

# Dublin Historical Society

Dublin, New Hampshire 03444 • Founded 1920

Newsletter No. 77 – November 2009

## DUBLIN'S ECCENTRIC PARSON SPRAGUE

After the unfortunate experience with the Rev. Joseph Farrar (described in last November's Newsletter), Dublin was without a minister for over a year. To fill the gap, supply preachers were hired for temporary duty. There survive two receipts for payment by the Town Treasurer to clergymen who preached during this period, for a stipend of one pound, four shillings a Sunday. Although there is no surviving receipt from Edward Sprague, he was among these supply preachers, though not yet ordained. These temporary preaching engagements served as auditions for a permanent call.

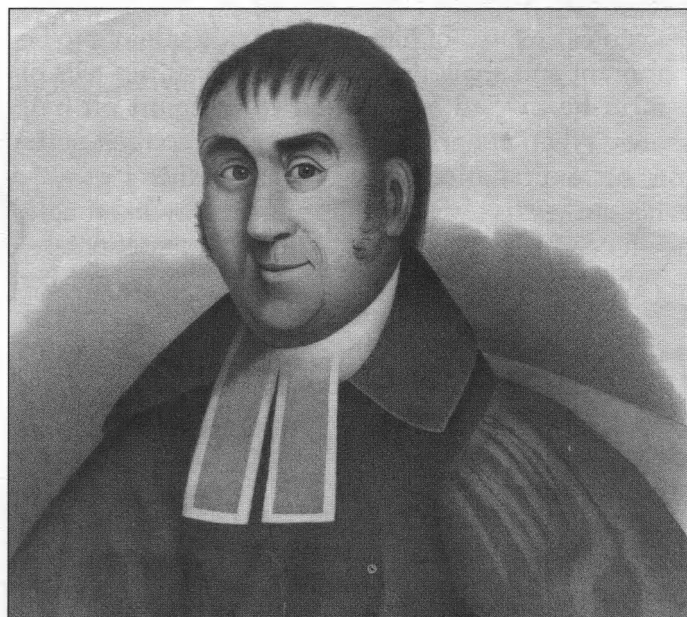
### MR. SPRAGUE COMES TO DUBLIN

When the Town of Dublin voted to make an offer to Mr. Sprague, he accepted, and was ordained and instituted simultaneously on November 12, 1777. The Rev. Samuel Langdon, Sprague's minister in Cambridge, as well as President of Harvard College, came all the way to Dublin to preach the ordination sermon. In those days the settlement of a minister was, like a marriage, expected to last for life and Sprague stayed as Dublin's spiritual mentor until his death in December 1817 – just over forty years. What sort of minister – what sort of man – was he?

That he was not a run-of-the-mill 18th century cleric is suggested by the only likeness that survives, a lithograph based on a lost painting. The portrait is like no other painted at that time. He is pictured smiling (if not smirking or leering), which was simply never done, especially with men of the cloth. Further, the squint in his right eye gives him a slightly raffish look. The impression conveyed is that of a man with either a sly sense of humor or a slightly feeble mind. His contemporaries were divided as to which.

The Rev. Levi Leonard, Sprague's successor, wrote in his *History of Dublin, N.H.* (1855):

Mr. Sprague, in some respects, had the simplicity of a child; but he often surprised those who knew him only from report, by his shrewdness of remark and readiness of repartee.



**The Rev. Edward Sprague.** Lithograph after a portrait by Zedekiah Belknap, D.H.S. archives.

A Harvard classmate, the Rev. William Bentley, described him less charitably as an "example of a man being indulged in his wishes, without qualifications & of the power of wealth to support an entire insignificance of character."

*continued on page 2*

**Dues envelopes** are enclosed with this edition of the newsletter. These are dues for 2010 and are payable by December 31, 2009. The amount (\$25.00) is the same as last year.

On the other hand, Timothy Dwight, President of Yale, described Sprague more charitably after visiting him in Keene:

With a vein of good sense and considerable attainments in learning, Mr. S. unites that peculiar cast of thinking which sees objects in a light in which they are rarely, if at all, seen by others. This gives a characteristic novelty to his observations; and, added to a native and innocent sportiveness, renders his conversation particularly agreeable.

#### MISUNDERSTANDINGS

It is a fair guess that the somewhat off-beat qualities of mind, to say nothing of the "native and innocent sportiveness", which appealed to President Dwight were not calculated to win the sympathy of hard-bitten pioneers trying to wring a bare subsistence from Dublin's rocky soil. They were doubtless puzzled by a man bred in luxury, learned in the classical tongues but wholly ignorant of country matters.

