

Kathleen Girardi, "Noah Atwater (1752-1799) and His Contribution to Westfield Life"  
*Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 3, No 1 (Spring 1974).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

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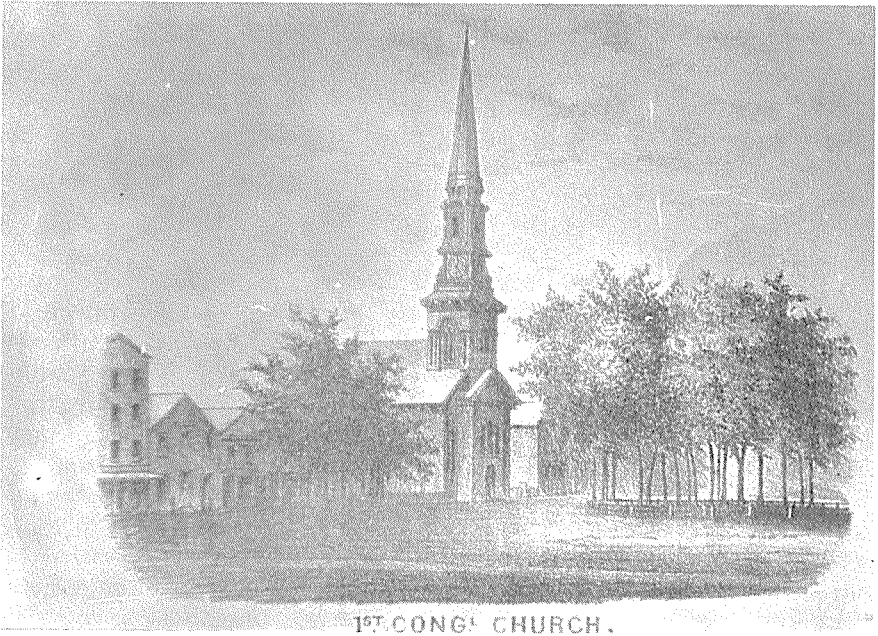


# Noah Atwater and His Contribution to Westfield Life

**Kathleen Girardi**

Noah Atwater served as the fourth minister of First Church in Westfield from 1781 to 1802. He was a colorful, industrious figure and dedicated his fifty years of life to serving other people. Atwater was born into a well-known family in Hampden, Connecticut (formerly a part of New Haven) on January 3, 1752. His ancestors had arrived from Lenham, England and settled in New Haven five generations earlier. As a boy, he was trained in the strictest Puritan tradition. He determined at an early age to spend his life in the ministry. Joseph Lathrop, the minister who delivered the sermon at Noah Atwater's burial, said of Atwater: "With a view to preach among his fellow-mortals the unsearchable riches of Christ, he desired and obtained a public education."<sup>1</sup>

While attending Yale College, the young man became popular as a friend and successful as a student. He was awarded first honors and presented the valedictory address to his class in 1774. Following graduation, he studied theology for two years, probably under the guidance of a minister. Shortly after Atwater became a preacher, he was called upon by the town of Westfield to carry on in place of the deceased Reverend John Ballantine. However, Westfield's plans were delayed. It seems that "the distressed state of the country, then involved in war and the eruption and spread of smallpox in this and the neighboring towns discouraged, at that time, any attempt for the settlement of a minister."<sup>2</sup>



Picture courtesy of the Westfield State College Archives.

In 1778, Rev. Atwater was offered a position as tutor at Yale College. He accepted gladly and once again became an influential member of the Yale community. One of his students, Simeon Bradstreet, later became a judge on the bench of the Supreme Court and was a son-in-law of Roger Sherman (a signer of the Declaration of Independence). In 1847, Judge Bradstreet wrote to a grandson of Rev. Atwater and said of his former tutor: "He took charge of us when Freshmen and carried us through until we were Seniors. He had a happy faculty for governing young men; was mild, affectionate and persuasive in his manner, and thus gained the esteem and confidence of his pupils."<sup>3</sup> Bradstreet went on to say that "while some of his associates by a different course became unpopular, he always retained a full share of influence."<sup>4</sup>

Rev. Atwater served the Yale students until he was called back to Westfield. In November of 1781, he was ordained to the office of minister for the town and held that position until his death twenty years later. He married twice, and both of his wives had been widows. Mrs. Rachel Mather, his first wife, died shortly after the birth of their second child. His second wife was Mrs. Anna Rockwood of Milford, Connecticut. Noah Atwater has been remembered in Westfield for his contributions as a minister; as an observer

of natural phenomena, and for his valuable accounts of Westfield life as he saw it. Much can be learned about Rev. Atwater, his people and his times from his journal, sermons and letters. As a minister he was very active. He spent a great deal of time visiting families, exhorting them in spiritual and other matters. He was an example of generosity to his parish, and the people consistently showed their appreciation for him.

