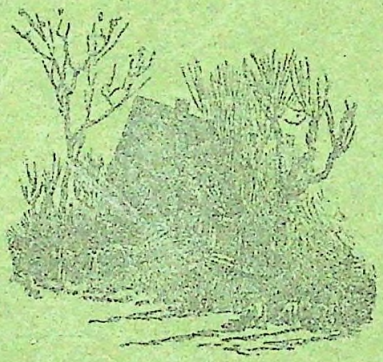
1651-1901

Souvenir of Medfield

II.



PEAK HOUSE

A Sunday in the Old Meeting-house

1651-1901

SOUVENIR OF MEDFIELD

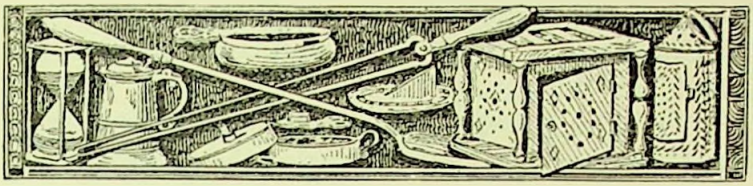
II.

A Sunday in the Old Meeting-house

BY

WILLIAM S. TILDEN

BOSTON
GEORGE H. ELLIS, PRINTER, 272 CONGRESS STREET
1901



A Sunday in the Old Meeting-house.

IT was a clear, cold, bright morning in February, 1659—(1658, 12 mo., it was then called). If there had been such a thing as a thermometer in town, the mercury would have been mostly down in the bulb; but Fahrenheit wasn't born over there in Prussia for thirty years yet. It was one of those mornings when the snow crystals sparkle in the sun and creak under the feet of men and horses; but there was no sound of runners or of sleigh-bells, for all the riding then was on horseback. The snow whistled around the ears of travellers as the sharp north wind eddied it about, and the breaths of men congealed upon their fur caps. George Barber had beat his first Sunday drum-call an hour after sunrise; and men were busy about their cattle, sheep, and other stock, the goodwives hurrying the breakfast things away, and all are getting ready to "go to meet'n." Another hour passes; and the second drum-call sounds out on the keen air, this time from

the top of the meeting-house roof, the better to be heard down in " Brig-street " and across the river at Sherborn " Farms."

The tithing-man appeared with his staff of office, and set the great door ajar, so that the earlier comers might get in out of the cold wind. There was no artificial heat in the building, colder and more damp as it seemed to grow with each succeeding week of the long winter. It was a hundred and seventy years yet before such a thing as warming the meeting-house was thought of in old Medfield.

If we were coming toward the place that day, we would wonder what those strange ornaments were which bedecked the house on each side of the door and under the windows,— *wolves' heads*, brought in and nailed to the walls so as to get the bounty. The wolf was a villanous beast, and very destructive to lambs, pigs, calves, and young stock generally, the most hated of all the wild beasts then infesting the town. Everybody was interested in having him killed, and a good liberal bounty was paid for every head of a wolf brought in. But nail it up: the town does not want to pay bounty on the same head twice.

Those windows looked small, and they were not very numerous; it must be rather hard for Parson Wilson to read his long manuscript which he wrote evenings by the light of the tallow candle. But those windows are real glass, diamond panes, lead sashes, bought in Boston.

On the door were sundry notices posted. Let us read : —

Robert Mason of Medfield intends marriage with Abigail Eaton of Dedham.

Strayed away from me. 1 red steer, 2 years old, has the Medfield brand on the rump, and my mark, namely,— two holes through the top of the left ear, and one notch on the inside edge of the other. JOHN BOWERS, Oct. 20, 1658.

