

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE METHODIST GENERAL BIBLICAL INSTITUTE.

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The Methodist General Biblical Institute—the only strictly theological seminary ever maintained in the state—began its existence in Concord in April, 1847. A charter was obtained from the legislature the following June, and approved by the governor July 3d of that year. The names of the original corporators were Charles Adams, Osmon C. Baker, Abel Stevens, Dexter S. King, Elisha Adams, Ralph W. Allen, Minor Raymond, Lorenzo D. Barrows, David Patten, James Porter, Silas Quimby, Sanford Benton, Jefferson Hascall, and Newell Culver. The school had its inception, however, several years before, in a convention of Methodist ministers and laymen, delegates from every New England state, held in Boston, April 24 and 25, 1839, when, believing the time had fully come to make provision for a training-school for religious teachers, the “ Wesley Institute Association ” was organized to promote the early establishment of such an institution,—“one which should represent a broad and profound conception of humanity and of the divine purpose in the history of humanity.” Under the efforts of this association, in 1840, the Methodist Theological seminary at Newbury, Vt., was renamed “The Wesleyan Theological Institute,” and Reverend John Dempster was selected to be professor of theology, and Reverend John Wesley Merrill, A. M., was chosen to be the professor of sacred literature, when the new institution should be established. As the needed funds were not yet provided, Reverend Osmon C. Baker, then principal of the Newbury seminary, and Reverend William M. Willets, continued to give theological instruction to the students preparing for the ministry as before.

It had been previously agreed that if the Wesley Institute association should become at any time convinced that Newbury was not the best locality for the theological school, they might remove it to one more eligible. After a trial of several years, Professor Merrill¹ says, the conviction became clear that to succeed it must be removed to a more central locality, and at the close of the year 1846 it was determined to make a change.

¹ The writer is indebted to the late Professor J. W. Merrill, Mrs. Sarah (Sanborn) Adams, and W. F. Whitcher for much of the material contained in the above brief sketch.

When this fact was known, some of the people of this town became much interested to secure its location here. The North Congregational society having built a new and more modern church nearer the center of population, and wishing to preserve, in some useful way, its earlier home, offered gratuitously, for the accommodation of this new theological school, its former place of worship, the old North church. The latter was a large and venerable edifice,—the main body of the house being nearly a hundred years old. It was of spacious dimensions, with an ideal location in the center of a beautiful triangular green campus of an acre and a half of land, with streets on three sides. This noble offer was gratefully accepted, and thus it came to pass, singularly enough, that “the first home of the first Arminian theological seminary in America was the free and cordial gift of a church and parish of Calvinists.”

The old church was soon fitted up at the expense of public-spirited citizens of Concord, chiefly those connected with the Congregational societies. It was divided into two stories, with halls on each floor, running from north to south. A convenient chapel, with a seating capacity for one hundred and fifty, was fitted up in the second story; a lecture room, 44 x 24, and two recitation rooms, 24 x 24, on the ground floor near the east and west entrances. On the second floor, over the east lecture room, was a reading-room, and next south of this a library. The remaining portion of the edifice was made into fifteen rooms or dormitories, all high, airy, and well lighted, for the residence of students, and furnished mainly by individual Methodist churches in New England. Few and unimportant changes only were made to the exterior. The east or main entrance opened into a tower surmounted by a belfry and steeple, upon the spire of which, one hundred and twenty-three feet from the ground, was perched the old, gilded-copper “potter,” or weather-cock, four feet in height. This anomalous but lordly-looking chanceler had kept watch and ward over the old church for sixty-four years.

On the westerly side of State street, a little northwest of the old church, a commodious dwelling-house was made into a boarding-house, where the students, in a club, under their own management, might board themselves at cost. All were thus provided for save the few who preferred either to board themselves in their rooms, or in private families. A course of study, essentially the same as that at Andover, Union, Newton, and other theological schools in the United States, was adopted, requiring to complete it three full years. No charge was made for tuition, and the rent for rooms was merely nominal.

“The resources for the support of the school,” said Professor Mer-

rill, "were by no means ample at any time. As it was the first theological school proper of the Methodist Episcopal church, it had some persons in high stations to conciliate, much indifference to overcome, and to convince the masses of the Methodist ministers and people that it was really a needed element in their great work. That it was eminently useful and effective soon became very clear to most in the church. Some were so well satisfied as to be willing to do something to sustain it. The venerable bishop Elijah Hedding gave it his choice library and one thousand dollars toward its endowment. Lee Claffin, of Massachusetts, gave eleven hundred dollars. Daniel Drew, of New York, gave five thousand five hundred dollars; Mrs. Eleanor Trafton, of Boston, a thousand dollars. Five thousand dollars was a sum held for the use of the institution by the White Mountain Lumber company. Mrs. Agnes Sutherland, of New York, afterward of Leith, Scotland, gave another thousand dollars, and Mr. Morrill, of East Kingston, gave three thousand dollars towards founding a professorship. There were many smaller subscriptions of the usual character. The endowment funds, including the above, though not large, were wisely invested. Besides this small endowment, eight conferences of the Methodist Episcopal church, all in New England, with the Troy and Black river, were pledged to raise funds annually, by collection in their churches, to maintain the board of instruction in their new school. The sums thus realized, though very small, were greatly needed and much appreciated."

