

Boston University

## **First Parish Church in Brighton**

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The First Parish Church in Brighton was established in 1744, at the northeast corner of Market and Washington streets in Brighton Center. In 1808, moving across Washington Street, a larger and more elaborate church replaced the original building, where it also took on the function of Brighton's first Town Hall. Having long prospered in Brighton Center, this significant landmark was the dominant moral, religious, and social force in the early days of Brighton. However, the once historically significant church gradually began to lose its status in the center of Brighton, partially due to disrepair of the premises as the building began to show its age.

In 1889, the Parish Committee wrote a letter to church families, announcing a fundraising effort for repairs to the old church in order to replace the original roof, paint the pews and floors, and replace the ceilings, walls, and windows. The Committee believed that the repairs would restore the church to its former status as a pleasant place of prayer, one that would "...afford a great pleasure to be able to welcome friends into a neat and comfortable house." [1] To the Committee, the beauty of the old church building reflected the strength and beauty of the church society, demonstrating "...its ability to resist the tide and the tooth of time." [2]

Preserving the original church building had long been a sacred value among the parish committee. However, this value was not always shared among all members of the congregation, as a proposition to remove the old church to another location was heavily debated as early as 1836, only 28 years after the building's

construction.[8] Nevertheless, a compromise was reached by way of a thorough renovation and extensive improvement which took place in 1843-44. Even this provoked criticism; "...the action of a short-sighted parish committee brought about such dissension that several entire families left the church. The members of the parish, who had always lived under the eaves of the church, refused to have a new church built upon another site; so the old building was repaired and the vestry extended to the west wall, taking in two rooms which had been let by the parish committee for very material purposes, and for which said committee was justly condemned," wrote a member of the Ladies' Association, further noting that, "Of the new-comers in the town, a majority were not of our faith, and many of the minority who believed in our profession were repelled by the dilapidation and decay of our ancient temple." [9]

During the 1880s and 1890s, the First Church was losing its dominant influence in the center of Brighton, at a time in which Brighton Center's commercial prosperity was facilitated by the relocation of cattle yards to North Brighton, as well by improvements in transportation. The church was located at the main intersection of Brighton Center, where commercial enterprises flocked in to build architecturally distinguished commercial blocks. Having been taken a portion of the church lot by the town to widen Market street, the church was becoming an anomalous presence in Brighton's fast-growing commercial center.[10] "The church is to be removed and instead, a block containing stores and offices is to be erected in its place. Now the

widening of Washington Street should be begun without delay. No one cares to begin the erection of any building until Washington Street is laid out on the new lines proposes,” argued an 1892 edition of the Boston Globe.[16]

In 1890, the parish committee finally decided to erect a new church in a new location. Ending the long struggle between parish committee members and congregation, the momentous decision was eventually made by one person, Reverend Albert Walkley. “Rev. Walkley’s earnest efforts and interest taken in the welfare of the parish and growth of the society in the future caused a change to be made and the building of the handsome new edifice of worship on Chestnut Hill Avenue was the result,” written in the First Church Records.[3]

Rev. Walkley, a charismatic, tireless person, came to the First Church of Brighton in 1890, convinced that building a new church would “...make the old First Parish as successful in the future as it had been in the past.”[11] Rev.Walkley was pastor of five churches in his lifetime; out of those, he oversaw the building of three stone properties, in Manistee, Michigan, in Brighton, and finally in Ottawa. His efforts on behalf of church construction were well acknowledged by parish members, who they recorded their debt to him for the erection of their substantial structure, and regarded him as the great church builder of the nineteenth century.[12]

In 1892, after the parish had agreed to the construction of a new church, the committee sold the old building to Frederick A. Moore at the cost of \$16,000 and

signed a two-year lease agreement.[4] In 1893, land for the new church was selected by the building committee, which had been specially organized for this task. Among the candidate sites was a piece of land offered by George Wilson and B.F. Ricker, located at the corner of Washington and Parsons Streets, two blocks away from the old church on Washington Street.[5] Rather than remaining in the Brighton's commercial center, however, the First Parish Church of Brighton instead elected to move to a suburban area on Chestnut Hill Avenue. The chosen lots belonged to Sarah E. Waugh and the heirs of William Warren: a parcel of 15,000 square feet from Waugh and another parcel of the same size from Warren's heirs.

