



# A Peek at the Past

## Yesterdays at our Church

By Judy Buswell

### *Just Around the Corner ~ Two Churches in the Village*

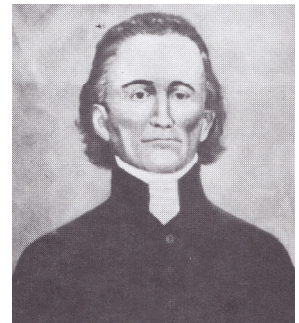
Over the years and depending on purposes and priorities, the Gilford Community Church (GCC) has changed its name with surprising frequency. Some names stuck and others were soon forgotten.

The roots of today's Gilford Community Church began with the Freewill Baptist faith, founded in 1780 in New Durham, NH by Benjamin Randall. By 1796, the new Baptist



**Gunstock Meetinghouse, drawn by Peter Stewart from a written description**

religion had found its way to Gilford (then Gilmanton) to become one of four congregations sharing the Gunstock Meetinghouse on top of Gunstock Hill. Elder Richard Martin moved from Lee, NH with two mandates: pastoring this new Freewill Baptist congregation and strengthening this theology around the Lakes Region.



**Benjamin Randall from New Durham, NH, founder of Freewill Baptist faith in 1780**

Several decades later when sharing the Meetinghouse led to quarrels and confusion, all four congregations decided to go their own way. The Freewill Baptist flock agreed to build down the hill in Gilford Village. In the interim FWB members met in clusters in private homes, schoolhouses or even outdoors in neighborhoods such as the Village, Liberty Hill, "Back of the Mountain", Glendale, and the Intervale.

By May of 1826, organizing documents for the Gilford Freewill Baptists took the name, "*First Freewill Baptist Church in Gilford*". Church leaders acquired land on what is now Potter Hill Road and the brand-new facility - funded by selling pews to families - was dedicated on January 1 of 1835.

Some two decades later in May of 1857, the energy and commitment in this congregation was flagging and so the church was reorganized under new covenants and leadership. While the church kept its Freewill Baptist beliefs and governance, it was renamed the "*Gilford Village Church*".

For the next twenty years or so, the Baptist Church prospered as the only church accessible to most Gilford residents. That all changed in 1874 when the Methodist Episcopal Church opened its doors just around the corner



Meeting site for new Gilford Methodist Church in the latter part of the 19th century

in the old Union Church, the former home of the Universalist congregation. Led by Abraham Lunt, the Methodist faith was an attractive option for some unhappy Baptists. In January 1875, a cluster of these disillusioned members left under a bit of a cloud and joined hands with the Methodists only a few steps away.

Among those new Methodists were **GUST** and **JENNIE COPP**. Gust Copp was a skilled carpenter who owned Copp's Mill along the Gunstock River. Copp led a flurry of changes to the Methodist facility, including building a parsonage across the street and redoing the meetinghouse interior in the popular Rural Gothic Revival style. Both congregations met in their separate meetinghouses and each held their own socials and Sunday School activities in the nearby Town Hall.



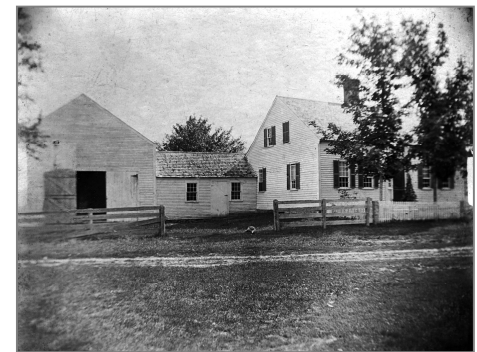
Gust Copp



Copp's Mill- Gunstock Brook

But in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century both Village churches were struggling with dwindling resources and apathetic members. The joint solution was to meet together and share expenses, initially alternating worship services between the two facilities. When this became confusing and inconvenient, the Sunday meetings were moved to the larger Baptist building because it had heat and a horse shed for those members arriving in horse-drawn vehicles or on horseback.

In 1920 and 1921, meeting notices and church news in the *Laconia Democrat* and the *Laconia News and Critic* newspapers listed the two churches as meeting together under the leadership of **REV HAROLD R BRENNAN**. In 1922, Brennan was replaced by **REV A BROWNLOW THOMPSON** and the paired congregation adopted the name, the "*Gilford Community Church*". Thompson was bubbling over with community-based ideas including a monthly newsletter, the "*Gilford Booster*" that was mailed to all interested locals and others from as far away as California.



