusetts Bay. They received constant accessions from the Mother Country, grew and prospered. After John Endicott, the first governor of the Salem Colony, came Gov. John Winthrop, of the Boston Colony. John

Cotton, of the church in Boston, was then a prominent minister in the colony. It is said that the town is the social and political unit in New England, upon which our commonwealth rests; but at the beginning, the congregation, not the town, was the basis upon which the fabric rested. No one could vote unless he was a communicant, so that the town meeting was nothing but a church meeting and the deference to the clergy was unbounded, and not only the religious but the social and political authority was in the hands of the clergy. It seems as if the Puritans had certainly attained their object, a religious commonwealth. The clergy were consulted by the governor on every important question which arose, and their counsel was greatly heeded. Every inhabitant was obliged to attend the services of the Lord's day, under penalty of fine or imprisonment. The church and state were one; the government subservient to the clergy, who were a power behind the throne; there were several sermons on Sunday and several often during the week, that the masses of the people might be kept in a submissive spirit, that there might be no departure in thought or opinion from Puritan authority, and that any deviation from or opposition to their standards, might be at once frowned upon and crushed.

In 1636, among other Puritans, came another John, John Wheelwright, to enjoy the privileges and liberties of Massachusetts Bay. He was about 44 years of age and had been in the ministry eight or ten years, in England. In Gov. Bell's memoirs of Wheelwright, I read that he was a fellow collegian in England with Oliver Cromwell at the University of Cambridge, which he entered at 18 years of age, graduating in 1614. "I remember," says the Lord Protector Cromwell, "when I was more afraid of meeting Wheelwright at football than I have since been of meeting an army in the field, for I was infallibly sure of being tripped by him." Cotton Mather said he had heard that "when Wheelwright was a young spark at the University he was noted for a more than ordinary stroke at wrestling." From this it may be gathered, adds Gov. Bell, "that young Wheelwright was of vigorous bodily constitution, addicted to athletic exercises, and not lacking in spirit or resolution." He was a leading man in the Puritan party in England. He was instrumental

in the conversion of many souls and was highly esteemed; but perhaps owing to his Puritan views, which were strongly opposed to the Church of England, he lost his parish, and in April, 1636, sailed for New England. He came not wholly a stranger, for he was acquainted with Rev. John Cotton, the minister of the Puritan church in Boston, and a man of leading influence there.

Some of the members of the Boston church wished Wheelwright to be settled as a second teacher over that church, but this was opposed by ex-Gov. Winthrop, on the ground that Wheelwright was not sound in doctrine. Although Sir Henry Vane (now governor), Winthrop's rival, defended him, it was useless, and the friends of Wheelwright formed a church at what is now Quincy, Mass., and in October, 1636, settled Wheelwright as their pastor at the age of 44. The next January he preached a sermon in Boston on Fast day which gave great offence to ex-Gov. Winthrop and his friends and at length after a long controversy and many trials in civil and ecclesiastical courts, at which Wheelwright took the ground that he had preached nothing but the truth, and that he was not responsible for the application which they chose to make of it, he was sentenced to be disfranchised and banished. This was in November, 1637. He was given fourteen days to leave. Then they turned to his advocates and followers, and served many of them in like manner. Wheelwright left Boston, probably in a coasting vessel of John Clark's, (a sympathizer) for the region of Piscataqua river, perhaps Dover Point, or Strawberry Point, where were already settlements of fishermen, and as soon as the deep snow permitted, came to Squamscot in the spring of 1638, the site of what is now Exeter. In April, 1638, he secured by purchase, or otherwise, an extensive tract of land at Squamscot Falls, embracing what is now Exeter and several adjacent towns, and was now ready to be followed by his friends and followers, who were eager to share his fortunes and plant a new colony in the wilderness. He was soon surrounded by a company of followers large enough to insure the success of his project. The names of more than thirty men appear in the first assignment of land. As soon as some rude sort of shelter had been provided, their families followed, and at once measures were taken to organize a church. A place of worship forty feet square was built