

Second Congregational Church



This view of the Second Congregational Church was probably taken during the period of the Bethel Agricultural Fair (1891-1908) Note the missing window panes. Sometime after the 1908 fair, the old church was torn down. In 2013 the Bethel Historical Society received the photo from Cindy Carpenter McFadden, a descendant of Aaron (1787-1855) and Ruby Bartlett Mason (1796-1873). Aaron Mason, second owner of the Mason Farm, was the son of Moses Mason from Dublin, NH. (Since 1962 Mason Farm homestead buildings been known as the Norseman Inn.)

The Second Congregational Church's meeting house was built during the spring and summer of 1849. Bethel's first West Parish Congregational meeting house had been built in 1806 on the south bank of the Androscoggin near today's highway bridge. This location was decided by a vote of members living on both sides of the river. Those from the north side led mostly by Eli Twitchell won in voting for one of two choices: the area of today's Common or the Stearns property along the river. The key issue was reasonable convenience in getting to church services.

September 1796 when the West Parish Congregational Church Society was formed a number of members lived north of the Androscoggin River in what is now Mayville. Except briefly in 1839 when the first bridge connecting north and south sections of Bethel (it was washed out the same year), crossing the river was by ferry or individual boat. There were times during high water that river crossing was impassable.

Apparently by 1847, as church membership had grown the Bethel Hill residents had gained a voting majority, the members voted in favor of building a new meeting house on Bethel Hill. The last service in the old meeting house near the river bank was held in February 1848.

Forming a Second Congregational Church Society

However, meeting on the Hill created added inconvenience and more grumbling by members living north of the river who petitioned the church body in September 1848 for permission to organize their own church. A church council called to consider the request met in February 1849 and granted approval for a new church. The new church's members met soon thereafter and elected officers. Bethel Hill's Congregational Church became the First Congregational Church and the new church meeting house – the Second Congregational Church.

Rev. David Garland became the first and only pastor of the Second Congregational Church. He was born in Newfield, Maine, March 22, 1815. He had graduated from Amherst College in 1843 and from Andover Seminary in 1846. When he received the call to the Second Congregational Church in Bethel, it consisted of 29 members. Rev. Garland began his service for the church in April, 1849, and on the 15th of August he was ordained pastor.

For 38 years he served Bethel as pastor of the Second Church. During the time of his ministry in Bethel he attended 573 funerals and performed 204 marriages. Due to his location, a vast amount of work from small outlying towns within 25 to 30 miles of his church devolved on him. During his 38 years, 132 residents joined the church membership. He also devoted himself to the educational affairs of the town.

On October 16, 1887, at age 72, he died in the pulpit while conducting the regular Sunday service of the First Congregational Church in Bethel. [Read more about Rev. Garland's life in Bethel.](#)

The Second Congregational Church members assumed responsibility for the Mayville cemetery, known today as the Bethel Riverside Cemetery. In July 1886 Congregational members put up a new fence around their (Mayville) graveyard. The front was of iron set on stone posts, while the sides and back end was of wire with corner posts. The wire sections are long gone but in 2014 the iron fence remains in place marking the "old section" of the cemetery.

Second Congregational society votes to disband: "July 6, 1890, and closed the doors of the church edifice to the public as a resort for public worship and the descendants of the "prodigals" returned to the house of their fathers, less than a mile distant, a free bridge making the way more easy.

Bethel Agricultural Fair—New life for the old church as an exhibit hall

The old church's second life began with the Bethel Agricultural Fair's opening in 1891 and lasted through the 1908 fair event.

The church was used as the fair's main exhibit hall. But it's once a year use did not include building maintenance. Located at the entrance to the fair grounds, the old church proved to be an excellent, convenient exhibit hall. (At this time, the Northwest Bethel road's intersection with the Bethel to Newry to Rumford was between the church and the Mason Farm property.)

Yvonne Nowlin wrote an extensive, detailed paper for the Bethel Historical Society about the history of Bethel's Agricultural Fair from 1891 to 1934.

Some news highlights of the old church serving as the Fair's exhibit hall were:

For the 1894's fair, "In "Floral Hall" were displays of fruit, vegetables and many items crafted locally. The Bethel Chair Company displayed some "excellent specimens," including floor rockers, dining chairs, and center tables. C. S. York, a Bethel photographer, had on display photographs of every size, subject and style. Other items on display were braided and husk rugs, needlework and "wrought lace," exhibited by women ages 7 to 85. The Estey organ, exhibited for the first time by Harry Clark of South Paris, created much interest".

