

FIRE OF MYSTERIOUS ORIGIN DESTROYS UNITARIAN CHURCH

By Ellen Knight¹

On November 16, 1897, fire destroyed the first building of the Winchester Unitarian Society. The mystery of how it happened remains unsolved today.

Built during 1869 and early 1870, four years after the Unitarian Society was organized, it was the fourth church building to be erected in Winchester, following the two Congregational churches (the first of which also was taken by fire) and the first Baptist church.

The building stood on Main Street, uphill from the site of the current church building. Behind and below it was Manchester Field, then the site of a factory and freight yard.

When the church building was twenty-five years old, some members of the Unitarian Society apparently deemed that they needed a new building. Some post-fire reports described the building as in need of repair and enlargement. Others said the building was in good condition.



Original Unitarian Church as viewed from the hill. Next to it is the Gifford School. Also visible is the Congregational Church (right rear).



*Arthur W. Littlefield,
minister in 1897*

Either way, the standing committee voted down the suggestion for a new building in both April and May 1895. A building fund was created for church improvements, the first major one being the purchase of a new organ late that year.

Meanwhile, the neighborhood around the church was undergoing change. During the 1890s, the industry on Manchester Field was removed and parkland established. During the spring of 1897 the Metropolitan District Commission developed the Mystic Valley Parkway behind the church, taking some church land for the purpose. During that year, however, a proposal for a new building was not repeated. A more important issue was the increasing inactivity of the members.

Then, on Tuesday, November 16, at about 9:15 p.m., fire was discovered in the horse shed at the rear of the building and an alarm was sent in.

“Engineer Waldmyer says streams were put on the fire in five minutes after the sounding of the alarm, and that when he arrived the fire had worked under the rafters of the roof and that there was no possible chance of saving the building owing to the high wind,” *The Winchester Star* reported afterwards.



“The flames worked rapidly through the roof and soon the entire building was a mass of flames, illuminating the entire town. Within an hour after the fire had been discovered the steeple fell with a crash, and when the all-out alarm was sounded all that remained was the four charred walls.”

UNKNOWN CAUSE

How the fire started was never determined. The fire started in a pile of old shingles in the shed. Whether they were set ablaze accidentally or intentionally was not known. The minutes of the Standing Committee say simply that the fire was “thought to have been of incendiary origin.”

“It is reported,” *The Winchester Star* stated, “that Italian organ grinders have been in the habit of passing the nights there, and if this is so, it might furnish a clue to the origin of the fire.”

According to a church history published by the Unitarian Society in 1965, “Legend has it that two boys playing in the carriage sheds behind the church were responsible. Reportedly they were banished from town and later turned out well.”

In 1969, Marshall Symmes, who witnessed the fire, repeated a story he had heard. “You know the southern wing of the senior high school?² ... That’s the site of the Unitarian Church. It had a tall white spire, and it was a wooden building. And I was 4 years old or something when that burned. And there was a high wind that night, and the fire was so blue, and my mother looked up, and from where we lived we could see the spire. ‘Why,’ she said, ‘that’s the Unitarian Church burning.’ And you know, she held me up. I was so small I couldn’t see over the windowsill, and she held me up in her arms, and I remember distinctly seeing that spire fall over into the street. All the flames. And the chief of the Fire Department at that time had a son who was foolish, and he set the church on fire, but they never prosecuted him because he wasn’t normal.”³



A NEW BUILDING

However the fire started, it resulted in a new building. Rather than rebuilding on the same site, the church purchased the Parker estate at the corner of Main and Walnut streets (now Mystic

Valley Parkway) next to the new park at Manchester Field. The Parker house was moved to Lloyd Street and the new building erected in 1899.



On Nov. 16, 1997, the Unitarian Society commemorated the fire with a special service, a play written by member Lee Barton, and a slide lecture given by your author.

At the time, looking back on the fire but also forward to the new church, a member of the Ladies Friendly Society wrote, “As the church fell in ruins the real church of the spirit watched undaunted, only the form has passed away; the eternal spirit of the church remains to rebuild a fairer temple and restore therein a still nobler worship.”

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Nov. 18, 1997. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Now the McCall Middle School.

³ Interview of Marshall Symmes by Wallace McDonald, 1969.