

# REPORT

OF

## Committee of Investigation,

APPOINTED BY CITIZENS OF WILTON,

TO ASCERTAIN THE CAUSE OF THE FIRE BY WHICH THE TOWN'S  
MEETING-HOUSE WAS DESTROYED.

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1860.

THE Committee appointed at a meeting of citizens of Wilton, held Dec. 12, "to investigate the cause of the fire by which the Town's Meeting-house was destroyed," have attended to the duty assigned them, and ask leave to submit the following

## REPORT.

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ON Thursday evening, Dec. 8th, 1859, a musical entertainment was given in the old Meeting-house belonging to the town of Wilton, by the members of a Juvenile School under the instruction of Miss Thurston, assisted by several ladies of Wilton, and one or two persons from abroad. A large and interested audience had assembled, and the hours passed pleasantly by. Hundreds of hearts, if not literally "a thousand hearts, beat happily." When the exercises were closed, the audience, with hearty cheers, left the house — left it never to pass its portals again. Scarcely had the echo of the last foot-fall of the retiring congregation died away, when a mighty destroyer, like some fearful demon, entered. Throwing out from the church-tower a signal of his presence, that a few might gather round and gaze with saddened hearts upon his work of ruin, he strode on through pew and aisle, thrusting out his tongue of flame, and gathering within his devouring jaws the memorials of a past century, pregnant with a thousand reminiscences, pleasing or sad, of by-gone years. He descended into the orchestra, from which the voice of sacred song had so often ascended, and beneath his scorching breath it was blackened, charred, consumed. He leaped into

the pulpit, hallowed by the footprints of Livermore, and Fiske, and Beede ; and, heedless of the sacred memories garnered therein, he laid his hand upon it, and it was made silent forever. Stretching out his arms, he clasped the whole structure in his embrace, and soon " walls, arches, roof, and deep foundation stones, all, mingling, fell."

Probably no event in the history of the town, which did not involve the loss of human life, has ever occasioned so deep and so general a feeling of regret as the burning of the Old Meeting-house. Erected in A. D., 1773, it had stood for eighty-six years, and was highly prized as a relic of the past, increasing in interest, in this point of view, as years passed by and churches of similar construction became more rare. Having been recently repaired, so far as to secure it against rapid decay, it was hoped it would long remain to furnish to future generations an illustration of the style of church-architecture of the eighteenth century.

More than this. It was an object around which clustered a thousand associations connected with the religious sensibilities of the community. It was a memorial of the time when there was a unity of faith, and when deep-seated religious principle was the rule, and skepticism, or a disregard of Christian institutions, was the exception. It was the place where our ancestors worshipped. Thither, in its earlier years, the inhabitants of the town, almost without exception, were accustomed to go up to keep holy time ; thither, too, many of us present here to-day, perhaps most of us, were carried by our parents in our infancy, and led in our childhood, to receive our first public religious instruction.

The old house was fraught with interest on account of its connection with the civil history of the town. It was there our honored ancestors were wont to meet for deliberation and action in the troublous times of the revolution. It was there, probably, that they signed the covenant of non-importation and non-consumption of British goods, which is spoken of in the centennial address as " a

virtual declaration of independence, and perhaps the first ever made." From thence, too, some of them took their departure, when they went forth "thrice armed" in that they had "their quarrel just," to battle for their country's freedom. Within those walls, doubtless, were given and recorded votes which helped put in operation our national government, and to place the father of his country in the presidential chair.

The considerations already adduced are matters of common interest to the natives of the town. But there are others affecting a portion of our citizens still more deeply. The loss falls with peculiar severity upon the Congregational Society which occupied the meeting-house. Besides being deprived of their house of worship, which, although inconvenient and undesirable as a place of meeting, was dear to them on account of its hallowed memories, they lost several articles valuable in themselves, and the value of which was greatly enhanced by the associations connected with them. There was the organ, a present to the society from the ladies of the sewing circle, which, in addition to its legitimate uses, would call to mind many a scene of social enjoyment. There was the elegant pulpit Bible, which cost some thirty dollars, and was a present from the late Augustus Greele, Esq., of New York.

There was the Sunday School Library, of about 400 volumes, a remembrancer of the lamented Samuel Abbott, Esq., most of the books in the original collection having been selected by him. There was the Parish Library, the basis of which was 100 volumes selected with great discrimination and good judgment, and presented by Augustus Greele, Esq.; and 50 volumes, selected perhaps with equal care, presented by Dea. Samuel Greele and other friends in Boston. This library at the time of its loss contained about 250 volumes. As the record book was burnt, it is not known how many of these escaped destruction by being drawn for perusal; but, it is supposed, there were but very few.

The church also lost nearly all their sacramental vessels, a portion

of which were of silver, but were valued not so much because they were of precious metal as because they had cheered and strengthened in their Christian course many revered and loved ones, who have passed on to the spirit-land.

Such being the magnitude of the loss, — not so much in dollars and cents as in that which money can never replace, — it becomes a question of paramount interest, how the fire originated.

Anxious to ascertain the truth in relation to the subject, and to present to their fellow citizens a report which could be relied upon as embodying the facts in the case, your Committee engaged in the investigation with deliberation and care. Their examination of witnesses was commenced at the Brick Hall, at the centre of the town, on Monday, December 12th, from which place they adjourned to meet at the office of C. H. Burns, Esq., on Friday, December 16th, from whence they adjourned to Depot Hall, on the afternoon of the same day; and the investigation was closed at Mr. Burns's office on Saturday, December 17th.

