CHAPTER VI

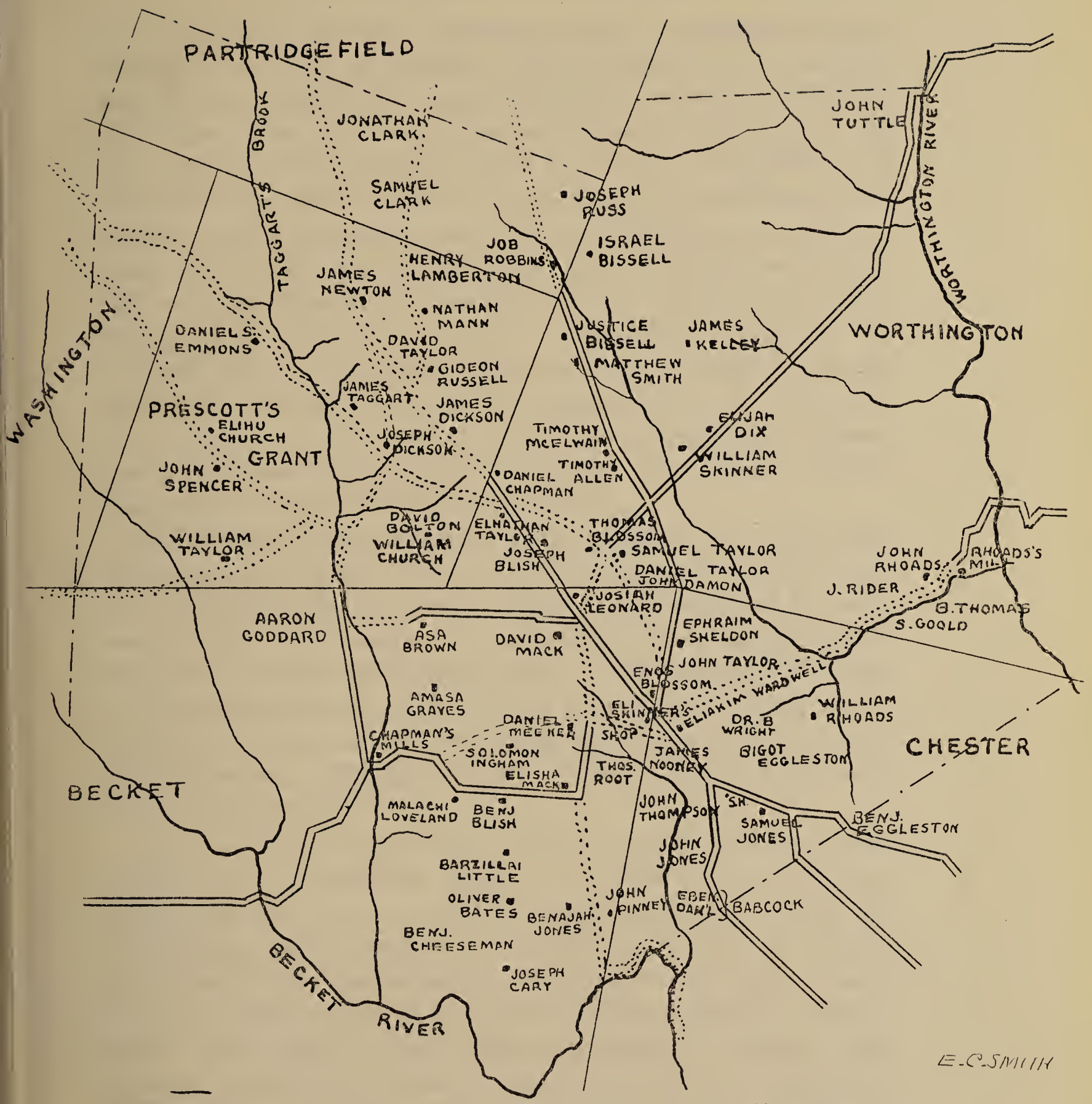
ORGANIZATION OF THE NEW COMMUNITY AND CHURCH

THOSE who have inquired into the busy first years of Middlefield as an incorporated town are always impressed by the great lack of unanimity of opinion, and the inability to abide by a decision, manifested in transacting public affairs, particularly in important matters such as choosing a central place for the establishment of the meetinghouse, and the selection of a minister. While such controversies are by no means uncommon in the history of small towns, it is seldom that they occur at the very beginning of their history and are so protracted as in the case of Middlefield.

If the local conditions are studied alone, the conclusion reached regarding the character and capacity of the new citizens is not flattering; but if we can picture them as simply a small portion of the great body of people who were trying to put into practice a more democratic form of government not only in the state but in the nation, we shall arrive at a fairer estimate of their civic management. It is therefore necessary to give some consideration to the general political, economic and religious influences that swayed mens' minds before we study in detail the interesting events through which the community was finally organized. When this has been done it seems likely that the wonder will be, not that Middlefield was so dilatory in achieving a fully developed town life, but that it was able at all under such unfavorable conditions to bring to a successful issue its own particular experiment in pure democracy.

It is a noteworthy fact that the first years of Middlefield's existence as a town were exactly contemporaneous with the period of unrest and reconstruction following the Revolution which has been called "the critical period in American History."

