

The North End Chapel

In the 19th and early 20th century, the church was the heart and soul of the community. People assembled for worship, attended prayer meetings, put on plays, “sings,” dinners and socials, whether to celebrate religious holidays, raise money for church improvements or just gather as friends and neighbors. By and large, islanders worked the land and the sea. Churches were both social hubs and a place to celebrate blessings and reflect on and seek solace from life’s burdens and nature’s whimsy.

The North End Chapel, also referred to as the North or Upper Church, is the only island church that has continuously served as a house of worship. In 2020, it is the Westport Island Baptist Church, the only active church on the island. As a house of the Baptist faith, it is a symbol of the history of that faith -- completing the “circle of religious worship” here on the island -- as well as an historical site in its own right.

In 1781, the Free Will Baptists were the first “congregation” to worship on Squam Island, as Westport was known then. The prevailing faith at the time was Congregational. Westport did not necessarily follow the social conventions of the

coastal mainland. Early settlers of the small island community embraced the messages of evangelical preachers: equality before the lord, free will, and salvation through good works. The new religions emphasized “local rule” with decision making “by the people” as opposed to a titled church hierarchy.



The North End Chapel is the “newest” church on Westport. In 1871, Rachel Lilly Cromwell, a Methodist, gifted the building and the land it sat on “for religious purposes”. At that time, the Methodist Episcopal Church was the dominant religion on the island. Methodist services, prayer meetings and “sociables” were conducted at the North Chapel, the Center Church and sometimes the South End schoolhouse to make travel easier for neighboring parishioners throughout the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. From news articles, there is evidence that for a number of years, the Methodists and the Baptists shared the North End Chapel, as they did the Centre Church.

Because of its closer proximity to the main land, the North Chapel often hosted visiting

parishioners from Wiscasset and Edgecomb. Many times, Westport also shared ministers with other neighboring towns.



The church went into intermittent disuse around the 1950's. However, the church's oldest member in 2020, Helen Delano, vividly remembers attending Sunday School in the summers during the 1950's. Her Sunday School teacher was Florence "Flossie" Gilmore. Flossie was born on the island in 1879 and went on to graduate from Radcliffe College. On retiring from teaching high school in Massachusetts, she returned to college for a theology degree. From 1952 on, she served as a Sunday school teacher during her summers on Westport. Helen remembers her Sunday School teacher well. The



piano in the church in 2020 was the same piano Helen listened to as a child. She remembers Flossie "striking out the keys" and making music. Like Flossie, Helen would later graduate from Morse High School in Bath. When Helen graduated, her former Sunday School teacher was the oldest living alumni of the high school.

The North End Chapel was renovated and put into service as the "Westport Island Baptist Church" in 1961. The Freewill Baptists had the first congregation on Westport in 1781; and in 2020, the only house of worship on the island is the Westport Island Baptist Church.

Since the 1980's baptisms have been done at the Ferry Landing; but some remember when they were done at the Dike Causeway. In the earliest years of the chapel, they were likely done on the shore below the church.

The Land & Building:

The North Church is a simple front-gabled structure on a low brick foundation. The roof has a fairly steep pitch running east to west. Until a renovation in the 2000's there were simple stained glass-windows on the road-facing side. There is only one entrance which welcomes parishioners with a view of the altar. Three rows of bench pews are set along two aisles. An addition to the left side of the building was added in the 1980's. The addition is used for storage and a compost privy.



Features that are consistent with a pre-Civil War era building according to Les Fossel, Old House Restoration, are:

- The exterior is clad with quarter sawn wood clapboards with visible grain, typical of wood cut by radial saws;
- The attic windows appear to be original four-over-four glass windows;
- There were shutters on the building at one point indicated by driven in shutter pintles – a style typically employed from 1820-1860;
- The floors are spruce, face nailed, and of random width; and
- The doors are very old, possibly original; they are through-mortised and very well made.

The church was closed from 1912 to 1916 for repairs; the extent of the repairs was not specified in news accounts. In 1915, during the closure, a fairly elaborate tin ceiling was installed by Charles Colby and C.E.A. Cromwell and a chandelier, presented to the chapel by Mrs. and Mrs. J.K. Fowle, was installed. The chandelier was electrified sometime after electricity came onto the island in the 1940's.

Westport Island property tax records note the date of construction as 1850; but no town records have been identified to support this date. The North End Chapel was not indicated on the 1857 Lincoln County map by C.M. Hopkins, but the Methodist & Freewill Baptist Church at the center and the school houses are noted on the map.



The land where the church sits was acquired by Rachel Cromwell on April 7, 1866 from her sister-in-law Sophronia “Sophia” Cromwell Brown. Sophia was married to Josiah “Hayward” Brown. The deed does not make reference to buildings but with the addition of this land, the tax records note the following additions to Simon and Rachel Cromwell’s homestead: 2 acres of land and buildings unfinished, including stable; 5 acres improved land “bought of Hayward Brown”. In 1859, an outbuilding had been added to Brown’s taxable valuation – the outbuilding is not reflected in the main Valuation Book; it is documented in a special Valuation Book that more fully details all real and personal property.

