

Isaac Damon and the Southwick Column Papers

By DAVID MERRILL

THE career of the Connecticut Valley architect and bridge-builder, Captain Isaac Damon¹ (1781-1862) has long remained understandably obscure.² A provincial follower of Bulfinch and Benjamin, content to live out his days in Northampton, Massachusetts, Damon played a secondary role in a period in which even the most prominent figures have by no means all been adequately studied. A further obstacle to any investigation of his work has been the disappearance of most of his papers and drawings, particularly those which were reported still in his family's possession around the turn of the century.³ Yet enough of his buildings have survived or been photographed prior to their destruction to convince the present writer both of their architectural merit and of their importance to our understanding of the later Federal period in New England. The problem has been to assemble enough documentary evidence to establish the main facts of his career and to permit some insight into the workings of his mind.

Fortunately a long and quite detailed obituary notice greatly facilitated the achievement of the first of these objectives.⁴ Newspaper references, court records and a few letters have contributed more gradually to the second. A particularly helpful source of information on building practices in Damon's *milieu* has been the Southwick column papers.

These two documents came to light in the spring of 1950, when it was found

necessary to replace the four Tuscan columns of the portico of the Congregational Church in Southwick, Massachusetts⁵ (Fig. 1). Protected simply by a piece of rough brown paper, they had lain undisturbed inside one of the columns since the completion of the building in 1824. Their immediate function had been to record the names of the men who had taken part in its construction. Fortunately, in doing so, they have helped greatly to clarify both the role of Isaac Damon in the execution of this project and the manner in which his influence would seem to have spread among other builders of the day in western Massachusetts.

The first of these papers begins:

Southwick Nov 6th 1824

This house erected for a place of worship to the one only living and true God was contracted for in the winter of 1823 and 1824. It was built by subscribers of the town of Southwick, Captain Isaac Damon of Northampton was the first contractor. It cost about five thousand dollars. Mesrs Elijah T. Hayden of Deerfield and Erastus Hunt of Northampton contracted of Capt. Damon to build the house and accordingly completed it about this time or will in a few days. They commenced the 2 day of May 1824. It was raised one [*sic*] the 11th 12th and 13th days of June following. No accident happened of any consequence.

A list of the names of the workmen follows:

Isaac Damon Northampton
Elijah T. Hayden Deerfield
Erastus Hunt Northampton
Hart Phillips Deerfield
Samuel Hanly Northampton
Erastus Bardwell Montague

