

COMMUNITY CHURCH OF PEPPERELL Commemorating 100 Years Historical Moment

Our First Pastor

Joseph Emerson was born in 1724 in Malden into a family of pastors. He entered Harvard College at age 16 and by age 21 he received a call to Groton West Parish as this area was then called. The agreement between the parish and Emerson was; that he should receive 35 cord of wood delivered to his door each year. He was also given forty acres of land on both sides of what we now call Main Street almost down to the traffic circle. He could do whatever he like with it and it would not revert to the parish should he ever leave.

The community firmly believed that everyone should respect the Sabbath and keep it holy. That meant there should be no work on the Sabbath. (Certain exception were allowed concerning farm animals which needed to be fed and milked.) A prominent farm was selected on the major roads. If persons were seen traveling abroad, they were stopped and asked to explain themselves. Some emergencies such fire, illness or accidents were allowed. Failing these, the persons were sent home, told to pray and honor the Sabbath. (My own Boynton family was given this duty).

Morning church services were suspended at noon. There grew up around the center and meeting house, small buildings called "Noon Day Houses". Two or three families would band together if they lived a mile or two away. The women would pool their resources and cook a hot meal for the folks. After this, all would return to church for afternoon services. This was most necessary in the winter months Records show an annual sum of money was also set aside as "rum for the choir".

Paper was a precious commodity. Emerson used small sheets of paper about 3' by 4 ½'. He would pen his sermons in a tiny script from edge to edge, wasting nothing. His thoughts for the lesson for the day may go on maybe 15 to 20 minutes, then he would break off and speak extemporaneously. Sometimes he would summarize his message with closing remarks.

Joseph married Abigail Hay and together, they had 6 children, a daughter and five sons. The name Joseph appears twice, clear message that one son did not survive.

In Europe, England and France had been at war for some years. Over here, it was known as the French and Indian War. Through his friendship with a pastor at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Kittery, ME, Emerson became aware of a plan to attack the French Fort of Louisbourg on Nova Scotia, all under the command of William Pepperrell. Joseph signed on to be chaplain. The siege was successful. Upon returning home, Emerson proposed that this village be named first a district , then a town for Pepperrell, he admired his leadership so much. For his services, George iii knighted Pepperrell to be Sir William.

In the peace that followed, the English gave Nova Scotia back to the French in exchange for a city they wanted in India. This was added to the many grievances the colonists had with the mother country. For his part, Sir William returned to England, but did send a bell to his town. It never made it beyond Boston, believed to have been melted down for armaments in the Revolution.

With one brother in Concord, another in Conway and their cousin Daniel in Hollis, they were collectively known as the Four Patriot Emerson Preachers. As matters grew worse and worse, it became known that the British planned to march and seize arms stored in Concord. A militia was formed between Pepperell and Hollis under the leadership of William Prescott to march and stoop them. Reverend Emerson delivered the prayer on Cambridge Common before the combined militias marched to Breed's Hill, now called Bunker Hill, in Charlestown. The cold, damp wind off the water can be brutal in mid-April. Due to the harsh conditions coupled with the rigors of war, Reverend Emerson was taken sick. Six of his parishioners had been killed, men he had baptized, there were funerals to be delivered, families to be consoled. Emerson never recovered his health. He grew worse over the summer and died on October 29th, 1775 from fever and dysentery, at age 51 years and 24 days.

Emerson's widow Abigail, who was six years older than her husband, outlived all her children. Phoebe Wright of Hollis, who was a former daughter-in-law, made a home for Abigail when she re-married. Abigail died in 1807 at the age of 89.

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