

## STEVENS MEMORIAL CHAPEL - WHAT WHEN WHERE WHO AND HOW IT CAME TO BE

As the Stevens Chapel Committee is examining our Stevens Memorial Chapel and thinking of future improvements, it might helpful for all of us to be knowledgeable about how our chapel came to be built, who designed it, who built it, why it was built and why it was so named.

The chapel was built in 1896 by the Channing Conference of the American Unitarian Association, but I have been unable to find the minutes of their meetings. However, thanks to Nell Carlson, Curator of Historical Collections at the Andover-Harvard Theological Library, I was able to obtain *A Quarter Century of the Channing Conference*, an address by Rev. Augustus Woodbury which was delivered at Newport RI in 1892. Vineyard Haven played a prominent part.

Some forty years after the American Unitarian Association was organized, the Channing Conference was formed in response to an American Unitarian Association aim to provide *A closer union of neighboring societies, especially desirable for a more effective labor in the interest of liberal Christianity.* Providence, RI provided leadership in establishing our conference and neighboring churches were invited to attend an organizational meeting. At a meeting in Providence in April 17, 1867 the Unitarian churches from Portsmouth, RI; Brooklyn, CT; Dighton, Fairhaven, Fall River, Mansfield, Norton, Raynham, Taunton and Tisbury, MA became members of the Channing Conference. The name of Channing was chosen to honor Rev. William Ellery Channing, minister of the Newport church and prominent clergyman. Originally the Tisbury Church of the Unity and the Mission to Seamen were both listed, but by 1892 Rev. Woodbury noted that the *Society (Church of the Unity) which at best had a precarious existence has disbanded*. Rev. Woodbury explained that he will say more about the Mission to Seamen later in his presentation. Listing strengthening of congregations and their buildings, charitable contributions bequeathed, and collections taken up yearly by the Conference, Rev. Woodbury notes, *Of this sum, \$7,500 has been given (over the years) to the mission to seamen in Vineyard Haven.*

Rev. Woodbury wrote of the early efforts of the Channing Conference, *The chief enterprise in which the Conference was engaged, and that which we can regard with a considerable measure of satisfaction, is the Mission to Seamen at Vineyard Haven, conducted for nearly a quarter of a century by the late Rev. Daniel W Stevens, who lamented death last autumn, deprived the Conference of one of its most useful members.* (Rev. Stevens and Rev. Woodbury were fast friends and Rev. Stevens chose Rev. Woodbury to deliver the eulogy when Rev. Stevens died in 1891, the year before this address was given. Today I think we would classify Rev. Stevens' mission as Social Action.)

Rev. Woodbury continues, *Mr. Stevens went to Tisbury to preach - in what had been a Congregational, and subsequently, a Universalist Church, but which, at the time had fallen into the hands of the Unitarians, (called the Church of the Unity), - in the spring of*

1868. He was inducted to go to that place by the Conference Committee on Christian Work. He saw the needs and opportunities of the situation, and after consultation with The officers of the Conference and of the American Unitarian Association, and with friends in Boston, New Bedford, Providence and Fall River, he decided to devote himself to missionary labor rather than parochial work. The harbor of "Holmes Hole" as it was formerly called is exceedingly well sheltered, has secure anchorage, and is spacious enough to contain a large fleet. It has been for many years a harbor of refuge and a place of call for orders, water, and occasional supplies for the large number of vessels which make Vineyard Sound their thoroughfare in coastwise voyaging. Hundreds of seafaring men were in port during the year. (It was estimated at 10,000 sailing vessels passed through the sound each year as they traveled between New York City and Boston.) Could anything be done to promote the well-being of these visitors, even though their visits were of brief duration? Mr. Stevens here found his field and his vocation. Although born and bred inland, a stranger to maritime affairs, he felt called to this work among the seamen of the New England shore. With his clear good sense, consummate tact and unswerving loyalty to the liberal faith, he undertook the enterprise, which has been declared to be one of the most valuable of Unitarian missions. He accordingly purchased the property upon which he recently lived, (on Hatch Road in Vineyard Haven), and opened his house as chapel, prepared and furnished a free reading-room, supplied it with the leading journals of New England and New York, established a free library, collected and arranged a cabinet of curiosities, obtained scientific apparatus, and busily employed himself in every labor which could attract, interest, and profit those in whose behalf he was at work. He preached on Sundays, lectured during the week, distributed reading matter and made himself useful in every way. Rightly judging that the must manifest his faith by his works, he engaged in the practical enhancement of the comfort of his visitors. Like the patriarch of old, he digged a well from which they who came after him could draw living water free and without charge. (Lloyd's Chandelry, just down the beach at the end of Grove Ave., charged 10 cents a barrel for water). He also built a landing wharf opposite his house, to afford convenient access to the premises.