Even during the war the success of the first efforts of the


PARTRIDGEFIELD
JONATHAN CLARK
SAMUEL CLARK
TAGGART'S BROOK
JOSEPH RUSS
JOB ROBBINS
ISRAEL BISSELL
HENRY LAMBERTON
JAMES NEWTON
NATHAN MANN
JOHN TUTTLE
WORTHINGTON RIVER
WORTHINGTON
WASHINGTON
DANIEL EMMONS
DAVID TAYLOR
GIDEON RUSSELL
JUSTICE BISSELL
JAMES KELLEY
MATTHEW SMITH
JAMES TAGGART
JAMES DICKSON
PRESCOTT'S
ELIHU CHURCH
JOSEPH DICKSON
TIMOTHY MCELWAIN
ELIJAH DIX
GRANT
JOHN SPENCER
TIMOTHY ALLEN
WILLIAM SKINNER
DANIEL CHAPMAN
DAVID BOLTON
ELNATHAN TAYLOR
THOMAS BLOSSOM
WILLIAM TAYLOR
WILLIAM CHURCH
JOSEPH BLISH
SAMUEL TAYLOR
JOHN RHOADS
RHOADS'S MIL
DANIEL TAYLOR
JOHN DAMON
J. RIDER
JOSIAH LEONARD
B. THOMAS
S. GOOLD
AARON GODDARD
ASA BROWN
DAVID MACK
EPHRAIM SHELDON
JOHN TAYLOR
ENOS BLOSSOM
ELIAKIM WARDWELL
WILLIAM RHOADS
DR. B WRIGHT
AMASA GRAVES
DANIEL MEEKER
ELI SKINNER'S SHOP
CHAPMAN'S MILLS
SOLOMON INGHAM
ELISHA MACK
THOS. ROOT
JAMES NOONEY
BIGOT EGGLESTON
CHESTER
BECKET
MALACHI LOVELAND
BENJ BLISH
JOHN THOMPSON
SAMUEL JONES
BENJ. EGGLESTON
JOHN JONES
BARZILLAI LITTLE
OLIVER BATES
JOHN PINNEY
EBEN'R BABCOCK
BENAJAH JONES
BENJ. CHEESEMAN
JOSEPH CARY
BECKET RIVER
E.C.SMITH
MIDDLEFIELD
1783
NEW TOWNSHIP LINES
TRAILS
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states at self-government led many people to advocate radical theories. As early as October, 1776, the hill town of Ashfield, not far from Middlefield, announced to the world the adoption of certain "Resolves" as to the proper form of government for the country. The conclusion reads as follows: "Therefore it is voted that we take the Law of God for the foundation of the forme of our government, that it is our opinion that we Do not want any Goviner but the Goviner of the Univarse, and under him a States Gineral to Consult with the wrest of the United States for the Good of the whole . . . that all acts passed by the Gineral Court of the State respecting the Seviral Towns Be Sent to the Seviral Towns for their acceptants Before they shall be in force." Under such a plan of referendum the General Court of Massachusetts would be hardly more than a clearing house for the political whims of the towns.

Such extreme ideas, however, would probably have made little impression had it not been for the distressing economic conditions which followed the war. Half of the people of the state were in debt. Gold and silver had disappeared from circulation and there was no suitable legal tender. Debtors were confronted on the one hand with a depreciated paper currency and on the other with the unjust laws inflicting imprisonment for failure to settle accounts. Furthermore, the General Court was unable to give prompt relief.

As this situation continued society seemed about to disintegrate into antagonistic classes. On the side of law and order were the men of wealth, the journalists, the clergy and professional men generally, while the opponents of existing government were the farmers and tradesmen who had no means of paying debts incurred by the war, soldiers unable or unwilling to settle down in their former occupations, and also demagogues and other turbulent spirits interested in fomenting an insurgent movement. There was, however, little organization among the forces of discontent. On the contrary, a fierce antagonism arose between debtors who had served in the war and those who had not.

There was also a lack of sympathy and understanding between the western and the eastern sections of the state. By the disruption of their former markets in Great Britain the inland

agricultural people probably suffered more from the after-effects of the war than the trading and shipping people on the coast who were quick to discover the new currents of commerce. The westerners, therefore, felt a natural distrust of the easterners who seemed to control the state government without recognizing the hard conditions of living in the hill towns. In explaining the general support given to Shays' Rebellion in the western counties it should also be borne in mind that a large number of the settlers had recently arrived from Connecticut and had not yet developed any particular loyalty to the government in the distant city of Boston.

It is inevitable that the new ideals of democracy and the economic crisis just described should affect the relations of the church to the state. Since 1692 it had been the law of the province that each town should be "constantly provided with an able, learned orthodox minister of good conversation" who should be "suitably encouraged and sufficiently supported and maintained by the inhabitants of such town." This law did not prevent the establishment of churches of denominations other than the Congregational when petitioned for by a sufficiently large number of people in a community, but it made necessary an elaborate system of certification of the sincerity of any dissenter in order to make sure that this professed dissent was not an excuse for evading his support of the Puritan Church.

As the ranks of the dissenters grew the administration of such restrictive laws in Massachusetts and Connecticut became more difficult and distasteful, especially when they were applied by the standing order to a faction of their own denomination known as "The New Lights" who on account of divergent views engendered by the Great Awakening in 1740 felt it necessary to withdraw from the orthodox church and form societies of their own. Many of these Separatists eventually joined the Baptists who were the pioneers in the movement for the separation of the church from the state. Even before the Revolution the latter had taken the position that the colonists could not logically demand representation in Parliament in the matter of taxation and at the same time levy clerical taxes themselves upon those whose religious convictions differed from their own. But though the power and prestige of the privileged church

steadily diminished after the Revolution, it remained strong enough to ward off the day of disestablishment until many years after the period now under consideration.

Under these circumstances the temporal affairs of the church were matters of town business just as much as the construction of roads and the establishment of schools, and it was in the democratic town meeting that the opposition to the standing order was in evidence. As will be seen later, the disadvantages of the dependence of the church upon the town are clearly shown in the experience of Middlefield. Although the levying of clerical taxes insured every man's interest in religious matters, whatever his sentiments toward Congregationalism might be, his voice and vote had to be taken into account also. Church problems were thus likely to become involved with other local issues. Dissenters with political influence could often obstruct the plans of the Congregationalists in ways which would have been impossible had the church been independent of the town.

The fact that frontier towns attract the restless and radical spirits of the older communities as well as those who are forced to emigrate by the economic pressure of the times made it certain that the various religious factions would be well represented in Middlefield. Even a slight study reveals the fact that the dissenters, although probably not in the majority, were nevertheless strong enough to force the standing order to compromise in order to maintain control. Moreover, the protracted nature of the disagreements may have been partly due to the hopes and efforts of the dissenters to secure a sufficient number of recruits from the influx of newcomers with the hope that eventually a church of their own faith might be established.

But added to these general causes of dissatisfaction and hardship in the hill towns was the peculiar handicap which Middlefield people sustained in the unorganized state of their community life. Ordinarily when new towns are formed out of older ones it is because two or more villages within a township become sufficiently equal in numbers or leadership, or are so situated geographically that a division of the territory becomes advisable for the efficient administration of local affairs. The division of Murrayfield into Chester and Huntington, and of Partridgefield into Peru and Hinsdale, are illustrations of this

point. In such cases the new towns begin life with a community spirit already developed, and, in many cases, with a church already built. Their leaders having grown up with the original township have acquired the influence and experience necessary to initiate at once a successful ordering of the civic life.

