

Historic Deerfield

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Saints & Sinners

Samuel Willard & the Brick Church

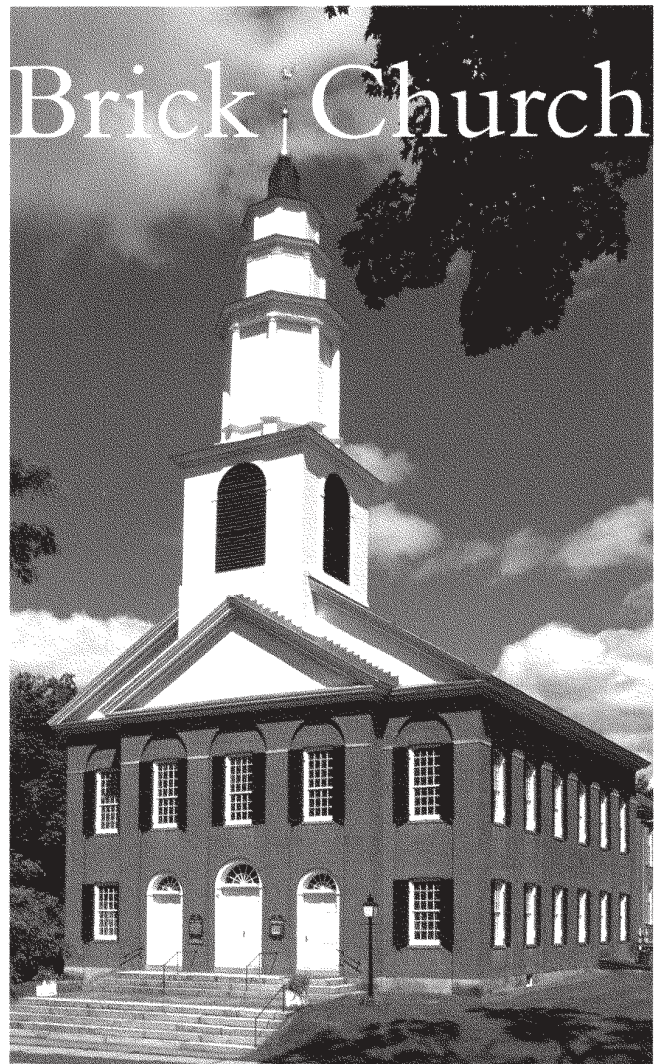
by Adam Voiland

The trip up the bell tower of the Brick Church in Deerfield begins with a flight of stairs that opens into an airy, whitewashed second floor vestibule. On the wall, towards the left, an intricate frame houses the portrait of a handsome man with wire-rimmed glasses and thinning hair.

It is a memorial plaque, and the inscription reads: "Rev. Samuel Willard: 1776–1859 . . . Pioneer of the Unitarian Movement in Western, MA . . . Scholar, Author, Patriot, and although blind, a leader for fifty years in educational, temperance, peace, and antislavery reforms. His life ever remains a challenge to future generations."

To the left of the plaque is a small, padlocked door that my guide, Wayne Turner, a long time member of the church and former teacher at Deerfield Academy, unlocks. As we step over the threshold onto a rickety staircase a twinge of the sublime seems to crackle through the air, for as we tread upward, each step seems to take us further back in time. Paint gives way to ragged, unfinished wood; magnificent, worn rafters and rusted support beams jut through a shadowy, ship-like cavern; a tattered bell rope snakes skyward, leading to ever narrower stages of the tower. Something about the air, too, is reminiscent of a time gone by. It is musty and full of mold and rich with stories. It tells of uncompromising church fathers, a persevering young minister, his graceful brick church, and a tightly knit town and a progressive congregation whose hopes for change would not be undone.

Deerfield had decided to build a new meetinghouse on February 17, 1823. The first cornerstone was laid on June 1, 1824, and a little less than two years after the process had begun, the village was ready to formally dedicate the handiwork of Montague builder Winthrop Clapp. The dedication of the Federal-style church, perched on a knoll, just north of the town common, must have been a sight to behold. The church, parts of which are reminiscent of the work of Clapp's mentor, Greenfield-born Isaac Damon, featured what a *Franklin Herald & Public Advertiser*



The Brick Church, built by Winthrop Clapp of Montague in 1824, is the fifth meetinghouse of the First Church of Deerfield. The building consists of recessed arches set in brick sides, a square wooden belfry, octagonal stages, and an elegant, Spartan interior that reflected the Yankee values of pragmatism, frugality, and simplicity.

reporter called “the very best materials.” As it does today, the restrained, planar building consisted of graceful recessed arches set in brick sides, a square wooden belfry, octagonal stages, and an elegant, spartan interior that aptly reflected the Yankee values of pragmatism, frugality, and simplicity. Atop, the glistening gold-leaved rooster that has graced Deerfield meetinghouses since 1731, gazed down on the village below.

The same *Herald* reporter, waxed poetic about the dedication ceremony, led by a middle-aged Reverend Samuel Willard: “The solemn and interesting performance from the pulpit, the soft enchanting strains of the music swelling and rising with ascriptions of praise to the great architect of nature, together with the silent attention of a crowded audience, all conspired to exclaim, truly, ‘this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of Heaven.’”

