

The Chapel: A part of Acton history

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Driving along Main Street through Acton Center, one might almost miss the small brick-front building, (No. 504) set back from the road and nestled among the trees. Yet this building, built in 1829 and known as "the Chapel," has a history that, in many ways, parallels Acton's own.

The 1820s were a time of political unrest in Massachusetts. While the Puritans had come to America in search of religious freedom, they had established their own churches which, in time, came to dominate public life. During the 1820s, differing opinions about the roles of Church and State began to boil over, leading to protests in the towns and, eventually, to a battle through the courts and the state legislature that resulted in an 1833 amendment to the Constitution, separating Church and State.

The First Congregational Church of Acton was directly affected by this spirit of protest and divisiveness. The minister, Reverend Marshall Shedd, who had come to the church in 1820, worked hard to maintain harmony, but a rift began to develop between those members who held a traditional view of the role of the church and those with more liberal views. In 1829, some of the more orthodox members decided to build a small chapel on Main Street near the Common, where they could hold private worship services.

The Chapel was built in the Federal style that was typical of the era. The sides of the two-story building were clapboard, but the brick front and back were more stylish than many of the buildings of the time. The front pediment, or gable, had two quarter-circle windows facing the common. Entry to the vestry was through two doors on either side of the brick front facade.

In the late 1820s, Acton was a growing town with a population of over 1,000. Development of Acton Center had begun in 1806 with the building of a new Town Hall and several houses around the common. By the 1830s, Acton Center was fairly built up. In addition to the Chapel and the Town Hall, a store, the Brooks tavern and about a dozen houses lined the area surrounding the Common.

In 1831, Reverend Shedd succumbed to the doctrinal differences within the church and left. The following year, a group of 59 members formally withdrew from the Congregational Church to form a separate, more orthodox church, the Evangelical Society of Acton, under the leadership of Reverend James Trask Woodbury. Services were held in the Chapel on Main Street.

By 1833, the Evangelical Society's membership had grown so that a new, larger meeting house was built across the common, on the site of the current Congregational Church. The Chapel was converted into a residential dwelling, but remained in church ownership until 1839. Rumors persist that the basement may have been used as a stop on the Underground Railway during the mid-1800s.

In the early 1900s, the Chapel began to fall into disrepair. In contrast to the earlier tenants, who had lived in the house for long periods of time and maintained the property, the new tenants became shorter-term occupants. At times, as many as four families were living in the small house.

Modern times

In 1922, the Chapel was purchased for \$8,000 by the Acton Woman's Club, a group that had been formed ten years earlier as a social and philanthropic organization. After years of meeting in members' homes and church vestries, the Club had, in 1920, purchased a house at the corner of Main Street and Nagog Hill Road. While the members of the Club were happy to have a place for their activities, the building did not have adequate space to hold the entire membership for their monthly meetings. When the Chapel became available for sale, the Woman's Club purchased it with plans to rebuild and renovate the historic building.

Renovation of the Chapel took months. Under the guidance of architect Edwin Clark, partitions dividing the large rooms into multiple apartments were removed. Fireplaces



The Acton Woman's Club building on Main Street. (photo by Ann Chang)

were restored. An addition to the back of the building included a new kitchen and upstairs space. Electricity, plumbing and heating systems were installed.

The front facade of the building was altered by the elimination of the two doors at either side, which were converted to windows and replaced with Georgian-style doors along the clapboard side walls. Interior spaces were painted and papered to reflect the style of the building's era. The furnishings, which were acquired largely through donations from the members, supported the style of the building's decor, although, as Woman's Club president Virginia Rhude notes, they are geared toward comfort and usability rather than as "museum pieces." In 1924, the Chapel was officially opened as the home of the Acton Woman's Club.

The Chapel has always been a well-used building. The Woman's Club holds its monthly meetings in the building, beginning with a buffet in the downstairs sitting and dining rooms, then moving upstairs to the larger hall for speakers and presentations. The Chapel also is the locus for much of the Club's fundraising, and for such philanthropic activities as gathering food for monthly donations to the Acton Community Supper and for gifts of Christmas cookies for elderly residents in the area.

Behind the building lies a large rose garden, planted in memory of the late Mabel Jenks, former president and long time member. At least a dozen varieties of roses border the large, oval-shaped garden, which is dotted with white benches. The rose garden, as well as foundation plantings, an herb garden and other plantings and landscaping details, follow a design typical of the gardens of the early 19th century. With generous open spaces, and visually accessible to neighbors and passersby, these gardens are meant for walking in and enjoying.

The Chapel, designated a national historic landmark in 1983, is maintained through the fundraising efforts of the Acton Woman's Club. These fundraising activities include twice-yearly pie sales, held on the front lawn, and dance classes for children in grades 5 through 8, conducted in the large, second-floor function room. The building also is available for rental for private parties and functions.

Excess funds, as well as the energies and talents of Woman's Club members, are used to support a variety of community services and philanthropic activities. The Club has a 55-year tradition of giving scholarships to graduating high school seniors. Weekly teas are served to lift the spirits of elderly residents of the Suburban Manor Nursing Home, and the Club supports the Fuel Assistance Fund, the Widowed Persons Fund, Project Graduation, and many other community programs. Club members also knit caps and scarves for donation at the Acton Community Supper and sew "comfort quilts" to give to battered women and children.

As Ms. Rhude notes, the Acton Woman's Club is dedicated to the dual mission of preserving the historic Chapel and of using this building as a home base for its charitable and community service activities.