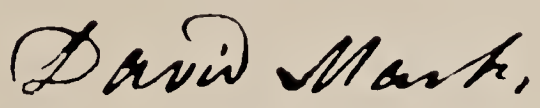
Quite different, as we have already seen, was the beginning of Middlefield. Fashioned overnight out of the remote portions of five adjoining townships, it contained no community within its borders. Prescott's Grant, the central portion which served as a nucleus of the township, was a sparsely settled private tract in which no highways or bridges had been built to give its inhabitants communication with the outside world. Upon incorporation some sixty settlers suddenly found themselves citizens of a new town. They were not only more or less unknown to each other but, in many cases, had no direct means of meeting one another, particularly if they lived on opposite sides of the Grant.

Obviously the prime necessity was to find the center of the town for the location of the meetinghouse and to build roads to this point from all directions. But before this could be done the settlers had to get together as best they could and elect their town officers after only a slight acquaintance with one another. These facts should not be forgotten when we seek for an explanation of the lack of harmony and constant change of opinion which characterize the first few years of the town's political life.

On account of its later origin Middlefield also lacked the advantages of the proprietary government under which its neighbors had been organized. In obtaining their grants the proprietors bound themselves to reserve certain lots for the support of the parish and schools. This could not be done in the case of Middlefield as all the land was already in the hands of private individuals. While the proprietors could lay out roads as they pleased in their unsettled tracts, the town leaders of Middlefield faced a more difficult problem in locating their center and highways in relation to the portions of roads which had been constructed by the towns formerly owning the territory. The proprietors were men of wealth and known to all the prominent men of the state. The Middlefield settlers, who

came largely from another state and were of the farming or artisan classes, were of moderate means, and entirely unknown at Boston, possessing only such influence as they had acquired through aptitude for managing local affairs. It will be well to keep these considerations in mind, therefore, in estimating the achievements of the town.

To commence the actual story of Middlefield, the first town meeting was held at the house of David Mack on April 10, 1783, the "warning" of which was given by Benjamin Eggleston in accordance with the instructions of the General Court. As might have been expected, the session was largely concerned with the election of town officers. The selectmen chosen were



Samuel Jones, who formerly held that office in Chester; David Mack, the best known citizen of the community; and Job Robbins, from the northeast part of the town. Daniel Chapman was elected town treasurer and Solomon Ingham, town clerk. These two officers, and also Mr. Mack, were all from the Hebron contingent in Middlefield. In spite of the lack of acquaintance with each other the voters chose wisely, as all these officers were re-elected the following year.

At the second meeting two weeks later the town gave attention to its pressing needs. The citizens voted to raise at once thirty pounds for the support of preaching and ten pounds for the establishment of schools and appointed committees to have charge of these matters. With the intention of following the custom of other New England towns in placing the meetinghouse at the center of the township, a committee was appointed for the purpose of locating the desired spot. In order that a satisfactory result might be reached the town prudently selected as members men who lived in different parts of the town; and when the Becket section was left unrepresented by the death of Elisha Mack, Sr., his neighbor, Benjamin Blish was chosen in his place, and also Benajah Jones, another neighbor, "in case Benjamin Blish be absent."

In spite of all this precaution, however, the town did not accept "the place perfixed by the committee for the center," probably because the center was found to be at some inaccessible

spot on the central ridge. Another carefully chosen committee was instructed "to find the most proper place for the meeting-house to stand". They reported October 6 that this spot was "on the main road on the line between Mr. Joseph Blish and Widow Ford's."[1]

With this point apparently settled, highways could now be constructed to give the citizens access thereto, and thirteen were surveyed and built during the fall and winter. The first three were laid in the isolated Prescott's Grant section. The first of these was the continuation of "the main road" from Daniel Chapman's, now (1924) the Cook farm, to the Peru line to join a road to Peru Center and Pittsfield. The second road ran west from the Center across the valley of Factory Brook and northwardly along the West Hill ridge to the Washington line, much the same as it does to-day, except that it began nearer Widow Ford's, where the church was to be erected, instead of at the Oliver Church homestead. The third road branched from this highway near Factory Brook, running north to the farm later known as the Samuel Smith place.

As the roads already existing in other sections of the town had been built without reference to any prospective center at Middlefield, a number of branch and cross roads leading toward the site for the meetinghouse were necessary. Among these were: the present road to the Alderman farm which originally continued down the steep mountainside to the Root farm at the foot of Mt. Gobble; the so-called "Ridgepole Road," running north from the Den past the Chipman and Cottrell farms to the Peru line, and the cross road running east to this road from the McElwain farm which originally continued east and south toward the Den. The highway from Worthington which ended at Blossom Corner was extended to meet the main road at David Mack's. Other roads, later abandoned, were also built at this time, one from the Den to Arthur Pease's; one for the settlers in the Walnut Hill region; and even one running north from the main road at the Uriah Church homestead over the steep slope of Dickson Hill.

So much labor was expended on these roads that the farmers called for an abatement of a portion of the highway tax stating

[1] Near the Baptist parsonage, now owned by Mr. Griffin. (1924)

that they could not carry on their farms and also complete the highway work planned for the year of 1784. When we of to-day wonder why the roads were often built perpendicularly up and down even the steepest hillsides, we should keep in mind the amount of labor needed to make a smooth path through a rugged and wooded region. As horseback riders and ox-team drivers could negotiate readily grades which tax the strength of horse teams and automobiles to-day, any means was employed which shortened the mileage.

While the first few years showed steady progress in the establishment of roads and schools, the religious welfare of the citizens was a matter requiring the constant consideration of the town leaders for nearly a decade. The site for the meeting-house having been chosen, the next question was the settlement of a minister under whose guidance a church society might be built up and the meetinghouse erected. But it was just at this point that the greatest difficulty arose, due, to some extent, to the presence of factions representing various kinds of religious belief.

