

Bi-centennial Celebration OF THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN WOODBURY.

Special Correspondence of The Courant.

The valley in which nestles the beautiful village of Woodbury, as we first viewed it from a hilltop, after a ride of ten miles over the hills, was flooded with the rich spring sunshine, and gave back a vision of green fields and comfortable white farmhouses, and orchards, in which the red tint of the apple blossom could be distinguished among the tender green foliage. Far away the hillsides lay in the sunshine, green and smooth, not rock-ribbed and rough. Whether Nature herself had peculiarly blessed this happy valley, or the sturdy farmers of old Litchfield county had made even rough hillsides to be smooth and bloom like a garden, I couldn't tell. But to ride down into this valley, past farmhouses and orchards, gave one a sense of exquisite enjoyment this bright spring morning.

And what an array of country teams lined the sides of the broad street upon which the village clusters! The country for miles around had contributed to their array. At home the plow stood idle in the half-plowed field and the cattle rested on the mid-day of the week. The farmers donned their best mils of black, their wives and girls decked out in holiday attire, and all to Celebrate the day and the goodly men, their forefathers, who just two hundred years ago founded—in this then wilderness—a church for the worship of their God.

For some little time the preparations had been going on. Invitation had gone out to churches in the neighboring towns, offsprings of the mother church; busy hands had provided a bountiful store of sandwiches, meats, pies and cakes, and the town hall presented a perfect picture of country hospitality, with its loaded tables; and other busy hands had been at work with evergreens and flowers, and, guided by an artistic taste, had hung the church with rich festoons that swung from the center to the four corners, while the galleries and pulpit and nave were most beautifully adorned. To insure the effect of the whole the taste of the artist Henry C. Curtis, of Hartford, was called in, and the decoration of the church was of a very fine order. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated* will contain sketches of

the church and decorations and other places of interest.

THE SERVICES.

of the morning commenced promptly at 10 o'clock, the congregation uniting in singing that grand old hymn "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." The Rev. R. G. Williams read the scripture, and was followed by prayer by the pastor. The chief interest of the morning of course centered in the sermon by the pastor, the Rev. Gurdon Noyes. This was a historical statement of the founding of the church and its subsequent history. The sermon was founded upon Psalm 77-5, "I have considered the days of old, the years of ancient times." To many in this age, there is little enchantment in the distant past, the present is so full duty and enjoyment and the future is so might with hope, that they readily forget "the days of old, the years of ancient times." It is as we trace our connection with departed worthies and realize our indebtedness to them for present privileges and blessings that we are incited to emulate their virtues and fitly labor for posterity and heaven. To-day the church completes a history of 200 years. After a review of some political and other changes during that time he spoke of the early discussion in the church on the half-way covenant system. The division in the old church at Stratford, from which the Woodbury church sprung, was such that twenty-one of the male members separated themselves from the church, being in favor of the half-way covenant system, called the Rev. Zephaniah Walker of Long Island, to be their pastor; the privilege of erecting a plantation a Pomeraug was granted them by the court in May 1672, and early the next spring twenty-five migrated to this place. Mr. Walker divided his ministrations between this flock and that at Stratford until June 1678 when he moved here. Seventeen more had been added to the church, and it started as the First Church of Woodbury with thirty-seven members, six of whom were females. At first religious services were held in each others houses in winter and in summer on the east side of the Orenacey Rocks at *Bethel Rock*, with



sentinels stationed on their summits to guard against surprise by the savages. Mr. Walker continued his ministrations till his death in 1700, and was succeeded by the Rev. Anthony Stoddard, who was then just licenced [sic] to preach. This good minister lived to the 83d year of his life, and the 61st of his ministry. His salary was fixed first at £70 per annum, to be paid in wheat, peas, Indian corn, pork and firewood. He was almost as much at home in medicine and law as in his profession. He preached the election sermon...Noah Benedict was ordained, an earnest, eloquent divine of rare discretion and goodness, who continued to minister unto the people for 53 years and died in 1813 at the age of 76. These three ministers of so long duration were followed by a succession of shorter ones, among whom the most noticeable were the Rev. Samuel R. Andrews of Milford, from 1817 to 1846. The Rev. Lucius Curtis of Torrington, from 1846 to 1854, when he was missed at his own request. From 1854 to 1869, when the present pastor was ordained, there were four different pastors. During its long history the church has received into the fold 1526, placed the seal of covenant upon 2999, and ordained 23 deacons, only three of whom survive. Its present membership is 192. Six churches have been formed entirely out of it, and two others have received a goodly number of members. From it have sprung 73 ministers. One of the present deacons has been in office 40 years.

