



Above image--An etching of the second church, which was done in 1839 by John Barber in his *Historical Collections: being a general collection of interesting facts, traditions, biographical sketches, anecdotes, &c., relating to the history and antiquities of every town in Massachusetts, with geographical descriptions.*

Although it says "Southern View", it is actually looking north. The Universalist Church can be seen in the distance.

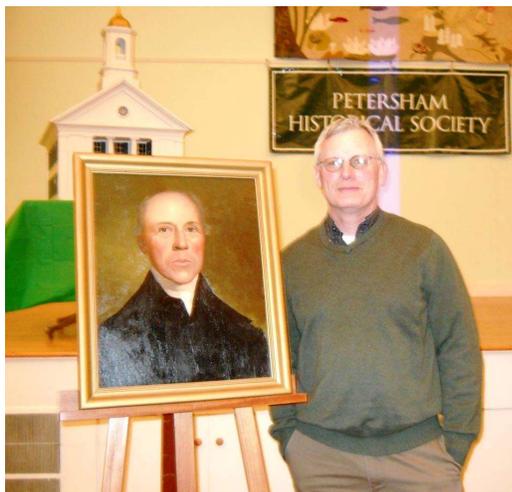
History of the First Congregational Parish, Unitarian, Petersham, Massachusetts *Beginnings Trace to 1733*

In **October 1733** seventy-two house lots were drawn including the one set aside for the use of the **minister**, and a petition was made to the General Court for incorporation as a township. The courts prepared the documents for incorporation, but left the name of the town blank until 1754, when the town officially became incorporated. Court officials selected the name of an old English town, Petersham, for the name of this new town.

Also in 1733 a vote was also taken to **build a house of worship and instruction** and two years later, **in 1735, the First Meeting House was built** at the northwest corner of what would become the Village Cemetery. "This first house of worship was fifty feet long and forty feet wide. The front door was on the south side, the pulpit on the northern. It was without spire, unpainted, with windows of small diamond-shaped glass set in lead." (*Coolidge*)

The first preaching was done in the month of May 1736 by Mr. Ephriam Keith. Various ministers were employed until **December 1738 when Aaron Whitney was ordained and settled as minister.** He remained minister until May 1775, when he was forbidden to preach from the pulpit because he was a Tory, which resulted in his being locked out of the church and a guard placed at the door to make sure that he didn't try to come back in. He continued to preach from his own house to those who "were politically in sympathy with him." (*Coolidge*) Years later at the time of the fourth meeting house which is the current church, there was a **marble plaque placed above the pulpit wall that reads, "Aaron Whitney, First minister of this church, 1738 - 1775, True to his convictions."**

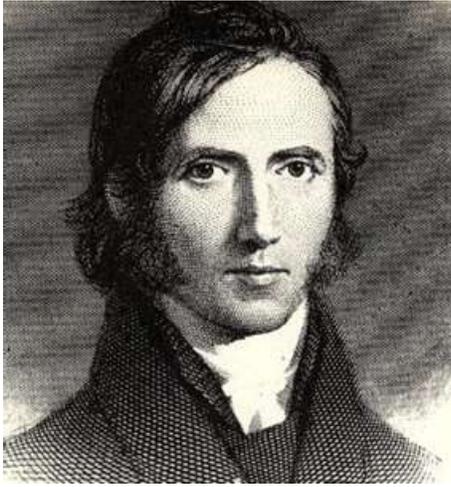
The second minister was Rev. Solomon Reed who was ordained at the Meeting House on October 28th, 1780 and was dismissed from his ministry on June 25th, 1800 for public drunkenness. During Rev. Reed's pastorate the **Second Meeting House was built in 1783.** This building was located on the south side and middle of the Town Green (Common). **A bell cast by Paul Revere and Sons was hung in this church steeple. The bell was recast in 1798 and encircled by the inscription "The living to the church I call and to the grave I summon all."** After the dismissal of Rev. Reed, the town was without a minister for over a year. Then Rev. Festus Foster was called as the settled minister and remained to the end of the year 1817.



