

The Churches In Charlestown

An Historical Sketch

by
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In the Beginning

Charlestown's church history began with the very founding of the community. When an advance party of settlers arrived in 1629 to lay out town street lines and build the Great House to be the seat of Massachusetts Bay Colony government, the party included a clergyman, Rev. Francis Bright, to attend to its spiritual needs.

The following year, Governor John Winthrop and the main body of about a thousand Puritan immigrants for whom these preparations were made arrived in eleven ships and took up residence in Charlestown in July 1630. The emigration had a religious basis: Puritans came seeking to found a "religious and civil commonwealth." Here they might practice in peace their more moralistic "purer" version of Protestant Christianity free of the intolerance of the Crown and Church of England.

On July 30, 1630 Rev. John Wilson established the first church in Charlestown with the signing of a religious covenant by its first members. As first Pastor, Wilson commenced holding services under the spreading Charlestown Oak tree on the east slope of Town Hill. In early October, many of the settlers moved to the Shawmut peninsula in search of better water and established there the town of Boston. Governor Winthrop moved the seat of government thence and Rev. Wilson shifted his church there. Some congregation members remaining in Charlestown held informal services in the now-abandoned Great House while others faithfully rowed or canoed to Boston to attend Rev. Wilson's services.

The First Congregational Society of Charlestown was founded on November 2, 1632 with the arrival and installation of Rev. Thomas James as Pastor. With the establishment of a Charlestown church most of those attending the Boston church withdrew in favor of a more convenient church home. That same year the building of a meetinghouse commenced, located between the market square and the Neck it was probably in the vicinity of today's Thompson Square.

The Congregationalists

For the next 170 years the Congregational church established by the Puritans reigned supreme in Charlestown. The church was originally closely intertwined with the civil government of both town and Colony. While the Puritans came to the New World to escape religious intolerance, they discouraged settlement in the Bay Colony by those of other faiths. To become a Freeman or voting member of the colony required membership in the prevailing church. Admittance as a Townsman called for a similar affiliation.

Tolerance increased over time as immigrants of different faiths arrived in the Bay Colony in numbers sufficient to demand to have their own churches. Boston's first Baptist church was built in 1679.

In 1639, a second meetinghouse was built on the slope of Town Hill facing the market square. The third Charlestown meetinghouse was built within the market square itself in 1716 and served until its burning in 1775, along with the rest of the town, during the Battle of Bunker Hill. As the rebuilding of the town

began, parishioners met, from 1777 to 1783, in a blockhouse on Town Hill built by British troops. In 1783, a new Congregational meetinghouse was built of wood atop Town Hill. A steeple designed by Charles Bulfinch was added in 1804.

In 1833, the wooden First Congregational meetinghouse of 1783 was replaced on the same site by a simple Greek Revival brick structure with gilded domed belfry supported by eight Ionic columns. This church went through a major remodeling in 1852-53, converting it to the Norman Romanesque Revival style with a picturesque tower. In 1868 the tower received a chime of 16 bells donated by Charlotte Harris, granddaughter of Revolutionary War patriot leader, Richard Devens.

The Congregational Church divided and, in 1833, the off-shoot First Parish Congregational Church, later known as the Winthrop Church, built a brick house of worship on Union Street. The Winthrop Church relocated to a new steepled church built of brick on Green Street in 1849. This church still exists and continues to function as First Church in Charlestown. In 1912, the two orthodox Congregational churches recombined due to a membership decline. The long-vacant brick meetinghouse on Town Hill was demolished in 1934 after being ravaged by fire.

The Baptists

Growing religious tolerance and diversity in Charlestown was signaled by the construction, in 1801, of the First Baptist Church at the head of Salem Street on land given by Oliver Holden. The house of worship was of wood with a cupola at its west end. In 1810, the Baptists moved to a larger house of brick at Lawrence and Austin Streets which they enlarged in 1830. This church was replaced in 1843 with a new one, also of brick, with a tall wooden steeple, later modified to a cupola. Nearby, at Lawrence and Union Streets, the church, in 1831, established the Charlestown Female Seminary, a boarding school for young women.

From 1809 to 1823 a small congregation met in a wooden chapel on High Street opposite the head of Wood Street. Known as the Puritan Church, its services reflected older worship traditions. Its organizer and minister was a brilliant multi-talented individual named Oliver Holden. Holden was a carpenter and joiner, real estate investor, minister and composer of hymns, of which his most famous is "Coronation."

The Second Baptist Society was formed in 1844 and dedicated its plain wooden church on High Street opposite Elm Street in 1846. Yet another Baptist Church emerged in 1850 with the formation of the Bethesda Baptist Church on Bunker Hill Street at the corner of Mystic Street. Popularly known as the Bunker Hill Baptist Church it was of plain wood construction but was remodeled in 1885 in the more elaborate Queen Anne style. The church closed in 1910.