The faculty of the institution, while in Concord, were as follows:

Reverend Bishop Elijah Hedding, D. D., senior bishop of the Methodist Episcopal church, was the first president, and so continued from 1847 until his death in 1852.

Reverend Osmon C. Baker, D. D., was professor of New Testament, Greek; homiletics, church government and discipline, from 1847 to 1852, when he was made a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal church, but from 1854 to 1868 he held the place of Bishop Hedding as president of the institute.

Reverend John Dempster, D. D., whose selection for a professorship was made several years before, was engaged in soliciting funds for the institute in 1846, and was professor of theology and ecclesiastical history from April 1, 1847, to November, 1854.

Reverend Charles Adams, D. D., was professor of Biblical literature from April, 1847, to 1849.

Reverend Stephen M. Vail, D. D., was professor of Biblical and Oriental literature, Hebrew, Chaldee, Syriac, and Arabic languages from 1849 to 1868.

Reverend John W. Merrill, D. D., was professor of mental and

moral philosophy, natural theology, ecclesiastical history, and the history of doctrines, from 1854 until 1868.

Reverend David Patten, D. D., was professor of Christian and pastoral theology, homiletics, church government and discipline, from December 1, 1854, to 1868.

The coming of this "School of the Prophets" to Concord, in 1847, proved a valuable acquisition to the town. It brought, in faculty and students, many earnest and thoughtful men, whose presence and influence were a blessing to the community, and whose services were especially helpful in educational, religious, and social circles. Rev. Dr. Patten served as a member of the public school board from 1859 to 1867, with rare diligence and efficiency; and the large number of theological students, the most of whom were young ministers, preached on Sundays in near-by mission chapels, and supplied the pulpits in churches without a pastor in many places in the state, through all the years the school continued with us. Several of the latter found, among the fair daughters of Concord, helpmates for their professional life-work. In the twenty-one years that the institution found a home in Concord, five hundred and seventy students received instruction in theological studies. Two hundred and eleven young ministers passed through the three years' course and were graduated. In the first seven years, from 1847 to 1854, thirty-four were graduated; in the next seven years, eighty-three, and in the last seven years, ninety-four; and most of them became effective ministers of the Methodist Episcopal church. Among the graduates and students who won distinction as preachers may be mentioned: Reverends Lewis P. Cushman, John Cookman, George Prentice, W. F. Watkins, R. S. Stubbs, Charles U. Dunning, Charles Young, James O. Knowles, William V. Morrison, James B. Faulks, Dudley P. Leavitt, M. M. Parkhurst, William F. Hatfield, Richard Harcourt, Nathan G. Cheney, Norman J. Squires, Elijah Horr, and N. T. Whittaker. Three were missionaries to China,—Stephen L. Baldwin, Carlos R. Martin, who died in China, and S. L. Gracy, who was also United States consul there; and one, S. L. Golden, now (1899) in China, is one of the missionary secretaries of the Methodist Episcopal church. Reverend Albert D. Long, missionary to Bulgaria, has now been many years professor in Robert college, and Reverend Edwin Parker, D. D., has ever since he went to India been one of the most effective and useful missionaries in that distant Hindu land. A number have joined the Episcopal and Congregational churches, and labored faithfully in those denominations. The seminary, while at Concord, settled forever the utility and practicability of theological seminaries in the Methodist church, and obtained for them the hearty sanction of its general conference.

As the institute was removed from Newbury, Vt., to Concord, in 1847, on promises of better accommodations and increased support,—so, in 1868, after the expiration of another score of years, on the pledges of wealthy contributors in Massachusetts to provide the means for its further expansion, it was removed to Boston and became the nucleus of Boston university. April 24th of the latter year, Reverend Elisha Adams, who had been very closely identified with its interests from the beginning, and treasurer from 1852 to 1868, reported all expenses paid, and invested funds in cash value amounting to twenty-four thousand four hundred and sixty-eight dollars, besides notes and other obligations of uncertain value amounting to a nominal sum of five thousand nine hundred and forty-eight dollars; and four hundred and eighty-three dollars in money were paid into the treasury of the new university. Such was the only source of income, in addition to conference collections, in the last days of the institute,—from which it may be easily imagined how scant it was before.

On the removal to Boston of the institute, its library, cabinets, and other portable property, some of the faculty were transferred to the new field of duty; all left Concord save one, Professor Merrill, who, on account of advancing years, tarried here. He filled appointments for a few years in his old conference, and then returned to Concord, where, after a long life of patient, unremitting, and unwearying industry in the service of the Great Master, he passed to his reward, February 9, 1900, aged ninety-one years, and was buried at Wilbraham, Mass.

The institute buildings and land, on the removal of the school, reverted to the society of the North Congregational church, and the property was sold soon afterward to the Hosmers of Fisherville. The proceeds of the sale were applied to the purchase of a parsonage for the society, on Franklin street. The building was rented for tenements, by the new owners, until the night of November 28, 1870, when the venerable structure, nearly one hundred and nineteen years old, and “which had associated with it more of marked and precious history than any other building in the state,” wrapped itself in flames, and in a blaze of glory was wafted to the skies.