

**AN HISTORICAL DISCOURSE DELIVERED
AT THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE WEST LEBANON
CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH AND
SOCIETY, NOVEMBER 8, 1874**

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An Historical Discourse Delivered at the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the West Lebanon Congregational Church and Society, November 8, 1874 by A. B. Rich

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BY A. B. RICH, PASTOR.

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SERMON.

I SAMUEL vii: 11, 12.

“AND THE MEN OF ISRAEL WENT OUT OF MIZPEH, AND PURSUED THE PHILISTINES, AND SMOTE THEM, UNTIL THEY CAME UNDER BETH-CAR. THEN SAMUEL TOOK A STONE, AND SET IT BETWEEN MIZPEH AND SHEN, AND CALLED THE NAME OF IT EBEN-EZER, SAYING, HITHERTO BATH THE LORD HELPED US.”

It would be both unphilosophical and superficial, in giving the natural history of a choice fruit-tree, to speak only of its height and size, the form it has assumed in the progress of its growth, and the characteristics of its fruit. We wish to know, as well, where it originated, and by whose culture it has been brought to its present state of perfection. We trace the variety back to the nursery of some distinguished pomologist, learn the circumstances under which it came into notice, the different names by which it has been known, the care and culture that have been expended upon it to bring it to the present state of perfection. And we come to estimate the value of our particular tree, not simply by the annual supply of delicious

fruit it bears, but by the circumstances of its origination, and the labors of other hands that have transplanted, pruned, and guarded it, before it had a place in our orchard. Let these things be an allegory.

The church of Jesus Christ on earth has a history: and each particular local church stands in spiritual relations with it. It has not an independent history. It has a germinal relation with some church or churches that preceded it. The life that had been begotten in human hearts by the Divine Spirit under other relations, is having a new development under new relations. There is a sense in which the local church is new, a higher sense in which it is old—*as old, indeed, as the establishment of a church on earth, as the idea of a church in the mind of its head.* Each local church, therefore, has a history that runs back of the date of its origin, as found in its records,—a hidden history, like the roots of a tree that run underground, a part of the tree, as truly as the trunk, but out of sight.

In proposing to write out the history of this church, I cannot resist the temptation to go back of Nov. 8, 1849—back even of the organization of the parent church—to the influences that moulded the characters of the original settlers of this town. So far, at least, we can easily trace the roots of the tree that has been growing here on the banks of the Connecticut for the last quarter of a century.

Our thoughts are turned to "the land of steady habits"—to the interior of Connecticut; and we are almost surprised to find the towns of Enfield, Windsor, Hartford, Norwich, Lebanon, Woodstock, Meriden, Lyme, Bristol, Franklin, Danbury, Canaan, and Andover crowded as thickly together there as they are in this latitude in the valley of the same "Long River."

It suggests other relationships, running back to colonial days.

I know not why the name of Mansfield was not transferred to this locality, as the original settlers of this town were from the adjoining towns of Mansfield and Lebanon. The first meeting of the eighty-two grantees, under the charter obtained from the royal governor, Benning Wentworth, was held in Mansfield. But the majority of these belonging to Lebanon, they voted to call the town by this musical Scripture name. I presume their children have approved their decision.

As to the moral and intellectual character of the first settlers of the town, we can judge somewhat by reference to the clergy under whose ministry they had been educated.

The Mansfield colonists had sat for seventeen years under the preaching of Rev. Richard Salter, a graduate of Harvard college. After his graduation, Mr. Salter studied medicine, and became "a skilful practitioner." His attention was then called to the min-

istry, which, after a course of preparatory study, he entered. Declining a call from one of the Boston churches, he settled in Mansfield, and remained there until his death—forty-one years. He was elected a Fellow of Yale college, and received from that institution the degree of Doctor of Divinity. He is said to have been “a man of more than ordinary intellectual powers, and to have ranked, in this respect, among the first ministers of his day in Connecticut.”

It may be of interest to know that it was from him that the Rev. Richard Salter Storrs, late of Braintree, Mass. (the father of the distinguished divine of the same name in Brooklyn, N. Y.), received both his name and his education.

Remembering now the reverence felt by all classes for the clergy a century and a quarter ago, and the influence they exerted upon the intellectual and moral *status* of a community, in the absence of good educational institutions, and we can gauge quite accurately the mental and moral traits of a Mansfield colony in 1761.

The Lebanon colony was in nothing inferior, judged by the same standard. For twenty-six years before their *hegira* they had enjoyed the religious training of the Rev. Eleazer Wheelock, of whom Trumbull, a personal friend, says,—“His preaching and addresses were close and pungent, and yet winning beyond almost all comparison, so that his audience would

be melted even into tears before they were aware of it."

His labors were greatly promotive of revivals of religion. They covered the years when Whitefield was making his flying visits through New England. Dr. Wheelock welcomed the great revivalist to his pulpit, and was in full sympathy with him in the great awakening. "So fervent was his zeal, that in one year 'he preached a hundred more sermons than there are days in the year.'"

Several years before the colony left his congregation to settle in this town, Dr. Wheelock commenced a family school, to eke out his scanty salary. Ere long a Mohegan Indian boy, Samson Occum, became connected with the school. His subsequent conversion and distinguished labors as a preacher turned Dr. Wheelock's thoughts so much towards the Indians as to lead him to change the plan of his school. It grew at length into "Moor's Indian Charity School," taking its name from that of a liberal benefactor—a generous farmer of Mansfield.

Years roll by: the school is mainly composed of Indian children. At length, some eight years after the departure of the New Hampshire colony, in August, 1770, the venerable minister and teacher, with the charter in his hand of Dartmouth college—"vox clamantis in deserto"—followed his former parishioners into the wilderness, and transferred his school to Han-

over,—“he and his wife and daughters living in a log cabin eighteen feet square, and his sons and students in booths of hemlock boughs, until a dwelling-house and college could be erected.”

Thus was renewed his acquaintance with the former members of his parish, and his influence over them continued until his death. He presided over the college from 1770 to 1779, “and conferred the honors of the college on seventy-two young men, of whom thirty-nine became ministers of the gospel.”

Perhaps I am occupying too much space with the influences that moulded the characters and habits of our fathers: but how could I have said less?

No record has come down to us respecting the spiritual history of the colony during the first three years of its existence. No doubt there were praying souls here, and closets, and family altars, in rude dwellings scattered throughout the town. No doubt, when occasions served, they sang and prayed together, for they had come up from some of the most thrilling revival scenes which have been enjoyed in New England.

But on the 13th of May, 1765, when, it is supposed, the town contained only about twenty families, measures were taken to secure the preaching of the word. It is the earliest extant record of the town.

“At y^e motion of Mr. Asa Kilbourn, queryd, whether we will have a minister in the town this summer or not? Voted in the affirmative.

“Voted, that we first send subscriptions to y^e neighboring towns, and