The Congregational Society, organized in November, 1783, had sixteen members, seven of which—the Macks, Browns, Chapmans and Oliver Bates—coming from the orthodox parish of Gilead in Hebron, Connecticut, were stout maintainers of the faith of their fathers. Other prominent members were Joseph Blush and Landlord John Taylor and his wife who died within a few years. As no new members were added until the installation of Mr. Nash while a number of the others moved away, the society did not have a flourishing existence during this decade. The interesting point to note is that not one of the East Haddam Colony in the northwest part of the town nor of the large Enfield contingent in the southeast was a member of the society in its early days. The fact that James Dickson and Samuel Jones, the leaders of these respective sections, were frequently united in opposition to David Mack in religious matters suggests that there may have been some dissatisfaction at the control exercised by the Hebronites in both church and town matters, aside from the disagreements caused by the difference of religious belief.

It was but natural that the members of the Congregational So-

ciety should take the lead in attempting to secure a preacher, and the names of Chapman, Mack and Blush appear for three years on the committees chosen for this purpose. A Mr. Smith preached for a few Sundays in 1783 and a Mr. Griswold in the early part of 1784. During the summer and fall Rev. Timothy Woodbridge preached on probation and a move was made to give him a call to settle. The committee which waited on Mr. Woodbridge was composed of three Hebronites, two East Haddamites, and one Enfield man. Although the town records do not disclose the exact source of the failure of the negotiations, the second article of the warrant for the December meeting indicates the general result: "to see if the town will take some method which may be thought proper according to the rules of the gospel to heal the divisions that seem to prevail in this town respecting our different sentiment in the matter of religion."

The prestige of the standing order was not impared by this setback, however, for the town in the spring of 1785 again chose Blush, Mack and Chapman as a committee to find a preacher. An appparently favorable reception was given to the Reverend Mr. Thompson who preached during the summer and fall, but when the town voted to give him a call, there was a vigorous protest against the settlement on the part of thirteen citizens, headed by Samuel Jones and James Dickson. Again the exact reason for the remonstrance is not made clear in the petition, but judging from the fact that the signers were mostly Scotch-Irish or members of the Babcock family, it seems likely that Mr. Thompson was not sufficiently tolerant of the beliefs of Presbyterians and Baptists to make him acceptable. With two of the town leaders in opposition the attempt to settle Mr. Thompson was abandoned, and once more the committee sought to find a candidate who would give better satisfaction to all. Until the erection of the meetinghouse, town meetings and religious services were held either at the Mack or Blush Tavern or at private houses.

In 1786 the situation became more complicated. The committee's candidate, Rev. Joseph Strong, like his predecessors, failed to receive a call at the end of his summer ministrations. "The unhappy differences" of religious opinion are again mentioned

in the town records for this year. One reason for this was that the Scotch-Irish element was exhibiting some activity of its own regarding procuring a preacher. In May James Dickson had appeared at the meeting of the Presbytery at Coleraine to ask that Middlefield and Chester be taken under the care of that body and that a preacher be furnished them. As a considerable colony of Ulsterites lived just across the southern border in Chester, Dickson apparently believed it possible to establish a Presbyterian Church in Middlefield.

Very wisely the town took measures to harmonize the differences between the Congregationalists and the Scotch-Irish. On September 4 the citizens ratified four "articles upon which the church can consistently agree to receive members to their watch and fellowship": (1) To receive into membership all persons who had owned the Covenant and brought letters of recommendation; (2) To permit the baptism of children whose parents by reason of doubts and scruples could not see their way clear to come to the ordinance of the supper; (3) To receive under the care of the church all baptized persons; and (4) To receive "those persons that call themselves Prebeterians upon the same footing they were when they went from us, and all persons in the town of Middlefield that think the prebeterian rule of admission of members to be according to devine appointment, they making a profession of their faith and being free from ignorance and scandall, shall be admitted to ordinance and be disciplined according to the Presbeterian rules of church government."

Under this tolerant policy persons of different faiths could become affiliated with the church, and such was the ultimate result. It would seem, however, that the Presbyterians had already withdrawn from fellowship with the Congregationalists and that they did not return immediately, as the Presbytery on September 27 made preparation to ordain elders at Middlefield and Chester with the instructions that "they are to find a sound preacher, if they can, and when obtained he and they are to be admitted under the care of Presbytery."

Besides this positive move toward the formation of a rival church, there was also the rising tide of political insurgency to strengthen the opposition to the Congregationalists. As a

result, James Dickson, Samuel Jones and Bissel Phelps were authorized by the town in November to apply to the Reverend John Robinson for preaching and he accepted. To the further

detriment of domestic harmony came the turbulence of Shays' Rebellion in which Middlefield citizens were actively engaged on both sides. As the dissenting element in church affairs coincided with the insurgent faction in the state, the opposing factions of the town continued their local struggle with sword and gun and military display at the same time that they were hindering or helping the settlement of the wider political issues of the state. To these exciting but bloodless incidents we must now give attention.

To assist the state in remedying the distressing economic conditions described at the beginning of the chapter, Hampshire County, following the example of other counties, held conventions at Hatfield in May and August, 1786. Lieutenant Malachi Loveland, a conservative, represented Middlefield in the May assembly, but by August insurgent sentiment had so increased that Samuel Jones and James Dickson were chosen delegates to the later meeting. Such radical views were uttered at this gathering that shortly after a mob prevented the sitting of the court at Northampton. Encouraged by this success, Daniel Shays and a following of one thousand attempted in the latter part of September to break up the session of the court at Springfield, but were prevented from doing so by General Shepard and the militia who were guarding the Springfield Armory.

Nothing shows more clearly the strong insurgent sentiment of the hill towns than the experience of Middlefield in raising its quota of militia. Besides being a stout defender of the faith, David Mack stood for law and order in the state and was captain of the militia. Upon receipt of this order from General Shepard Captain Mack immediately made a draft of his men, ordering them to be in readiness to march to Springfield the next day. That evening, however, the company met without its captain, voted to support Shays, and chose as their new officers Samuel Jones, Eliakim Wardwell and John Meacham.