On June 23rd **1819, Rev Luther Willson was installed as the forth minister** of the Town Church. Rev. Willson is the most written about minister of the Petersham church to date. He began his studies at Yale but withdrew after a year to continue his studies at Williams College. He studied theology, as was the custom at the time, with the Rev. Zephaniah Swift Moore of Leicester, MA. He was ordained "junior pastor" of the First Church of Brooklyn, CT in 1813. That same year Williams College, in recognition of his educational work, conferred him the degree of Master of Arts.

Fred Day stands next to a portrait of his ancestor the Reverend Luther Willson who was installed as the first Unitarian minister in Petersham in 1819.

During his time in Brooklyn, **Willson's study of the scripture convinced him that the doctrine of the Trinity and the supreme deity of Jesus were not essentials or fundamentals of the Christian faith.** The church council at the time found this radical but recommended "mutual charity and the concession to one another of the liberty which each claims for himself." (*Coolidge*) There was a faction, however, in the congregation that wanted to see Willson dismissed. The disagreement threatened to cause a split in the church, so Willson asked that he be dismissed rather than be the cause of a rift. After Brooklyn, Willson was quite upset and considered leaving the ministry. Coolidge writes, "(He) was disposed to give up a calling which held such uncertainties for the conscientious seeker and upholder of truth."



Willson spent a week in Boston as the guest of William Ellery Channing who evidently convinced him to stay in the ministry. Channing also presented him with a watch "in recognition of his sturdy manhood." Shortly after his visit, Willson received a call to the Petersham Church. **The church in Petersham was just what Willson was seeking. "It did not require acceptance of the debated doctrines that had provoked widespread dissent of the Congregational fellowship, but left each member to follow his own conscience and convictions."** This was because there was a large liberal element in the community. However, there were some that were opposed to having a more liberal minister.

William Ellery Channing was the foremost Unitarian preacher in the United States in the early nineteenth century.

Within a few years of his arrival, some of the less liberal minded asked Rev. Willson to change his views and manner of preaching. But when he continued to expound what he regarded as "the pure undogmatic religion of our Lord Jesus Christ, the son of God but not God the Son." **Dissatisfied members withdrew and organized the North Congregational Church, which today is called the Orthodox Congregational Church of Petersham.** Willson served as pastor of the Petersham Church until October 18, 1834, when he resigned at the age of fifty-one. He continued to live in town until his death in 1848 preaching in various Unitarian pulpits. Dr. Andrew Peabody, writing of early Unitarians said of Luther Willson, that he left, "a spotless record of a life passed in simplicity and godly sincerity, and in close and constant following of his Saviour."

It was during Willson's tenure that a clock was installed in the belfry of the church. It was known as the town clock, and still is to this day, even in the fourth Meeting House—the present church. Every year the town sends a tax stipend to the church for the maintenance and repair of the clock. In 1900 the original clock was replaced by a new one presented to the Parish by the grandchildren of Rev. Willson. This was destroyed in the fire of 1905 and replaced by the present one.

In 1834 George R. Noyes, a native of Newport, RI was installed as minister. He remained as minister until 1840 when became a distinguished professor of Hebrew and lecturer on Biblical literature at Harvard University.