In the last sermon he preached, Rev. Atwater spoke of the visitation he had done: "In the first year of my ministry I visited every family in the town. Afterwards I visited many, and frequently, but not the whole in a particular limited time... For six months past I have spent much time in visiting, designing my visits as religious ones... I have been glad to find, in a great part of the families which I have visited, a readiness to converse upon religious subjects."<sup>5</sup> Mr. Lathrop also testified to the frequent visits made by the faithful minister and declared to the townspeople: "Remember his labor and travail in preaching the gospel to you, both publicly and from house to house. Ye are witnesses how attentive he was to you in times of sickness and adversity — how ready to visit you at your request..."<sup>6</sup> In addition to doing private counseling, Rev. Atwater conducted services in outlying areas. Some of these instances were recorded in his journal: "June 1785, 12th Preached 3 sermons one at Capt. Grays. 19th Preached at Solomon Roots barn after the service in town... Oct. 25th Preached a lecture at Granville at Lieut Bancrofts."<sup>7</sup> Another entry read: "May 22nd went to Northampton to visit prisoners."<sup>8</sup>

The exhortation (urging one to pursue some course of action, looking toward the future) which he did concerning spiritual matters was very powerful and often carried a threatening tone. In his sermon, *Preservation and Changes in Human Life*, Rev. Atwater declared: "If Christ pronounced a woe upon the inhabitants of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, because they neglected great gospel privileges for three years and a half, and if he declared that it would be more tolerable for heathens at the day of judgement than for them: How awful will it be for sinners, who have neglected great Gospel privileges, not for three years and a half only: but for twenty years? How will they stand at the day of Judgment!"<sup>9</sup> He also encouraged his listeners to think ahead in a sermon delivered at the funeral of General Warham Parks: "The places which once knew him know him no more forever. — Let your hearts be tender and receive the truth that you must die."<sup>10</sup> Rev. Atwater did not exclude his family either. In a letter to his only son, William, written shortly before Atwater's death, he reminded the young man that "true religion is the principal thing.... You must repent of sin, believe in Christ, and have your heart conformed to God.... I beseech you make no delay."<sup>11</sup> For twenty years Rev. Atwater charged his people to repent and be worthy to walk with God.

The busy preacher obviously did a great deal of career counseling. In answer to a request for advice, Rev. Atwater wrote to Timothy Cooley, then a student at Yale. He had instructed young Cooley before the boy went to college, and Cooley must have held him in high regard. The young man could not decide between Law and Divinity. Rev. Atwater strongly recommended Divinity, and Cooley accepted this advice, later becoming the minister of the church in Granville, serving there for over fifty years, and helping to train other students for the ministry.<sup>12</sup> Rev. Atwater's advice to his own son was not quite as imperative. He made a number of suggestions concerning college, and encouraged the boy to make responsible decisions. In a long letter to William he said, "I shall not give positive directions respecting your choice of a profession; but be sure to choose one that is favorable, and the most favorable to a pious life."<sup>13</sup> He recommended the ministry and discouraged law, and he advised against college if William were interested in farming. The youth obviously had a mind of his own, however, as he chose to be a physician and became distinguished as such in Westfield.

There were other ways in which the minister gave of himself besides preaching and counseling. At times he gave up part of his salary for other people, and directed his church in contributing to specific needs. One entry in his journal recorded this gift: "Feb. 28th 1786. To the Selectmen of the Town of Westfield. Considering the inconveniences and distresses of the poor in the Town I wish to contribute to their relief. And I have determined to relinquish something of my last years salary for the purpose."<sup>14</sup> The decision as to who would receive the money was left to the selectmen. Another entry read: "Sept. 1787. First. Before day in the morning Mr. Dean's Grist Mill took fire and burnt down, at the place called Willer's Mills. A new Mill and a very costly one. 5th Subscribed to give 2L to the owner of the Mill."<sup>15</sup> (2 £ = about \$6.66) Contributions most likely made by the entire church were also mentioned: "January 1783 — Contributed to the Inhabitants of Charlestown to build a Meeting House... June 10th 1787 Contribution for those in Boston who lost their effects by fire in April"<sup>16</sup>