Not having power to summon witnesses by legal process, the request was publicly made that every one in possession of any facts having a bearing upon the case, should communicate them to the Committee. Most of those who were supposed to know anything which had a tendency to throw light upon the origin of the fire, were found to be present at the meetings of the Committee, and others came in response to special requests. So that every person who had, to any extent, the charge of the fires or lights in the meeting-house on the night of the concert, those who were early at the fire, and all persons who, so far as could be ascertained, possessed any information which could aid in coming to a correct conclusion, were before the Committee, and were fully examined.

No testimony was taken particularly in regard to the condition of the stoves; as it will appear from the evidence which follows that the fire could not have originated from them, it being well known that they were in the body of the house, and that the funnel rose

perpendicularly from a point below the galleries and entered a chimney near the centre of the house.

The church was lighted principally by candles, placed in chandeliers of wood prepared for the occasion, which were suspended from the ceiling. These were over the stage and remote from either end of the building. There were one or two lamps placed upon the front of the galleries. There was also a candle in a wooden socket in the body of the house, in the east part, another on the table in the lower entry, where the tickets were sold, and another in the upper part of the entry, near the gallery door.

The evidence before your Committee appeared to establish the fact, that no one who had anything to do with the arrangements for the concert went into the attic with a light, unless it was enclosed in a glass lantern, entire and perfect, from which fire could not be supposed to be communicated. Mr. Theron Russell was the last who had any business in any part of the house higher than the galleries. He went up to the attic with his lantern, soon after the exercises were ended, to lower one of the chandeliers. He did not discover, either by sight or smell, any appearances of fire, and saw no light after leaving the lower entry till his return thither, except from his own lantern.

The concert closed at about half-past nine o'clock in the evening, and most of the lights were immediately extinguished. Mr. Abiel A. Livermore testified that he remained in the house until about half-past ten o'clock. He was the last person, as he supposes, who left. He extinguished the only remaining light in the body of the house; was careful to put out the snuff; took a position from which he could see into and over the galleries; no light was visible in them; passed into the entry and carefully extinguished the light of the candle there; looked up the stair-case; it was all dark in the entry above; passed out and locked the door, taking the key with him; looked around at the house after passing a little distance from it; everything appeared to be right.

At about eleven o'clock fire was discovered by several persons in the vicinity, issuing from the church tower. Messrs. Caban, Wm. Emerson, Blake, Isaac and Gardner Blanchard, concur in their testimony that the fire appeared to burst out immediately under the bell-deck, and from no other part of the building. The only testimony that conflicts in any degree with theirs, is that of Mr. Stimson, who thought the first fire he saw issued from the main roof, below the union of the tower with the roof, and within two or three feet of the east end of the building. Messrs. Stimson and Glading testify that they attempted to get into the church at the east door; but being warned that the bell was in danger of falling, they gave up the attempt, and being joined by others, they went around to the south door, where a panel was knocked in and an entrance effected.

It does not appear in evidence how long a time elapsed after the discovery of the fire before the church was entered. Some estimate of the length of time may be formed from the fact that Mr. Blake, after calling the inmates of his house, went towards Mr. Caban's, then towards the meeting-house, and, thinking of the key, went to Mr. Amos Putnam's for it; was not able for some time to arouse any one; was told that the key was at Mr. Livermore's; started towards Mr. Livermore's for it; but, thinking that to be useless, returned to Mr. Cobb's and obtained an axe; went to the south door; struck two or three blows, and gave up the axe to Glading; who states that it seemed to him five minutes that he was at work at the south door. Messrs. Gardner Blanchard and William J. Putnam, who were among the first that entered the house, testify that they saw no fire in the body of the house, and Messrs. Stimson and Glading, that there *was* none when they first entered. Their testimony upon this point is not contradicted.

The candle in the upper part of the entry being the only probable means by which the fire could have been communicated accidentally, your Committee carefully examined all matters connected with that.

Mr. Charles Heselton testified that he put up that light. The

stick in which it was placed was nailed to the casing of the gallery-door, upon the south side, and projected about six inches from the casing. There was no wood-work within several feet of the candle except that immediately about the door. Mr. Theron Russell deposed that when he went into the attic immediately after the concert, the light was not burning. Mr. William B. Russell testified that, after the exercises were closed, he noticed the candle particularly. The light was extinguished, and about three inches of the candle remained unconsumed in the socket. All the witnesses who testified respecting the breaking of the fire into the body of the house, with one exception, stated that the fire first came in from some point higher than the top of the gallery-door. Mr. William Emerson, who did not go into the house till some time after an entrance had been effected, stated that when he entered, the gallery door was open, and that no fire was to be seen in the entry. He is positive that *there was no fire in that part of the porch which was passed through in going into the gallery.*

In view of all the evidence presented, your Committee are unanimously of opinion that the fire was set by an incendiary. By whom the deed was done they have not the means of determining, nor of forming a reasonable presumption. And as rumors on this occasion, as on others, will doubtless be rife, they would recommend to their fellow-citizens to act upon the principle adopted in our courts of justice, that every one is to be presumed innocent until proved to be guilty.

BENJAMIN BAKER,	}	<i>Committee.</i>
JOSEPH NEWELL,		
JOEL HESELTON,		
GEO. L. DASCOMBE,		
JONA. LIVERMORE,		
WM. EMERSON,		
CHAS. H. BURNS,	}	

**NOTE.** — The last knell rung out from the old tower announced the death of one born the same year the church was built. To many there seemed a peculiar fitness in its falling with the last inhabitant that witnessed its rise. Many pleasant memories remain with us. Last, but not least (and never to be forgotten by those who heard it), was a choir of infant voices chanting "Farewell, Farewell."