

**MEMOIR OF THE  
REV. CHANDLER  
ROBBINS, D.D.**

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Memoir of the Rev. Chandler Robbins, D.D. by Charles C. Smith

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**CHARLES C. SMITH**

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CHARLES C. SMITH.  
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## MEMOIR.

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THE record of himself which Chandler Robbins wrote in the College Class Book, in 1829, is very brief, and is as follows: "Was born in Lynn, Mass., A.D. 1810, Feb. 14th. Shall probably study Divinity." He was the second son of Dr. Peter Gilman Robbins, who was in early life a physician at Lynn, and afterward removed to Roxbury, where he died in 1852. His mother's maiden name was Abba Dowse. She was the second daughter of Samuel Dowse, of Charlestown, and is said to have been "a lady of rare personal beauty, of great dignity and grace of manner, of a sweet disposition and clear and cultivated mind," — characteristics also very noticeable in the son. Before her marriage she was a teacher in the girls' department of the Franklin Academy at Andover. She died in March, 1812, at the age of twenty-six, leaving two sons, — Chandler Robbins and a younger brother, Samuel Dowse Robbins, — both of whom became ministers. Their grandfather was the Rev. Chandler Robbins, D.D., minister of the First Church in Plymouth, and their great-grandfather was the Rev. Philemon Robbins, of Branford in Connecticut.

The subject of this memoir pursued his early studies with the Rev. Dr. Thayer at Lancaster, the Rev. Mr. Colman at Hingham, and at several private schools, the last of which was the school at Wiscasset, Maine, taught by the Rev. Hezekiah Packard, D.D. He also received private instruction at Roxbury, from Edward Bliss Emerson. In 1825 he entered Harvard College, and graduated with good rank in the remarkable class of 1829. At college he had few intimates; but he secured the esteem of all who knew him, and kept it

under very trying circumstances. Early in the freshman year there were various acts of insubordination in the class, which finally led to the expulsion of one of the members, who it was generally thought by his classmates had been betrayed by one of their own number. They were indignant at what they regarded as treachery; and the great majority, writes one of the surviving members of the class, "demanded that the offender be wholly cut off from society or notice,—that no one of the class should even *speak* to him, on pain of having to submit to a like exclusion himself." Robbins was conspicuous among the few who would not yield to these extreme demands, though it seemed pretty sure, at first, that his course would "place him in the same category of practical banishment with the proscribed one." The class, however, soon became aware that his position was not meant as a defiance, and he did not lose their respect and sympathy. In this steadfast adherence by the boy of fifteen or sixteen to what he thought was right, it is easy to discover traits of character which he exhibited all through life.

His scholarship in all branches was good, and his college rank high; but he specially excelled as a writer and speaker. His part at Commencement was a forensic with the late Joel Giles on the question "Whether the Inequalities of Genius in different Countries be owing to Moral Causes." Dr. Pierce, who heard it, wrote in his manuscript journal in possession of the Historical Society: "The forensic between Giles and Robbins was ably handled by both parties. The latter was the best speaker who exhibited in his class." After dining with the alumni, Dr. Pierce "visited the company of Robbins in Porter's tavern," at North Cambridge, and of two other graduates in Holworthy.

After graduating, young Robbins entered the Theological School in Cambridge; but at the close of his first year he left, and became an usher in the Public Latin School in Boston. Here he remained a year, and then returning to Cambridge resumed his connection with the Divinity School. In 1833 he graduated with four of his college classmates. The subject of his dissertation was, "Wherein consists the Strength

of the Evidence for the Divine Origin of Christianity." Dr. Pierce again thought him the best speaker in the class; but he noted that Mr. Robbins "appeared to undervalue existing evidences of Christianity, and confidently to anticipate better."

His first sermon after leaving the School was in the Brattle Street Church, in Boston, the pulpit of which was then vacant; and soon afterward he preached in the Second Church. In October he received a unanimous call to become the minister of that church, as successor to Ralph Waldo Emerson, with a salary of \$1,600 a year. He was ordained on the 4th of December, 1833. The sermon was preached by his predecessor, Professor Henry Ware, Jr.; the charge was by the Rev. Dr. Kendall, his grandfather's successor in the church at Plymouth; and the ordaining prayer, by his early teacher, Dr. Packard, for whom he retained a special regard. After the services the ordaining council and many of the society dined together in Concert Hall. Dr. Pierce, who counted this as the ninety-seventh ordination which he had attended, — sixty-four in the country and thirty-three in the city, — writes in his journal: "The dinner was sumptuous; but it was the first ordination I ever attended where there was no wine, nor even cider, nor indeed anything to drink but water; excepting that in the midst of dinner coffee was served round to such as desired it. This was a glorious example, which I pray God may be universally imitated." A few days after entering on his new duties, — December 12th, — Mr. Robbins was married to Mary Eliza, daughter of Samuel Frothingham, of Boston.