The marine hospital on the island claimed his attention, and he was appointed the disburser of a fund, provided by a wealthy friend in Boston, for the relief of widows and orphans of seamen. He interested himself in the affairs of the town and county. He served on the School Committee of the town for several years, and, as chairman, directed its educational affairs. He even gave himself at one time to the study of the old Indian language, then fast becoming extinct. The work was all done so quietly and unobtrusively, without pretension or show, as to induce an occasional visitor, who only saw the surface, to be somewhat sceptical as to the extent and character. A more showy workman would have put on the veneer, but our friend made solid work through and through. You and I know that there was a great deal which was necessarily below the surface, but which was really most effective in execution, and most permanent in results.

During his presentation, Rev. Woodbury paid tribute to the ministers within the Channing Conference who died during the span of which he speaks. Of interest to us are his comments about Rev. Stevens: *Of Rev. Stevens I have already spoken. Our memorial service at Fall River was a faint expression of our esteem. It is to be hoped that the cherished hope of his heart will meet with fruition, and that a memorial chapel* bewareing

*his name will be erected near the scene of his labors.*

Additional information about the building of the chapel was gleaned from the account of the dedication of the Stevens Memorial Chapel in the Vineyard Gazette of 1896. The congregation did not form as a body until 1898 -two years later. The only local person listed as taking part was Miss Mulliken of Vineyard Haven, who sang. The Vineyard Gazette states: *The chapel is erected on land owned by the late Rev. Daniel Waldo Stevens. In his will he bequeathed a lot of land for a church to the American Unitarian society (Association), provided they would erect a chapel within the next two years after his (death, but this was not accomplished. His son, however, wishing to do in spirit what his father desired, gave practically the same lot to the Channing conference, to be used by them for this purpose when they could secure the necessary funds. The chapel is located on a knoll, surrounded by a grove of young oaks, just a little off the main West Chop Drive. (This lot of land was recently identified by Glen Provost of Vineyard Land Surveying as on Old Lighthouse Road, about where the third house is on the left.) The building faces east with a frontage of 32 feet and 8 inches, and a depth of 42 feet and 6 inches. In the east there is a large memorial window. The entrance is surmounted by a tall tower, and belfry. There is a raised chancel 10-4x8, on one side is the organ. (Not our present organ.) and on the other a vestry, 7-4x8. The interior is of Georgian pine and heating is done by a furnace. It is expected regular services will be held during the summer.*

In 1946, at the request of Rev. McKarl Nielson who was our summer minister, Mrs. Grace Packer wrote a "Brief History of the Vineyard Haven Unitarian Society". She included the following information about Stevens Memorial Chapel: *In 1896, the Channing Conference of the American Unitarian Association, in appreciation of the work done locally for the seamen by the Rev. Mr. Stevens, purchased land on Main Street, Vineyard Haven, a few hundred yards north of Dagget Avenue, and erected on that land a chapel. Mr. Hinckley, local contractor, received the contract for the building of the chapel. Mr. Hinckley told the writer that all instructions came from Mr. Tripp, Treasurer of the Channing Conference at that time and a resident of Fairhaven, Mass. Mr. Hinckley received the entire payment from Mr. Tripp. She continues: Mr. Hinckley told the writer that in 1901 he was ordered by the Channing Conference and paid by them, to move the chapel from the location on Main Street near Tashmoo Avenue to a site which had been vacated by Grace Episcopal Church. This was purchased from General Edward Carey by Mrs. A. Cromwell Howland. In due process it was deeded by her to the Channing Conference. The deed is today registered in the name of the Channing Conference. She paid \$500 for the land. About 1900 the land on Main Street vacated by the chapel was sold with clear title to Sophronia Cleveland of Tisbury, and, in 1937 was in her possession.*

Stevens Memorial Chapel continued to be owned by the Channing Conference until the merger of the Unitarians and Universalists (the Unitarian Universalist Association) in the early 1960's. At that time the Channing Conference sold it to the Trustees of the newly named Unitarian Universalist Society of Martha's Vineyard for \$1. The terms explicitly state that the ownership will be transferred to newly elected Trustees. We remain grateful to the Channing Conference for having this lovely chapel. We have never had a mortgage.

It is regrettable that this information is so meager. It would be wonderful to know more about why this particular design was chosen, who was the architect (if there was one), how much it cost, etc. I have been trying to find the minutes of the early years of the Channing Conference which might provide more information, but have so far been unable to do so.

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