



The Rev. Pitt Clarke House

By JENNIE F. COPELAND

OLD houses have personalities. Something worth while was born when a young man put love and devotion into the construction of the home he built with his own hands for his bride.

If the house was to be the home of the only minister in the community and the parishioners gave of their time and strength to help build it, it became a part of the town.

Such a house in Norton, Massachusetts, has upheld its tradition through one hundred and fifty years. For a short time it had a dejected look. No one was living there. It suffered the indignity of a "For Sale" sign put up before its parlor windows. Now the sign has gone and all is well again, for a young family will occupy the place.

The Congregational Church of the town had but two pastors during the first eighty years of its existence. On the death of the second, Rev. Joseph Palmer, on

May 4, 1791, a committee was chosen to supply the pulpit and find a new minister. For a year and a half they heard candidates. The candidate in October, 1792, was Pitt Clarke, who had graduated from Harvard College two years before and had been approbated to preach by the Cambridge Association of Ministers, April 17, 1792. Norton was his first place of preaching on probation.

After preaching "four Sabbaths," the church gave him an invitation to settle as their "gospel minister." This was so sudden and unexpected that he almost declined, but consented to give it consideration and to supply the pulpit until he made up his mind. He soon found that the call had not been the unanimous desire of the people. They had heard so many candidates that they were confused. Churches were then governed by two bodies, the church and society. Many in the society were opposed to Mr. Clarke.

Cold weather and bad travelling were approaching. Mr. Clarke decided to spend the winter in Norton. The pleasant result was an almost unanimous vote of both church and society for Mr. Clarke to become their pastor. Though the salary was small, he felt that the united wish of the people was something that he had no right to reject. He was ordained July 3, 1793.

At the end of two years, Mr. Clarke found the depreciating value of money made his small salary inadequate. He confided to a few friends that he might have to seek another church unless he received a larger salary in Norton. The people rallied to his aid and promised him greater support. This so encouraged him that he immediately bought himself twenty acres of uncleared land a quarter of a mile from the meetinghouse.

The papers were passed on the sixth of September, 1796. That very afternoon thirty-four of his parishioners appeared to help clear it. From then until the house was built they gave their assistance. He recorded that on September 22, thirty-two voluntarily worked on his land to prepare it for plowing. On September 29, twenty-two came with twenty-four cattle to plow what had been cleared and to get out stone. October 6, "26 oxen and eleven hands plowing and drawing stone." He set down for October 12, "40 yoke of oxen and 18 hands at work, only two yoke and three hands at my expense." On October 17, "13 men, with 30 oxen, ploughed for me and harrowed two acres of rye." November 8, "4 of my parish laid the wall for me, and two cut up the brush." November 10, "commenced digging my well." The well was finished on December 24.

December 16 had been a memorable day. "A number of hands cut down a greater part of ye timber for my house and brought it to a place for building."

Before the year was ended he bought additional land adjoining his property. The house was built during 1797, though not completed entirely that year.

Besides much voluntary labor on the land and house, his parishioners assisted him financially, at one time with \$131.82 and at another, \$255.61.

Everything was going so satisfactorily that on February 1, 1798, he married Rebecca Jones of Hopkinton. The house then became a parsonage, noted for its hospitality and gracious living. Nine fireplaces kept the house cheerful and warm, according to the standards of the time. Not all the hardwood had been cut to build the house, but to conserve the remainder and save the minister the bother of cutting, wood was donated from time to time. One year Judge George Leonard, the wealthiest man in Norton and largest landowner there, if not in the whole county, agreed to give as much wood as the men in the parish could cut and haul in one day. They entered into the enterprise with great enthusiasm. At daybreak the Leonard woodlot was filled with men and teams. By night enough wood was drawn to the minister's yard to last him three or four years. In addition to the wood needed for the nine fireplaces, he required it for fires to heat two brick ovens for baking, for the smoke-room where he cured his meat, and also for the fire under the set boiler used on wash days and at butchering time.

Ten months after the bride took up her duties as mistress of the manse, baby Abigail arrived; fifteen months later, a boy, who received the full name of the great English statesman, William Pitt, much admired by the Clarke family. Of the three other children born before Mrs. Clarke's death, in 1811, only one survived infancy. On November 12, 1812, Pitt Clarke brought a new wife, but no

stranger, to the manse. She was a niece of his first wife, Rebecca. Three of his four children of the second marriage lived to maturity.