GCC Parsonage with attached barn and Horse Shed, circa 1900. The Barn was torn down and replaced with the Weeks Parish Hall in 1938. As part of the 2009 renovations, the Parish Hall was removed but the Parsonage remains on the GCC campus as an attractive and well used storage space.



Cover of the August 1922 debut issue of the "Gilford Booster" with photo of Rev Thompson

Rev Thompson, also the Booster Editor, wrote a front-page article that called for "unifying the local forces of Christianity" and dedicating themselves to the community before asking them for donations. Methodist leaders heartily endorsed the idea but a bit later in 1925, Thompson, the author of the concept, left to lead another church.

Several years later, the combined congregations shed their Community Church identity and renamed themselves the "*Gilford Federated Church*", pastored first by **REV NOYES STEVENS** and then by **REV GEORGE LADD**.

Notices in the *Laconia Democrat*  
 L-R: December 9, 1921  
 August 11, 1922  
 March 28, 1930

Gilford,  
 Methodist & Baptist Churches.  
 Harold B. Brennan, Pastor.  
 Lord's Day Services.  
 11 00 a. m.— Morning worship as usual.  
 12 15 m. — Sunday school  
 7 00 p. m. — Evening worship. The subject will be "Heart Searching." The pastor will be assisted by two or three men from the church in this service. Come, and be sure and bring your Bibles.

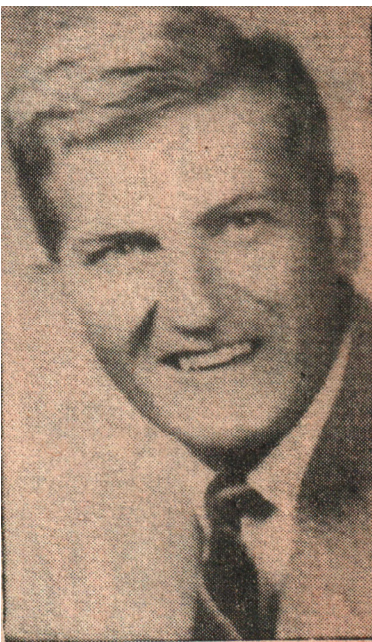
Gilford.  
 Community Church.  
 A. B. Thompson, pastor.  
 Sunday Services.  
 11:00 — Morning worship. Subject, "The Measure of Success."  
 12:15 — Church school.  
 There will be no evening service.

GILFORD FEDERATED CHURCH  
 Rev. E. Noyes Stevens  
 Sunday, March 30, 1930  
 10:45—Prayer Circle  
 11:00—Sunday morning service  
 12:00—Bible School.  
 7:00—Prayer and Praise Service  
 7:30—Thursday evenings, prayer meeting.

It is not clear when the Methodist-Baptist partnership finally dissolved but in 1940, all Gilford Methodist assets were given to the Laconia Methodists. The Church and Parsonage were sold and many Gilford Methodists joined the Methodist Church in Laconia.

More interruptions came in the mid-1960s, but for different reasons. The city of Laconia was changing its downtown area through a federal urban renewal program. The plan included tearing down the old Methodist Church on Union Avenue to provide space for the Sunrise Towers complex and its housing and services for seniors on fixed incomes.

Meanwhile things were a little unsettled in the Baptist congregation, that a decade or so earlier had renamed itself the *Gilford Community Church (GCC)*. During a Sunday morning service in early 1967, the GCC minister, **REV FREDERICK SERLEY**, walked from the dais to the floor, took off his robe, and said he could not be their minister any longer, abruptly tossing the bewildered congregation into murky waters.



