

Chapter V

"...a seminal period..."

The fifty years which followed the American Revolution proved to be a seminal period in the life of East Stoughton. Important educational, religious and civic institutions developed, and they helped to shape the character and course of the village even down to our own day.

From the very earliest years of its settlement, Massachusetts had been a leader in the field of public education. A law passed in 1642 required parents to see to it that their children were taught how to read, write and understand the colony's civil and religious laws. Five years later the Massachusetts Public School Law, in an attempt to thwart "ye olde deluder Satan," mandated that every town of fifty or more families support an instructor to teach children to read and write. Furthermore, towns of 100 or more families were to establish a grammar (Latin) school to prepare students for the University.¹

The dearth of public records makes it difficult to examine the early years of Stoughton's schools. We know that in 1740 the people of York (Glen Echo) and Curtis Corners put in a claim for school money, and the town voted £60 for a "traveling school," so-named because it moved from one part of town to another. The following year it was again voted: "That a moving school be kept in this town [Stoughton] in several places where it has been heretofore kept." Additionally, and perhaps in consequence of East Stoughton's recent petition to be set off to North Bridgewater, it was voted to allow the school to hold sessions "in that part of ye town where Moses Curtis and others live."²

In 1745 Stoughton was asked to build a schoolhouse in each of its three precincts, but it refused and classes - if they were held at all - met in private homes. Although we do not know in whose home the East Stoughton school was kept, two of Stoughton's earliest itinerant

teachers were John Withington and John Dickerman.

It wasn't until 1795 that the first schoolhouse was built in East Stoughton. The year before, the town had voted to build an additional eleven schools, five of which were to be in the Second Parish, which included East Stoughton.

This first schoolhouse was built on West Main Street, near its present-day intersection with Harrison Boulevard. It cost the town £50, and it measured 19'x25 '. Its walls were brick and the building had eight windows, three of each side and two on the end. There were fifteen squares to each window, and the panes measured 7"x9 ". The building had a pitched roof; it was painted red, with white window trim. It was the typical "little red schoolhouse" of eighteenth and nineteenth century New England.³

Although no photographs of the school exist, we can be sure that conditions inside were completely different from those of today. Most noticeable would be the great disparity in the ages of the scholars. Since these schools were ungraded, a child of six or seven years old often found himself sitting across from a student who was well into his teenage years.

Despite the fact that the harsh schoolroom discipline of the old days has been both exaggerated and idealized, the students were held to an exacting, though tedious, routine throughout the day. The curriculum was devoid of imagination or variety, and total emphasis was placed on rote memorization of the rules of arithmetic, spelling and grammar. Exercises were done on small slates which could be wiped clean after the lesson. Later students used copybooks of paper, folded and sewed into covers of brown paper or scraps of wallpaper. They ruled this with plummets which they had made by pouring melted lead into grooved sticks or even in the cracks in the floorboards at home. ⁴

It is likely that throughout much of its early life the East Stoughton school was in session only a few weeks a year. The shortage of qualified teachers, as well as the fact that children were often needed to work in fields or shops beside their parents, made formal education a haphazard affair. Most youngsters ended their schooling by the time they reached their fourteenth birthday. Additionally, East Stoughton had neither a public grammar school nor a private academy, and there is no record of any village youngster going on to college in this period.

In 1826 the Massachusetts State Legislature passed a law requiring each town to choose a school committee to have general superintendence of its public schools. One or more members were to visit the schools at least once a month, "without giving previous notice thereof to the instructor."⁵ Throughout the nineteenth century, one of the three members of the Stoughton school committee lived in East Stoughton.

The year 1831 saw a schoolhouse built on West Main Street in the vicinity of the Hammond property, just south of Pond Street. Three years earlier the town had divided itself into school districts, and two of these, Numbers I and 7, were located in East Stoughton. The district plan was discontinued by an act of the General Court in 1869, and in 1870 these schools became the Gifford and the Littlefield, respectively.

In 1854 the Commonwealth ordered that towns of 500 families or 4,000 people must maintain a high school. Prior to this the upper classes had sent their children to private academies in the area, including the Stoughtonham Institute, Sumner Academy, in Stoughton, or Bristol Academy in Taunton. While the high school law represented another milestone on the Bay State's road to educational reform, the issue served to drive another wedge between Stoughton Centre and East Stoughton.