At any rate, his parishioners seem to have regarded him as an easy mark. Charles Mason, in his Centennial Address (1852), spoke of "the thousand anecdotes" related of him, which made him out to be "ignorant and shallow". One of these stories tells of a farm he owned and leased to a tenant on half shares. When at harvest-time Sprague received nothing, his explanation was, "My half didn't grow". What strikes us as ironical humor was by his rough-hewn neighbors interpreted as simple-mindedness.

Edward Sprague had been born in Boston in May 1750, the son of John Sprague, a prosperous physician. He entered Harvard College in September of 1766, when his name appears in a list of freshmen supplied with a Hebrew grammar. A smattering of Hebrew, along with the Latin and Greek earlier acquired at the Boston Latin School, was required for a ministerial career, which in those days was then the destiny of almost all Harvard graduates. Undergraduate behavior, however, was much the same then as later, and Sprague's name appears, ear-

ly in his freshman year, as one of the participants in a riot. *Sibley's Harvard Graduates* records that "... because of the indulgence of a rich father, he had everything he wanted and did nothing he did not want to do. As a result he passed through the course without any distinction at all." Nevertheless, after graduating in 1770, he continued his studies in divinity, and earned an M.A. degree in 1773.

Reading between the lines, one gets the impression that about this time his father got tired of supporting him, so that he was forced to look for a parish. The Community Church archives contain a sermon (copied out in the handwriting of his successor, the Rev. Levi W. Leonard) which Sprague, though not yet ordained, preached in six different churches in and around Boston in the years 1775 and 1776.


Shortly after coming to Dublin, Sprague apparently felt the need for a wife. He went to Cambridge in September, 1778, proposed to Hannah Fitch, a woman about ten years his senior, and was observed setting out to Dublin with his bride. "She carried chief of her furniture in the chaise. He appeared too torpid and indiscretionate respecting a livelihood; but she appeared discreet, sensible and resolute." There were no children of the marriage, and in later years they seem to have lived mostly apart, he in Dublin and she in Keene.

#### MONEY PROBLEMS

On voting to call him to Dublin, the Town fixed his salary at 60 pounds a year, but the inflation of the times soon made this wholly inadequate. It was raised to 160 pounds in 1779, but the value of the currency continued to decline, and in 1780 he remonstrated with the Selectmen:

Previous to my settlement with you I understood...that I was to have a salary sixty pounds equal to silver. Had I not understood it thus I should never have accepted the invitation. ... I allow that I could possibly exist with the stipend had I the advantages that the other ministers have namely presents. But when I must pay for everything even a piece of beef there is great odds. ... My sufferings since I have been in the Town have been unparalleled. I don't think there is one person in a hundred that settled as I did and was generally allowed for nothing and have had so little consideration that would have stood their ground so long.

His relations with his flock seem to have gradually improved after this remonstrance. In any case, his financial problems were solved by the death of his father in 1797, by which he inherited something on the order of \$50,000, a very large sum for those days,



### WINTER POT-LUCK SUPPER

The **Winter Pot-luck Supper** will be held in the Church Vestry on Friday, February 5, 2010 at 6:30 p.m.

**Save the date**, which you will find already marked on your 2010 Society calendar.



**Edward Sprague's house in Dublin, looking west from the Town Common, c. 1905.** D. H. S. archives, Frothingham photographs.

which allowed him to build the square, central-chimneyed house, still standing on what is now Frothingham Road. He also inherited his father's four-horse carriage, which must have been something of a spectacle on the primitive roads of Cheshire County.

#### **AN ABSENTEE MINISTER**

In 1801 he asked the Town for permission to move to Keene (ostensibly for his health), undertaking to continue as minister at no salary. To this the Town assented. He acquired a house on West Street, but kept his house in Dublin, continuing to spend most of his time there, while Mrs. Sprague stayed in Keene.

In December 1817, shortly after the 40th anniversary of his ministry in Dublin, he suffered a carriage accident resulting in injuries from which he died a week later. By his Will, made on his deathbed, he left a fund of \$5,000 to the Dublin church, and the remainder of his estate, subject to his wife's life interest, to the Town for the support of education. (This is still administered as the Sprague fund.) Hannah Sprague followed him out of this world within six months, and a grateful town erected over their graves the pair of table tombs still standing on the north side of the cemetery.

In a time of theological ferment, he steered clear of controversy, or perhaps, as has been suggested, never really grasped the issues that so divided his brethren in the cloth at the period when Unitarianism was gaining acceptance among the more liberal clergy. He had not the reputation of a great preacher. Three

of his sermons, written in his own hand, are in the Community Church Archives, and are wholly illegible. It is said that his handwriting became so bad that he himself couldn't read it.

Charles Mason said of Sprague:

He was preëminently of a social and jovial character, fond of conversation, anecdote, repartee and good cheer. He is reported to have possessed, in a marked degree, the qualities of shrewdness and sharpness of intellect; ... He was a man of most kindly, generous disposition, and of ready sympathy with affliction and distress.