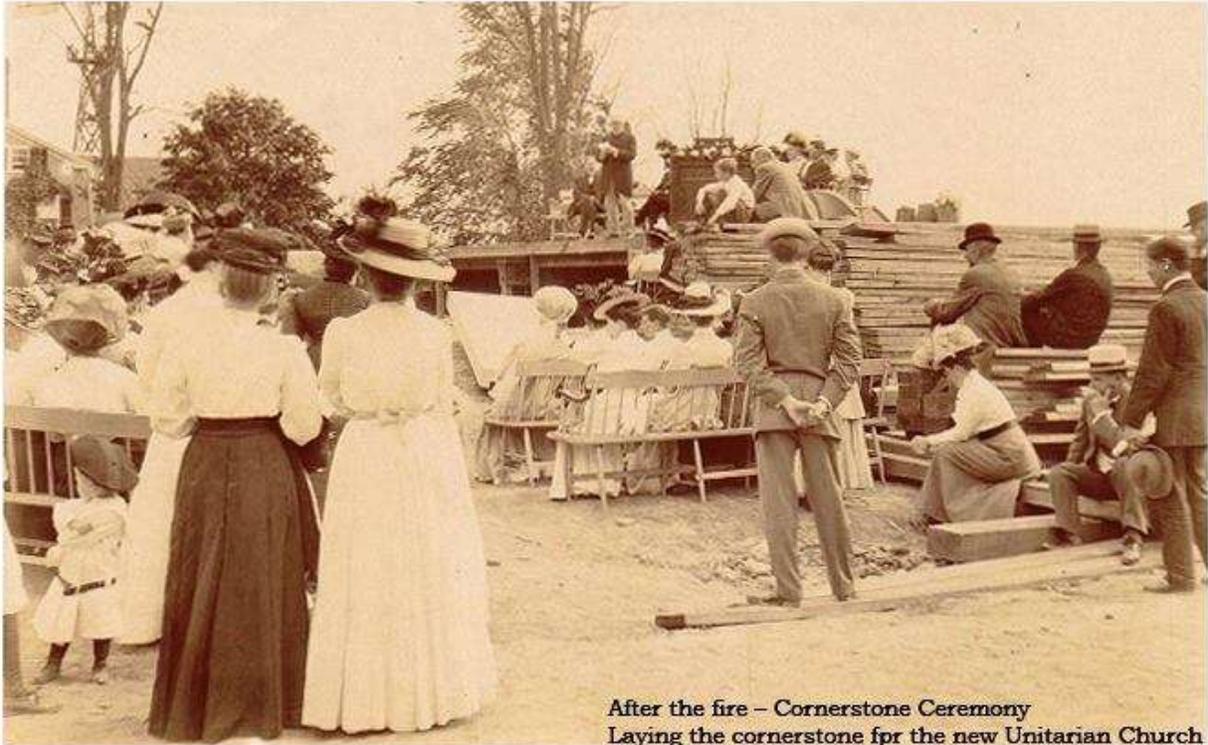
In 1833 by order of the General Court of Massachusetts church and state were separated.

In 1842 "The Unitarians built their own church, which became the Third Meeting House on the west side of the common and the town church, the Meeting House that was built in 1783 was moved to the east side of the Town Green beside the Town House and was burned with it on February 5th 1845, during one of the fiercest snow storms the town has ever known."
(Coolidge)

The third church was built on land bought from Jonas Howe (Simes house) for \$250.00. The architect was Edward Lamb, who was described as "an extensive builder" from Worcester and

may also have designed the First Church in Brimfield. (*Christine Mandell, Petersham Historical Society*)

In 1843 the first **Levee** was held. The Levee was an annual fund raising event held in January, originally on the night of the full moon so that the horses and carriages could find their way home. There was a dinner at the Unitarian Church and a ball (nowadays a dance) at the Town Hall. The whole town was invited. **The purpose of the event was to provide some additional support the church because of its loss of tax revenues.**



After the fire – Cornerstone Ceremony
Laying the cornerstone for the new Unitarian Church
July 2 1909

In 1908 the Third Meeting House burned during a severe drought which prevented saving the church; only the pulpit was saved. A week later, at a parish meeting an enthusiastic congregation pledged to rebuild and within one hour more than \$15,000 dollars was raised. The corner stone for the fourth Meeting House (current site) was laid on July 2, **1909**. The first church service was held in March of the following year. The formal dedication was held on June 10th with the Rev. W.W. Fenn, Dean of Harvard University preaching a sermon.