The Stoughton town meeting appropriated \$800 in March 1858 to sup-

port a high school which would hold six-month sessions at the centre and four month sessions at East Stoughton. Although the villagers apparently ported the elementary school, they wanted no part of the high school or the taxes it would cause to be levied upon them. The East Stoughtonites managed to secure a reconsideration of the vote and the issue was postponed.

The question was revived in 1860 when six articles concerning the establishment of a high school were inserted in the town meeting warrant. The villagers promptly complained that it was too difficult for them to travel to the centre to vote, so it was decided to hold the rest of that year's meetings in East Stoughton, though the patience of the centre people was wearing thin.

The high school question was supposed to be resolved on the evening of May 2, 1860, in a meeting to be held in Engine House Hall. The Engine House, headquarters of the East Stoughton fire department, was located on the site of the gazebo in present-day Goeres Square. Excitement was high because the "friends of the high school," as they called themselves, had hired a band and promised free transportation over to East Stoughton for anyone willing to vote for the high school.

Greeting the pro-education forces was Dr. Silas Gifford, a tireless friend of education and a man who spent a lifetime working for the good of his community. Born in Sandwich, Massachusetts thirty-six years earlier, this East Stoughton physician was a self-made man. He had begun his working days as an officer aboard a vessel involved in the coastal trade. Later he took a job as a school teacher, but his great ambition in life was to be a doctor, and he finally entered a medical academy. Shortly after his graduation Dr. Gifford married Mary Chamberlain of Acushnet and established his medical practice in East Stoughton.⁶

"The long-awaited showdown over the high school question never

materialized. The crowd which gathered in front of the small building far exceeded the seating capacity of the hall, and this played into the hands of those seeking to defeat the question. Claiming that democracy could not be served in such cramped quarters, they managed to have the vote postponed, and the proponents of the high school went home frustrated and angry.

Finally, their patience exhausted, the progressives filed for a grand jury complaint against the town in September 1860. Although Stoughton was clearly in violation of the high school law, no action was taken. The ugly clouds of civil war were now on the horizon and a common effort to save the Union took precedence over everything else. 7

The development of strong and enduring religious institutions paralleled the somewhat halting growth of public education in East Stoughton. On August 24, 1780 thirty-six individuals, including fourteen women, entered into a covenant constituting a Baptist church. The records state that they had been baptized - that the said elders examined into their experiences and characters - as also their Articles of Faith and Covenant -after which they gave themselves up to God and one another in covenant, INSERT PICTURE engaging by Divine help to carry on the worship of God and those ordinances He hath kept appointed for his people to observe.

Tradition has it that the church's first service was held outdoors, under an apple tree in the yard of John Howard on Page Street. The first parishioners came from East Stoughton, North Bridgewater and South Braintree (present-day Randolph and Holbrook). This church was only the second in Norfolk County and the other was in Medfield, twenty miles away. Many of the first covenant members were from prominent East Stoughton families. Among them were the Howards, Briggses, Blanchards, Littlefields, Goldthwaites, and Curtises. They met at William Blanchard's house in January 1784, and "voted to pay Caleb Howard £10's. for a quarter of an acre on the east side of the road by

Capt. Jacob Wales house."

On this land was built the first Baptist meetinghouse. Located just over the line in present-day Randolph, it was standing by June 1784, but the interior remained unfinished for another fifteen years and more. Initially men and women sat on different sides of the aisle, but this practice gave way to one in which families purchased pews by subscription. Above the congregation, the balcony was reserved for blacks.

The first pastor of the East Stoughton Baptist Church was Reverend Joel Briggs. Born in Norton in 1757, Briggs had marched as an 18 year-old militiaman on the Lexington alarm of April 19, 1775. Having been prepared for college by William Williams of Wrentham, he entered Brown University in 1777, but the proximity of the British troops caused the cancellation of classes and he never returned. Brown awarded him an honorary Bachelor of Arts degree in 1787, and he earned a Master of Arts Degree in 1795.