House of David Mack

House of Samuel Jones

The next morning the insurgent band surrounded the Mack house, making the captain their prisoner. Resistance being useless, Mack did his utmost to point out to his friends and neighbors the seriousness of their action, but without result. Finally with genuine yankee resourcefulness he requested a furlough of three days, which the newly elected officers granted, signing the parole without apparent concern for the consequences. With the paper in his pocket the deposed captain hurried to Springfield and made known to General Shepard the reason for the absence of his company. The General replied: "Well, Captain Mack, as you have no men to fight with you, you may go home. We shall immediately attend to the men who have signed this paper." A short time afterwards Jones and his fellow officers received a surprise similar to that which they had given to Captain Mack, when General Shepard's men captured them at Jones's house and took them to the Northampton jail. In their plight these Middlefield rebels now sought Captain Mack's assistance in gaining pardon, and with the speedy collapse of the Rebellion he generously aided them in securing their release.

After the failure of the attempt to capture the Springfield Armory, the dispersing bands of rebels took to the mountains. On January 29, 1787, one of these bands, commanded by Captain Luddington, and numbering one hundred men, while retreating through Southampton surprised and captured fifty of General Shepard's men and their provisions. The news of this capture reached Springfield the following day just as General Lincoln was arriving with state troops from Boston. In spite of their fatigued condition from several days' travel, Colonel Baldwin with fifty Brookfield volunteers in sleighs and Colonel Crafts with one hundred horse were despatched in pursuit of Luddington's men. The insurgents in the meanwhile were retreating slowly with their booty through Norwich and nightfall found them at Middlefield. About half of them were quartered at the Jones house and the rest in neighboring houses. In this remote region they probably thought themselves perfectly safe; but Lincoln's men had found their trail and, pushing on over the hills in spite of all hardships, had surrounded the Jones house by midnight.

It happened that in the pursuing party was General Tupper under whom Captain Luddington had served in the Revolution as corporal. Surprised by the stern order of his old commander to surrender, the captain became disconcerted and made no resistance. The door was opened and he was on the point of surrendering when the remainder of the insurgent force appeared two hundred yards away, ready for battle. The state troops advanced to meet them and each party was about to open fire, when the rebels, overawed by the apparent superiority in numbers in the opposing ranks, gave themselves up without firing a shot. The next day Lincoln's men returned to Springfield with fifty-nine prisoners and nine loads of provisions. Thus ended one of the last important incidents of the Rebellion.

During the short life of the insurrection many Middlefield citizens were more or less active in this ill-advised attempt to better their condition. All such were required to subscribe to the oath of allegiance. Eight of those who took this oath during 1787 were Benjamin Eggleston, Solomon Root, Daniel Root, Tabor Pelton, John Meeker, Samuel Jones, Jr., David Carrier and Oliver Blush, and their arms were returned to them except in the case of Daniel Root. The note that Root's arms were "lost at West Springfield" would seem to indicate that he participated actively in the retreat of Captain Luke Day's forces from West Springfield to Northampton. As the state required that participators in the rebellion could not hold office that year, we know that the selectmen, David Mack, Matthew Smith and Bissell Phelps, the town clerk, Solomon Ingham, the town treasurer, Erastus Ingham, were on the side of the law and order. The clannish character of the opposing factions is again evident. Four of the five town officers elected during the crisis were of the Hebron Colony. On the other hand, all the officers of the insurgent company and some of the men were Enfield people. The rest of the rebels were probably mostly Scotch-Irish, as this element throughout the state gave the revolutionary movement considerable support.

The widespread sympathy for the hardships of the mountain farmer seems to have been intensified rather than dissipated by the failure of the rebellion. Samuel Jones and James Dickson soon regained their political power as their names appear upon

town committees again before the end of the year. Furthermore, their candidate for the ministry, Rev. John Robinson, was given a call to settle, with the somewhat ominous proviso, "in caise the church and the town agree in matters respecting church discipline." The absence of gold and silver in the state made it necessary to provide that the salary and settlement should be paid in "neat cattle, wheat, rye, indian corn, pork, flax, oates, beef, wood, butter, and cheese . . . at the then market price." As nothing further is heard of Mr. Robinson, it is evident that he either refused the offer, or that the town could not come to a final agreement in the matter. At any rate, the problem of procuring a minister was displaced by the revival of demand for the erection of the meetinghouse which absorbed the attention of the citizens for the next three years.

It was unfortunate that, in addition to political and religious differences, the topography of the township should be one of the hindrances of an early decision on the site of the meetinghouse. Extending south from the Peru line through the center of the town was the range of Robbins and Pelton Hills, terminating in the knoll on which the Agricultural Hall now stands. This ridge acted as a wedge between the settlers in the northeast and those in the northwest, who could reach each other only by the roads running south and meeting at the Mack Tavern or at the

W. R. Skinner

Blossom Tavern. At this time, it should be remembered, there was neither any "Center" nor any "Blossom Corner," nor any cross road between these points. As the center of the township was apparently somewhere on the ridge, the town voted to select "the most convenient place nearest the center of the town on the public or town highway." But to carry out these instructions it was necessary to make a choice between the highways on either side of the ridge, to the disadvantage of the settlers on the side not chosen who would be obliged to make a circuitous journey to attend Divine service and town meeting.

By this date many more people had moved into the township, especially into the eastern section. Moreover, three of the committee chosen to select the site, "the selectmen and Mr. Dickson," lived on the eastern side of the ridge, or accessible to it. It was

but natural, therefore, that the original site near Widow Ford's on the west side of the ridge which had been chosen in 1783 should be rejected in favor of "the height of land between Justus Bissell and Bissell Phelps." This location cannot be identified with accuracy as Bissell is supposed to have been living near the Matthew Smith farm, nearly a mile north of Phelps who lived near the Coleman house.[2] It is unreasonable to suppose that the site was at any great distance from the Phelps' farm, however, and in any case it was much more easily reached by all the people east of the central ridge than the original site on the western side.

If there was any opposition at this June meeting to the town's decision, it was evidently not considered important, for the acceptance of the Phelps' site was immediately followed by a vote that the meetinghouse should be fifty-two by forty-four feet. The townsmen also voted to raise 200 pounds to provide building materials and appointed a committee to receive and inspect them. The collection of money and materials, however, proceeded slowly, both on account of the hard times and the growing dissatisfaction of those living in the western part of town who desired a more convenient location of the meetinghouse. In November matters were brought to a standstill by a vote to reconsider the Phelps' site.

