

# Two Curious Ministers

by: Doris Sherrow

**This month, I'm going to give you a *lack of history*.**

Two locally famous ministers came to Portland, **Rev. Moses Bartlett** in 1732, and **Rev. William Jarvis** in 1829, and each one chose, in my opinion, a somewhat bizarre place to make his home. I don't know why they did this! So let me tell it to you--perhaps one of you will have insight, or historical information, or séance material to offer...

In 1731, **Rev. Daniel Newell**, the first minister of the twenty-year-old Congregational Church, died. The subsequent search for a new minister yielded Moses Bartlett, who turned 24 in 1732, the year he was hired. The church stood in what we know as the intersection of William and High streets — traffic was too rare and gentle back then to make it a hazard to place a building in an intersection!

Not surprisingly, a piece of land was purchased for Bartlett to make his home. **Forty acres of Wangunk Indian land!** This lot stretched from Bartlett Street on the north, to William Street on the south, with High Street forming its western border.

So logical it would have been for him to set his house on the corner of that lot, in the spot that is now the entrance to the Swedish Cemetery. His church would have been directly in front of him!

No, he set his house on the diagonally opposite corner, the northeasternmost edge, opposite the south end of Prospect Street! Thus his nearest neighbor was the Wangunk Indian tribe--about forty families of Wangunk dwelt predominantly in the Penny Corner Road area.

Most of the houses of his church members were located along Main Street; only two other houses stood on Bartlett Street. Why did he choose to settle near the several dozen Wangunk?

One possible answer is that he hoped to "Christianize" them as various other ministers had attempted. The two most famous are **John Eliot** in the later 1600s, and **Eleazar Wheelock** in the later 1700s. Many people saw this proselytizing as a blessed chance to create more Christians while simultaneously "raising" the Indians from their "lowly" culture to the "exalted" Christian one. (Few of these people were Indians.)

**David Brainerd** from Haddam was another young minister to the Indians. Even though he only lived to the age of 29, his activities were so outstanding that the more famous **Rev. Jonathan Edwards** published a book from his journal in 1749. Brainerd had grown up in Haddam, and taken his ministerial training from **Rev. Phineas Fiske**.

Moses Bartlett had also taken his ministerial training from Rev. Fiske, albeit several years earlier. Was there something about Fiske's teachings that led a young religious man to think about the Indian community? I don't know.

So I don't know why Bartlett would settle virtually amidst the Wangunk.

Now the other minister, Rev. William Jarvis.

A bold few citizens formed the Episcopal Church in 1789. They built a colonial-house type of building on the corner of Bartlett and High streets, and worshipped there until 1832, when they built a small, simple brownstone church on the site of the current Episcopal Church. William Jarvis was called to lead them in 1829, while they were still in the Bartlett Street building, i.e., the more northerly area of town.

Jarvis had married **Elizabeth Miller Hart** from Saybrook. Her wealthy father built them a house on Marlborough Street. It was a beautiful Federal style with a fanlight in the gable and elegant carved wooden trim both inside and out. Its gable end is barely visible through the trees of what we know as Elmcrest, which is now Saint Francis Care Behavioral Health.

This location is not too odd, in that it was just around the corner from Main Street, though it would have been equally logical for Jarvis to locate on Main Street, near where the new Episcopalian church was built a few years later. The downstreet area was coming into power as the brownstone industry became more profitable, and its residents made up the larger portion of his communicants.

More curiously, the house built for the Jarvises was decidedly far back from the road, which had been a toll road since 1808. Until recently I worked in this building, running the library for Elmcrest, and I noticed, to my surprise, that I could not really hear the intense 1990s traffic along

Marlborough Street! The 1851 Clark map, which shows downtown Portland, shows that Jarvis's house was three times further back from the road than other Portland houses built by that date.

Back from the road is one thing – even more curiously, the Jarvises' new house was **ROTATED AWAY FROM THE ROAD!** In effect, the 1829 house had been built considerably south of, and turned away from, the church and the congregation. Jarvis was fondly remembered by his congregation, as evidenced by **Julia Norton McLean's History of Trinity Episcopal Church**, Portland, Conn., 1788-1938. Why would he want to retreat so far away from his congregation?

Perhaps the non-Portland roots of this couple, indeed the Saybrook origins of Mrs. Jarvis, made them less likely to cluster in the middle of Main Street with their congregation. Maybe the beautiful house away from the turnpike, gazing out onto the Connecticut River, was a lovely form of solace to them. We currently strive to find work in corporate mob scenes only to retreat to woodsy suburban homelots. Who knew this mindset was around in the 1820s? (Curiously, one surviving letter from the Jarvis family complains of the noise drifting into the house---from the docks down at the river front!)

So why did Jarvis set himself down away from his community, with his architectural back to them? And why did Bartlett plunk himself down in the midst of the Wangunk? Let me know if your crystal ball offers an answer!