

Bowdoin Sunday Remarks

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Good morning. First Parish is the church into which I was born, baptized, and confirmed. It is where I sang in the junior choir, and where the Cross family was embraced with love and understanding for so many years. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today about some of the historical connections of First Parish Church and Bowdoin College in this, the 300th year of the church's history. As I stand here, I am reminded that there are many among you who know this history as well as – or better than – I do, and I certainly would put Mary Baard, Bill Millar, Mildred Jones, Liz Newman, and Homer Kenison at the top of the list.

Bowdoin College was chartered in 1794 and opened in September of 1802. The delays were due to debates over the where the College should be located, the amount of time it took to sell lands granted by Massachusetts to fund the new college, and the time required to build Massachusetts Hall. Williams College, chartered in 1793, and Bowdoin, chartered in 1794, represented an acknowledgement by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts that the western and eastern regions of the state should be served by literary institutions that were “closer to home” There is a persistent story – I don't know if it is true – that the legislature approved the two charters at the about the same time, but that Governor John Hancock withheld his signature on Bowdoin's charter because he and James Bowdoin II did not get along; Governor Samuel Adams had no such reservations in 1794.

The opening ceremonies for the College took place on a platform under a grove of pines on the sandy plains of Brunswick in September of 1802. President Joseph McKeen's address established a principle that guides the College's mission to this day: “It ought always to be remembered, that literary institutions are founded and endowed for the common good, and not for the private advantage of those who resort to them for education. It is not that they may be enabled to pass through life in an easy or reputable manner, but that their mental powers may be cultivated and improved for the benefit of society.”

As an aside, Bowdoin's first seven presidents had theological training, and six were ordained Congregational ministers (Joshua Chamberlain graduated from Bangor Theological Seminary, but turned down two offers for pastorates in favor of teaching at Bowdoin). There hasn't been an ordained minister leading the College since William DeWitt Hyde (president from 1885-1917).

The first meetinghouse on outer Maine Street served First Parish until 1806. In consideration of a subscription of eight shares by the President and Governing Boards of Bowdoin College, an agreement was reached to build a new meetinghouse within 100 rods of Massachusetts Hall, the only college building, and to hire a Congregational minister. The money had to be refunded if a minister of another denomination was installed. The College was assigned a pew for the use of the President and College officers and a gallery for students (the north gallery in the second meetinghouse; the south gallery in the third meetinghouse [this building]). According to the terms of the agreement the College would have use of the building for opening convocation ceremonies, during Commencement week (including graduation

exercises), and for other events, provided that requests were submitted ten days in advance and that the College pay for any damages that might result from use.

The new meetinghouse occupied a central place in Brunswick – at the intersection of the road from Portland and the falls of the Androscoggin River; the road to New Meadows and Bath; the road to the coast at Maquoit Bay, and the Harpswell road, which, until 1949, ran through the campus between Adams Hall and Massachusetts Hall (lining up with the short segment that runs behind the chancel window). There was a tavern built in 1802 right across the street on the edge of the College grounds. For many years it was a stage coach stop and was a source of temptation for a young Nathaniel Hawthorne and other students, as well, as an even greater source of inconvenience for college presidents and faculty determined to enforce the rules of the College. The tavern was bought by the College and was moved to Noble Street in 1842, where it still stands as a private residence.

At the time of the first Commencement in 1806 the second meetinghouse was nearly complete, although heavy rains and a leaky roof forced President McKeen to use an umbrella during the ceremonies. Until the 1920s College rules required that students attend a church on Sunday. Parental permission or a self-declaration for students of age was needed to attend a church in Brunswick or Topsham other than First Parish. Attendance did not always mean attention, however. At an 1871 Bowdoin Alumni Association dinner in New York, Reverend George Adams responded to a toast “To the South Gallery of the Old Church and Its Occupants”: “Speaking literally I should say there was little to be seen there, except a row of boots, more or less highly polished, generally less, resting on the bulwark in front. Whether there were human feet in those boots, and human bodies connected with those feet, and heads attached to those bodies, and brains to those heads, this deponent will not now venture to determine. The whole Congregation knew about the boots; they were obvious to the meanest capacity: the brains, not so obvious.” The south gallery was sometimes referred to as “Dr. Adams’ Boot and Shoe Display.”

The galleries (north for servants; south for students) are graced with exquisite stained-glass windows. The south window (Matthew and Mark) was given in memory of Professor William Smyth of the Bowdoin Class of 1822. According to son George, the name was pronounced with a long “i.” Smyth was an outspoken abolitionist, a founding member of the Board of Managers of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, a founder of the Maine society in 1834, editor of an abolitionist newspaper, and a person who harbored runaway slaves in his home. While architect Richard Upjohn was in Brunswick to work on the Bowdoin Chapel, Smyth persuaded him to design First Parish’s third meetinghouse. Smyth was a tireless “clerk-of-the-works” for the construction of the Bowdoin Chapel, and the third meetinghouse. He made modifications to the square tower of Upjohn’s church, adding a spire, and then making adjustments when the spire blew down in a storm. He was the driving force and fundraiser for Memorial Hall as well.