The triumph of the moment could not have been lost on the residents of Deerfield, who watched their once embattled, and now blind, minister stand proudly on a pulpit that towered over the congregation and preach an optimistic sermon about the future. “This beautiful house,” said Willard, “which has been brought to so happy a completion, and which we are professedly devoting to the service of God, we have built not for ourselves alone, but for our children, and our children’s children, perhaps for two or three centuries to come; and it is at once a sublime and affecting thought, that we are to take the lead in that long train of devotions, the consequence of which will be more august and important, than the rise and fall of empires.”

Willard’s words were not to be taken lightly, for in the eyes of most Deerfield residents, he was a man who understood adversity. Throughout the last 17 years, residents had watched him face and overcome a variety of obstacles, including a hostile clergy in the midst of his ordination and

the gradual worsening, and eventual loss, of his eyesight.

The story of Willard’s ordination begins in 1807. Deerfield, once a remote New England outpost, had entered a new era of security and prosperity following the close of the Revolutionary War. At the end of the 18th century, Deerfield Academy had been founded, libraries were established, new roads and bridges were being constructed, and manufacturing was blossoming. As in others parts of the burgeoning republic, the future seemed bright.

However, Deerfield was in need of a minister. To many residents Samuel Willard of Petersham, Massachusetts, seemed an ideal choice. The tall, slender man came from good stock, had graduated from Harvard in 1803, taught at both Exeter and Bowdoin, and gave forward-looking sermons.

On May 18, 1807, church members agreed to invite Willard to settle among them. The salary was fixed at \$666.66. On July 6, with a glowing letter, Willard accepted the invitation. Plans were made for his ordination on August 12, 1807. The ordaining council, which would consist of delegates from nine surrounding churches, would meet on the 11th. It did, and according to Deerfield resident and historian George Sheldon, “a long and searching examination of the candidate was made.”

After the deliberations a spokesman for the council released the following statement:

That the council having attentively and patiently examined the Pastor elect, as to his religious doctrines, found him to be a gentleman of rich talents and acquirements in theological knowledge, of a most amiable temper and disposition, and of an exemplary frankness and sincerity in communicating his opinions. But yet, after a long and patient investigation, the Council did not discover in him that belief of the true and essential Divinity of our LORD JESUS CHRIST, nor those sentiments respecting the entire moral depravity of man . . . The Council therefore, in fidelity to their Lord and Master, cannot proceed to separate him to work of the Gospel Ministry over the Church of Christ and the Congregation of God’s people in this town.

Most residents of Deerfield were furious at Willard’s rejection. After the ordination meeting some of the boys in the town heaved bowling stones at the shins of the council members in disgust. An angry letter from the town’s elders to the council called the ruling a “Dread Decision” and urged that Willard be ordained.

Reverend Willard later commented that after the rejection he found that the “attachement of the people increased rather than diminished.” Within a month and a half, in fact, the indignant town had arranged to convene a different council that would approve Willard, and on September 23, 1807, Willard was ordained.

A portrait of Samuel Willard, Deerfield’s minister from 1807 until 1827, hangs in the second floor vestibule of the Brick Church. Courtesy Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Memorial Hall Museum, Deerfield, Massachusetts.





ABOVE: Members of a 1925 church committee with the Brick Church weather-vane. Courtesy Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Memorial Hall Museum, Deerfield, Massachusetts.

ABOVE RIGHT: After work, Brick Church builder Winthrop Clapp often bought rum for his crew at Orlando Ware's store in Old Deerfield. Courtesy Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Memorial Hall Museum, Deerfield, Massachusetts.

1/2	Calvin	Shaw	Dr	32
1/2	For 4	Shaw	Booth	17
22	Winthrop	Clapp	Dr	
1/2	For 2	Gale	W.B. Penn	1 80
	2	Stone	guy	50
1/2	Calvin	Shaw	Dr	
1/2	For 1	Swiss	Lobacco	25



Willard was not without his detractors, however. After his ordination a determined minority from the southern end of town requested a division of both the town and the funds raised by the town ministerial tax.

One petition read: "We are conscious in our own minds of a very essential difference in opinion from the Reverend Willard on some of the most important doctrines of the Gospel & consequently cannot derive that instruction & eddification by attending his ministry we otherwise can."

After a lengthy legal battle, residents of the aggrieved southern end of town got what they wanted. On December 3, 1810, the towns of Conway and Whately annexed parcels of Deerfield's land. And on June 30, 1818, residents who had earlier abandoned Willard for Sunderland and Whately congregations established the Second Congregational Church in South Deerfield.

Deerfield, despite the wrangling in the south, had stoutly rejected what Sheldon, called the "musty theology handed down with little or no change from the Puritans." Over time Willard's ordination would come to be known as the first important breach of the "Standing Order" in western Massachusetts and the first expression of the liberal theological opinions that would eventually lead to the separation of the Unitarians from the Congregational Church.

ABOVE: The original pulpit was nearly level with the balconies and was entered from the second floor vestibule. In 1854 the congregation voted to lower the pulpit to its present height in order to make it less imposing.

Adam Voiland is a 2001 graduate of Deerfield Academy and a sophomore at Brown University. He lives in Montague Center, Massachusetts.