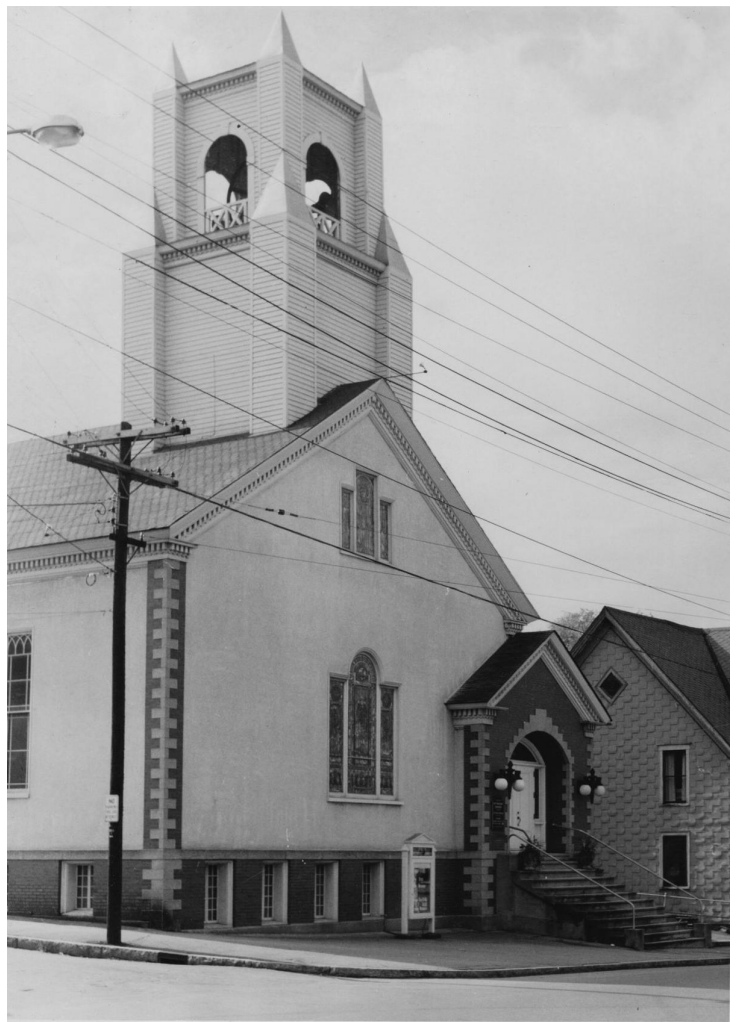
Rev Fred Serley who suddenly resigned in early 1967

The two churches soon recognized their shared crises as an opportunity to set a different path and purpose for both parishes, perhaps even together.

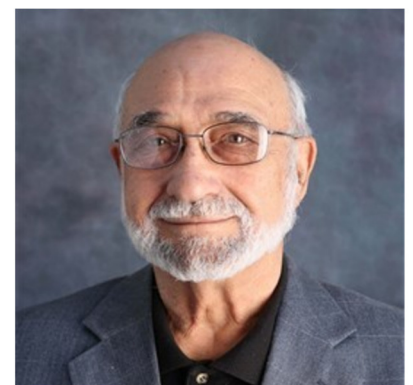
A meeting on May 7, 1967 with **REV FRANK GULINELLO**, minister of the soon-to-be homeless Laconia Methodist congregation, attracted more than 60 GCC members. They spent the evening discussing a potential merger as part of an initiative called **SCOMP**, or the "*Special Committee on Merger Possibilities*".

Among the GCC members who spoke at this meeting were Bob Clifford, Bob MacHaffie, Don York, Doris Lord, Evelyn Seavey,

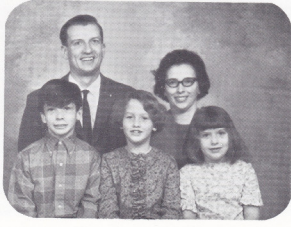
Fred Shurbert, Gary & Lucille Allen, Harold Smith, Harry Simpson, Helen Cochran, James Nevers, John & Marcelia Muehlke, Ken Spaulding, Louise Mason, Dick Burt, Richard Ray, Rita Watson, Rupert Simonds, Ruth Curtis, Seth & Peg Keller and Shirley Morrow.



Methodist Church before Urban Renewal



Rev Frank Gulinello in his later years



ROBERT CLIFFORD FAMILY



ROBERT MACHAFFIE FAMILY



MR. & MRS. DONALD YORK



MRS. EVELYN SEAVEY & BRUCE



RICHARD MORROW FAMILY

Photos of those in the c 1990 GCC Directory who spoke at this SCOMP meeting

MAY 7, 1967 MEETING WITH REV GULINELLO

The discussion that evening was probing and their questions and comments were numerous and varied:

- What does the Methodist congregation think of the Gilford Community Church?
- Who would select the Sunday School materials and the Minister?
- What types of outreach activities are currently organized by the Methodist Church?
- Would we have to become Methodists?
- What can two churches do better *together*, rather than *separately*?
- What is the connection between the Baptist umbrella organization and the GCC property and buildings?
- Just going to church on Sunday mornings is not enough to sustain a church.
- The necessity of raising the minister's salary by at least \$1,000. *(The yearly salary for the recently departed minister was \$3,500 along with free housing and various other stipends.)*
- GCC has a history of partnerships with the Methodist Church
- The beliefs of our church members differ widely. Some question the divinity of Christ. For us to succeed these differences would need to be resolved.
- Should we vote to table this proposal?