The townspeople responded to Rev. Atwater very openly. Although he was supported by public taxation as their only resident minister, the people continually brought him gifts to meet all of his needs. Many of these gifts were mentioned in the journal, such as the following: "Nov. 3, 1783. Recd. a present from Miss Pynchon a fine silk white Handkerchief. 13th Present 2 Fowls of Col. Mosely... A lb. of Tea of Mrs. Greene Pickles of Mr. Clap, Mrs. Emerson Butter, Many things of Doct. Mather, Mrs. Glass, of Mr. Mather Rum, Brandy and wine of considerable amt. Recd. of Mr. John Phelps a fat loin of mutton and some candles."<sup>17</sup> The young men also cut wood for him in the winter, as was the tradition, and reaped his grain in the summers. Rev. John Lockwood, in a sermon for the bicentennial of the First Church, noted that, "as a token of the estimation in which Mr. Atwater was held, we have the town's action, voting that his family should have free use of the parsonage

and ministry land for one year after his death, and that a printed copy of his last sermon should be given to each family in town.”<sup>18</sup>

Besides ministering to the needs of his people, Rev. Atwater found time to observe all kinds of natural phenomena. He kept bees and a garden. He maintained weather records with a rain gauge and thermometer, and kept astronomical data from his own sightings. He was certainly well-rounded in the area of science, and it is not surprising to know that he “received a premium for an Essay on the Canker Worm, in 1793.”<sup>19</sup> Observations such as amounts of rainfall and the temperature on extremely hot or cold days were noted in his journal. He also described tremendous storms and weather changes such as these: Aug. 23rd 1786 “In the afternoon a remarkable Thunder shower... broke down the large tree before the Meeting house door and many apple trees in the town and leveled many fences... It began to rain at exactly 5 o'clock and rained 20 minutes and the rain that fell in that time was 1.70 inches; (Sept. 4th 1782) Thermometer 93° — 5th 94° 13th, 14th, 16th, 19th hard frosts, corn killed.”<sup>20</sup> This account was especially amazing: “October 1786 The first 5 days showery and the 5th at night hard rain... the water was about to the planks at Wellers Bridge, the meadows covered. All the bridges above us carried away... 4 persons in a canoe passed from the Hill at Oliver Ingersolls in the road all the way to the hill at the widow Taylors... The Great river at the Old County Bridge rose 20 or 22 feet and 18 to 19 feet in 8 hours... and the fall was almost as sudden as the rain.”<sup>21</sup>

Rev. Atwater recorded other natural occurrences such as earthquakes, meteors and the Aurora. “Nov. 29th (1783) A small earthquake between 10 & 11 o'clock in the morning... 17th (Nov.) Great Aurora Red.”<sup>22</sup> His keen ability for observation was evident in this description of a meteor: (Aug. 23rd, 1787) “A large meteor in the N. East... The direction nearly in the direction of the sun's rays at this season of the month or a month later at 10 o'clock in the forenoon. The wind was N. West... It vanished I should think when it had descended to within 15 or 20 degrees of the horizon... I observed the time by my watch.”<sup>23</sup> In addition to his own studies, Rev. Atwater read almanacs, and these publications (1782-1788) have been preserved.<sup>24</sup> They provided information such as dates of eclipses of the sun and moon.

Not a great deal was known about Rev. Atwater's work with bees. He bought and weighed the hives, and he noted the swarming patterns and appearance of yellow legs on his bees. He obviously made use of the honey, because he made Metheglin (a beverage, made of fermented honey and water).<sup>25</sup> Rev. Atwater also took an interest in planting and landscaping. A note in his journal dated April, 1782 recorded “57 apple trees brought from Southwick... 16 & 17, Shade trees set on the Green and on the streets that lead from it.”<sup>26</sup> Lockwood added, “That was perhaps the formal inception of the wise plan which has resulted in making Westfield famous for the beauty of its streets... Such trees are living links with a past which is full of historic

interest, and which has been potent in shaping and enriching our lives.”<sup>27</sup> Rev. Atwater inoculated trees and planted crops as well.

