

MY PAPA'S MEETING HOUSE

What was it like to worship in a Massachusetts Congregational Meeting House in the years before the Civil War?

The following four pages are copies of a document that was found in the Historical Room of the First Congregational Church of West Brookfield, Massachusetts. It was written by a woman to describe her mid-1840s experience as a young girl with the Massachusetts Congregational Meeting House, which was right beside her home and in which her family members were very active.

The author of that document was FRANKE NICHOLS COMBS of Lee, Massachusetts. Franke was born on February 20, 1841. Her birth name was Frances Aveline Nichols. She married Hiram S. Combs of Warren, Massachusetts, on February 10, 1859.

Genealogical records I have found indicate that Franke was born in North Brookfield. She died in North Brookfield on December 2, 1911, and is said to have been buried in Norwalk, Fairfield County, Connecticut. Her parents are said to have been Elijah Dewey Nichols (1808-1868) and Sally Merick Wilder (1819-1901).

In this document, Franke says, *"My big sister five years old, and myself aged three, often went unaccompanied to morning services."* Her big sister appears to have been Fidelia Nichols, who was born on May 31, 1839, in North Brookfield.

The church she describes in this document apparently is the First Congregational Church of North Brookfield.

Based on my understanding of Massachusetts Congregational Church history, I believe that this document gives one a helpful view of what it was like being in such a Congregational church for worship in the 1840s. For example, note its mention of "the tankard full of wine," the "whale oil lamps," the dogs in attendance, the big "box" stoves with stove pipes running through the sanctuary, the "foot stoves" in family pews, and the variety of musical instruments used in worship. And for that reason, I'm not at all surprised to have found a copy of this document archived in the Historical Room of our West Brookfield church.

DKS

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

MY PAPA'S MEETING HOUSE

This story is more interesting as grandma herself tells it, so we leave it to her to tell.

"The meeting-house was not papa's, really, but in my early years I thought it was. Had I ever spoken of it as belonging to papa the idea might have been explained away. As it was, I was far happier believing it so. The meeting-house was right next door to our home. The ministers "put up" at our house, they usually having to come quite a distance. I say "they" for no one of them seemed to come on many successive Sundays. They always put their horses in our barn, and the church silver was kept in our parlor cupboard. The door had no lock. There were none but honest people, in that vicinity, in those days, and no one kept awake nights worrying about the silver. There were no fastenings to the windows, and in summer time we slept with the outer doors standing wide open.

Mama made the communion bread, and papa took that and the silver, including the beautiful tankard filled with wine, all together in baskets, one in each hand, to the meeting-house, at regular times. The wall lamps, two dozen of them were made of brass, and were brought regularly to our house, to be replenished with whale oil. The lamp reflectors were polished at our house. They were, to me, most dazzlingly resplendent, being of the beautiful white, Mexican silver, plated onto copper. Papa's work-boy swept and dusted the meetinghouse, and papa kept the keys. Why shouldn't I think it was papa's?

Then, again, there was a half basement, to the building, with walls so low that a man could not stand upright there; and there papa stowed away our sleigh and the big "pung" in summer time, and in winter his plows and harrows were likewise stowed. I couldn't help thinking it was papa's.

My big sister five years old, and myself aged three, often went unaccompanied to morning service. We really were quite privileged. I felt we owned the whole business, and as I sat in our big pew, the sides of which I could just peep over, I watched the people as they straggled in, to see that they seated themselves in their respective places.

I watched the minister tiptoe up the pulpit stairs and deposit his long-napped silk hat, and his long, circular cloak, upon one end of the faded, old, red damask sofa to the rear of the desk. I even watched the two dogs that regularly attended. They were as sure to be there as was the minister. "Tige" Gage always just before the door of the Gage pew, close beside his master's hat that was always deposited bottom up in the aisle; and "Pomp" Chase always lying at the top of the pulpit stairs, not far from the ministers feet, and just where he could view the congregation. Pomp had a run of four miles behind the yellow hulled, two wheeled chaise that brought Mr. & Mrs. Chase to church on Sunday mornings.