Mr. Robbins had a long and eventful ministry. Though he was minister of only one church, he preached in five successive church edifices and in four temporary places of worship. No other minister in Boston has ever had a similar experience. At the end of his first year his salary was increased to \$1,800. Two years later it was raised to \$2,000. In 1854 it was made \$2,500. Three years afterward it was raised to \$3,000. Finally, in 1865, at the close of the war of the Rebellion, it was made \$3,500. These figures are of interest, as showing to what extent the habits of the community changed



and the cost of living increased with the growth of the city, and as indicative of the estimate which the proprietors of the church placed on the value of his labors among them. His ministry began under very favorable auspices, and for ten years the society enjoyed a high degree of prosperity. At the annual meeting in 1841, "the treasurer congratulated the proprietors upon the general prosperity of the society for the past year, alluding more particularly to the popularity of the pastor." And in his last sermon preached in the old meeting-house, Mr. Robbins was able to say:—

"We have passed together through changeful times, through various periods of great and wide-spread excitement, through powerful agitations of opinion; whilst within the borders of our own little community, we have been blessed with uninterrupted peace, and hardly a single momentary jar has invaded our sabbath home. All our concerns have been managed with commendable fidelity and wisdom on the part of those who have been intrusted with their charge. The number of our proprietors and worshippers has increased. Accessions to the church have been recently greatly multiplied. New manifestations of social feeling and of spiritual life have strengthened our union and refreshed our hearts."

This was in March, 1844. For several years there had been a growing belief that it was expedient to erect a new house of worship. Serious differences of opinion, however, existed among the proprietors as to the best site for the new building. The question was finally set at rest, in the latter part of 1843, by the passage of a vote to take down the old meeting-house and to rebuild on the same site. The result showed that this was an unwise decision. The drift of the population away from the North End had already begun; the new church—the most beautiful church edifice built in Boston up to that time—cost more than twice the sum originally voted by the proprietors; and a heavy debt was incurred. The new building was dedicated on the 17th of September, 1845; and in the next two or three years various unsuccessful attempts were made to extinguish the debt by a voluntary subscription, an assessment on the pews, or by

some other method. At length more than eighty of the proprietors surrendered their pews to relieve themselves from further liability; and they were reduced from one hundred and seven in number to about twenty. In June, 1848, Mr. Robbins tendered his resignation, which was accepted, and at the same time a vote was passed to close the building. But availing himself of a distinction familiar to every one in the early years of the schism which divided the great Congregationalist body into two distinct parts, he still retained his connection with the communicants, known to New England usage as "the church," and religious services were continued elsewhere without interruption. Subsequently the edifice was sold to the First Methodist Episcopal Church for less than two-thirds of its original cost; and in 1871 it was demolished in consequence of the widening of Hanover Street.

Meanwhile the Chapel in Freeman Place was purchased from the Church of the Disciples by members of the society who had accompanied Mr. Robbins, and was offered to the proprietors of the old church free from any liability on their part. This offer was accepted; and in December, 1850, it was

*"Voted, That the Second Church resume public worship forthwith in the house recently contracted for in Freeman Place, and that the Rev. Chandler Robbins be invited to renew his connection with us and take the pastoral charge of the same."*

After this reunion the society, though much weakened, began to prosper. Meanwhile, in the summer of 1852, Mr. Robbins had an attack of typhoid fever which lasted two months, and left him with some trouble of the lungs. Once before, in 1839, in the early years of his ministry, he had been obliged to go abroad on account of impaired health. He now passed the first two months of 1858 in South Carolina; but after returning home in March he had a relapse, and on the first of May he again sailed for Europe, where he spent three or four months in travelling in England, Scotland, Ireland, and France.

Shortly after his return negotiations were opened for the purchase of the church edifice in Bedford Street, belonging to

to the Church of the Saviour, and for the union of that society with the Second Church. By this arrangement, which was completed in the early part of 1854, Mr. Robbins once more became the minister of a strong and active congregation. Three years after the completion of this union the Standing Committee wrote in their report to the proprietors: —

“In reviewing the past three years we have much cause for gratitude, and may now congratulate ourselves upon being one of the strongest societies of the city. Three years ago there may have been misgivings as to our success,—it was a problem whether the people of the two congregations would mingle together in such a manner as to make a united society. The result has exceeded our anticipations. We are daily growing in numbers, and in sympathy and regard for each other.”

But after ten or fifteen years, the continued drift of the population toward the southern and western parts of the city, which made the location of the church inconvenient to a large part of the congregation; the death of many of the older members, whose places were not filled by new-comers; and the removal or withdrawal of others, from one or another cause, showed their effects on the society in a gradual and steady decline from this prosperous condition. In 1862 the chapel adjoining the church was partially burned; and in 1868 it was entirely removed, in consequence of the opening of Avon Street. Meanwhile the erection of a large and high building on an adjacent estate greatly obstructed the light, and rendered the interior of the building gloomy and unattractive; and various plans were suggested to remedy the difficulty. At the same time there was a growing feeling that it would be expedient to rebuild in some more favorable locality. In 1869 the Standing Committee, after stating that there were seventy-nine proprietors and that only two pews had been purchased while several had been given up during the year, expressed the opinion that “a removal seems to be only a question of time, unless we are willing to let the fire upon our altar go out, and the church as an independent organization become extinct.” A year later they reported: —