In 1783 Mr. Briggs was licensed to preach by Norton's Old Baptist Church. One year later he married Hannah Sprague of Attleboro and then accepted the call of the East Stoughton Baptist Church. Beginning his duties in January 1785, Mr. Briggs built a house on North Main Street in which he and his wife would raise six children. He was ordained almost three years later, in December 1787.

It was a formidable task indeed which faced the young minister, for his was the only Baptist church between Boston and Middleborough. Rev. Briggs passed his lifetime ministering to a congregation that came not only from East Stoughton, but also from present-day Stoughton Centre, Randolph, Holbrook, Brockton, Canton and Abington. His kindly disposition and devotion to his church, plus the fact that his ministry lasted forty years, made this beloved clergyman a local institution.

Ironically, Rev. Briggs' success served to make his own circumstances

more difficult, for his parish was never a wealthy one. His salary, for example, was set at \$150 per year from 1810 to 1819. In the latter year forty-four members of the congregation were granted permission to form the North Baptist Church of Randolph. The remaining parishioners could not maintain the minister's salary at its previous level, and by the last two years of his active ministry Rev. Briggs' salary was down to \$70 per year.

The loss of parishioners, coupled with Rev. Briggs' advancing age and infirmity, brought hard times to the East Stoughton Baptist Church. The venerable minister retired in 1825 and passed his remaining years surrounded by family and friends. His death, on January 28, 1828, brought sadness to the entire community. His devoted wife died sixteen years later, and today both lie in the Old Cemetery on East Main Street.

Through the 1820's the Baptist meetinghouse fell into a state of disrepair and there was talk of moving the building to a new location. The structure was apparently unsound, however, and this plan was abandoned in favor of a new building. This second meetinghouse, built "on the land of Mr. John Woodbury, south of his .barn" (east of present-day Goeres Square), was dedicated on September 7, 1831. The new building was larger than its predecessor, and it had a small steeple and a bell. Unheated at first, the members of the congregation were advised to bring their footstoves from home when they came to worship.

By the mid-1840s this second meetinghouse was too small for the growing congregation, and some members suggested adding on to the building. The idea was short-lived, however, and a committee consisting of Isaac Blanchard, Charles Packard and Samuel Chase was appointed in 1846 to secure a new site and to superintend the building of the third meetinghouse.

The efforts of the committee and the prayers of the congregation were

finally realized on March 30, 1848 when the third, and present. East Stoughton Baptist meetinghouse was dedicated by the church's pastor, Rev. Isaac Smith. The building was financed in part by public subscription, as well as by the sale of Joel Briggs' parsonage and the second meetinghouse.

It must have been some sight indeed which greeted on-lookers as they watched the construction of that meetinghouse. Legend has it that the sides of the building were framed on the ground and raised into position using oxen and block and tackle. Likewise, it has been passed down among parishioners that a sailor from the Boston Navy Yard was hired for the sum of \$9.83 to supervise the raising of the 1,300 pound bell into position in the steeple.

This present-day meetinghouse was built on "ten rods of Land on the main Publick Road and parallel with the New Road." The plans called for "70 or 74 pews nine feet in length with a Centre Isle four feet wide, the wall Isles three and one half feet wide." The total cost of the building as \$7,363.06.8

St. Michael's, East Stoughton's other church, still lay twenty-five years in the future, but some of the Irish Catholic families who would one day organize the parish were coming to the village in the 1830's and 40's. Ironically, what little we know about them comes to us from records belonging to the Avon Baptist Church. In its collection is a comprehensive list of all East Stoughton deaths from 1828 through 1855. It appears that the list was in some way associated with the use of the town hearse at funerals.

The first Irish family mentioned is the McQuiney family (also spelled McQuinney), whose baby died in September 1840. Thereafter, the Irish appear frequently and often anonymously. Along with two other McQuiney children, there are deaths listed in the Wade, Donovan, McBride, Brown, Moran, Mullen, Lynch, Galaney and Higgins

families. Throughout the records there are cryptic notations on the death of "an Irish woman," or an Irish child drowned," or an "Irish man."⁹

As the number of Irish coming to East Stoughton increased during the 1840's, and especially the 1850's, the immigrants tended to settle in one area of the village. "Donegal," as it was called, lay along West Main Street, in the general area between Pond Street and Harrison Boulevard. In fact, Gill Street was once known as "the Rocky Road to Dublin."¹⁰ The East Stoughton Irish took jobs as day laborers on farms, and later they worked in large numbers in shoe factories.