Because of the position he held and his interest in what was happening in his locality, Rev. Atwater left behind accounts of different aspects of life in Westfield and the surrounding towns. He wrote about the tone of religious life in Westfield; made use of census records, and noted local, historical events. Rev. Atwater felt that religious life in Westfield was suffering through a period of spiritual “declension”. This lack of involvement was occurring across the country at that time. Although all the people took part in supporting the church, Mr. Atwater’s figures show that only a minority were active church members. Some of the reasons for the decline of religious interest were understandable. Rev. Atwater said, “When I was ordained, the number of the communicants was 135. Of these, two thirds are gone from us — seventy... are dead; and twenty have removed to other places. But 45 remain.”<sup>28</sup> He added that 121 had come forward to make a profession of religion (public declaration of a personal faith), some of them from other churches. These figures did not particularly bother Rev. Atwater, but the following ones did: only 362 persons had been baptized during his ministry, and most of them were children. This number was small, considering that there were about 1600 births during that time.

He spoke to his church of past revivals when many people “were hopefully born again”<sup>29</sup> (born spiritually by putting their trust in Jesus Christ and being able to look forward to eternal life with Him). He encouraged the members to come forward and give themselves to the Lord. Since relatively few (121) responded publicly, it was somewhat disheartening for the minister. He maintained an attitude, however, that “if the number of conversions has been less than our desires, yet we have reason to rejoice, that it has been so great. The conversion of one soul is a work exceedingly great — exceedingly important.”<sup>30</sup> One aspect of church life did not seem to decline — Rev. Atwater attended to 305 marriages!

In pointing out changes which had taken place in the church, he displayed a little dry humor by describing the physical and mental changes of his congregation during twenty years time. “On many grey hairs are numerous. A decline of sight and... hearing are changes in others and yourselves. Minds have changes as well as bodies. A decline in mental faculties is observable in many. If you are insensible to this in yourselves, others may perceive it, and you may perceive it in those who are no farther advanced in life than yourselves.”<sup>31</sup>

In a sermon on the history of religion in Westfield, Rev. Atwater spoke of his church as being lukewarm. He cited various facts to support his point. No one had made a profession of religion or joined the church in a year and a

half; few attended public worship and weekday lectures; general conversation and conduct showed more concern with temporal than spiritual or eternal matters.

One event which must have encouraged Rev. Atwater was a revival which occurred during the summer of 1795 in Mundale (also known as Hoophole), the West Parish of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Meetings were being held there in Moses Sackett's barn, and they were evidently quite noisy. It was rather humorous to notice the reaction of Rev. Atwater's congregation because, "as a revival was a strange thing, the Congregational Society in Westfield held a meeting to see what measures to take to put things to rights in Hoophole..."<sup>32</sup> They requested that Rev. Atwater attend a meeting, and he reported back that all was well in Hoophole, because God was there.<sup>33</sup>

As a scholar, Rev. Atwater wrote sermons which were informative as well as persuasive. Once when referring to the number of deaths in town, he used census records to reinforce his message. He observed that "the average number of deaths in the town for a single year is twenty-seven."<sup>34</sup> At the time of the sermon (1801), there were 2185 people living in Westfield. During the twenty years of his ministry 541 had died. Of those "120 were under the age of 5 years — 28 between 5 and 10 — 36 between 10 and 20 — 55 between 20 and 30 — 31 between 30 and 40 — 27 between 40 and 50 — 28 between 50 and 60 — 38 between 60 and 70 — 51 between 70 and 80 — 26 between 80 and 90 — 6 between 90 and 100 — 3 between 95 and 100."<sup>35</sup> Infant mortality obviously accounted for a good part of the deaths.

Social history was of great interest to Rev. Atwater, and his journal referred to local events, civil strife, and governmental proceedings. There were some lively things happening in the area, such as, (June, 1782) "12th The jail at Springfield broken open & Ely taken out... 16th the mob appeared at Northampton to rescue the three men kept as hostages for the return of the above mentioned Ely, but did not affect their design. The Regiment called — it interrupted the Lord's day at Westfield."<sup>36</sup> Another passage spoke of the public execution in Northampton of a woman for the murder of her bastard son. The entry for Sept. 26th, 27th and 28th, 1786, mentioned "the great insurrection against the superior court at Springfield" and on January 18, 1787, "the men went to Springfield. 25th 4 men were killed at Springfield (the outbreak under Shays)."<sup>37</sup> On May 7, 1783, Rev. Atwater led the town in rejoicing for peace, and on Feb. 7, 1888, he noted the adoption of the constitution by the State Convention.

