

**HISTORICAL DISCOURSE IN  
COMMEMORATION OF THE ONE  
HUNDRED AND TWENTY-FIFTH  
ANNIVERSARY OF THE FIRST BAPTIST  
MEETING-HOUSE, PROVIDENCE R.I.,  
SUNDAY, MAY, 27, 1900**

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Historical Discourse in Commemoration of the One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the first baptist meeting-house, providence R.I., Sunday, May, 27, 1900 by Henry Melville King

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**HENRY MELVILLE KING**

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R.I., SUNDAY, MAY, 27, 1900**



# HISTORICAL DISCOURSE

IN COMMEMORATION OF THE

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE

DEDICATION OF THE

FIRST BAPTIST MEETING-HOUSE,

PROVIDENCE, R. I.,

SUNDAY, MAY 27, 1900,

BY

HENRY MELVILLE KING,

PASTOR OF THE CHURCH.

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PROVIDENCE, June 11, 1900.

At the Annual Meeting of the Charitable Baptist Society, held this day, the following votes were passed:

Voted,

"That, appreciating the very valuable addition to our history in the discourse delivered by the Rev. Dr. King, Sunday, May 27th, 1900, on the occasion of the 125th Anniversary of the dedication of our Meeting-house, we do request of him a copy for publication."

Voted,

"That Mr. C. H. Guild be a committee to notify Dr. King of this action of the Society, and to make the necessary arrangements for publication."

Attest,

F. T. GUILD, *Clerk.*

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PARSONAGE OF THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH.

PROVIDENCE, June 13, 1900.

MR. CLARENCE H. GUILD:

*Dear Sir:*

I herewith submit to you the manuscript of the Discourse preached on the 125th Anniversary of the Dedication of our Meeting-house, and requested by the Charitable Baptist Society for publication.

Sincerely yours,

*Henry M. King*

*"This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of Heaven."*—GEN. xxviii: 17.

On the twenty-eighth day of this month (to-morrow) will occur the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of the dedication of this house of worship. At the ninetieth anniversary of that important event, May 28, 1866, Rev. Samuel L. Caldwell, D.D., the pastor of the Church, delivered an appropriate commemorative discourse. On the one hundredth anniversary, May 28, 1876, Hon. Samuel Greene Arnold, the president of the Charitable Baptist Society, which from the beginning has held this property in trust for the use of the Church, delivered before that body a very complete historical address. Both of these discourses have been published, and are accessible. They leave little to be added to the interesting statement of facts which they give in reference to the building and preservation of this venerable edifice down to the dates of their delivery. All subsequent historians must acknowledge their great indebtedness to them.

A quarter of a century has now passed away since Governor Arnold's address was spoken, and the meeting-house still stands, having lost none of its architectural

beauty, but being clothed with the added sacredness of an increasing antiquity, a monument to the generosity, the self-sacrifice, the wise foresight of its builders, and a conspicuous landmark in this ancient and rapidly growing municipality. It seems fitting, possibly demanded, now that the definite period of a century and a quarter has elapsed since the doors of this sanctuary were opened, that we should recall to mind something of its history, and reflect for a few moments upon its relation to the life of man which has been lived about it, and the long service which it has rendered to God and truth and humanity.

This Church, as you are already aware, had had from its organization in 1638 but two meeting-houses before the erection of this one. During the first sixty-two years of its existence it had no home and no shelter except such as it found in the humble and hospitable dwellings of its members. It was literally "the Church that was in their house." When the weather permitted, worship was held in the open air, with the blue sky for the roof of their sanctuary, the branches of the trees for its arches, and the winds for its music. We are told that at that time "there was no public building in the town even for civil purposes." The ancient record reads that in June 1676, the annual town meeting was held "before Thomas Field's house, under a tree, by the water-side."\*

The first Meeting-house was erected in 1700 on a lot of land near the corner of North Main and Smith

\*Staples' Annals of Providence, p. 162.



streets, and erected by the pastor, Elder Pardon Tillinghast, at his own charges.\* It was small and unattractive, not larger than the little house in which Roger Williams preached in Salem, and which is now to be seen on the grounds of the Essex Institute. Yet it was in keeping with the homes of the people. Subsequently the pastor deeded this property to the Church in due form, the deed being now on record at the City Hall,† and showing that the Church then held to the Six Principle position which was supposed to be laid down in Heb. VI: 1-2.‡

"Therefore, leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead and of eternal judgment."