Selectmen for the year 1658, in the town of Medfield : —
Timothy Dwight, Robert Hinsdale, John Thurston, George Barber, Daniel Morse, Henry Smith, and Henry Adams.
HENRY ADAMS, *Clerk of the Writs.*

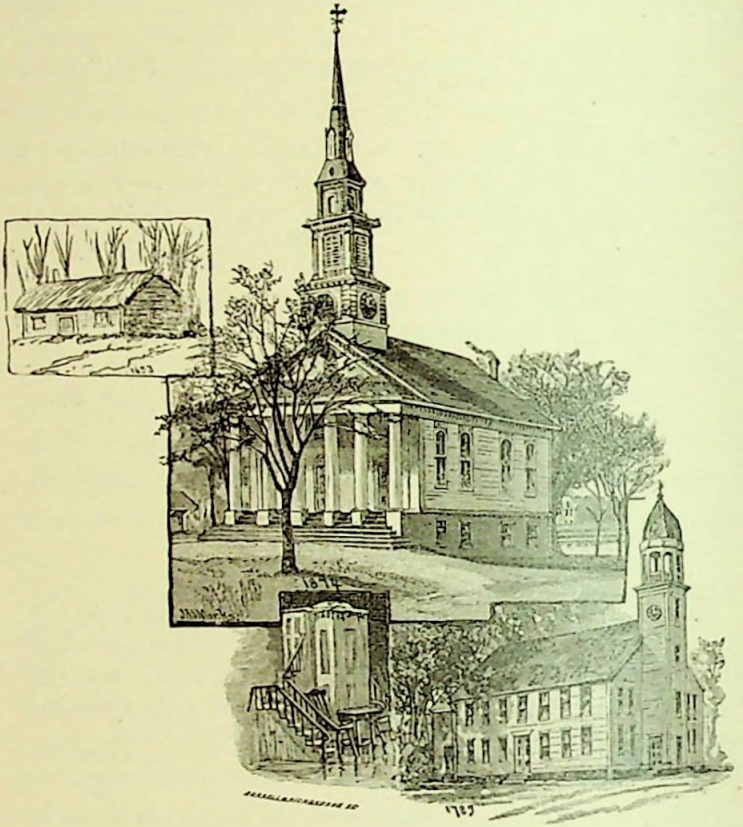
SALE.

Mr. Wilson will sell, on the 15th day of March, a surplusage of corn and salt pork received by him in part payment of his salary.

TOWN MEETING.

The inhabitants of this town qualified to vote in town affairs will assemble on the 28th day of February, 1659, to see what bounty the town will allow upon grown wolves, squirrels, and blackbirds, killed within the limits of this town, or do or act anything relating thereto.
Attest : JOHN FRAIRY, *Constable.*

But it was time for the people to begin to appear, the farthest off arriving first, as usual,— George Fairbanks, from the "Farms," in what is now Millis, but close to Sherborn line. His twelve-year-old daughter, Mary, was riding behind him on the pillion. There were neighbors at the "Farms"



MEETING-HOUSES OF THE FIRST PARISH.

(now South Sherborn), Nicolas Wood, Thomas Holbrook, and Henry Leland. They attended church here in pleasant weather, though they were out of Medfield bounds and our tithing-men had no authority to bring them to church. They did not steal their preaching, though, but helped pay the minister till they built their first meeting-house near "Farm pond." It was so early that morning when Fairbanks and his daughter came that he said he *must* go over to Joshua Fisher's "ordinary," and warm up before the meeting.

Pretty soon the people from Bridge Street were seen coming; also, Henry Adams from Mill-brook, and old Thomas Boyden. He had married Widow Morse a short time before; and she came with him, gayly riding on the pillion, *his* grown-up children by his first wife, and *hers* by her first husband, soberly trudging on foot up from their lane, now Pound Street.

The dwellers in the village — Mr. Wheelock, the Fishers, Barbers, Frairys, Dwights, Bullards, Metcalfs, Thurstons, Wights — and others, from different directions, now came dropping in, and took their seats. Those seats were not upholstered, — just rough board benches without backs, less comfortable drowsing-places than modern pews. There were some queer-looking pouches nailed to the front of many seats. Those were fur bags, made of wolf-skin, into which the people thrust their feet during

the long service, to keep them from freezing, especially the women. The men let their dogs come in, often, and lie at their feet, in cold weather, as a sort of animated foot-warmer.

These rough, uncomfortable seats occasioned a complicated state of things in those days. To begin with, as soon as the house was built, the seats were "dignified"; that is, each seat in the house was ranked, from the front centre by the desk to the the rear bench in the gallery. Then a committee chosen in town meeting assigned the people to their seats, according to their estimated standing in town; and there each man and woman must sit. Usurping another person's seat called down a fine upon the offender. The men sat on one side of the house by themselves, the women by themselves. The younger girls sat with their mothers, or near them, on little stools in the alley-way. The boys had a domain allotted to them near the pulpit, where the tithing-man could superintend their behavior. Sometimes the girls in the alley-way needed a little supervision, too.

