

MANSFIELD MEMORIES: Meetinghouse was center of civic, religious life

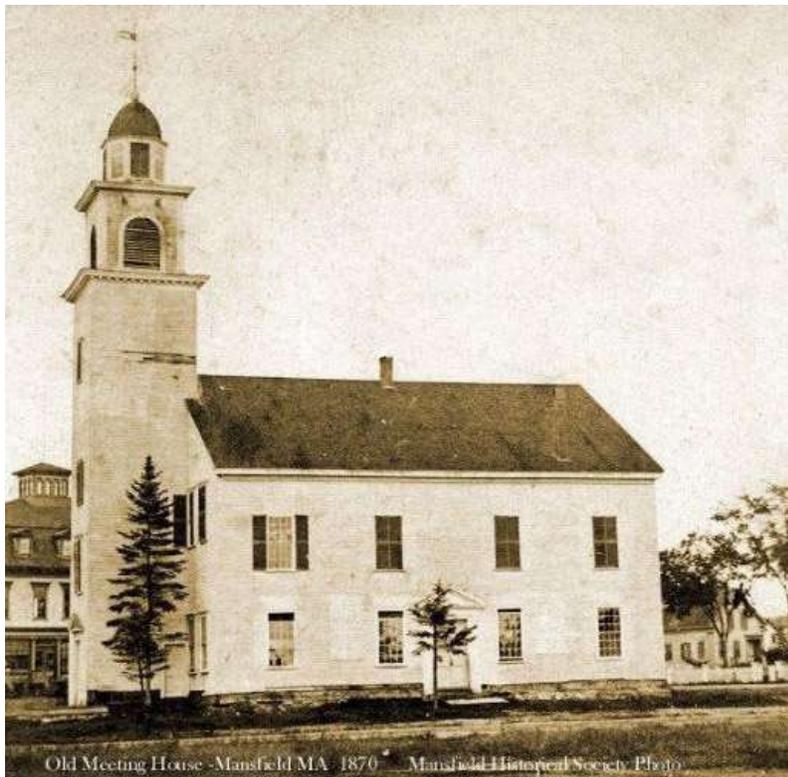
By Kevin McNatt and Andrew Todesco

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MANSFIELD – This is the first in a four-part series on the town halls of Mansfield.

By the 1720s the people of northern Norton, which we now know as Mansfield, had grown tired of the arduous trek to Norton center every Sunday for church services. As their counterparts in Easton had recently done, they began to take the first steps toward separation.

After several failed attempts, the Norton North Precinct (now Mansfield) was approved in 1731. A precinct meeting was held at home of Isaac Wellman on present-day South Main Street. The meeting approved the hiring of a minister and the construction of the crude first meetinghouse on what we now know as the South Common.



Old Meeting House - Mansfield MA 1870 - Mansfield Historical Society Photo

Mansfield's second meetinghouse, one of the most historic structures in town history, was approved in 1764 and completed in 1768.

In colonial America, there was little separation of church and state. All local families belonged to what became known as the First Parish. They constructed the first meetinghouse, a small structure that was so basic it had oiled paper in place of glass windows. Local historian Jennie Copeland called it “the center of both the civic and the religious life.” The first meetinghouse stood for about 30 years, and essentially served as Mansfield’s first town hall.

With the dream of full own status drawing ever more near, it was decided to build

a larger and more suitable structure in the 1760s. Mansfield’s second meetinghouse, one of the most historic structures in town history, was approved in 1764 and completed in 1768. The townspeople worshipped and conducted town business from it upon achieving town status in 1775.

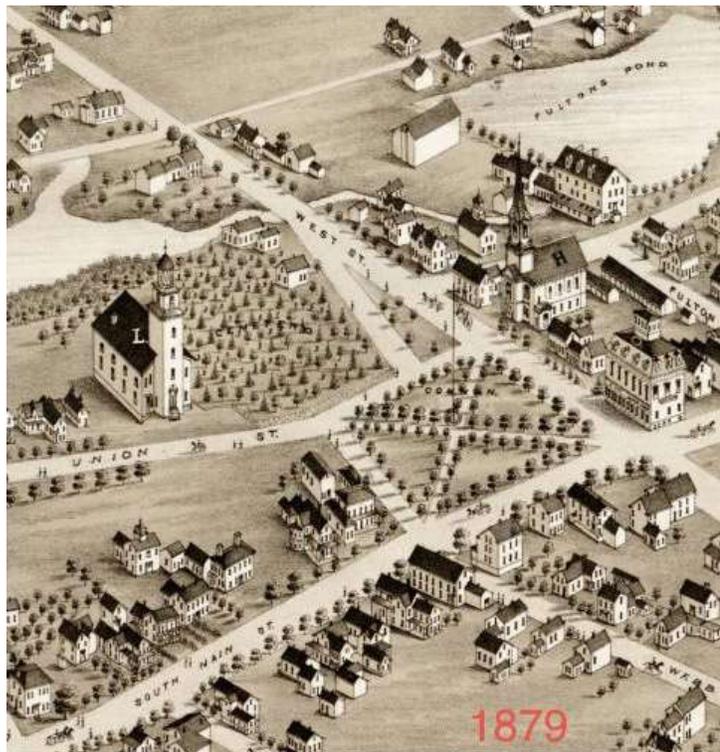
In 1827, the town was the beneficiary of Asa Clapp's generosity. A native of Mansfield, Clapp had become a wealthy merchant in Portland, Maine. As a sign of affection for his hometown, Clapp financed a bell cast at Paul Revere and Sons foundry, which was installed at the meetinghouse. After several moves, the Revere Bell has found a new home at the public safety building on East Street.

A decade later tension over slavery was on the rise. In 1836 local abolitionists invited notable African-American orator Cecil Burleigh to speak at the meetinghouse. A handful of local pro-slavery residents gathered to drown out his speech with drums, shout him down, and intimidate Burleigh and his sympathetic Mansfield allies. Constable Chandler Cobb literally read the pro-slavery mob the riot act, and they responded by bloodying his nose. The mob tactics only galvanized the local abolitionist sentiment.

The First Parish was soon plagued by theological differences, causing a large contingent to break away and form the Orthodox Congregational Church in 1838. The meetinghouse remained the de facto town hall, but the parish had a difficult time maintaining a building that was too large for its needs. After a drawn-out dispute, it was decided that the town would purchase the land on which the meetinghouse stood. The land became the town common (now known as the South Common). As a result, the meetinghouse was moved to Union Street around 1873.

Now standing on the first lot on Union Street just south of the old town cemetery, the meetinghouse soon became obsolete. An elegant new Town Hall opened in 1883, and the First Parish soon closed its doors. In 1888, the historic second meetinghouse was torn down. Lumber from the building was used to construct the house that now stands on the same lot at 33 Union St.

Authors' Note: this article is only possible through the research and writing of Jennie Copeland (1879-1956), Mansfield's preeminent historian and founder of the Mansfield Historical Society. We remain forever in her debt.



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