The Rev. William Bentley, already quoted, wrote in his diary for 1800:

This day Mr. E. Sprague minister of Dublin, visited me. This singular man has come into the possession of a very handsome estate & continues to preach to an audience who have not the most exalted opinions of his understanding, tho' not the most competent to judge of his abilities.

Bentley's further comment, written in 1804, will serve as the last word on Edward Sprague: "He is an original".

—J.W.H.

(As usual, an annotated version of this article is on file at the Archives.)

## SOCIETY NEWS

### ELECTIONS

Members present at the Annual meeting on August 21, elected the following officers for the ensuing year:

President	Henry James
Vice-President	Sarah Bauhan
Treasurer	Bill Goodwin

The Trustees later elected Rusty Bastedo as Curator and John Harris as Secretary and Archivist.

The Board of Trustees continues without change, except for the lamented retirement of Sharron Monaghan, whose term expired. Current members of the Board are Rusty Bastedo, Sarah Bauhan, Amedine Bella, Bill Goodwin, John Harris, Henry James, Tim O'Connell and Matt Wagner.

### THE 2010 CALENDAR

The Society's Calendar for 2010, now available, is in color for the first time. The theme is "Monadnock from the Dublin Side" and the illustration for each month is a painting of the mountain by a local artist. Design and production were done by Henry James and Sarah Bauhan.

The calendar is on sale at the General Store, Carr's, at the Archives, on our new website ([www.dublinhistory.org](http://www.dublinhistory.org)) or by mail (please include \$5.00 for postage). The price is \$12.00 to Society members and \$15 to

non-members. **New members joining before the end of 2009 will get a calendar free.**

### AT LAST, A WEBSITE

Sarah Bauhan and Henry James are working with Center Pond Communications to create the Society's first website: [www.dublinhistory.org](http://www.dublinhistory.org). The site is up and running, but will be expanded over time to include information on our archives and museum collections. Suggestions are welcome as to what people would like to see on the site.

### ACCESSIONS TO THE ARCHIVES

**Sharron Monaghan** has taken a fine set of photographs of houses in the village, thereby recording their appearance as of 2009. Other gifts of photographs have been received from the estates of the late Anne Anable and William Bauhan, as well as from **Michael Carter, Will Morgan** and **Charles Winchester**. Keen-eyed **Anne Blodgett** passed on information on three Dublin ladies from the pages of the Chapin School bulletin.

We continue to buy relevant material on E-bay – most recently a hand-written agreement, dated 1850, concerning the elaborate water system built in 1828 to carry water from springs behind the Fremont Mason house (the yellow house on Main Street just below the fire pond) to houses further down the hill.

### Dublin in 1774

#### JEREMY BELKNAP'S (NOT VERY KIND) DESCRIPTION

*This is an extract from the Rev. Jeremy Belknap's journal of a trip he made from his parish in Dover to Dartmouth College in 1774.<sup>1</sup> On the way back he took the southern route – down the Connecticut River as far as Walpole and then east through Keene, Dublin, Peterborough, etc., until he reached the coast.*

Monday, Aug. 29. At day-break we came away from Keene, crossed Ashuelot River, and rode twelve miles to Mother Morse's,<sup>2</sup> near the Grand Monadnock, which is the highest mountain in these parts and the largest of a very long and crooked range of mountains which go by the name of the Pack Monadnocks. On the top of this great mountain is a cranberry meadow. We could see many bare rocks among the trees. Just before we arrived there, a flock of wild turkies crossed the road in the woods. They were speckled and ran very fast.

Morse's is a filthy house. We then rode through Dublin, a very rough, rocky place. I saw but about twenty rod of good land in the town, yet it is settled by some families, and they have taken pains to have good orchards. The minister's lot, which is partly cleared near the meeting house, is the worst that I saw; full of rocks. There is a pond near it which is said to be full of salmon trout<sup>3</sup> and scarce any other fish.

We crossed Contoocook River three times within an hour; and dined at Wilson's in Peterborough, a very good house.

<sup>1</sup> Edited by Edward C. Lathem and published by Dartmouth Publications, Hanover, n.d.

<sup>2</sup> Presumably Eli Morse's tavern, which now forms the wooden west wing of Louisa Spencer's house near the outlet to the Lake. In the 18th century what is now the Old Marlborough Road was the main route between Keene and Peterborough.

<sup>3</sup> These trout (now unfortunately extinct) were later identified by Harvard Prof. Louis Agassiz as a distinct species not found elsewhere. They were given the scientific name *Salvelinus agassizii*.

## C R E D I T S

This issue of the Dublin Historical Society Newsletter was edited by John Harris.  
Design & layout by Heidi Thomas of Little House Graphics.