Despairing of settling this question among themselves, the town appointed a representative committee consisting of Lieutenant Matthew Smith, of the east side, Lieutenant James Dickson, of the west side, and Major David Mack, a neutral, to apply to the General Court for a committee to make the momentous decision. This move was quickly superseded by a vote in December that Deacon Jonathan Brewster, of Worthington; Deacon Jesse Johnson, of Chester, and Lieutenant Scott, of Norwich, be asked to perform this delicate task. As there is no record of their consenting to serve, these two deacons and one lieutenant probably considered that discretion was the better part of valor in the face of a reception committee consisting of the aforementioned military escort reinforced by two more lieutenants, one deacon, and the late chief insurgent, Samuel Jones.

Although the vexatious problem was repeatedly mentioned in

[2] About half a mile east of the Center where Ralph Bell now lives. (1924)

the warrants for town meetings during the following year of 1788, no attempt seems to have been made to find a solution. Just at this point when religious conditions were in their most unsatisfactory phase, a new element of controversy was injected into the situation by "those who call themselves Baptists." Assisted, no doubt, by the other dissenters, they obtained a town vote whereby the minister rates of Ebenezer Babcock were abated "from the time he joined the Baptist Church in Chesterfield which was September 18, 1785." It was probably fortunate for the town that this new issue did not become of vital importance until several years later.

The Presbyterians also were taking advantage of the discordant situation. On April 30 the Presbytery, sitting at Peterboro, New Hampshire, appointed the Reverend John Houston "to supply Middlefield and Chester, and to certify to them while there, if he judge proper, that they are an organized Presbyterian Church." As nothing further is heard of this movement to form such a church, it is evident that some understanding was reached between the dominant factions, for the town voted in December "to settle Mr. Frederick Parker on either the principles Prespeterian or Congragational as he pleased." Unfortunately Mr. Parker, who seems to have given general satisfaction, could not be induced to accept the call, the probable reason for which was the lack of a meetinghouse. At any rate, the town at once made another strenuous effort to cut this Gordian knot.

The year of 1789 must have been one of the most exciting in the history of Middlfield. The same popular sentiment in favor of a lenient attitude toward Shays and the insurgent leaders in general, which had carried John Hancock into the governor's chair at Boston two years previous, seems to have been operative in the hill town where the Smith-Mack régime was superseded by the Jones-Dickson faction. A new site for the meetinghouse was proposed,—"the height of land by Cyrus Cone's house," which the town promptly accepted. The uncertainty as to the location of Cone's house at this date together with the introduction of new elements into the controversy make the interpretation of events difficult, but we will proceed as best we can.

On April 29 the town voted the acceptance of a cross road

beginning on "the main road" at Daniel Chapman's (near Widow Ford's), and running east over the ridge to Bissell Phelps'. This road undoubtedly brought into closer harmony the northeast and northwest sections by giving them direct communication with each other and by making both the Widow Ford site and the Phelps site more suitable as a location for the meetinghouse. As the Cone site was promptly rejected at the same meeting that the new cross road was accepted, it seems probable that Cone must have been living some distance further south, so located that the site for the meetinghouse near his place would not be rendered more desirable by the acceptance and use of the new cross road. That Cone's house might well have been some cabin near the Mack tavern or Josiah Leonard's is further indicated by the appointment of a committee in August "to pitch the spot for the meetinghouse between Oliver Blish's and Josiah Leonard's," apparently a compromise measure which would satisfy both those who desired a site near the Blush tavern or Widow Ford's and those who believed that the cross roads at the Mack tavern was a more suitable spot.

One must not suppose that the selectmen were at all united on this point. It is a curious fact that of the three sites proposed Widow Ford's was nearest Dickson's house, the Phelps site not far from Phelps's house, and the Cone site nearest Samuel Jones. The three choices were now probably equally available, and doubtless each had its adherents, but the Phelps site was less acceptable as there was no tavern in that vicinity. While the contest was thus narrowed down to a site between two points on "the main road," the balance of power remained with the people in the east and northeast for whom there was not much choice between the two remaining sites. Only the presence of this third doubtful element, voting first one way and then another, can explain the rapid changes in sentiment as the situation reached its crisis.

The site between Blush's and Leonard's which the committee chose and which the town approved was "the beech staddle on the height of land near Oliver Blush's,"—some spot not far from where the present church stands. The north and south factions at last were reconciled. Collectors of material were again chosen and the erection of the meetinghouse about to be-

gin, when the familiar query appeared again in the warrant of October 31,—"to see if the town will come to a better agreement in any other spot to build the meetinghouse." The difficulty at this point seems to have been that the people in the east felt themselves unjustly dealt with by the agreement between the north and south; that while they were willing to go as far as the main road,—either to Widow Ford's or the Mack Tavern,—they balked at the prospect of traveling another half mile along the main road from either of these points in order to reach "the beech staddle."

The whole controversy was thus reopened and the partisans rolled up their sleeves to fight the matter through to a settlement. On November 11 the town voted again for the Cone site, reconsidered it a few days later, chose it again on December 14, and reaffirmed that vote on January 4. Finally, on the sixth, a majority vote was again obtained for "the beech staddle" site, but this time there was an important proviso attached to the effect that a highway should be laid out at once from that spot to Thomas Blossom's, or "Blossom Corner," thus giving the eastsiders a direct road to the meetinghouse. All parties now seemed satisfied, and after a slight change of location from "the beech staddle" to a point "on the rocks," the problem of "the most convenient spot for the meetinghouse" was finally solved.

Having concluded this important business, one might suppose that the details of building the structure could have been safely left to a building committee, so that the townsmen might be free to give more attention to their farms. But the intense individualism and extreme confidence which each man had in the worth of his private judgment, which were characteristic of this period, made it seem necessary to hold frequent meetings to decide upon the master workman, his assistants, their hours and wages, the method of raising the frame, and many other minor points. The fluctuating value of currency rendered it necessary to recompense the workmen "in produce of the earth," and considerable discussion must have been necessary to arrive at the decision that Ithamar Pelton should receive sixty pounds for covering the meetinghouse, "he finding the whole of his board, to be paid in rye at 3s per bushel, and good merchantable barrel beef 16/8 per cut and one third thereof in neat cattle priced by indifferent men and other articles of produce at the market price."