A deeply religious people, the Irish immigrants found no Catholic Church in Stoughton. Occasionally Mass would be heard in private homes or in Forrest Hall, but the worshippers often had to travel to Quincy or Boston to attend services. For many years before the construction of St. Michael's in 1872, East Stoughton's Catholics went to Mass at St. Mary's Church in Randolph.¹¹

It was during this period, finally, that a post office was established in the village. Before 1822 East Stoughton's mail was brought to the Wallace Capen house, the residence of Postmaster Aaron Gay on the Taunton Turnpike, close to Central Street, a good distance from the village. In 1822 Darius Littlefield was appointed postmaster at East Stoughton, and during his eighteen-year administration the post office was located just north of his residence, near present-day Goeres Square. The location of the East Stoughton post office changed at least seven times during the nineteenth century, though it was always within easy walking distance of the town square. From 1822 to 1892 the village had fourteen postmasters and, interestingly enough for that period, at least two- and perhaps three - were women.¹²

So the four decades which followed the American Revolution saw the development of important educational, religious and civic institutions in

the village of East Stoughton. It is important to note that this maturation was largely independent of events in Stoughton Centre, and the villagers continued to see themselves as set apart - geographically and otherwise -from the centre.

We should not overestimate that period of early nineteenth century growth. One writer who happened to pass through the place described East Stoughton as merely "a dull, drinking, droning 'corner,' a few old houses, and a country store retailing, on long credits, codfish, mackerel, molasses and New England rum..."¹³

But even as these unflattering words were being written the tiny village stood on the eve of dynamic industrial change. The transformation which was about to begin would influence East Stoughton for a century and more.

NOTES

1. Albert Bushnell Hart, Commonwealth History of Massachusetts (New York: The States History Co., 1927-28). I, 284
2. Huntoon, p. 136
3. John E. Flyrni, A History of Education in Stoughton, Massachusetts (Stoughton: AStoughton High School Publication, 1959), p. II
4. Elizabeth George Speare, Child Life in New England, 1790-1810 (Sturbridge, Mass.: OldSturbridge Village, Inc., 1961). p. 10
5. John Fairfield Sly, Town Government in Massachusetts 11620-19301 (1930; rpt. Hamden,Connecticut: Archon Books, 1967), pp. 121-22
6. Undated newspaper clipping, Lorch Scrapbooks, Avon Historical

Society.

7. Flynn. p. 2.

8. Avon Baptist Church, Avon, Massachusetts (n.p.: n.p" 1980), n.p. This excellent short history of the Baptist Church in Avon was published in commemoration of its bi-centennial. Hereinafter this work is cited as Avon Baptist Church History, 1980.

9. Deaths in East Stoughton since 1828," MS in the collection of the Avon Baptist Church. This will make a fascinating study for a future historian. Not only does it contain the names of early Irish residents, it also represents the only extant list of nineteenth century black families in East Stoughton. Among the "collared" were the Matrick, Niles, Jackson, Levillion and Jacobs families. More needs to be done with this manuscript.

10. "History of Old Streets," newspaper clipping dated February 13, 1945, Lorch Scrapbooks, Avon Historical Society

11. Robert F. Doyle, "History of St. Michael's. 1872-1946," in St. Michael's Church Parish Reunion (n.p.: n.p" 1946). n.p. The most comprehensive parish history is found in William Clark's "History of St. Michael's Parish, 1908-1983," found in St. Michael's Church. 1908-1983: 75th Anniversary (n.p.: n.p" 1983), n.p.: hereinafter cited as Clark. 75th Anniversary.

12. "Has Essay on Post Offices," newspaper clipping dated August 17, 1945. Lorch Scrap-books. Avon Historical Society

13. Note 13 is missing from both book and file!