

**ADDRESS AT THE CELEBRATION OF
THE TWO HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE BUILDING OF THE OLD
MEETING-HOUSE A HINGHAM. ON
THE EIGHT OF AUGUST, 1881**

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Address at the Celebration of the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the Building of the Old Meeting-house a Hingham. On the eight of August, 1881 by Charles Eliot Norton

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CHARLES ELIOT NORTON

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The Building of the Old Meeting-House
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BY
CHARLES ELIOT NORTON.

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ADDRESS.

*Mr. Chairman, Reverend Sir,¹ Your Excellency,
Men and Women of Hingham:—*

You have thought it becoming to commemorate the building of this old Meeting-house on its two hundredth anniversary. You have chosen me, as the lineal descendant of the minister settled over this parish when the Meeting-house was built, whose voice was the first to ask the blessing of God within these walls, and who for many years, Sabbath after Sabbath, here taught the people of the ways of the Lord,—you have chosen me, his descendant, to give expression to the thought and sentiment natural on such an occasion as this. I undertake the duty, to which you have called me, in a spirit of filial piety. Five generations of my forefathers united with your ancestors in worship under this roof. I see around me the descendants of those who listened to the first sermon heard from the ancient pulpit. The names of Hobart, Lincoln, Thaxter, Beal, Cushing, Fearing, Loring, Hersey, Whiton, Sprague, attest the permanence of the families of the early settlers, and the continuity of the life of the town, while they bear honorable witness to the excellence of the stock planted here.

¹ Rev. Calvin Lincoln.

I shall be easily pardoned if to-day I recall a history familiar and dear to many of you.

No building in the United States is more venerable than this within which we are met. Of all edifices an ancient church is the most reverend. This is the house of worship in which the weekly service of prayer and preaching has been for a longer time continuous than in any other in New England,—probably than in any other in the United States. For us, in this still new world, its age is great. But our antiquities are modern as compared with those of our Mother-country; the oldest of them are of to-day in comparison with the Pyramids; they are novelties in the eternity of Nature. But the two centuries during which this house has existed are the longest centuries in the history of mankind, for in their course man has made greater progress in the knowledge of the world in which he lives, and consequently in power over it, than in all preceding time. His relations to Nature have changed. He has come into possession of new faculties. His thoughts have widened. The denizen of a parish two hundred years ago, the intelligent man is to-day the citizen of the world. Spiritually measured this little span of time is longer than cycles of Egypt or Cathay. To the imagination this Meeting-house is the monument of a great antiquity.

But it has more than the interest of mere age. Like all the works of the hand of man, it tells the

story of its times. It is the expression of the moral convictions and material conditions of the men who built it. Here is no fine art. No touch of beauty is visible here; no faith is here nobly realized in imperishable form; no ideals of life are displayed here in dedicated shapes of prophets, saints, and kings; no aspirations are manifest in lavish wealth of consecrated ornament; no sentiment of pious ardor finds utterance in sacred symbols. All is plain, bare, homely, unadorned, the work of an ascetic race. The fancy can hardly find, in this rough timber frame, a type of the temple of the Holy City, with its gold and silver and iron and brass and purple and crimson and blue; or recognize, in the builders with plank and shingle, a community of spirit with those who wrought miracles of stone in mediæval church and cathedral. No, this is the poor Meeting-house of a poor people, of a people moreover, to whom the adornment of the church and the pomp of ritual were an abomination, and who rejected all the imagery of earlier ages of piety, even the deepest and tenderest symbols of the faith, because associated with superstition and confounded with idolatry. To them this plain house, their Bethel, was more truly the Gate of Heaven than if it had been a pearl like the gates of the New Jerusalem; and they trusted that the promise made by Jehovah to Solomon held good also for them: "Mine ear shall be attent unto the prayer that is made in this place."

I know not if the legend be well attested, but you are familiar with the tradition that the little band of the first settlers of Hingham, on their landing here in 1635, led by the father and first minister of the town, the valiant Peter Hobart, gathered round their pastor under an old oak, to join with him in asking the blessing of the Lord on their new planting in the wilderness. Within a few months they had a house built for public worship. It was the central house of the little village, the common refuge in times of spiritual stress or material peril. In 1645, at the time of alarm lest the Narragansetts should break out in war against the colonists, it was voted to erect a palisade around the Meeting-house, "to prevent any danger that may come unto this town by any assault of the Indians." To that house, thus protected, the forefathers of the town came to worship and take counsel for forty-five years. There, for forty-three of those years, Peter Hobart, to whom Governor Winthrop bore testimony that "he was a bold man and would speak his mind," taught his people. Age brought its usual burdens to him, but his heart remained fresh, and in his last days, as Cotton Mather reports, "he set himself with great fervour to gather the children of his church under the saving wings of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in order thereunto preached many pungent sermons on Ecclesiastes xi. 9, 10, and xii. 1." Beautiful is the picture of the venerable man, himself the father of many chil-

dren whom he had carefully nurtured,¹ worn with the infirmities of years, and weary with the labors which fell to those who had, in their own words, "transported themselves, with their wives, their little ones, and their substance, from that pleasant land where they were born, over the Atlantic ocean into the vast wilderness," for the sake of "liberty to walk in the faith of the gospel with all good conscience," — beautiful is the picture of the old and faithful pastor, death now near at hand, looking with benignant eyes on the younglings of his flock, the first native-born New Englanders, and appealing to them: "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them."

It was on the 27th of November, 1678, that "he did with his aged hand ordain a successor, which when he had performed with much solemnity he did afterwards with an assembly of Ministers and other Christians at his own house, joyfully sing the song of aged Simeon, Thy servant now lettest thou depart in peace." Less than eight weeks afterward he died.

That successor was Mr. John Norton, a young man twenty-seven years old, who had received as good a training as New England could then bestow. He had been bred under the shadow of the

¹ He names fifteen children in his will. Five of his sons graduated at Harvard College, and four of them became ministers.

church. Named for his more noted uncle, one of the four famous Johns who were the lights of the early church of Boston, he had derived from him a taste for learning, and the consecration to the ministry. He graduated at Harvard College in 1671, in the last class sent forth by the pious and learned President Chauncy; and Sewall, afterward Chief Justice, was one of his classmates.¹ It was a distinction then to graduate at Harvard. It meant being one of the clerical or magisterial order. It meant the possession of pre-eminent advantages. But the relation of the clergy to the community had already become very different from what it had been in the earlier days of the Colony. The contrast between the prominent position in public affairs, the wide and strong influence, the admitted authority of the uncle, and the tranquil, retired life, and the narrow limits of influence of the nephew, was not altogether the result of diversity of opportunities and of gifts. It affords an illustra-

¹ From an entry in Sewall's Diary, published by the Massachusetts Historical Society,—a book from which more is to be learned than from any other of the life of Boston and its neighborhood during the last quarter of the seventeenth century and the first quarter of the eighteenth,—it would appear that Mr. Norton had grave doubts as to coming into the Church. "Saterdag, Mar. 3, 167½, went to Mr. Norton to discourse with him about coming into the Church. He told me that he waited to see whether his faith were of the operation of God's spirit, and yet often said that he had very good hope of his good Estate . . . He said, was unsettled, had thoughts of going out of the country. . . . And at last, that he was for that way which was purely Independent. I urged what that was. He said that all of the Church were a royal Priesthood, all of them Prophets and taught of God's Spirit, and that a few words from the heart were worth a great deal: intimating the Benefit of Brethren's prophesying: for this he cited Mr. Dell. I could not get any more." It is not certain that the Mr. Norton with whom Sewall held this conversation was Mr. John Norton, but it seems probable.