

The Building of the Goshen Meeting House

By Ronald G. Whitney

I

“An institution,” Ralph Waldo Emerson once observed, “is the lengthened shadow of one man.” In the case of the lovely old meeting house now known as the Goshen Community Church his words are particularly appropriate for it was built almost single-handedly in 1851 by the determined faith and indefatigable labor on one man – the Reverend Eleazer D. Farr. “He was the only building committee,” wrote his son Oren years afterward, “and he was personally responsible for everything as much as if it was his own house.”

The Reverend Mr. Farr was living on a farm in Marlow and preaching in Unity when he came to Goshen on a visit in December of 1850. Shortly thereafter he accepted the call of the Goshen Baptists to be their pastor. It was a small, struggling, discouraged, hardscrabble parish of only 21 members but there were those who believed the little society had a future.

One of those was a widow named Hannah Tandy who had taken \$300 out of her life’s savings and dedicated to the Lord. She told Reverend Farr that if he would accept the Goshen pastorate she would contribute \$100 a year for three years toward his salary. That was a meager sum even for those days but it was enough to provide a foundation for his call.

The young minister was a most resourceful and remarkable person. Theology was only one of his many talents. He was also a skilled cabinetmaker, carpenter, architect, and farmer. Possessing artistic ability he designed original stencils for decorating sleighs, a service then much in demand. He had a scientific bent and was interested in history and the classics. Later in life he hunted for pirate gold along the New Jersey coast and invented a dowsing rod which he believed could actually detect the presence of buried treasure!

His wife, Charity P. Tandy, was a Goshen girl. After their marriage in 1837 she encouraged him to enter the ministry. A man of strong opinions and tenacious faith he studied hard at the New Hampton Institute to prepare himself. On January 18, 1850 he was ordained and served briefly as a city missionary in Lowell, Massachusetts.

Reverend Farr was a young man of 34 when he arrived in Goshen. He was tall, well-muscled, active, vigorous and endowed with tireless energy. He was a man of God whom nobody pushed around. Once, while on a fund-raising trip, two highwaymen tried to rob him. One leaped out from the roadside and seized his horse’s bridle while the other jumped into the buggy. With a powerful sweep of his arm Reverend Farr laid the whip across the rump of the horse causing it to break into a frenzied gallop making the highwayman lose his grip on the bridle and the other highwayman a resounding blow with the stock of the whip knocking him completely out of the buggy. It was all over in a twinkling and he and his horse, together with the buggy, had vanished around a bend in the road by the time the battered highwaymen had picked themselves up out of the dust. Pacifism was not part of Reverend Farr’s theological stock-in-trade.

During the Goshen years Reverend Farr kept a diary in which he recorded his daily thoughts and activities. It is a priceless document for it gives not only delightful insight into the inner life and personality of himself but provides a concise and dramatic account of his adventures in the building of the meeting house.

A few sample entries – After a serious Sunday evening conversation with a young Parishioner about the state of his soul, Reverend Farr wrote: “O Lord cause him to have a sleepless night tonight on account of sins and may he soon fly to thine almighty arms for

mercy.” On another occasion two of his parishioners came to him “to see if he were willing to have a woman Ranter and Comeouter come here and preach.” After hearing them out Reverend Farr told them that “if they were dissatisfied they might change their preacher, if not they had better go along about their business and let woman ranters along.” Several entries began with the words, “feeling very Mondayish today,” indicating a momentary depression of spirit. After attending a March town meeting in Marlow he wrote acidly: “May the Lord hasten the time when the town of Marlow will not be governed by a company of rum drinkers.”

It was only a couple of months after accepting the Goshen call that Reverend Farr decided the struggling little congregation needed a meeting house of their own. The Sunday services and weekly prayer meetings were held in the “River Schoolhouse” at Mill Village but it wasn’t the same as having their own church building. A proper meeting house, he thought, might even spark a revival. So he set himself to the task.

On February 1, 1851, Reverend Farr noted in his diary that he and Almon Tandy, church treasurer, were appointed a committee of two “to investigate the subject of building a meeting house.” Caught up in the excitement of the idea he spent most of the next day drawing up a plan and “calculating about a meeting house, size, cost of building, etc.”

The decision to build the meeting house was not unanimous. Some of the congregation were not as convinced as he about the wisdom of attempting such an ambitious and costly project. Said one deacon: “I like brother Farr, but I believe on my soul he will be the ruination of us all. We can’t raise fifty dollars.” To this another deacon made reply: “I’ll give a hundred dollars!” But the majority believed it could be done. The deacon’s generous gift was the first of many. So they set about to build the meeting house in spite of apathy and grumbling opposition. Reverend Farr was not easily discouraged and it was most fortunate that he wasn’t for it turned out to be a long, hard struggle. More than once he must have been sorely tempted to give up.