A vote was taken and 26 voted to table the motion while 36 voted to continue this merger discussion.



GARY AND LUCILLE ALLEN



MR. & MRS. SETH KELLER



HAROLD SMITH FAMILY



MRS. RUTH CURTIS



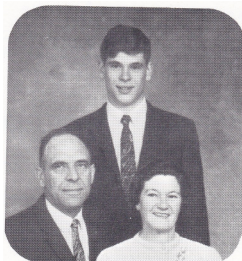
JAMES NEVERS FAMILY



MR. & MRS. RUPERT SIMONDS



MR. & MRS. JOHN MUEHLKE



ROBERT WATSON FAMILY



RICHARD RAY FAMILY



RICHARD BURT FAMILY



MR. & MRS. ASHLEY MASON



MR. & MRS. KENNETH SPALDING

This discussion, some 50 years ago, of merging the two Gilford churches ended peacefully with each church finding its own faith-driven roots.

The Methodists held their last service at the old Laconia church on November 5, 1967. For the next two years during land acquisition and construction of their church, the Methodists met for worship services and Sunday School classes at the **TEMPLE B'NAI ISRAEL OF LACONIA**, generously offered by the Jewish congregation. The first service in the new Methodist

facility on Route 11-A was held on August 3, 1969.



The new First United Methodist Church in Gilford, once fondly called the "Flying Diaper", is now known as "New Hope Ministries".

Meanwhile, the Baptists were working through a rather painful and long hiatus with no permanent minister. In November of 1968, **REV FLOYD KINSLEY** and his wife **POLLY** accepted the call and moved into the Parsonage. His compensation of \$6,700 with free housing and other stipends nearly doubled that of his immediate predecessor. Rev Kinsley's friendly and earnest leadership style matched the pressing needs of the congregation. Much beloved, Rev Kinsley led the church for close to seven years during which he presided over the first major expansion of the facility in 1970.



REV FLOYD KINSLEY

GCC is now open to all beliefs, is nimble and independent of any denomination, and has members from throughout the Lakes Region. It is a user-friendly and safe place to ask life's important questions, but as they stress, we're certainly "not perfect"! GCC sponsors a wide variety of social action programs, some self-initiated and others as partners with existing local programs. Its spacious and renovated church campus, just eleven years old, hosts the Village Preschool and the area's only year-round Youth Center.

The Methodist Church, now known as "**Hope Ministries**", fosters communities of hope through its three areas of concern: Connecting, Growing, and Serving. The church is also recognized for promoting and sharing the arts. This unique focus introduced yet another path to understand oneself and interpret past, current, and emerging social issues and cultural shifts. For more than 30 years, their lively December

"*Madrigal Dinners*" was one of the Lakes Region's most anticipated and sought-after events. Over the years, their theatre productions have involved hundreds of community members and have helped to build an appetite for theater in the Lakes Region. The Church still hosts the *Lakes Region Singers*, a community-based choral group.



In the end, while the finer points of theology in both churches may differ, their commitment to live lives inspired by the tenets of Christianity while

enriching their surrounding communities remains the same. And so does the friendship between the two churches... located just around the corner and about a mile down the street.



**RESOURCES:** \* "150 YEARS OF FAITH"—HISTORY OF THE GILFORD-LACONIA METHODIST FAITH; \* PETER STEWART ASSOCIATES ARCHITECTS; \* "THE JOURNAL OF BENJAMIN RANDALL", ED. DR. RAY THOMAS; \* DIANA DUCKOFF MATERIALS; \* LHMS ARCHIVES; \* THOMPSON AMES HISTORICAL SOCIETY; \* "THE LACONIA DEMOCRAT" NEWSPAPERS; \* LACONIA LIBRARY; \* GILFORD LIBRARY; \* GCC ARCHIVES; \* HOPE MINISTRIES & GCC WEBSITES; \* "GUNSTOCK PARISH" - ADAIR MULLIGAN; \* JANE MUEHLKE ROLLINS MATERIALS; AND \* MR. GOOGLE, HIMSELF!