

Deacon William P. Lawrence's Recollections of the Colebrook Church

Deacon William Lawrence, who lived where Ellen Fredsall now resides on Pinney Street, spent his entire life in Colebrook where he operated one of the finest dairy farms in the community, as well as one of the busiest lumber mills.

Sundays were always reserved for church, with the evenings set aside for socializing with his friends and neighbors. He was a deacon of the Congregational Church in Colebrook Center for many years. He set down on paper his recollections of this church in 1917, 86 years ago, when he was 83 years of age.

“This is not a brown church, but if it had not been properly cared for it would have been brown from age, outside and in. It was built in 1842, 75 years ago, and I sometimes think if a member of its early years could appear here, he would be greatly surprised. He probably would not find one of his former associates in town or out and if he entered the church, he would find many changes there.”

“When first built, the only way of heating was by two box stoves standing in the belfry, the pipes running through the church to the chimney at the opposite end. The ladies used to carry foot stoves to help keep their feet warm.

Every pew had a door and a button to fasten it. Every Society meeting they would sell the pews at auction. The highest bidder could have the first chance to proceed to help pay the society expenses.”

“After a while, the four back seats in the body were taken out and the stoves were placed inside, which gave a little more heat. Other changes have been made from time to time. The pew doors have been removed and arms put on; the platform of the pulpit has been lowered perhaps 2 feet; a new pulpit has been put in place of the old one which was much longer and light colored.

The choir always used to sit in the gallery and every time a hymn was sung, the congregation would arise, turn around, and face the singers with their backs to the minister. Some thought it would be better to have the choir below, near the minister, and Howard Smith fixed a nice place in the corner where the piano now stands. The piano was purchased with money raised by Mrs. W. W. Cooper. It seems to me it would be more social and more like modern times if the choir would occupy it now.”

In 1885, some of the good people thought the basement would be much better and more pleasant if the floor was lowered. There was some objection, and some thought it could not be done. But Hiram Smith came and talked with me about it and we went at it.

We took out many loads of rocks and dirt and lowered it a foot and a half. At that time Mr. Smith drew some large flat stones and put them where the furnace now stands and the stoves were put below, the pipes cased and 4 registers put in, which was a great improvement on warming the church.”

“The forerunner of the Ladies Aid Society was organized in 1885. The constitution was written by Hiram Smith and it was called ‘The Ladies Social and Industrial Society’. The proceeds were to go towards repairing the church, beginning at the basement. Mrs. Horace M. Phelps was president. It continued under that name, doing good work until Miss Sarah Carrington reorganized it and named it ‘The Church Aid Society’ in 1893. It has raised much money and paid on repairs to the church. I understand the only members now living in Colebrook that have been with it from the beginning are Gertrude Smith and Mrs. Lester Smith.”

“The Ladies Society has been of great help and done most of the inside repairs, commencing with laying the basement floor, removing the long seats which came out of the old church, and putting chairs in their place. They caused the stage to be built and furnished. They have dropped all of their former names but Ladies Aid.

They have paid out over \$1,300 for work inside the church and parsonage. In 1912 they put a furnace and cook stove in the basement costing \$304.45. In 1918, they placed a furnace in the parsonage costing \$97.75 and also raised the money used for painting and decorating the interior of the church, putting in new carpets and purchasing new cushions.”

I presume some of you do not know that the Church Society does not own the park in front of the church, and if the church should be removed, does not own the land upon which it stands. If such were to happen, the land would revert to its former owners, the Emerson heirs.”

“The Sunday School was formerly held in the basement. This was difficult, because there was no way of getting there but by going around on either side of the church. This situation was changed in 1885, when Amos Corbin put in the stairs. It was at this point that I first went to the Church Society.

The library books were under the stairs in the basement until Charles Seymour put up the present library and presented it to the school.”

“I sometimes call this my church, not because I have ever done anything for it or paid anything for it, but because I never attended any other. Although living within 4 miles of Winsted churches and many a Sunday could have gone there easier than to Colebrook, I have only been there to church three times.”

“No spot is so dear to my childhood as the little white church in the vale. Upon reflection, there is one spot that is dearer; it is home, where I have lived 83 years, although the dearest part of that has gone beyond the River, where I expect to follow soon.”

As a footnote to the above, I would like to add two things: the Emerson/Rockwell families many years ago deeded the land upon which the church stands to the Church Society, along with the green in front. Also that I knew his son William, a man who had inherited his father’s mood and temperament, and have pleasant memories of times spent with him. The Lawrence family gave much to the town of Colebrook; they were hard working and honest and were the best of neighbors. When he writes that he never did anything for his church, he is being modest; he was what was known as a pillar of the church, and the title of deacon rests easily upon his head.

Historic Bytes

Bob Grigg