II

The most pressing need was money. There was little to be found in Goshen so early on the morning of February 17, 1851, Reverend Farr started for “Boston and vicinity to beg money to build a meeting house” for his little flock. Deacon Almon Tandy drove him in horse and buggy over the mountainous Province Road to South Newbury where he took the stage to the railroad station in Bradford. Traveling by train to Concord he “staid overnight at the tavern and paid 62 cents for a poor supper and lodgings.”

He went to Manchester the next day where he “called on both ministers and some of their members to obtain money for the meeting house.” Then he went to Tewkesbury in Massachusetts where he “called on the leading members of the church and collected 14 dollars for a meeting house.” Next he stopped briefly in Lowell and thence to Boston where deacon H. G. Lincoln “gave me two dollars for my own use.”

Several days were spent in the Boston area calling upon friends and strangers seeking funds for the Goshen meeting house. A few more dollars were gathered. Finally, after buying some books for himself, Reverend Farr left Boston and returned to Lowell where he “called on several Brethren but none gave me anything but Bro. Dayton.”

III

He stayed in Goshen for the next few days catching up on his pastoral work and drawing plans for the meeting house. Then he walked from Goshen to the farm in Marlow for a reunion with his family.

It should be noted that during the period Reverend Farr was building the meeting house he maintained his family on a small farm in Marlow. He was, simultaneously, pastoring in Goshen, building the meeting house, traveling to raise funds, supporting his family by farming in Marlow plus a few odd jobs decorating sleighs.

On March 18, 1851, he was back in Goshen and “spent the entire day in selecting a place for a meeting house and finally decided to locate it between Moses Trues and Parker Richardsons and then purchased an additional piece of land for a Parsonage when needed. The entire lot measured 6 rods by 10 rods (or 100 by 160 feet).

Several days were spent drawing and redrawing plans for the meeting house. At last he “got one to suit me very well.” Then he called on Captain Daniel Stearns, a veteran of the War of 1812, to show him the plans and to secure an estimate for building the frame. The framing of the meeting house would cost \$185.

Obviously a lot more money was needed. Reverend Farr drew up a subscription paper to see how much could be raised from Goshen folks. When all was in readiness he called a meeting of the congregation on March 22, 1851 and “made a report concerning the meeting house affairs and they voted to accept the report and plan of the house and subscription paper.” His own name led the list with a pledge of \$100.

A week later another congregational meeting was held “relative to building a meeting house.” By majority vote the meeting appointed Reverend Farr to be “a Superintending Committee to see to the whole business connected with building a meeting house.” Amazing though it seemed the congregation had authorized the meeting house to be built under the direction of a committee of one!

Things were moving more to Reverend Farr’s satisfaction. Two Sundays after that crucial parish meeting he preached an encouraging sermon to his little flock gathered in the River Schoolhouse. The text was taken from I Kings 5:5: “I propose to build an house unto the Lord.”

On April 17, 1851, Reverend Farr gave Captain Stearns the contract for erecting the frame of the meeting house. Spruce logs for the frame were cut on Lovell Baker’s mountain lot while the lumber was sawn at John Chandler’s mill on Blood Brook. Hyland Dodge, a local stonemason, began to gather granite slabs for the foundation from a quarry on the side of Page Hill.

IV

Bright and early Tuesday morning May 13, 1851, Reverend Farr left Goshen to go to Boston on another “tour after money to build a meeting house.” Arriving in Boston he attended a meeting of the Missionary Union giving him opportunity to spread the word of Goshen’s need for help in building a meeting house among the brethren.

Visiting Cambridge Port he spent the night with his wife’s uncle, James Tandy who had taken a keen interest in the meeting house project. Then he went to Concord where he had a stroke of luck. His pleas fell on receptive ears at a church meeting and he collected \$7.50 “to aid in building a meeting house in Goshen.”

Returning to Boston he “continued to solicit aid for Goshen people.” He “went to Watertown and by working hard obtained \$4.” In the evening he attended what he called a

“political meeting” in Cambridge Port and heard a lecture by the famous educational reformer, Horace Mann.

Leaving Boston Reverend Farr went to Tewkesbury where he preached at a Sunday morning worship service. In the evening he addressed a meeting in a schoolhouse in Andover. Apparently he was feeling some discouragement for his text was from Psalm 142:4 which reads: “No man cared for my soul.”

The he went to Lowell and on to Woburn where he took lodgings with deacon John Cummings. His psirits were better for he noted in his diary: “Enjoyed my entertainment.” Brother Cummings took him calling around the neighborhood to introduce him to potential donors. In addition Cummings promised to give \$25 which was a very generous sum in those days. A friend indeed!

Reverend Farr’s next calls were in West Cambridge where he picked up \$3 more for the meeting house. Malden next heard the echo of his footsteps. No cash was forthcoming but several promises were.

He paid a short visit to Chelsea and returned to Tewkesbury and Andover where he preached at Sunday services again. Traveling on to Salem he spent the night with Reverend William Eaton whom he found “in a spiritual state visiting his people every afternoon.” Unfortunately money was tight in Salem for he “called on many of the brethren and did not receive but one dollar.”