The sermon closed with an earnest appeal not to rest upon this record of the past, but to enter upon the new century with a firm trust in God and a prayerful purpose to labor.

The communion service followed, administered by the Revs. Messrs. Noyes and Hall.

This ended the morning services whereupon the visitors from out of town wore [sic] served with the substantial collation at Town Hall. The arrangements here were in the hands of the ladies and seemed complete. The tables were very tastefully arranged, and the abundance of good things was sufficient to stand the attacks of even a larger crowd than gathered in.

BETHEL ROCK

While the collation was going on, your reporter, together with the editor of the *Waterbury American*, and Mr. Curtis of *Frank Leslie's*, tramped ever the hills to a most delightful little dell, accessible most readily by a long ravine to that famous rock where the Puritan fathers used to hold their services in the days when it was necessary to post sentinels on the heights above to warn the approach of savages. A large overhanging rock of forty feet height formed their natural temple, a heavy bolder formed the pulpit, leaving a place for the book, and a seat for the preachers. It was difficult to imagine on such a peaceful sunny morning as this, the times when these hills and valleys were the scenes of Indian wars and devastations. I tried to picture the little congregation that gathered here in those days, men coming to meeting with their rifles slung over their arms, and the sentinels keeping vigilant watch above while the worshippers were engaged below.

We were reluctant to leave so beautiful a spot, a sketch of which the artist had taken, but returned to witness the

DEDICATION OF THE FATHERS' MONUMENT.

in the old cemetery at one o'clock. The monument is not specially distinguished for its beauty or proportions. It is made, with the exception of a single block of sacred stone, of the bolders [sic] that were found on the farms of the earliest settlers. They have been hewn into a shaft resting upon a base of granite block and the four sides bear the inscription of the earliest ministers of the church, together with the deacons. It cost \$1500, and is more to be prized as a tribute of "filial affection" than as a work of art.

A platform had been raised near monument and carpeted, and after singing by a quartette, Mr. William Cothren delivered an oration on the Fathers, and was succeeded by a poem by the Rev. William T. Bacon, both of which were in keeping with the monument, so on the whole their part of the day's celebration was very unique. From the Cemetery the crowd went to the church to attend the

AFTERNOON SERVICES.

On the platform were seated the chairman of the exercises, the Rev. H. Winslow of Willimantic, and the pastor of the old mother church at Stratford, the Rev. W. K. Hall; of the Southbury Church, a daughter of the Woodbury Church, in 1731; of the Bethlehem Church, an offspring of 1739; Roxbury, a child of 1743; South Britain, 1766; Judea, 1741; Woodbury second, 1816.

The audience was such as would delight the heart of a New Englander to show to an inhabitant of any other part of the world as a specimen of what a New England audience is. These old Litchfield hills do turn out some noble specimens of the intelligent Yankee farmer. I was proud of them myself. After the usual introductory exercises the speeches followed, none over fifteen minutes in length, unless it might be the reverend gentleman from Judea who had "but one word more" about three times. The speeches were in response to sentiments propounded by the chairman, and very appropriate to the churches. They were not dull either, and the audience were kept in the best of attention and humor by the witty essays of the reverend speakers. There was read a couple of letters written by old Dr. Bellamy of the Bethlehem Church, a man mighty in metaphysics and theology. It is a pity time and space fail for my giving them, for they were trenchant with sharp sense and wit.

But at last the benediction closed the exercises and the congregation broke up, departing some one way, some another, till the roads among the hills in all directions were alive with the returning teams, and so the day of celebration ended.

G.