Pomp behaved well. I never knew him to forget himself but once. On that occasion he let out a quick, sharp bark, when the minister suddenly raised his voice to an unusual pitch. Pomp usually lay, with his nose resting on his forepaws, watching with calm interest all before and around him. I was a little child, and perhaps no judge, but it seemed to me he understood all, just as well as did many of the people.

Mistress Chase was the richest dressed lady in attendance. She wore rich damask, and brocaded silks. From the rim of her deep bonnet, hanging like a curtain, a splendidly embroidered black lace veil; said to have been purchased in Paris. It was nearly four feet square. This she lifted, as soon as she was seated, gracefully catching it on the backs of her hands and

tossing it up in folds onto the top of her bonnet, leaving just the scallops drooping around her face and down to her shoulders. There were other ladies who wore long green veils. How queer the wearers looked, as they passed up the aisles with that veil hanging like a curtain over their faces, and down over their hands, in which usually was carried a prayer book, handkerchief, and in season some pretty flower like a white rose or a grass pink. The wearers of those veils gracefully and deftly swept the veil to one side of the bonnet and left it drooping before one shoulder, the end resting in their laps as they were seated.

There was one woman who was very proud. When she went up the aisle, she switched her skirts this side, and then that, and carried her chin very high. One Sunday she forgot to take down and close her big yellow parasol, and marched up the aisle with it spread over her head, not finding her mistake until she sat down. I tittered, out loud and the minister smiled.

There were no stoves in the main body of the house. There were two big "box" stoves in the lobby, from each of which ran a long pipe through the body of the building to the chimneys at the rear. The body of the building was not comfortably warm, but the people came prepared for it. They were warmly clad, much more so than are the people in the very same latitude and place today. Their winter garments were of home raised, home-spun wool; and big camlet cloaks were worn alike by men and women, as an outside wrap, over all other coats and cloaks by those who came in sleighs and "pungs". These latter had a goodly quantity of straw in the bottom, that all might ride with warm feet.

During service, one would find the top of those box stoves well covered with small stones, keeping hat, for the home-going. The ladies wore big fur boas, which passed several times around their necks, and carried very large muffs.

Those gay colored plaid cloaks would look strange on the streets today, with their home dyed scarlet linings. Now and then one may be found in some attic today.

"Foot stoves" were often brought, and during service, quietly slid along from one person to the next in family pews.

In summer time it often happened that a little baby was brought to church; a tiny, nursing baby. Those were days when children were not brought up on bottles. Sometimes there might be two little babes present. It really was a pretty custom, and people seemed more human to each other, more like one loving family together, in their plain, simple customs, and the little babies were as welcome as their elders. Healthy, happy babies, they were, making no disturbance.

But the music; the music. There was a gallery in papa's meeting house, and quaint instruments there; flutes, violins, bass viol, trombone, cimbals, triangle and something they called a French horn. The people all joined in this triumphant worship. Their voices ran all about, carrying the various parts in "harmonious discord" and all strangely coming out together in a good rousing manner at the close.

Those worshipers who did not go home at noon were accustomed to gather around the big fireplace in the long kitchen at our house.

* * * * *

Note: Brookfield first settlement 1660-1676. Deed for the purchase of land from the Indian Chief Shattockquis was made on Nov. 10, 1665. Wolcott.

In the Second or North Parish -- A meeting house was raised in 1749 but not immediately finished. This was later referred to as the old house in Lower Village and was occupied till the close of 1823, 74 years from the date of raising the frame.

My Papa's Meeting House, written by Franke Nichols Combs, Lee, Mass.
Tyringham R. F. D.

(Frances Aveline Nichols, born Feb. 20, 1841.

Married Hiram S. Combs of Warren, Feb. 10, 1859)