Evidently, Rev. Atwater was a man of amazing energy, steadfastness and compassion. Even during the twentieth year of his ministry when his health was failing, he revisited almost every family in town. He "never preached the same sermon twice — always kept several sermons on hand which he had never preached, and prepared his sermon for the ensuing



Sabbath early in the week. He always rose before the sun, even in summer.”<sup>38</sup> Rev. Atwater did a lot of riding, and he enjoyed sleighing. He must have had a tremendous horse, because he covered amazing distances in specified times, over terrible roads. His home life must have been difficult following the death of his first wife. His daughter was only a month old at the time, and William was a year-and-a-half. They were motherless for two years until Rev. Atwater married Mrs. Lockwood in 1789.



WESTFIELD GREEN, about 1838, courtesy of the Westfield Athenaeum.

Rev. Atwater must have truly cared for his congregation to keep up the pace that he did on their behalf. Lathrop said “we know that you highly esteemed him... he was willing to have imparted to you, not the Gospel of God only, but even his own soul, because ye were dear to him.”<sup>39</sup> As fourth minister of First Church and as a member of the Westfield community, Noah Atwater left an impression upon the people and a valuable sketch of his times to those who would follow.

END NOTES

- 1 Joseph Lathrop, *Funeral Sermon*, delivered January 28, 1802, at the interment of Rev. Noah Atwater (Springfield, 1802), p. 10, in safe at Westfield Athenaeum.
- 2 *Idem*.
- 3 Judge Simeon Bradstreet to Noah Atwater's grandson, 1847, cited in Rev. John Lockwood, *Westfield and Its Historic Influences, Vol. II* (Springfield, 1922), p. 161.
- 4 *Idem*.
- 5 Noah Atwater, *A Sermon on the Preservation and Changes of Human Life*, delivered to his people on Nov. 22, 1801 (Springfield, 1802), p. 13, at Westfield Athenaeum on microfilm reel #5.
- 6 Lathrop, *Sermon*, p. 12.
- 7 Noah Atwater Journal, June 12, 19, October 25, 1785, cited in Rev. John Lockwood, *Westfield and Its Historic Influences, Vol. II* (Springfield, 1922), p. 166.
- 8 Atwater, *Journal*, 1787, p. 169.
- 9 Atwater, *Preservation*, p. 9.
- 10 Noah Atwater, *Funeral Discourse*, delivered on the death of General Warham Parks, March 19, 1801, ms at Westfield Athenaeum, reel #3.
- 11 Noah Atwater to William Atwater, shortly before Noah's death, (Springfield, 1802), in Westfield Athenaeum, reel #5.
- 12 Noah Atwater to Mr. Timothy Cooley, Jan. 25, 1793, referred to in Lockwood, *Vol. II*, pp. 171-172.
- 13 Noah Atwater to William Atwater, p. 19.
- 14 Atwater, *Journal*, p. 168.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 170.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 163 and 169.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- 18 Rev. John Lockwood, *Bicentennial Sermon of the First Church of Westfield, Mass.*, Oct. 5, 1879 (Westfield, 1879), p. 28.
- 19 A committee of pastors, *Sketches of the Churches and Pastors in Hampden County, Mass.* (Westfield, 1854), p. 62.
- 20 Atwater, *Journal*, pp. 163, 167.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 164, 168.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- 23 *ibid.*, p. 169.
- 24 *Almanac*, Jan. 6, 1782 to Dec. 31, 1788, at Westfield Athenaeum, reel #3.
- 25 *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass., 1970), p. 533.
- 26 Atwater, *Journal*, p. 162.
- 27 *Idem*.
- 28 Atwater, *Preservation*, p. 7.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 30 *Idem*.
- 31 Atwater, *Preservation*, p. 5.
- 32 Eloise Fowler Salmond, *Mundale, the West Parish of Westfield, Massachusetts, in the Olden Days* (Springfield, 1934), p. 77.
- 33 *Idem*.
- 34 Atwater, *Preservation*, p. 6.
- 35 *Idem*.
- 36 Atwater, *Journal*, p. 163.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 167, 169.
- 38 Pastors, *Sketches*, p. 62.
- 39 Lathrop, *Sermon*, p. 12.