The Chestnut Hill lots were chosen, in part, due to the strong affinity between the First Church and Warren family; however, their relatively low cost was also a factor. Webster F. Warren, a brother of William Wirt Warren, had been Clerk of the Parish for thirty seven years, since 1873.[7] During the construction of the church, he oversaw trust funds for the Parish, as well as part of the purchasing process; he would therefore have had substantial influence in the decision to build on Chestnut Hill Avenue. The more decisive factor, however, was likely the economic contribution made by Warren and Sarah Waugh. The lot for sale at Parsons and Washington Streets was offered at 50 cents per square foot; despite the 19<sup>th</sup> century "development fever" for building in the area around Chestnut Hill Avenue, these two parish members appear to have offered their lands at half that price—25 cents per square foot—as a form of contributions to their church. The

dedication of those living on Chestnut Hill at that time is implied in the Church's record: "The hearty co-operation of every inhabitant of those beautiful hills and valleys which surround our new location is asked for and expected." [13] The First Parish Church purchased the land on Chestnut Hill Avenue for a sum of \$10,000 and planned to construct the new edifice over both of the two adjoining lots, erasing the dividing line between the two estates. [17]

Although the motivation for the new construction on Chestnut Hill Avenue was economic, the suburban landscape on Chestnut Hill must have also been more than attractive to parish members. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the area around Chestnut Hill Reservoir was rapidly growing into one of the prettiest neighborhoods in Boston, with the residential area along Chestnut Hill Avenue largely set aside for single family homes. These circumstances would have encouraged the parish's hope that the church would recover from the depression encountered in Brighton Center, strengthened by its new and growing neighborhood, as illustrated by an 1894 edition of the Christian Register: "The building will certainly attract attention; and, surrounded by a growing neighborhood, there seems every promise for an increasing usefulness." [18]

The church's idealistic image of the neighborhood, surrounded by the houses of wealthy people, is also reflected in the Ladies' Association note: "From the tower of that church will be seen the clustered homes of intelligence, of wealth, and refinement." [14] This prospect would prove so attractive for its members that

certain prominent families, previously connected to the church in Brighton Center, had also made the move to be close to their new church; for example, Arthur Everett, from 478 Shawmut Avenue to 8 Chestnut Hill Avenue; William H Downes, from 552 Columbus Avenue to 83 Sutherland Rd; and Frederic A. Tupper, from 372 Walnut Street in Newton to 7 Menlo Street. Dedicated in 1895, the new building in Chestnut Hill indeed meant a new life to the First Parish Church.



*Figure 1 First Parish Church on corner of Chiswick and Chestnut Hill Ave., Brighton Allston Historical Society*

Elegant, substantial, and beautifully equipped, the stone edifice was designed by the Boston architectural firm Cabot, Everett & Mead, to which one of the parish members, Arthur G. Everett, belonged. As a first step of construction on

Chestnut Hill, the natural territory was excavated under the direction of these architects; the entire lot was leveled and the stone was blasted on the lot. A great ledge of rock upon the land offered the architects an opportunity for the use of local material in the construction; boulders, excavated from the natural landscape, were carved down to appropriate scale for the church's walls. Seam-faced granite, which was often referred to as sap-faced because of the reddish-brown color bleeding through it, was also used for quoins and in the window-jambs, facilitating firm lines and well-defined angles.[19] Dressed stone was used only by practical necessity—in window-sills, lintels, and belts—and not in such quantity as to mar the effect of the natural faces composing the mass of the wall.

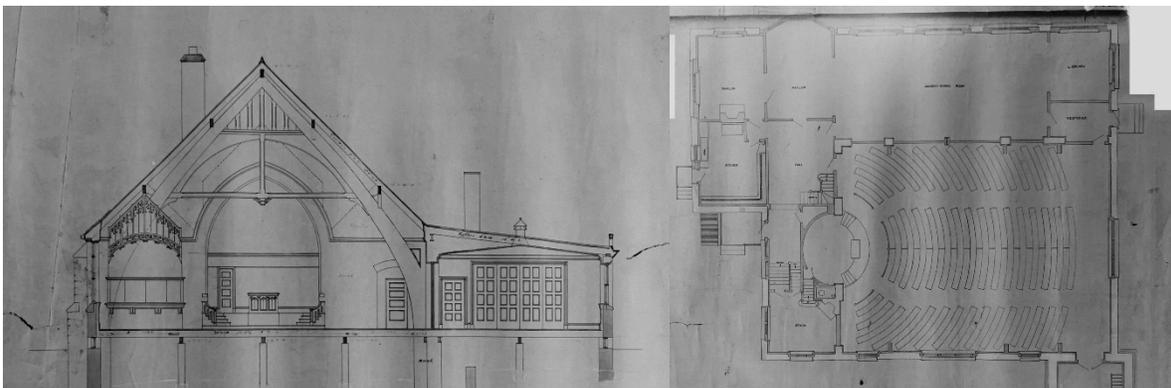
The new stonework was massive and solid. The previous church on the corner of Market and Washington Streets had been a simple, rectangular building, featuring classical architectural details such as pediments and orders in front of the tower which rises above the building (Fig. 2). That building had also been unidirectional, its windows regularly arranged side by side in the wall; the main entrance was located at the center, and the front of the building was emphasized through a protruding wall. In contrast, the new church had a more complicated form consisting of many different shapes, angles, and varying heights; the windows were irregular



