

Boylston's Third Meeting House

By Inga Milbauer



The Third Meeting House of the Town of Boylston was built in 1835, on the site of the present First Congregational Church. It replaced the Second Meeting House which was built in 1793 at the location of the present Boylston Public Library. For more information about Boylston's First and Second Meeting Houses, see: <https://www.boylstonhistory.org/images/round%20window.pdf>

Since members of the congregation had split off with Squire Ezra Beaman to form a Second Parish of Boylston, Sterling and Holden in 1795 many of the remaining members of the church found the Second Meeting House too large and "cheerless". This resulted in the decision to build a new meeting house. The Third Meeting House was built on land purchased from Aaron White, Esq., and Capt. Jason Abbott. The old bell from the Second Meeting House was moved to the new building. The Third Meeting House was dedicated on 10 December 1835. Unlike the previous two meeting houses, this was the first meeting house with heating facilities.

The interior of the building was remodeled during the pastorate of Rev. Dr. Andrew Bigelow, August 1866 to April 1873, and then again in 1896.¹ The headline in a local newspaper from 17 January 1897 read: "*Boylston People to Celebrate Remodeling of their Church*". A turkey dinner was held, followed by toasts to those who had led the way for the church improvements.

For the following ten years the "*Annual Reunion and Turkey Dinner*" was announced in the local newspapers. This social event which drew hundreds of people on the evening of 18 January 1906 ended in the unfortunate accident of the floor in the vestibule collapsing. The headline in a local newspaper from 19 January 1906 describes the event:

"Collapse of Church Floor Injures Many. Fifty or more persons dropped into the basement at Boylston. None fatally hurt. The organist played hymns to calm the people."

Between 50 and 60 people "*dropped into the cellar*" when "*under the weight of a crowd of people*" the vestibule weakened from the weight simply gave way.² For more information about this event, read the article *Boylston in the News!* by Judy Haynes on our website:

<https://www.boylstonhistory.org/images/2023%20Jan%20FFF/FFF01202023%20Boylston%20in%20news%20church.pdf>

Another unfortunate event had happened just a few years earlier. On 12 February 1903, just after 12 o'clock in the afternoon, the steeple of the church was blown off the building in a storm. According to the "*Special to The Telegram*" of that day

*"People had been watching the spire for an hour as it swayed and bent before the gale, among these spectators being the ex-janitor H. Vickery, who for 20 years has rung the bell."*³

The article mentions that the steeple hit the east side of the roof, making a hole six or eight feet long, and the force of the blow broke a rafter. The splinters from the roof crashed through the ceiling of the auditorium near the gallery. A new steeple with the town clock was erected in 1906.



THIRD MEETING HOUSE WITH CLOCK TOWER

Disaster struck again during the month of February when the Third Meeting House burned down on the afternoon of Monday, 4 February 1924.

“The fire was discovered by William Talby who saw the smoke and flames from across the street and gave the alarm. The town apparatus proved inadequate and help was summoned from Worcester and Clinton.”⁴

**THIRD MEETING HOUSE ENGULFED IN SMOKE
4 FEBRUARY 1924
DESTROYED BY FIRE AFTER SERVING THE
TOWNPEOPLE FOR 89 YEARS**

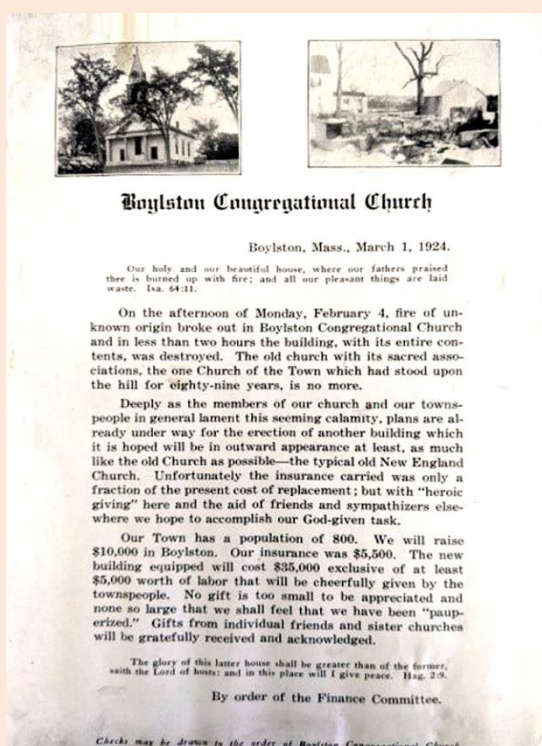


The front-page headline of a newspaper article from the 4th of February read:

“Boylston Church is Destroyed by Fire – Historic Edifice Built in 1835 and Entire Content Lost – Damage 25,000-40,000 – Worcester and Clinton Send Aid – Rebuilding Planned.”

It mentions William H. Talby immediately gave the alarm by ringing the Town Hall bell” and “The dense smoke inside the building made it impossible to enter and save the contents.”⁵ The newspaper *The Post* mentioned that “The fire was discovered by Frank Vinton, who conducts a store across from the church.”⁶ The previous article continues to describe that the church building was doomed and efforts were made to save the nearby residences. “The barn of Joseph H. Woodnead caught fire when the huge town clock fell.” The large church bell “which was ruined today was first rung in October 1861, as the soldiers marched from the village to the Civil War.”⁷ Some items were saved from the fire as they were not in the building: the large pulpit bible, a silver, gold-lined chalice given by Ward Nicholas Boylston in 1799, and a communion set purchased between 1832-1856. The bell from the steeple could also be saved.⁸

Plans to raise funds and rebuild the church were immediately put in place. Work began on 19 April 1924. Services were held in the Old Town Hall until 1 February 1925 when the basement of the current building was used for worship. The Fourth Meeting House (First Congregational Church) was completed in 1927, with a dedication service held in November. The building was designed by a Worcester architect, Edwin T. Chapin. Built in the style of the previous building, it stands on the same site (a few feet off the previous base), high on the hill overlooking the Boylston Town Common.



**REQUEST MADE BY THE BOYLSTON FINANCE
COMMITTEE TO THE 800 RESIDENTS OF
BOYLSTON TO BUILD A NEW CHURCH**

Acknowledgments:

¹ Mary French Scrapbook collection, Newspaper article *A History of the Old Boylston Church – The Reunion Held and Good Cheer Abounded Among Those Present*, January 19, 1899

² “Boylston Church Vestibule Floor Collapses; 31 People are Injured. List of Inured. Worcester, Mass. news, Friday morning, January 19, 1906, p. 14

³ Mary French Scrapbook collection, Newspaper article *Steeple is Overthrown*, Telegram, February 12, 1903

⁴ Mary French Scrapbook collection, Newspaper article *Fired Razed Old Boylston Church – Historic Congregational Structure Totally Destroyed by Flames at Midday*, Special Correspondence to the Gazette, February 5, 1924

⁵ Mary French Scrapbook collection, Newspaper article *Boylston Church is Destroyed by Fire – Historic Edifice Built in 1835 and Entire Content Lost – Damage 25,000-40,000 – Worcester and Clinton Send Aid – Rebuilding Planned*, Newspaper unknown, February 4, 1924

⁶ Mary French Scrapbook collection, Newspaper article *To Discuss Plans for Rebuilding*, The Post, February 5, 1924

⁷ Mary French Scrapbook collection, Newspaper article *Boylston Church is Destroyed by Fire – Historic Edifice Built in 1835 and Entire Content Lost – Damage 25,000-40,000 – Worcester and Clinton Send Aid – Rebuilding Planned*, Newspaper unknown, February 4, 1924

⁸ <https://www.telegram.com/story/news/local/the-item/2018/09/23/first-congregational-church-marks-275-years/10362572007/> *A Brief History of the First Congregational Church of Boylston*, Mass, being a sermon held by Rev. Israel Ainsworth on August 15, 1886, Press of Sanford & Davis, 1887, Worcester, Massachusetts

https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/Boylston_s_Church_History/c87

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