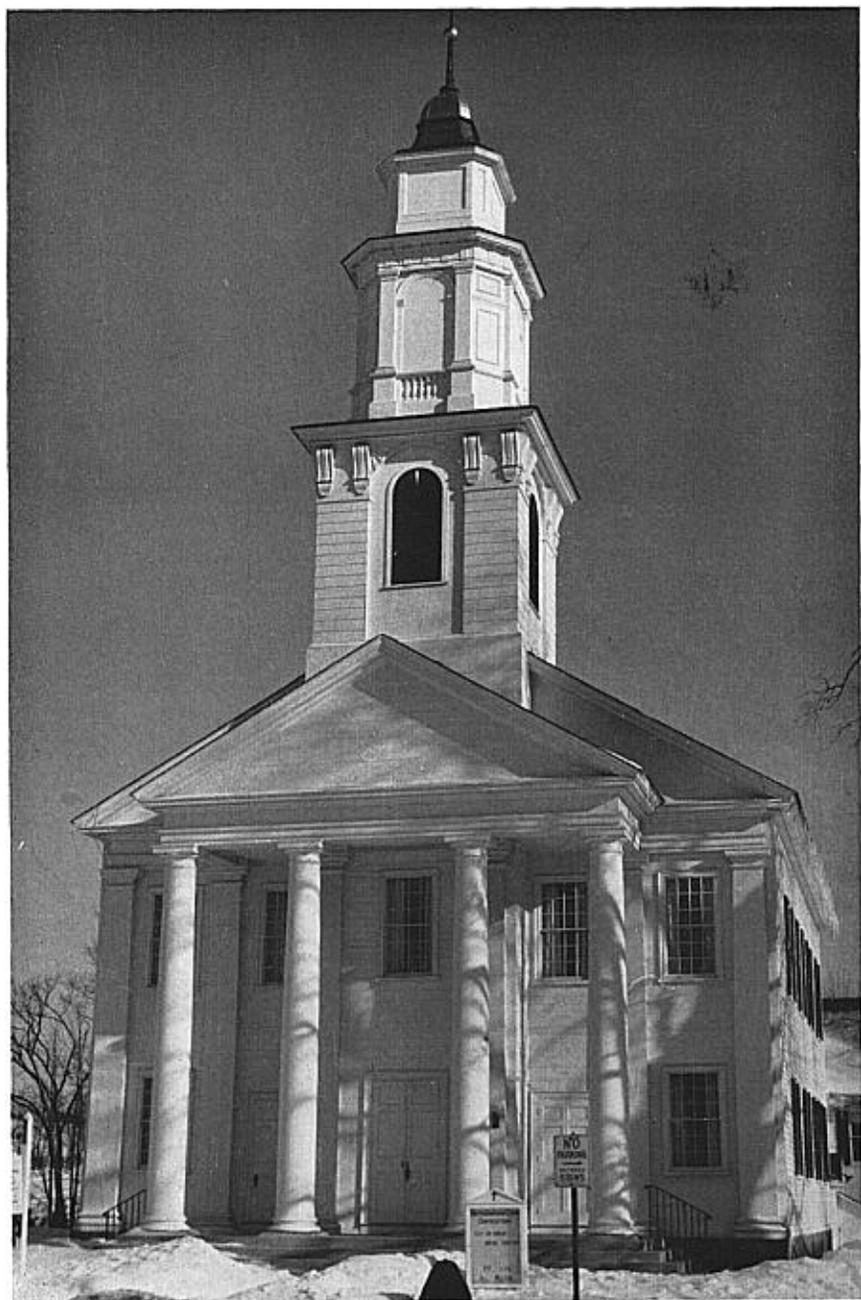


FIGURE 1. CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, SOUTHWICK,
MASSACHUSETTS, 1824
Isaac Damon, architect.