The desk, or pulpit, was elevated somewhat above the floor level. It was made of oak, with a semi-circular panelled front, and rudely ornamented. It was approached by several steps, and the boys were sometimes directed to take the pulpit steps for their seats. "Boys will be boys." On the desk stood the hour-glass, which was to be turned at the proper

time by the tithing-man or by the deacon, who had his seat directly in front of the preacher, and facing the congregation.

Robert Hinsdale had remarked to John Pratt, as they two were coming along over Vine Brook bridge near the meeting-house, that he meant to have a bell for this town, and that he knew of one in Boston that he could buy, and, if the town would give him a tract of land on Boggestow Brook that he wanted, he would buy the bell and exchange it for the land. John Pratt said he would speak to the selectmen about it, and have the matter brought up at the town meeting.

James Allen, who had just come in from his house on South Street, remarked that the sound of a bell once more, calling the people to meeting, would almost take him back to the old country. He said he well remembered in the time of the persecutions when Archbishop Laud's soldiers came and marched his grandfather off to prison for preaching to the Puritan meeting, and, when the poor old man tried to speak to them, they drowned his voice by beating the drums. He never could bear to hear the sound of a drum since. Young Isaac Chenery said he liked the drum well enough for Sundays and "lectur' days," but the sound of a bell did seem better at funerals, and he would vote for it.

Deacon Samuel Bullen now came and took his seat. Mr. Wilson and his wife appeared at the door.

The tithing-man rapped with his pole upon the floor, the people all rose and stood till Mr. Wilson sat down in the pulpit, when they also sat.

Several persons "put up notes," as it was called, which were read by Mr. Wilson at the outset: Isaac Chenery, for the birth of a son; Alexander Lovell, on account of his wife's sickness; Gershom Wheelock, for the death of an infant child; Eleazer



BIRTHPLACE OF HANNAH ADAMS.

Frairy, being about to take a journey to the Connecticut River.

The exercises of the morning then began with singing from the Bay Psalm-book. Not many of the people had books. Mr. Wilson, Mr. Wheelock, George Barber, the deacon, and a few others, of course, were able to have and use books; but, as some were not fluent readers, and the rest did not know the words by heart, it was necessary to have them "lined off," — that is, the first line was read by some one and then it was sung, the second and each succeeding line being treated the same way through the whole psalm. The congregation knew only about three or four tunes, mostly in common

metre,— i.e. lines of *eight* and lines of *six* syllables alternating; and these were old English or Scotch tunes, much perverted by many years of singing entirely by guess. But, as those who struck the word first had to hold on to it till the rest could get hold, the notes were dragged out to a fearful length, a man once declaring that he had to take breath twice in one note. After the line was read, some man who could (or thought he could) started off on a tune; and the rest followed, one part being all that was aspired to. There was no instrument of any kind, no pitch-pipe nor choir; and if he who "tuned the psalm," as they called it, was fortunate enough to guess at the right pitch, so that the tune would come within the range of the voices, "without squeaking too high or grumbling below," the psalm might be got through with.

That day in Medfield it was the 137th psalm that was to be sung in the astonishing versification of the "Bay Psalm-book":—

"The rivers on, of Babylón,
There, where we did sit down,
Yea, even then we mournéd when
We re-membered Zión.
Our harp we did, hang it amid
Upon the willow-tree,
Because that they, that us away,
Led in captivity."

Deacon Samuel Bullen gave out the first line,—

"The rivers on, of Babylon."

Goodman Fussell started the tune: he used to do it in the Puritan meetings in old England pretty well, as he thought.

But being now somewhat into years, besides having a cold, in trying to strike the pitch, his voice broke into a sort of "Dutch warble," which completely upset the beginning of the tune.

