

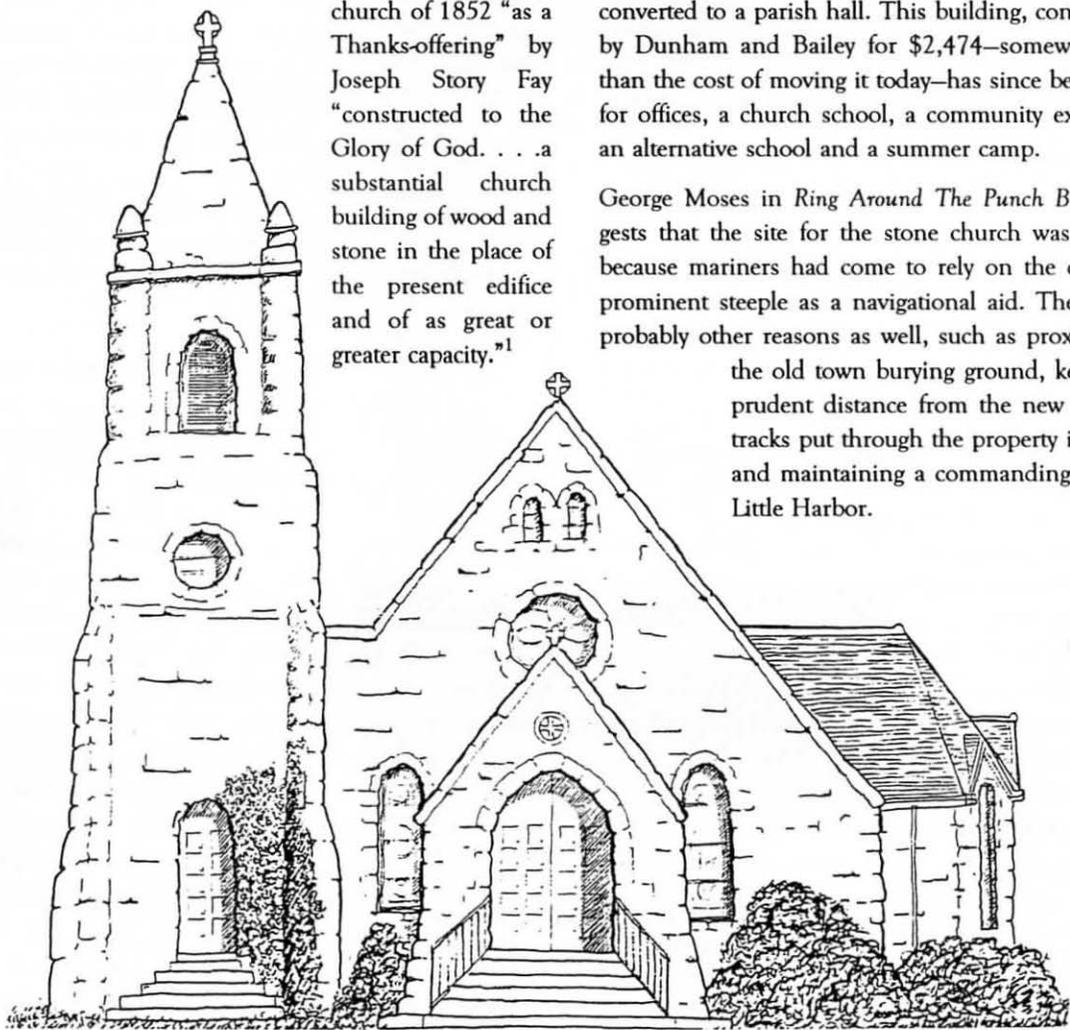
The Stone Church of The Messiah in Woods Hole

William O. Burwell

The stone Church of The Messiah was built in Woods Hole in 1888 on the site of the original wooden church of 1852 “as a Thanks-offering” by Joseph Story Fay “constructed to the Glory of God. . . a substantial church building of wood and stone in the place of the present edifice and of as great or greater capacity.”¹

In accordance with our Yankee tradition of frugality, the wooden church was simply moved downhill and converted to a parish hall. This building, constructed by Dunham and Bailey for \$2,474—somewhat less than the cost of moving it today—has since been used for offices, a church school, a community exchange, an alternative school and a summer camp.

George Moses in *Ring Around The Punch Bowl* suggests that the site for the stone church was chosen because mariners had come to rely on the church’s prominent steeple as a navigational aid. There were probably other reasons as well, such as proximity to the old town burying ground, keeping a prudent distance from the new railroad tracks put through the property in 1873, and maintaining a commanding view of Little Harbor.



West (Church Street) elevation of The Church of The Messiah. Drawing by Paul Tessier, 1988.