in both size and form, and the semi-circular apse of the chapel perceivable on the south end from outside of the building. Above all, the combination of excavated stones, verdant lawn, and plants climbing the outer walls gives the church the appearance of being sprung from the natural terrain.

Inside the church, almost one entire side of the structure was occupied by a large auditorium, lit by two large windows on the north and the east. A pastor's room was built in the southeast corner, with the connecting pulpit housed partly within a niche and lit by a window from above. The principal entrance to the church was located on Chestnut Hill Avenue, through the square bell tower at the northeast corner of the building. The second entrance—also from Chestnut Hill Avenue—is at the southern end of the building leading into the hall, allowing access to the parlors and the Sunday school room without passing through the sanctuary. A third entrance, built on the church's north end, was intended as a convenient approach for those coming from the direction of Foster Street. A kitchen was placed at the southern end of the building with a separate entrance, allowing access to the hall through a vestibule.[22]

Notably, a large Sunday school room running parallel to the church occupies



nearly an entire side of the facade. The educational space, lit by a series of square windows, was separated from the auditorium not by solid walls, but by cypress doors, which could be lowered into the basement[20]; therefore, the event that more seating than usual was required, the two spaces could be combined into one spacious room. Considering that the Sunday school was given so much space within the church, its operation would have been a key feature in the new church's efforts to facilitate social bonds with its neighbors. The Wayside Pulpit, a religious and educational message board inaugurated by Rev. Dr. Henry Saunderson, minister of the First Church from 1919, may have been placed in front of the Church facing the school room.

The new church also honored its past through a series of memorials. The north window, called the "Ministers' Window," was erected in memory of the Revs. Mr. Whitney, Dr. Foster and Mr. Austin, former pastors of the church; the window consists of three panels depicting "Christ sending out his disciples to preach." Another window over the Sunday school room, a gift from Miss Susan L. Pierce, bears a design of grapes and the passion flower; a king's daughter window bears a silver cross in memory of Miss Warren, founder of a circle named after her.[23]

The one object exempted from sale of the old church was the Paul Revere bell, placed in its belfry in 1821.[24] Upon completion of the new church, the bell was relocated into its square tower on Chestnut Hill Avenue. When the First Church



Figure 4 Ministers' Window and Paul Revere Bell.

of Brighton disbanded in 1941 and its building was leased to the Bethesda Lodge of Masons, the bell was nearly sold to the

Community Church of New York. In a letter to the Parish Committee, the Community Church wrote, "We shall during the next couple of years be making out plans for a new building next door to the church, and at the same time will probable want to plan some kind of a small bell tower if we are to have a bell." [7] These intentions, however, were never realized. The Paul Revere bell remains in the church building's bell tower and though it does not ring on a regular basis as before, it still rings in special occasions according to the Zen center's plan, the current owner of the building; the last time it rang, for instance, was on the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of 9/11.

When the new church was built on Chestnut Hill Avenue, the land selected by the First Parish in Brighton was perfectly situated for the new church on high

ground which commands "...the view from every direction." [21] All sides of the building were visible to passengers from streets, ensuring its prominence in the residential district. This position as a neighborhood landmark did not last long, however, as the area's landscape soon changed.

Instead of the single-family houses originally planned for the area, apartment building construction was growing in the suburban area, triggered by the electrification of street railways and the increase in middle class attraction to the area. Within the church's immediate vicinity, three-stories apartments began to be built along Chiswick, Strathmore, Lothian, and Sooth Street on the south side of the church; in 1917, the south facade of the church became obstructed from Chestnut