With an increasing family to support on a meager salary, Pitt Clarke began early to make up the deficiency by other means. He had grown up on a farm. The knowledge he had acquired there, he made use of on the acres of his homestead, but he did not allow his agricultural pursuits to interfere with his pastoral work. He always rose early and in the first hours of the morning combined his farm work with mulling over his discourses. He did not neglect the sick. During his forty-two-year pastorate in Norton, he was seldom absent from his pulpit, unless in exchange with a neighboring minister. Even in the last eleven days of his critical illness, he did not miss preaching. His naturally strong constitution and vigor and his simple, regular habits of living, carried him along with more than normal health into his seventy-fourth year.

His mental ability was recognized beyond his own town. His ministerial friends sought his counsel, the Board of Trustees of Bristol Academy made him one of their members. Eight years before his death, he became a member of the American Educational Society.

Harvard University had such confidence in his scholarship that it sent to him young men whose courses at college had been disrupted for one reason or another, often a long suspension as a disciplinary measure. These young men he tutored and sent back, prepared to go on with their classes.

The house also became a sort of preparatory school from which boys passed into Harvard. His own system of high thinking and agrarian activities, Mr. Clarke applied to the boys. Each one had his task and checked up his time on the

panel still in its place outside the back door.

There were, and are, three doors: the brass knocker on the front one resounded through the house when stately ladies came to call; the broad, heavy kitchen one opened to friendly neighbors, who often had pies and cakes in their hands; the one the students dashed through was at the foot of the back stairs. That one was used for the only tragedy the house ever knew. On a cold, white January morning, in 1825, Isaac Lyons Buckminster took his own life in the yard by discharging the contents of a gun into his mouth.

After Pitt Clarke's death, in 1835, the house passed through the hands of two families. Since neither belonged in Norton, nor stayed there long, they may as well be nameless.

In 1856, Nathaniel Freeman bought the house and fifty acres that went with it. Mr. and Mrs. Freeman, both with deep roots in the town, came to stay. The family of two little girls they brought with them was later increased by another girl and a boy.

The Freemans were not in the least disturbed because the house continued to be known as the "Pitt Clarke place." Mrs. Freeman kept her pound cake and best china in the south parlor cupboard, just as the Clarke's had done, and drew out the same sliding shelf on which to cut the cake when callers came. The only son, who lived on the place, a bachelor, until the end of his eighty-four years, changed nothing and never failed to tell visitors that this was where Pitt Clarke lived.

Mother and son were deeply attached to the place. Each had a hobby that was indigenous to it. Mrs. Freeman's absorbing interest, outside her family, was her flowers. Her garden contained fine

shrubs and choice roses. Now, more than thirty-five years after her death, snow-drops, scilla, and glory of the snow struggle through the grass to nod in the early spring breeze. Later in the spring there are Johnny-jump-ups, lily of the valley and lilacs. She loved each blossom. With cutting shears she would go to the garden to gather roses. As she paused to cup a perfect bloom in her hand, she would say, "No, I can't cut you," and finally return to the house with a bouquet of bachelor buttons or field flowers.

From childhood her boy was fascinated by oxen. Left fatherless at seven years of age, he had little spending money, but by the time he was twenty he had saved enough to buy a pair of oxen. He prevailed on an old cattle man to take him to the Brighton market. Absorbed in his own buying, the old timer left the youth

to do his own selecting. At the time, he was proud of his choice; years later, he laughed about it. The oxen did not match in breed or color; one had horns that turned up, the other pointed his forward. With years, taste and judgment improved. His best buy was red Durhams that weighed 4,600 pounds and cost over \$400.00. In all, he had twenty-six yoke. Year after year, Mr. Freeman took prizes and ribbons at Taunton Cattle Show and Brockton Fair. The oxen were not expected to work for a living. They were pets.

It is easy to find the Pitt Clarke house. The stone wall laid by the parishioners is still there; a great elm, doubtless planted by the minister, shades the house. Almost anybody can direct you to the house that for years had oxen pastured north of it.