The Universalists

In 1810, a Universalist Meeting House was built of brick just off Thompson Square. At its west end it had a large and high square belfry. The Universalists previously met in Edmands Hall upstairs in a building that still exists at 125 Main Street. The Universalist Church had a long existence in Charlestown before closing its doors in 1937.

The Unitarians

In 1819, the Unitarians, most of them former First Congregational Church members, dedicated the Second Congregational Church (called the Harvard Church after 1837) on the Main Street site now occupied by the Charlestown Branch Library. This brick “hall plan” edifice had a plain exterior and a square tower surmounted by a tall wooden steeple of the “Wren school.” Prior to the construction of this church the Unitarians met from 1817-19 in the former Baptist Meeting House at the head of Salem Street.

Adjacent to what is now Hathon Square, the Unitarians also built Boylston Chapel for lectures and minor meetings. In 1856, the Harvard Church sponsored a second chapel known as the Harvard Chapel. Built at the corner of Ferrin and Edgeworth Streets, it served the less fortunate until 1879. The Harvard Church was disestablished in 1902 and, with steeple removed, later converted into a movie house.

The Methodists

The Trinity Methodist Church was organized in 1820. Their services were held for many years in the former Baptist Church at the head of Salem Street previously home to the Unitarians. The Methodists later occupied the edifice of the former Second Baptist Society at High and Elm Streets after that church disbanded in 1863. When this building burned in 1867, they replaced it with a substantial brick edifice on the same site with an impressively large auditorium and ornate organ pipe array which served until the church’s demise in 1924. That building, minus its steeple and much remodeled, now houses the Boys and Girls Club of Charlestown.

The Union Methodist Church was erected at the corner of High Street and Monument Square in 1848 and stood there until 1898. A simple building of brick with stone trimmings, it had an ornate cupola.

The Catholics

As the 1800’s progressed so did the pace of immigration, especially from Ireland. Job opportunities in Charlestown’s Navy Yard and docks attracted many of these newcomers to the point that Bishop Benedict Joseph Fenwick of the Diocese of Boston perceived the need for a Catholic church in the town and set about meeting the need. The first St. Mary’s Church was dedicated in 1829 on Richmond Street (now Old Rutherford Avenue) between Austin and Union Streets (where the ice rink now stands).

About the same time, in 1827, an Ursuline Convent was built on Mount Benedict (named for Bishop Fenwick) just beyond Charlestown Neck in what is now Somerville. This seminary for girls, because of its excellence, attracted students from a wide area and even out-of-state. In 1834, prejudice combined with lurid rumors led an unruly mob to plunder and burn the convent whose occupants escaped frightened but unharmed.

As the Catholic population of Charlestown grew, a second church, St. Francis de Sales, was erected on Bunker Hill Street in 1862 next to an 1830 Catholic cemetery. A leading example of Irish church architecture, St. Francis it is believed to be modeled after St. Munchen’s Church in Limerick, Ireland.

The first St. Mary’s church, despite being enlarged in the 1840’s, became too small for its purposes. A new and larger St. Mary’s was built of granite in the pointed Gothic style on Warren Street and dedicated in 1892. The stunning woodwork of its lofty interior has given it the reputation of being one of the most beautiful of Catholic churches. A third Catholic church, St. Catherine of Siena, built of brick with freestone trim in the modified Romanesque style, was dedicated in 1895 on Vine Street. All three Catholic churches sponsored adjacent parochial schools which were combined in 1993 in the St. Catherine’s school building as Charlestown Catholic Elementary School.

The Episcopalians

Continuing the Charlestown's religious diversification in the 1800's, Anglican services were held in Fuller's Hall in City Square beginning in January, 1840. The next year, St. John's Episcopal Church was constructed on Devens Street where it exists to this day. In 1873, a picturesque wooden chapel was built next door to house the Sunday School.

The 20th Century

Four religious institutions were established in Charlestown in the 20th century. The Jewish Congregation of Beth Jacob met here from 1907 to 1910. A group known as the Filipino Baptist Mission, established here in 1924, moved to Boston in 1941. The Salvation Army was represented here from 1919 to 1921. Most recently, the First Brazilian Baptist Church of Greater Boston moved to Charlestown from Cambridge in 1994 and presently holds services in the former B. F. Tweed School on Sullivan Square.

This brief overview of church history in Charlestown lacks space to tell the great story of the dedicated and sometimes renowned religious leaders who have served Charlestown congregations. Their dispensation of spiritual inspiration, insight, and guidance has led their followers toward lives abounding in faith, hope, charity, and good works, all to the glory of God and the blessing of the town and its people.

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