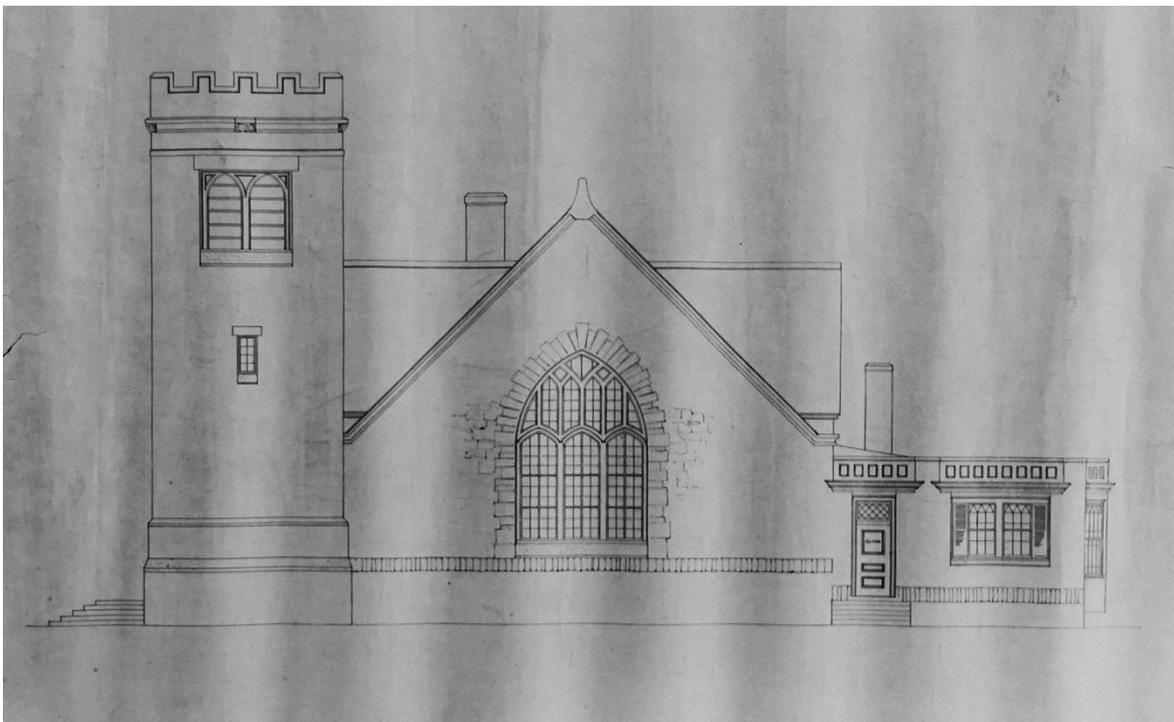


*Figure 5 South Elevation of First Parish Church in Brighton.*

Hill Avenue due to three stories apartments built next to the church. In 1921,

Connolly's Garage was built a short distance to the north of the church, while more, three-story apartments were built between the church and the garage in 1928.

This wave of apartment construction even changed original road plans. In the 1925 Bromley map of Brighton, Chiswick Road—facing the north end of the church—had not yet appeared, but the road's construction would have been facilitated in 1928, when an apartment was built facing the north side of the church, at 189 Chestnut Hill Avenue. The construction of Chiswick Road also required the building of a wall between the church and the road due to the difference in levels between the land on the hill. This cement wall not only mars the view of the church's natural faces, but also blocks the entrance on the northern end of the building, which directly led to the Sunday school. Furthermore, the west side



*Figure 6 North Elevation of First Parish Church in Brighton.*

of the church, intended to be highly visible to anyone walking along the sloping hill from the direction of Foster Street, was also obstructed after two-story family houses were built along Chiswick Road in 1931.

Not only the changes in the physical context, but also in the area's social fabric—namely, the growth of the immigrant and college student populations—contributed to the gradual decline of the church's influence. Although the overall population in the residential area had increased, the population of the neighborhood in relation to the church had decreased. By 1941, many of the congregation's older members were gone, leaving few opportunities for recruitment to the parish; the ranks of the church became so thin that the congregation eventually disbanded. However, the church still maintained the parish's legal existence through the cooperation of the Bethesda Lodge of Masons, another local organization, founded in 1819.

In 1941, the First Church leased its building to the Bethesda Lodge of Masons, which had been socially connected with the church for a long time; the same surnames appear on the list of original members of both societies, such as Livermore of George B. Livermore, Marshall of Cyrus E. Marshall, Marion, Warren, and Sparhawk.[15] When the Lodge leased and occupied the church building for its meetings, members of the Masons were elected to the membership of the Parish. Under this arrangement, the building and surrounding property retained their tax-free status, while the Parish maintained its legal existence in Brighton. The

remaining congregants of the First Parish Church of Brighton, however, eventually joined the First Parish in Brookline.[25]

The First Parish Church of Brighton had been previously associated with several churches in both Brighton and Allston, which would likely have been more familiar to congregants, and more conveniently located. Nonetheless, the First Church's



*Figure 7 First Church in Brookline, MA. The Photograph Co.*

members settled on the First Parish in Brookline, perhaps because of the church's image, which is nearly identical to the ideal that the First Church pursued when it originally chose to relocate on Chestnut Hill Avenue. Located in a suburban area, the First Parish in Brookline stands surrounded by trees and nature, and single-family houses are sparsely scattered around the church so that the church is perceived from every direction.