"Taking part in the fair of 1898 were several of the local granges, all of which had displays in the old church. It was noted that Mrs. F. F. Bean had made the banner displaying the name and number of Bethel Grange, No. 56, which had a majority of the exhibits. One of the oddest was a tree raised from a castor oil bean planted a year previous by I. A. Cushman of South Bethel; the tree's height of some six feet and leaves "of immense dimensions" attracted the attention of all who entered the "Floral Hall." In addition, Round Mountain Grange of Albany and Newry's Bear River Grange had good exhibits that year. One visitor to the Hall later wrote, 'the people here have simply outdone themselves in displaying farm products. Mr. Edward P. Grover (West Bethel) had the largest individual exhibit in the building.' "

1899: The old church, which had been used as an exhibition hall for the past nine years, was filled to capacity with the usual exhibits. "Guaranteed to fit and waterproof," gaiters, dress skirts, macintoshes, jackets and capes for all were exhibited for the first time by H. A. Hallowell.

1900: Of special interest to Bethel Historical Society members is the fact that Cyrene Littlehale, the niece of Dr. and Mrs. Moses Mason, had on display in the old Mayville Church a collection of items connected with her prominent relatives. Among these were a pair of stays reputedly one hundred and fifty years of age, a chair two hundred years old, a red cloak of the same age, the dress, bonnet and shawl worn by Mrs. Moses (Mason) at the inauguration of President Andrew Jackson, as well as the portraits of Dr. Mason and his wife, all prominently featured in the hall. Though usually devoted to agricultural produce, locally built items such as the Bethel Manufacturing Company's chairs, tables, tete-tetes, and couches "in the latest styles" were also on display.

Early in 1901, an article appeared in the Bethel News which shed light on the use of the Mayville Church as the Riverside Park exhibit hall. One reporter wrote, "The white steeple of the Garland meetinghouse with the dark mountain side for a background, presented a picturesque landscape view. Forty years' passing have wrought a change in the situation. Father time has wrought a dilapidating and demoralizing work on the church edifice, but the name "Garland" is perpetuated in the Parish House annex."

1906: The pulpit of the old Mayville Church, from which the Reverend David Garland had so long preached, was used to form an archway "which added much to the Bear River Grange display."

After the 1908 fair, the annual fair was not held for a number of years. The exact date when the church building was torn down is still a question. In 1912 William Rogers Chapman acquired the former Mason Farm from the estate of Mary Ryerson who died April 1911. Chapman made many changes within the old homestead's buildings; he also had the Northwest Bethel road relocated from between the Mason farm barn and the old church to its present location.

1909—Old Church comes down

In his 1909 column The Oxford County Citizen, Leonard Bond Chapman wrote that the old church was sold and torn down. Some of its timber was used in the (Nelson Springer) Novelty Mill rebuilt in 1908 after a fire destroyed the original mill located about where Hanover Dowel Company's mill stood in 1990.

In the early 1990's Robert Saunders (1947-1999) pointed out to me some of the timbers from the old church that were used in the Hanover Dowell mill – they were used for framing for the wall supporting stairs which led from the ground floor to the second floor office.

Saving the "Bethel Bird"

Also in a 1909 Leonard Bond Chapman's history article which appeared in a September edition of the Oxford County Citizen told of the "Bethel Bird":

"The rooster that was perched upon the staff that surmounted the cupola of the old meeting house structure during its existence of nearly half a century, though dead "still lives" in seclusion, weather beaten and otherwise disfigured, though not seriously from musket shot lodged in its body by wayward youth, hence a century old, neglected, out of sight-hence out of mind, "unhonored and unmourned," became forgotten. ... Why not bring the Bethel bird out from its seclusion and present to the public its written history that now exists in tradition only!



Calvin Twitchell made it from a "LIVE MODEL" was a room of his father's residence, (Calvin) was a son of Deacon Ezra Twitchell, the Deacon departing this life, May 16, 1821, his son Alphin Twitchell (1804-1886) occupied the farm after him.

Calvin with his live model and his pocket knife kept everybody from his room till his project materialized and was placed upon exhibition when the shouts from the spectators were loud and long.

Calvin was an uncle to the late Samuel B. Twitchell (1829-1905), who rescued the bird from total loss and by the aid of his daughters (Susie and Florence) the bird, now of an historical character, will receive the protecting care to which it is entitled."

References: History of Bethel Maine by William Lapham, History of the West Parish Congregational Church by Sumner Burgess and Margaret Tibbetts, Bethel Agricultural Fair by Yvonne Nowlin and The Bethel Bird by Leonard B. Chapman. Oxford County Citizen, Bethel Historical Society collections.