First Meetinghouse in Middlefield

The building of the meetinghouse was proceeding expeditiously, considering the absence of a permanent minister and the problems of raising funds, when a new element of discord was injected into church matters by the Baptists. At this date this sect centered in the Babcock and Rhoads families and their relatives and neighbors in the southeast part of town, particularly in the Den. Having previously refused to pay their minister rates, they presented a petition at the town meeting of November 11, 1790, which stated that the fifteen subscribers were attending "upon the Publick Instruction of the Rev'd Eleazer Rhodes a Publick Teacher of Piety Religion and Morality and of the Baptist Persuasion," and which demanded that the money which they had paid or would pay in the future for public worship be given to this minister.

Here was an issue of vital moment to the town. In these days of prosperity and complete toleration of religious sects nothing seems more reasonable than the request of the Baptists for the right to support a preacher of their own doctrines. But unfortunately this demand came at a time when it was a question whether even with the united efforts of all the citizens the town would be able to complete the meetinghouse. This is shown by the appeal of the town to the General Court for the abatement of their state taxes, sent in December, stating that the town "was settled by People whose circumstances were Low in the world"; and that "having the Burden of the Late War to support and the uncultivated wild to encounter," and not having "the Advantage of any Public Land for the Support of the Gospel or Schools as is customary in other new towns," the raising of three hundred sixty pounds within a year for the meetinghouse was "such a burden upon a considerable Part of the Community as to Prevent their completing the Building," if they were compelled to pay their state tax also.

As Congregationalism was still the established religion of the state, the town had an undoubted legal right to enforce the collection of the minister tax from the Baptists. Whatever their differences on doctrine and church discipline the Presbyterians and Congregationalists were in agreement on the present question. James Dickson, the most prominent Presbyterian, was the man whom the town chose to seek legal advice as to how to pro-

ceed with the petitioners. It is important to note here that not one of the Smith, Root, Pease and other families who were later active in the formation of the Baptist Church in Middlefield was a signer of the petition or apparently in favor of the movement at this time.

Under the circumstances the town was justified in denying the request of the Baptists. That the affair caused considerable feeling is shown by the fact that the town also refused to grant them "a little span of time to turn themselves" before paying the amount due. As nothing further is heard of this question for several years, the Baptists seem to have acquiesced in the decision without further remonstrance. Aside from the merits of the decision, it is refreshing to observe the town fathers taking prompt and decisive action on important local issues,—an indication of the growing coherence of public opinion which hitherto had been sadly lacking.

Just how far this decision affected the fortunes of the settlers in the Den is an interesting speculation. It is a curious fact that before another decade had passed every one of the Baptist petitioners living in that valley had moved away from town. In view of the later erection of a Methodist Chapel in this region, it is probable that a Baptist Church, if permitted, would have flourished here also for a time, and have given an opportunity for many in the outlying parts of Worthington and Chester to hear the Gospel. But a church is ultimately dependent upon the economic prosperity of the community. As the forests were gradually laid low, the profits of the sawmills steadily diminished, and no doubt, financial considerations were quite as potent as religious beliefs in causing the Rhoads families and their connections to move to other parts.

The first town meeting to be held in the meetinghouse was on April 4, 1791. The structure was not completed at this time as the first eight meetings there were concerned with the underpinning, "plastairing," clearing the parade around the building, laying the step-stone, and selling the ropes, spikes and hooks which had been bought to raise the frame. Ithamar Pelton was paid two pounds ten "for the extrordinary work done on the meetinghouse," but the following year some of his painting and joiner work was voted unsatisfactory, and he promised the in-

vestigating committee to "paint the house again by the first of July next and do all in his power to nail caps over the windows when it is painted and where the work inside is not sufficiently nailed to nail the same sufficiently and nail cleats on the roof where the snow drives through."

The last difficult problem concerning the meeting-house had to do with the seating of the citizens. One might at first think that if every townsman was taxed for the support of the church the seats should be equally free to all. But in these olden times when the church besides fostering the religious life of the people was also the only social institution of the town, human nature found its vent in demanding some recognition of the individual's standing in the community. It was therefore necessary to "dignify the pews," that is, number them in the order of their desirability and endeavor to arrange the families therein according to their deserts.

As the church taxes were apportioned according to wealth, the best seats would naturally go to those who had paid the most toward the erection of church, but the town reconsidered the vote to accept "the doings of the committee appointed to seat the meetinghouse," and appointed a new committee. To give due respect to age, the town gave instructions that "five years age shall be equal to £1 in the valuation." It was also decided that the children should sit in the gallery according to their parents' list, and "the foar seats around the galleries shall be for the use and benefit of those that perform the singing to sit in."

Even with this guidance the report of the committee was voted unsatisfactory. The historian of the Middlefield Centennial has suggested that probably an unnamed factor, political influence, was potent in the negotiations in order that seats might be obtained on the broad aisle. A third and larger committee, consisting of most of the leading men, was necessary before an acceptable plan was devised. According to this plan, be it noted, the most desirable seat was to be occupied not only by David Mack, but also by his erstwhile opponents in the forum and elsewhere,—Samuel Jones and James Dickson, a welcome indication that these brethren were now prepared to dwell together in unity.

During the erection of the meetinghouse preaching had not

been carried on with regularity. Mr. Joseph Strong preached again on probation the latter part of 1789 and Rev. Stephen Williams in the spring of 1790, but as the expenses of the building increased and as the Baptists refused for a time to pay their rates, it was not until August, 1791, that the question of raising money for preaching again appears in the records. At this date the meetinghouse was sufficiently completed so that the neighboring ministers might be invited to preach one Sunday each.

It was probably early in 1792 when Rev. Jonathan Nash, a graduate of Dartmouth College and a resident of Amherst, Massachusetts, began preaching in Middlefield. In June the town voted to hire him "to preach on probation for settlement," and in August they voted to give him a call, offering him "two hundred pounds money's worth of neat cattle as a settlement, to be paid in two years, and also a salary of sixty pounds the first year, this sum to be increased by five pounds yearly until the salary reached seventy-five pounds." Mr. Nash accepted this offer with slight variations. In his letter of acceptance he states that after due consideration "of the great trials which ministers are called upon to encounter," "the present situation in which you as a people stand,—the danger of your being more unhappy without a settled minister,—your desire that I should undertake in that character manifested by your unanimity and the proposals made for my support point out to me as duty thus publicly to manifest my compliance with your invitation."