Tradition says that that first house was "in the shape of a hay-cap, with a fire-place in the middle, the smoke escaping from a hole in the roof."§

That house served its sacred purpose for twenty-six years, the praises of the little group of hardy disciples, whose hearts had been kindled by a heavenly fire, ascending with the smoke that rose from the open hearth.

In 1726 under the ministry of Rev. James Brown,

\* Pardon Tillinghast became a citizen of the town in 1646, and retained his connection with the Church as private member and pastor until his death in 1718. As pastor, for probably thirty-six years, he served without salary, as did the other early pastors, although he declared it to be the duty of the Church to support the ministry which should come after him. (Beckus' Hist. II, p. 22). He was evidently well to do, and wielded a large influence in Church and town for an unusually long lifetime. His descendants have erected a monument to his memory on Benefit street.

† Recorded April 22, 1749.

‡ See The Mother Church, p. 61.

§ Knowles' Life of Roger Williams, p. 175.

the grandson of Chad Brown who had so much to do with the founding of this colony and this Church, and whose descendants down to the present time have been most generous contributors to the religious, educational, literary and commercial interests of Providence,\* a second Meeting-house was erected on the same spot where the first had stood. This building was a little more pretentious, being forty feet square and covering exactly one-quarter of the ground space of our present Meeting-house. The community had been slowly growing, and contained a population not much exceeding 2000. With the gradual growth there came a divergence of religious views, and other denominations of Christians sprang up, and took organized form in this land of religious freedom. St. John's Church, which was then King's Church, had built a house three years before on its present site (1723), and the first Congregational Meeting-house was built the same year (1723), at the corner of College and Benefit streets. The Friends were also engaged in erecting a Meeting-house for their simple worship on the land still occupied by them. It may be that this enterprise on the part of other Christians inspired the Baptists with a desire to have a more commodious and attractive house of worship. The first comers must not be outdone by those who came later. The new house had a central aisle extending from the door

\* " But in all that group of sterling, famous men, the colleagues of Roger Williams, not one was more able, upright and spotless than the Rev. Chad Brown, and the descendants of that heavenly minded man have had greater influence upon the fortunes of this city than the offspring of any other man living or dead." Moses Brown; a Sketch by Augustine Jones, LL. B.

to the pulpit, with pews on either side, or if not pews at the first, the plain benches soon gave place to them. There was also a small gallery with an entrance on the south side of the building, and "at high water," we are told, "the tide flowed nearly up to the west end."\* Here for nearly fifty years the message of life was proclaimed, and the people waited upon a ministry chosen from among themselves, Brown, Winsor, father and son, and Burlingame, men without the advantages of a liberal education, but with profound piety and with great strength and tenacity of conviction, still holding, with not a few of the members, to the laying on of hands as an essential and perpetual ordinance of Christianity, "rigorous for a doubtful and unessential rite," as Dr. Caldwell has well defined it.†

For more than one hundred and thirty years the Church had existed, sometimes agitated by doctrinal differences, and its life probably narrow and unaggressive, and yet all along, as at the first, having strong men connected with it, who only needed the occasion and the leader to draw them out, and show what was in them. In 1770 the Church had only 118 members, and seemed quite content to go on in its little way, which was hardly going on at all. But a new era was about to dawn, an era of quickening, of enlargement, of material and spiritual progress. In that year Rhode Island College was transferred from Warren to Providence, brought here by the generous offers of men

\* Life of John Howland, p. 29.

† Discourse at the Ninetieth Anniversary, p. 10.