The north window (Luke and John) celebrates Professor Alpheus Spring Packard. Packard was eight years old when he accompanied his father to the dedication of the second meetinghouse. After joining the Bowdoin faculty, Packard and Smyth lived in the halves of a house on College Street designed by Samuel Melcher, the builder of the Second Meetinghouse.

Packard holds the record for the longest active service by a faculty member at an American college or university – 65 years – a record that is unlikely to be broken. At First Parish he was the superintendent of the Sunday School for 25 years, treasurer for 34 years, a deacon for 25 years, and a long-time member of the music committee. Like Smyth he is known to have aided runaway slaves.

On the subject of slavery... You are, no doubt, familiar with the story of how Harriet Beecher Stowe experienced a vision of the death of Uncle Tom while sitting in pew 23, and then went to her home on Federal Street to write the book that some claim began the Civil War. In *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she wrote that the character of Uncle Tom was based in part on Phebe Jacobs, an African-American woman who born a slave and was a companion to Maria Wheelock, the young daughter of the president of Dartmouth College. Phebe came to Brunswick after her mistress married President William Allen (Bowdoin's third president). She lived independently following the death of Mrs. Allen, and was known for her piety and her close friendship with Reverend and Mrs. Adams. She died on the same night as her good friend, Sarah Adams. Although he was grieving the loss of his wife, Reverend Adams officiated at Phebe's funeral, saying that if his wife "...had been permitted to choose a companion to accompany her through the 'dark valley' and into the open portals of heaven, she would have chosen Phebe." Phebe is buried in Pine Gove Cemetery, next to Maria Wheelock Allen.

It is sometimes said that the Civil War began and ended in Brunswick, starting with Stowe's book and ending when Joshua Chamberlain oversaw the surrender of Confederate arms at Appomattox in April of 1865. Chamberlain's life is interwoven with the history of the church and the College – he directed the choir while he was a student, married the step-daughter of Reverend and Mrs. Adams, became a faculty member and later president of the College, and gave the chancel window in memory of Rev. Adams. [Chamberlain's pew, number 64, is located off the side aisle on the right as you enter the church].

There are other Brunswick bookends for the war – in this building future president of the Confederate States of America Jefferson Davis received an honorary degree from Bowdoin in 1858 – in a ceremony that also included an honorary degree for Senator William Pitt Fessenden, who held strong abolitionist views. Davis had been Secretary of War for President Franklin Pierce, a member of the Bowdoin Class of 1824. The awarding of an honorary degree to Lt. General Ulysses Grant here in 1865, less than four months after the war ended, provides the other bookend for the war.

More than 13,000 Bowdoin alumni and honorary degree recipients received degrees in Commencement ceremonies in the meetinghouses of First Parish Church over a 161-year span. The last Bowdoin Commencement exercises in First Parish Church were held in 1966. The completion of Morrell Gymnasium offered a greater seating capacity for a while, and now Bowdoin takes its chances with the weather in holding outdoor graduation ceremonies. The 2001 Opening Convocation was the last one at First Parish Church.

As for "other occasions," there have been some notable ones over the years. From this pulpit Henry Wadsworth Longfellow delivered his poem "Morituri Salutamus" at his 50th Reunion in 1875. Now that I've had my 40th Reunion, Longfellow doesn't seem as old as he

once did to me. Until the mid-1960s, the First Parish Church had the largest seating capacity of any building in town. Eleanor Roosevelt spoke here in 1942, at the invitation of the Delta Upsilon Fraternity. And then there was the speech by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in May of 1964. There was little advance notice of First Parish's involvement in the program because it was arranged at the last minute. King and civil rights leader Bayard Rustin had been invited – again by students – to talk at Bowdoin. Rustin's talk the previous night strained the capacity of Pickard Theater, and it was decided to change the venue for King's address to this grand setting – with the gracious consent of First Parish. I was there that night – squeezed into a pew in the south transept, as my parents found room in the packed hall for their three children wherever they could. As a ten-year-old, I didn't get all of the political and historical references, but I've never experienced the power of words with greater intensity than I did on that occasion.

First Parish Church and Bowdoin College share a proud history, but I would suggest that church's – and the College's – commitment to inclusion, compassion, and faith point to an even prouder present and future. In these times, Bowdoin President Roger Howell's words at the re-dedication of the house once owned Professors William Smyth and Alpheus Spring Packard as the College's African-American Center in 1979 seem especially appropriate: "...we are under an obligation to strive for a student body reflective of the marvelous diversity of American society, and that sense of obligation must not fade... it is all too easy to stray off the path, to become entangled in the briars and thorns that line its route, to sit down discouraged because the walking is difficult and the climbing harder still...Our vision...must be to the future. We will walk on—and we will walk on together—and [we] will be the better ... for it."

Thank you.