One of his pastoral accomplishments in Goshen had been the establishment of a Sunday school. It lacked a library so after plowing the barren ground in Salem he went back to Boston to make arrangements with one of his ministerial brethren to obtain one from him. Eventually a Sunday school library of fifty volumes found its way to Goshen.

Completing arrangements for the library he went down to Jamaica Plain and “called on several families but did not obtain a single dollar.” He did, however, receive promises of some help in the fall. Leaving Jamaica Plain he “went to Brookline and from there to Boston and thence to Lowell in the last train.” Another \$1.50 was added to his slowly growing fund in Lowell.

Sunday June 8, 1851 found him in Nashua where he preached “at the First Baptist Church in the morning and at the Second Baptist church in the afternoon and evening.” Departing Nashua he went to Manchester and on to New London where he “conversed with a joiner about taking the meeting house to build, etc.” On June 11 he got a ride back to Goshen and walked home to Marlow.

It had been a long trip but financially much more rewarding than the first. He had raised a total of \$103 for his precious meeting house on this second fund-raising tour.

V

The next day he “was about sick” but managed to draw “a plan for the windows of my meeting house.” Then he went to South Marlow where he contracted with Daniel Buss and J. Q. Jones “to take the frame when erected and finish the (meeting) house in all its parts specified, in a thorough and workmanlike manner and furnish all the materials for the same, by the twentieth of October next, in consideration of Six Hundred dollars.”

Ground was broken for the building of the meeting house on June 19 when he set some men to work “preparing the drain to the meeting house spot.” He spent the afternoon in “leveling lines and staking out the exact spot for the meeting house.” Then Hyland Dodge, the stonemason, began to lay the foundation for a cost of \$51.50.

August 7, 1851 was the red letter day! Reverend Farr “went to Goshen and offered prayer before raising the MEETING HOUSE FRAME.” In his diary he printed the last three words in upper case letters! For him the raising of the frame was the great , climactic moment for it meant that the meeting house dream was becoming reality. It would be built. His hopes were coming to fruition at long last!

But money was still a pressing problem. One day he made a trip to Charlestown “to see about getting some money out of the bank for the meeting house” but, sadly, the bank wasn’t interested in making any donations.

Once again he was thrown back upon his own resources. On September 30 he “borrowed \$500 of Calvin Smith to pay for the meeting house.” Thus he put his own credit on the line to guarantee that the meeting house would be completed.

Buss and Jones, the carpenters from Marlow, were now hard at work building the meeting house on the frame that had been erected. But there were still those who tried to throw cold water on the project. One long-faced brother who lived nearby came over to where the two carpenters were working and said: “Farr isn’t worth anything. You will only lose your money. To this Jones made reply: “I have known Reverend Farr since he was a boy and he will do as he agrees.”

The meeting house grew rapidly. Reverend Farr spent the first three weeks in October painting the meeting house. To save money he had volunteered to do all the painting, inside and out.

A soaring steeple with a bell graced the ridge line of the meeting house. Deacon Richardson of Boston had donated the bell. The letter F was cast on it in honor of Reverend Farr who was working day in and day out with the carpenters. With his own hands he did the intricate “graining” and “marbleing” which originally decorated the platform risers and other parts of the meeting house interior.

VI

On October 20 Reverend Farr laid down his paint brush, packed his valise, and set out on yet another fund-raising tour. Leaving Goshen at sunrise he went over the mountain to Bradford and took the train to Manchester. The next day he went to Dover to attend the annual session of the New Hampshire Baptist State Convention.

When the convention ended he went to Portsmouth and canvassed for funds and on to Boston. The weather was rainy but he “spent the day there begging” funds for his meeting house. After another day knocking on doors in Boston he went to Woburn. His luck was good there for he recorded that he “received from that church in all \$19.”

Leaving Woburn he took the train back to Bradford and stayed overnight at the home of a Mr. Chandler in Sunapee. The next morning, October 31, his host’s son “fetched me home to Goshen.”

It had been a short trip but the results were very gratifying. As a result of his efforts the meeting house fund was now \$225 richer. His hope that the meeting house could be dedicated free of debt now seemed near realization.

VII

There was still much to be done. The days following this last fund-raising tour were spent feverishly finishing the meeting house so it could be formally dedicated. On November

10 Reverend Farr wrote in his diary that he had “returned very early in the morning and worked all of the time for two days and nights without sleep.”

The Goshen meeting house was dedicated to the glory of God and the service of the community by Reverend Farr at a special service on November 12, 1851. It had cost \$1095 but due to the stupendous fund-raising efforts and prodigious labor of Reverend Farr the meeting house was dedicated free of debt. The Goshen Baptists now had a meeting house complete with steeple, bell, worship auditorium, and a vestry for Sunday school and midweek prayer meeting.

NOTES

Unless otherwise noted the remaining quotations have been taken from the handwritten diary of the Reverend D. Farr which has been preserved in the archives of the Goshen Community Church.

Ronald G. Whitney, an ordained minister and freelance writer, is a member of the Goshen Historical Society.