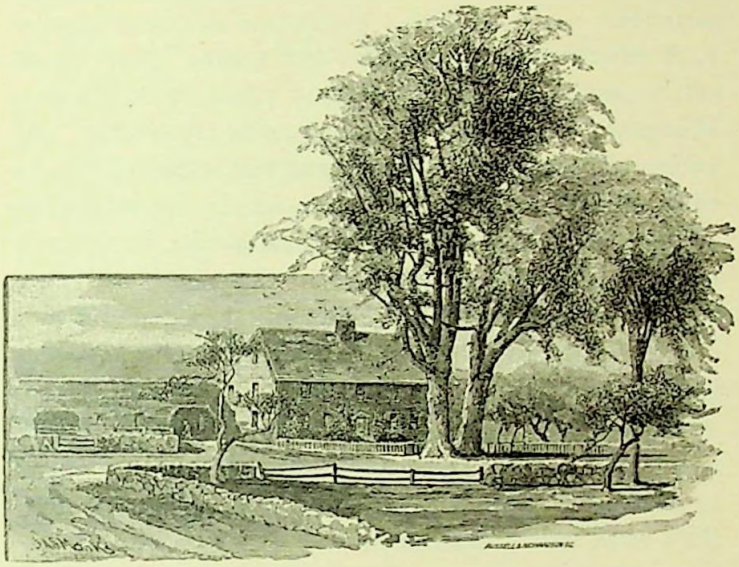
His neighbor, Edward Adams, came to the rescue; but pitching his voice much too high for the tune "Windsor," which he intended to give out, the congregation mistook and started off on "St. Ann's." He pulled lustily for "Windsor" for a while, but "St. Ann's" carried the day, and he had to give in.

No reading of the Scripture was allowed except quotation for immediate comment, as that savored of liturgy; and no repetition of the Lord's Prayer, for the same reason. But the people all stood while the "long prayer" was made by the pastor; and a long one it was, forty minutes in length.

But no person in the house must be guilty of so much disrespect for the prescribed order of things as to sit down before its conclusion, except women who had infants in their arms.

John Plimpton tuned the next psalm. He succeeded in pitching "Windsor" all right, and the people got through with the lines of the first verse safely.

But Goodman Thurston, who had just found the place in his old Psalm-book, and who had a strong voice, started the second verse with "Old Hundred," the people following him who sang the loudest. If the tune had been in the same metre as the



BAXTER HOMESTEAD.

psalm, the congregation would have ended in "Old Hundred" good and strong; but, when they came to the short line, disaster overtook them, and Thurston retired in good order, leaving his competitor in possession of the field.

It seems hardly possible that such versifications as those then in use could be sung by anybody; but

we must remember that, as long as there was the right number of syllables in the line, there was no trouble, all syllables being sung of the same slow length. Anything like accent or rhythm was thought to detract from the character of the performance.

A man who could "tune the psalm" was much set by in the old times. Many years later Nathan Plimpton, who had been set aside from the old parish church for discipline, was requested to "tune the psalm as heretofore," from which we infer that there was not a surplus of musical ability in town at that time.

Ephraim Wight's little daughter, born on the last Tuesday, was brought in for christening, according to custom, on the Sunday succeeding birth. The deacon kindly *broke the ice* in the christening bowl before Mr. Wilson performed the ceremony.

The hour-glass was set, and the sermon began. The sand had about half run out when old Goodman Rockwood was taken with the cramp, which was often the case with this hard-working farmer when he sat in one position long, as he had now been doing while much interested in the discourse. His movements, as he arose and hopped about in the aisle upon one foot, were a source of great satisfaction to the girls who were sitting by their mothers, just back of him. Mr. Wilson paused till the old farmer got both feet on the floor, he concluding to

stand the rest of the time. But Thomas Grubb's wife had brought her obstreperous infant that morning; and it had been perversely fretting for some time, the most generous and manifest motherly attentions being totally lost upon his petulant spirit, though without attracting special notice. But the long continuance of her efforts was wearisome, and a change of position, all "unmindful of the secret pin which keenly goaded him within," brought forth a series of yells from that infant, which again caused a stay of proceedings.

The hour-glass had to be turned before the sermon was through. And the sacrament followed, when the bread was found to be frozen solid, and rattled in the plates like pebbles.

Now came the noon hour. The congregation stretched its chilled limbs and stamped its feet. The near-by dwellers resort to their home firesides. The elderly women and those with babies are invited to partake of warmth and good cheer with them. The men go and stir the horses that have been cringing under open-air shelter only during the forenoon. Some ride to their farms, to see that all is right. The larger boys ride somewhere, indefinite as to destination. A good many munch their cold dinners on the sunny side of the house or by a window inside; while a few go over to the "ordinary," and discuss topics having no special relation to the day.