The architect of record is William Pitt Wentworth, a native of Vermont who trained in New York and practiced in Boston for 30 years. He also designed the Flower Memorial Chapel in Watertown N.Y. and the Medfield Hospital for the Insane.

There is a mysterious gap in the church records between Feb. 25, 1888 when Mr. Fay requested permission to build the new church and May 1889 when it was consecrated by Bishop Paddock. Considering the time required to design and construct a building of this size in a rural location, one can only assume that it was fast-tracked for Mr. Fay by the architect. Mr. Wentworth must have bypassed not only the financial oversight of the Vestry but any physical oversight as well. Although no drawings of the church have been found, the masonry specifications are so general in nature that it suggests a strong trust in the master mason.

Eugene MacDonald, a highly respected local mason who has worked on repointing and repair of the belltower, estimates there must have been a crew of more than 30 men working on the masonry in 1888. To obtain that quantity of granite, and to cut and set it in such a short time required drawing not only from the West Falmouth field quarry, but also from the Deer Island

A Special Light—Woods Hole's Stone Church

Visitors have frequently commented on the remarkable ambience of the Church of The Messiah. There is a special light that engulfs you as you pass through the small dark western vestibule and look toward the altar at the east end. Your eye is first drawn to the stained glass above it, sparkling with the morning sun. Gradually you become aware of more subtle light from the double pointed arch windows on the south and north walls. More brilliantly colored light streams through the triplet windows in the south baptistry to your immediate right and a small gem-like lancet window in the north wall of the bell tower to your immediate left. You may be in your seat before you notice the beautiful little triangular accents high up in the ceiling. You may not see the glorious Rose Window above the western entrance or the richly colored seascape of the new Maritime Window until you return from the Communion rail or turn to leave the Church. All these glowing windows and the reflecting brass of the altar furnishings blend to create a harmonious symphony of light within the granite and wood frame of the church structure.

quarry in Boston and perhaps from the Stony Ridge quarry in Connecticut.

We do not know what carpenter or millwork shop was responsible for the elegant altar paneling and hammer beam trusses in the nave, nor the roofer, the glazier, nor even the general contractor, if indeed there was one. Could Mr. Fay have made Wentworth the field coordinator as well as designer? This would have been a pioneering effort in expediting construction—a “design/build” project 30 or 40 years ahead of its time.

A clue to the mystery of the rapid construction may be found in “Mr. Beebe Has Got His Parish” by the Rev. T. E. Adams Jr. published in the Winter 1989 edition of *Spritsail*.² The author describes the “genteel ecclesiastical encounter between the Beebe and Fay interests over creation of a new parish”³ within the existing parish—just for the convenience of the Beebe family and two other Episcopalians living in the village of Falmouth. He set the beginning of this encounter in the summer of 1886, and its final resolution on December

4, 1888, after an “encounter dueled on the Diocesan battlefield”⁴ between the eminent Phillips

Brooks, rector of Trinity Church, Boston, and Dr. George S. Converse, Secretary of the Standing Committee.

The Church of The Messiah Vestry did not admit defeat until October 29 of that year when they wrote Dr. Converse that they did not desire to "interpose any needless delay in the action of the Diocesan Authorities" and waived the "reference of the subject to the Bishop unless it be canonically necessary". . . and would "abide by the judgment and decision of the Standing Committee."⁵

By this time the construction of the stone Church of The Messiah must have been well underway. When the Vestry had approved Mr. Fay's offer of a new church on March 10, 1888, the design of the church must have been completed, or well advanced.

Mr. E. Pierson Beebe may have got his parish, but Joseph Story Fay and his loyal Vestry got a full year's head start on building the first granite church building on the Cape.

St. Barnabas Church was started in Falmouth in June of 1889 and consecrated on June 11, 1890, and the Parish House was completed in December of that year—another remarkable example of expeditious con-

struction and the power of competition when reinforced by wealth.

There are many similarities in plan and appearance between these two churches, although each retains a unique character. Further research into their architectural and historical roots might yield interesting insights.

Meanwhile the search continues for the missing drawings and information on the exciting process of building the stone Church of The Messiah.

Bill Burwell first came to Woods Hole from Submarine School, New London, in 1943 to be best man for his brother, Dr. Langdon Burwell, at his wedding to Barbara Gates. Since then, he and his family have returned almost yearly, and retired here in 1991. Bill was a practicing architect in Seattle, where he and Lang were born, and in Rochester, N.Y., after receiving a FMA degree from Princeton in 1949. A vestryman at the Church of The Messiah, he is a member of the Falmouth Historical Commission, Falmouth Historical Society, WHHC, and is a not-yet-retired sailor.

Notes

1. J. S. Fay letter to Vestry February 25, 1888.
2. *Spritsail* Volume 3, Number 1 Winter 1989 p.9.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Messiah Vestry Minutes of October 29, 1888 Special Meeting.