The first reference to the North End Chapel appears to be in the Pastor’s Report of the June 17, 1865 Minutes of the first Quarterly Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church for Georgetown, Arrowsic and Westport held in Georgetown:

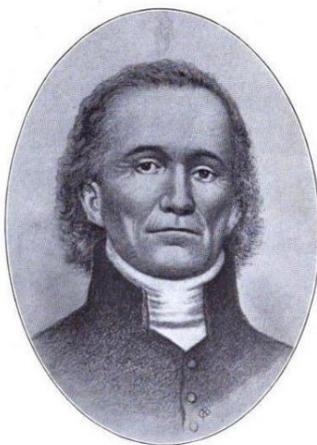
We have had in Arrowsic during the summer, two Sunday Schools and at N. Westport one Sunday School and a Bible Class at the Chapel. We expect to continue the Bible Class at the Chapel in Westport and the Bible Class connected with the School at N. Arrowsic through the Winter. At Westport we have one entire new Library; the other libraries on the Charge are in a fair condition but will need replenishing next spring. The attendance upon all the means of grace has been generally good on the charge, except the South class at Westport but we believe the prospect in that section is brightening.

Based on the information referenced, the building was likely built ca. 1859.

Timeline:

1781

Rev. Benjamin Randall, an itinerant Baptist preacher from southern New Hampshire “embodied a church of twenty members on Squam Island”, now Westport.



Benjⁿ Randall

Rev. Randall (1749-1808), although baptized in the Congregational Church, experienced a religious conversion inspired by the evangelical ministry of George Whitefield, a Methodist evangelical preacher who followed a doctrine of salvation for all, free will, free grace. Randall’s spiritual zeal moved him to re-examine the scriptures and to question the practice of infant baptism. His final separation from the Congregational Church came when he submitted himself for baptism by immersion at a service in New Hampshire and subsequently joined a Baptist church in Berwick, Maine. Randall espoused a message of universal love and universal grace which separated him from Calvinist Baptists. With his New Durham, NH congregation as his base of operations, he led revival meetings throughout New Hampshire and southern Maine becoming a principal founder of the Freewill Baptists. He had familial as well as church ties to Westport. His son-in-law, Stephen Parsons, and daughter-in-law, Sarah “Sally” Parsons were both children of Capt. Josiah Parsons, Westport’s Revolutionary War patriot of Bunker Hill.

1782

Randall visited the area east of Kennebec again. In the churches he established on his visit a year ago he now ordained “ruling elders”. In Westport it was John Dunton.

1784

Westport hosted a "Quarterly Meeting". Rev. Daniel Hibbard moved to Woolwich and took control of the Woolwich and Westport churches.

1786

Rev. Hibbard accepted an offer from the church at Squam Island (now Westport) to settle there; he stayed until his death in 1827

1802

Rev. Benjamin Randall attended the "Yearly Meeting" at Westport with nineteen new members added.

1804

The town of Edgecomb voted to accept Daniel Hibbard as a Minister for the town.

1826

Edgecomb voted to set off Squam Island as a separate religious parish from the main land – each with their own meeting houses and authority to govern their own parochial affairs.

ca. 1830's

The Methodist Episcopal Church takes hold on Westport.

ca. 1859

The structure that becomes the North End Chapel is built.

1865

Rev. D.M. True at the Methodist Episcopal Quarterly Conference, reported "We have had...during the summer...at N. Westport one Sunday School and a Bible Class at the Chapel. We expect to continue the Bible Class at the Chapel in Westport...through the Winter..."

1871

Rachel D. Lilly Cromwell (1831-1919) donates the building known as the North Chapel for religious purposes

1874

The North End Chapel was dedicated

1895

The Epworth League -- a Methodist Episcopal young adults' group with the motto "Look up, lift up" -- was organized "to promote piety and sponsor events, lectures and fellowship gatherings". The Epworth League met at both the North End Chapel and the Center Church

1910

The North End Chapel is legally deeded to the Methodist Episcopal Church

1912

Wednesday evening meetings ceased May 22; Sunday services and Sunday School ceased July 28 pending repairs.

1913

Services in the North Chapel were resumed Sunday, June 1st; and then were ceased in August. Services at the north end were conducted at the North End Schoolhouse and C.E.A. Cromwell's house while repairs to the chapel were made.

1915

The tin ceiling tiles and chandelier are added to the church; and the interior of the church was painted. When first installed, the chandelier was an oil lamp chandelier. It was electrified sometime after electricity came onto the island in the 1940's.

1916

The North End Chapel reopens in August with a morning and evening re-opening service.

ca1930

Westport became part of the parish of Wiscasset until 1939 when the Methodist Conference was reorganized.

1961

The church was reopened as the Westport Baptist Church by Rev. George B. Atkinson after being closed for a time during the 1950's.

1985

A small addition to the south side was constructed.

2015

The door sill, cross beams and adjacent clapboards were replaced.

2020

In the Spring of 2020, a metal roof was installed and the chapel was rewired with a new panel and outlets. For years, the panel was an old-fashioned circuit box most likely dating from when the church was first electrified.