Daniel Morse broached a plan he had in mind,

and said that, when he moved over to the "Farms," he meant to get leave from the selectmen to put up a building in which he could tie his horses at one end, and at the other have a chimney and fireplace, where he and his folks could go and stay at the noon hour. Henry Adams said they did that way down in Braintree, where he used to live, and he didn't see why three or four families might not join together and build a little larger, so as to have room for them all. (They did this a while after, and there were several of these "noon-houses" as suburbs to the meeting-house.)

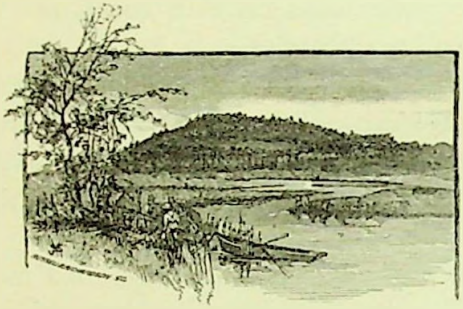
But George Barber beat his drum again, and those who had scattered a little while ago began to gather. More of the young people have come: the children look funny in their small-size old folks' clothes. There were no special fashions for children's clothing. The women, coming from the cheerful firesides of the village, full of warmth and dinner, chatted merrily, and seemed full of courage also to tackle the freezing temperature of the meeting-house again. In fact, the sun had not been shining in vain; and the cold had become a little softer than in the morning.

When the people were once more in their seats, Mr. Wilson arose, and said that he had something very important to speak of at this time. By news just come from England, it gave him great pain to learn that our steadfast friend and ruler, Lord Pro-

tector of the realm, Oliver Cromwell, was no more. In the midst of one of the most terrific storms that ever shook the British Isles the spirit of that noble Puritan had taken its departure. It was feared by many, he said, that the son, Richard Cromwell, would never be able to make his father's place good, that he would be overborne by a reaction, and that Prince Charles might come to the throne after all, in which case no man could tell what was to become of our liberties.

The afternoon services began much in the same way as had the morning; but, just as Deacon Bullen was about to commence lining out a psalm, a man rushes in, and says, "There is a smoke in the thatch on John Bullard's house: it must be afire." A dozen men at once seized the meeting-house ladder and some buckets that were kept hanging inside near the door, and rushed to the house that was in danger. In the excitement several of the boys slipped out, but they were speedily told that they could do no good and would only be in the way. So the tithing-man took the disgruntled youngsters back to their seats. The fire was soon put out, and the men came back to their places. The singing being over, the sermon began: it was a learned discussion upon a difficult point of doctrine. As it went on to tenthly, some of the women did not appear to be following the argument very closely, and, in fact, seemed to be on the verge of dreamland. The

tithing-man grasped his pole, some six feet long, a knob of wood at one end and a fox-tail at the other, ready for emergencies. Pretty soon John Turner's wife, who had been over home with Mrs. Wheelock at noon, and who sat a little way back from the front, began to nod assent to the successive steps in the argument very decidedly. The tithing-man got his eye on her, and the girls from



NOON HILL ACROSS THE MEADOWS.

their seats were watching with great interest the progress of affairs. Moving silently down the alley-way, he brushed her face with the fox-tail. Wakening at this, the good woman straightened up on her bench, and became deeply interested all at once, with a look upon her face which said, "Who says I'm sleepy?" The girls got a glance from the tithing-man, and their countenances became the very pink of soberness forthwith.

Goodman Fussell's cold made his head feel rather heavy, and before long he was treating the congre-

gation to a style of breathing more sonorous than musical. The tithing-man now conceived his duties to be on the men's side of the house. The boys also were wide-awake, and were on the sharp lookout for developments. They had not long to wait. Selecting a good position, the official proceeded to give the sleeper a vigorous dig in the ribs with the hard end of the pole, upon which he awoke with a snort which was altogether too much for young John Plimpton's superabundant animal spirits; and he ha-haed aloud to the great scandal of the whole congregation. The tithing-man looked fiercely at him, but took no further notice of it then, which boded no good to John later. Sam Smith kept on tittering after the principal excitement was over, in spite of all efforts to repress his mirth by holding his nose and otherwise; and he caught a rap on the head with the same knob that had waked up old Goodman Fussell.