As the owner of the church building changed, the building's appearance has also changed. When Bethesda Lodge of Masons first occupied the building, the auditorium was turned into a lodge room; a passage and a preparation room were added on the north end of the building; a library was turned into a platform, a parlor into a coat room, and the Sunday school room became a banquet hall; and the cypress doors between the auditorium and the Sunday school were replaced by

concrete walls. Otherwise, however, the existing building including the original exterior and ceiling structure was well-preserved. The work of alteration and addition was planned to match with existing details; for instance, doors added at this time were designed to match existing doors in the church. Therefore, the additions are not easily distinguishable, in terms of design and material, from the original construction.

In 1981, the second alteration to the building was made when the Bethesda lodge of masons sold the building to the American Buddhist Shim Gum Do Association. The new owner added a side porch and a greenhouse along the building's south side, as well as a parking lot with space available for ten cars. Additionally the parlors, library, pastor's room, and preparation room added by the Masons were turned into bedrooms for the Temple residents. Other than these changes, the new owner has carefully preserved the existing building; the old bell tower and windows have been repaired and repainted, trees planted; a garden space, decorated with statues was created around the site; and some original furniture, including the kitchen shelves, original columns, and decorative furniture are preserved and still in use today.

## **Conclusion**

A place's original days and its identity, as well as changes that the place has undergone are revealed through the reading of its landscape as well as architecture

of the place. The First Parish Church of Brighton, which contributed to forming the area's identity as Brighton Center in the first place, had lost its identity, established in its place. This loss not only represents a loss of the strength and beauty of the church due to the building's deterioration, but also reveals the changes in social demand for the commercial intersection in which the church was located for a long time. In other words, the religious and educational identity of the church was superseded by the rising commercial value of Brighton Center. As a result, this depression caused the First Church to relocate from the commercial center to Chestnut Hill Avenue—a newly emerging attractive suburban area.

Although the site selection was influenced by both economic factors and social factors related to the church community, the landscape of Chestnut Hill reveals the ideal that the First Church pursued; that the new church would be surrounded by fine homes of intelligence, of wealth, and refinement; and the natural face composing the mass of the wall would make the church appear comfortable and attractive in its beautiful suburban setting. However, this ideal did not last long due to the changing physical and social context around the area, which eventually changed the context inside the building as well.

Although the church is now given a new identity as an American Buddhist center, its previous physical form, which was built of solid rock, is relatively well preserved—mainly because of the efforts of new owners who have been interested in the historical value of the building. Therefore, the presence of the First Parish

Church building serves as medium to remind us of its past identity and the old days of Brighton, as well as revealing the building's new identity through its changed landscape.

## Notes

[1] "First Congregational Church and Society in Brighton (Brighton, Boston, Mass.) Records, 1721-1966.". Harvard Divinity School.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] "The Ladies' Association. First Parish in Brighton, 1829-1894.". In *First Parish in Brighton*, 62. Harvard University.

[9] Ibid., 16-62.

[10] Ibid., 43.

[11] Ibid., 23.

[12] Ibid., 64.

[13] Ibid., 65.

[14] Ibid., 65.

[15] Ibid., 1.

[16] "About You and Your Friends, Brighton." *Boston post*, December 31 1892, 7.

[17] "Church Home. New Edifice of Brighton Unitarians. To Be Dedicated Today." *Boston Sunday Post*, March 31 1895, 2.

[18] "First Parish, Brighton, Mass." *The Christian Register*, July 12 1894, 439.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] "First Parish Church, Brighton." *The Boston Daily Globe*, June, 14 1894, 7.

[23] "Church Home. New Edifice of Brighton Unitarians. To Be Dedicated Today." *Boston Sunday Post*, March 31 1895, 2.

[24] Baldwin, William H. "Our Farewell to the Old Meeting-House ", 43, 1895.

[25] "Church Home. New Edifice of Brighton Unitarians. To Be Dedicated Today." *Boston Sunday Post*, March 31 1895, 2.

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