On October 31, 1792, Mr. Nash was ordained as the first minister of the Middlefield Church in the presence of a council of pastors and delegates from the churches of South Hadley, Greenwich, Coleraine, Blandford, Partridgefield, Washington, Worthington, Williamsburg and West Springfield. It was indeed an auspicious event for the town. The earlier wisdom of the town leaders in not forcing the acceptance of a minister who was opposed by any considerable number of citizens and in compromising on the less essential points of church discipline and doctrine was now clearly apparent. Mr. Nash remained the beloved pastor of the church for nearly forty years,—a happy outcome after the years of controversy, discouragement and hard conditions of living.

Next to the proper provision for religious worship came the

education of the children. The intellectual achievements of many of those who received their early education in Middlefield is inspiring testimony to the wisdom of the town fathers in making liberal contributions for "schooling." In the first year ten pounds was set aside for this purpose, and the following year this amount was doubled. In 1786 the town voted that "each school district shall draw the money raised on the non-resident lands lying within each school district for school the year past and the year ensuing." By 1792 the appropriation had risen to forty pounds, and thereafter sufficient funds for education seem to have been regularly provided.

As there were over four hundred children in Middlefield in 1800 under sixteen years of age, the interest in the establishment of the schools and the division of the town into districts must have nearly equalled the interest taken in the location and erection of the meetinghouse. The value placed upon education is shown in the attitude of Colonel David Mack, who, to supply the deficiencies of his eight weeks' early training was not above going to school with his children. The hiring of a singing teacher during the winter of 1800 testifies to the early appreciation of the value of music as an aesthetic and social force in the community. This practice was continued in later years and singing schools became one of the pleasantest features of Middlefield winters.

For the first few years there were apparently four general school districts corresponding to the four main sections or territory originally belonging to the neighboring towns, and school was kept in private houses in different parts of the town. The topography of the township was naturally a deciding factor in forming the districts. In the north half of the town the four roads running north and south along the tops or the sides of the ridges each constituted a school district; these were the West Hill District, the district north of the Center, the "North Distric" along the old Peru road passing the Smith farm, and the Northeast District along the road north of the Cottrell place. In the southern half of the town there was a Southwest District including the region around Ford's or Loveland's mill on Factory Brook; a South District including the plateau between Johnnycake Hill and Walnut Hill; a Southeast District corre-

sponding to the Eggleston District established by Chester before the incorporation of Middlefield, and an East District which was apparently the Den region.

Curiously enough the people living nearest the Center rather than those on the outskirts were the most difficult to satisfy as to school accommodations. So few people were living near the meetinghouse that the Center District as first constituted included a large area in the middle of the township, particularly to the north and west. In 1792 this district obtained permission to build a schoolhouse on the highway north of Oliver Blush but the building was apparently not erected as a school committee was appointed the following year "to make such alterations as they think proper regarding school districts." These "alterations" were the abolishment of the Center District and the assignment of its inhabitants to the nearest outlying district. The measure must certainly have been disapproved by William Church, the only member of the committee from the Center District, who living only a quarter of a mile from the meetinghouse, was assigned to the West Hill District.

Renewed calls at subsequent town meeings for alterations indicate that the abolishment of the Center District was unsatisfactory. Finally at the March meeting of 1794 the Center District was re-established to include only those living about half a mile from the meetinghouse. The Blush Hollow people, who were formerly included, were assigned to the West Hill District, while those living on the upper part of Factory Brook were added to the district north of the Center. Particular difficulty was encountered in the assignment of Amasa Graves, who was situated at about an equal distance from the central points of three districts. With the splitting up of the Center District Graves was apportioned to the Southwest District, but when it was re-established, he was transferred to the South District. In 1795 he was joined to the Center District again, but a few months later found his final place in the Southwest District.

The school districts having been definitely determined, the building of the schoolhouses was the next matter to occupy the attention of the town. In 1796 an assessment of four hundred pounds was laid on the citizens and each district allowed to draw its proportion toward building its own educational center. This

work was not finished until 1798 when three hundred pounds more was appropriated for this purpose.

Until within a few years the old schoolhouse of the West District stood south of the fork in the road at the top of the West Hill. The Southwest District schoolhouse stood half way down Johnnycake Hill, and the South District building on top of that hill near the Lang place. The original Eggleston or Southeast District school stood just south of the farm of Mr. Henry Pease. In the Cottrell District the first schoolhouse stood north of Mr. Cottrell's barn, from which point ran the original road to Smith Hollow. In the North District the schoolhouse stood originally at the foot of the hill south of the Smith farm, but was later moved to a point just north of the Smith homestead.

Children educated in the comfortable schoolhouses of the twentieth century have little conception of the hardships of obtaining an education a century earlier. Even as late at 1830 the West Hill schoolhouse is described by a former resident as "very primitive in form and arrangement," and took care of from forty to sixty scholars. "The seats," he said, "were made from slabs with legs at the proper angles, often protruding through, making the seating surface uneven and uncomfortable when crowded. At one end of the schoolroom was an immense fireplace with chimney capacity well adapted to carry off all the heat from the fire below. In cold days the orderly routine of school was much disarranged by the frequent appeal, 'Please may I go to the fire?'—the reason for this appeal being so apparent that it could not be refused, and soon the fireplace was encircled with frozen ones who, when thawed, returned to their seats, to be replaced by others in like condition. It was indeed a melting spectacle." Even later when a box stove was introduced, in the absence of a regular fireman, it was generally either too hot or too cold.

Yet the standard of teaching, even at the beginning, was high, as is shown by the lives of those who received instruction at this period. A number such as Samuel Smith and Uriah Church, Jr., were successful teachers for a few years. Among others who attained distinction in the world at large were Professor Ebenezer Emmons, a graduate of Williams College and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and a noted geologist of New York State;

Rev. Lyman Coleman, a graduate of Yale, and a teacher, author and traveler, besides a minister of the gospel; Judge Elisha Mack, a graduate of Williams College, a jurist of Salem, Massachusetts; Azariah Smith, a successful merchant and manufacturer in Manlius, New York, and a trustee of several institutions of higher learning in New York State.

Aided thus by the vigorous growth of the church and the schools, the community emerged rapidly from its pioneer stage. From this time Middlefield was to rise steadily to an honored place among the towns of western Massachusetts, achieving a notable success in material as well as cultural ways.