Quiet and attention now reigned for a while till another event brought out a second breach of decorum from John Plimpton, Jr., and inaugurated a season of special interest among the boys. John Turner's old dog, Roundhead, which had been lying curled up peacefully about his master's feet, chanced to look out of the corner of his eye and observed Benjamin Alby's mastiff, Cavalier, which had been on similar service at a neighboring seat, pricking up his ears and looking intently at him. These two dogs

had never been on the best of terms, as their names might indicate; and Roundhead soon indulged in a feeble utterance much resembling a suppressed growl. This was responded to on the part of Cavalier by just the least bit of a snap and a wrinkling of the lip, showing a tusk or two. Another dog not far off — Peter Adams's Admiral — roused himself, and signified his desire to mingle in the debate; and the three were soon on their feet, snarling at each other. Whereupon the dog-puncher arose from his place, pikestaff in hand, and drove the yelping pack out of the house. Only the truly good dogs remained. It was during the height of this mêlée that John's second overflow of mirth took place; and of this "ha-ha" no notice was taken,— another bad omen. Sam Smith kept on giggling and shaking with his pent-up mirth as before, and was at length favored with a second rap, with the same knob and in the same place as on the former occasion, which caused an instant transmutation of feeling to something much less kindly, judging from the glare of his eye as he sat scowling at the tithing-man through the rest of the sermon.

Mr. Wilson had now passed nineteenthly and come to lastly, and the sermon ended.

At the close of sermon was the time for confessions on the part of those who had lapsed from rectitude and had thus come under censure. That afternoon John Ellis rose, and said that he was con-

scious of wrong-doing in that he had spoken disrespectfully of Deacon Bullen in alluding to his keeping Sarah Daniel, a comely young woman from Cambridge, in his family as a helper for his wife, and his having on two occasions allowed her to ride to meeting with him, all which remarks were wholly unjust and uncalled for. Also, he regretted having given way to his temper in firing at and wounding one of Goodman Frairy's pigs which came across the brook into his garden. Mr. Wilson said that Goodman Ellis had made a proper acknowledgment of his wrong, but counselled him to have care over his uncharitable judgment, his unguarded manner of speech, and his hasty temper.

All through that afternoon a wizen-faced-looking woman had been sitting on a three-legged stool directly in front of the desk, clad in garments patched, shabby, and defiled. This was the stool of repentance. She had been guilty of backbiting, idle babbling, and lying. She arose upon invitation of the tithing-man; and the good pastor reproved her before all most sharply for her manner of life, calculated, he said, to sow discord among brethren, and bring reproach upon our fair town. He counselled her, however, with the great kindness characteristic of his fatherly heart, to renounce these, her evil propensities, and, being now made to know her wrong-doings, to guard herself from it in the future.

Then the minister with his wife passed out of the house, all the people standing in their places till he was gone. This was generally the signal for dispersion ; but to-day there was yet another matter to be settled, and all tarried. The tithing-man brought out a good reliable switch ; and he of the multitudinous ha-has received a good sound dose of it, the people all regarding it as richly deserved and adapted to be of wide benefit to this community. Perhaps it was so to him. Do not despair of John Plimpton, Jr. In a few years he will be among the 101 soldiers raised in four hours' time at Boston to march under Captain Mosely to the relief of Swanzey ; he will go with Mosely's men to Deerfield, and with them avenge the massacre of Bloody Brook ; he will be in that fearful fight in the Narragansett swamp, and in the terrible march home through the snow from thence ; he will help defend us from the savage foe, and do a creditable part toward making our homes safe from further incursions. His fund of animal spirits will be serviceable in good time, notwithstanding his disastrous experience in church to-day.

Then the dwellers near by trudged on foot to their homes. The comers from far led up their horses, nettled and prancing with the cold and long abstinence, to the horse-block, jumped quickly with wife or child upon their backs, and rode decorously though swiftly away through the winding cartways

and bridle-paths to their rude dwellings in the scattered clearings, where a blazing hearth-fire and a substantial meal soon made them welcome,— rude, yet "home, sweet home. Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home."

And thus ended the "goin' to meet'n" of a winter's day in the olden time, such as might have happened in our native town of Medfield.