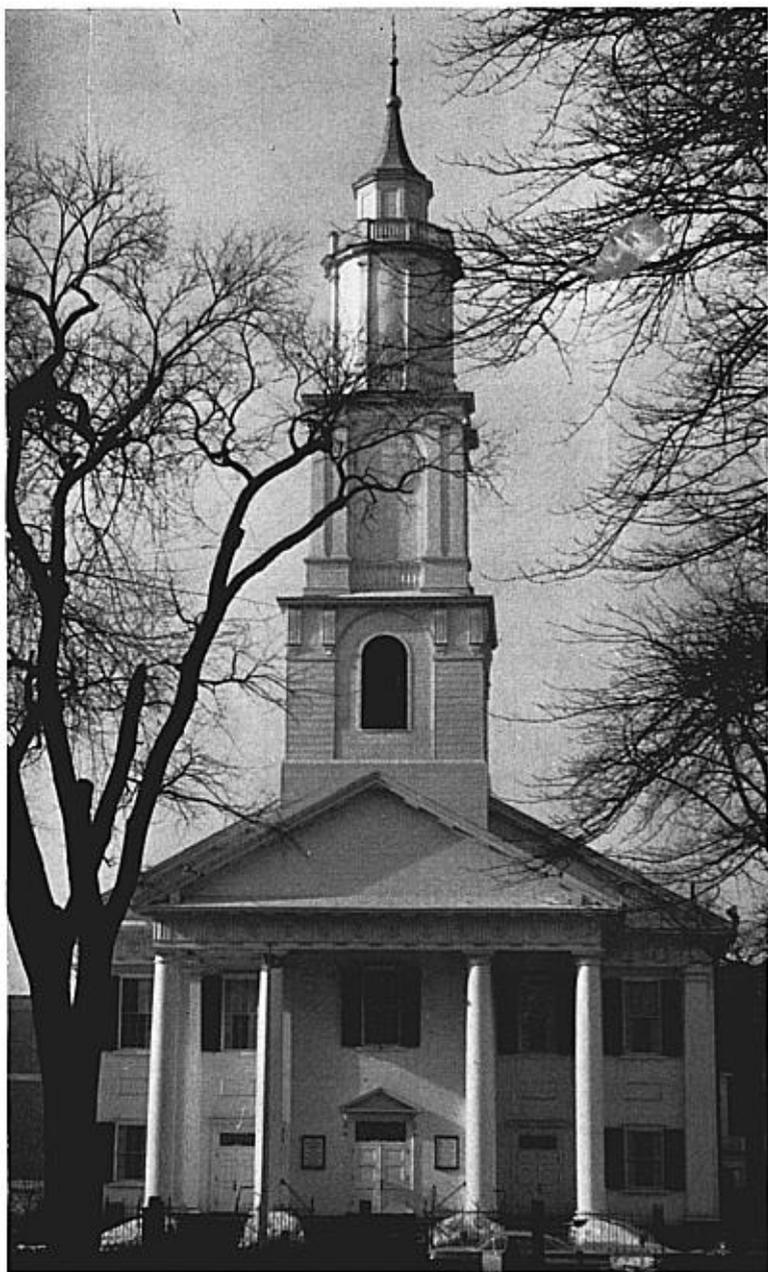


FIGURE 2. FOURTH MEETINGHOUSE OF THE FIRST CHURCH,
SPRINGFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS, 1819
Isaac Damon, architect.

Amasa Wade Jr. Williamsburgh
 Dwight Dunbar Amherst
 David A. Taylor Montague
 Timothy F. Benton Charlemont
 Roswell Cutting Northfield
 Austin Loud Westampton [*sic*]
 Mr. Shepard and Whitmarsh of Springfield
 and Mr. Daniels of New Haven Conn. Pew
 Makers

Masons

Mr. Jones and Miller of Springfield
 Mr. Alvord and two sons of South Hadley

On the outside of this first list, there appeared, when it was folded, the salutation "To succeeding generations," which the author of the list had substituted for his first thought, then crossed out, "to the person or persons who shall remove these columns." Perhaps this seemed an inauspicious sentiment to insert in a building that was barely completed, but the idea persisted and reappeared in somewhat more positive form in the concluding paragraph of this document:

To the people of Southwick who may be living when these columns shall be removed and others erected in their stead these few lines are respectfully dedicated By their friend one of the workmen.

Amasa Wade Jr.
 of Williamsburgh Mass.

In view of this rather candid appraisal of the relative durability of these columns it is interesting to have confirmed by the second document the already evident fact that the columns were among the finishing touches added to the building immediately prior to its completion: "these columns were builded by Erastus Hunt and Erastus Bardwell apprentices of his, Nov. 5th 1824." Headed simply "List of joiners names that worked on Southwick Congregational Meetinghouse," the second paper continues, "This house was first let out to Isaac Damon Northampton, Mass. then the work let by him to Elijah T. Hayden Deerfield Mass and Erastus

Hunt in Company from Northampton Mass, their hands names follow. . . ." The ensuing list omits the masons and does not identify the pew makers as such, but gives their full names, "Alva Whitmarsh, Springfield Mass Samuel Daniels Gilford Conn Seba Shephard Springfield Mass." A postscript reveals that this second paper was "written" by Erastus Bardwell of Montague, the "apprentes" column maker who gives his age as twenty. Since it is dated a day earlier than the other paper, the idea of inserting the papers may have originated with him, or it may simply have been a common practice to do so. The discovery in the fall of 1961 of a similar document inside a pilaster in the "Assembly Chamber" of Independence Hall in Philadelphia⁶ and the exposure of masons' signatures on the bearing surface of column bases on the East front of the national Capitol during its recent rebuilding⁷ would appear to support the latter conclusion. If so, we may expect to benefit still further from this custom.⁸

Of more immediate importance to the problem of Isaac Damon is the disclosure in the Southwick column papers, that he served there in the capacity of "first contractor." It should not be regarded as surprising that no mention is made of him as designer, for this aspect of his career was regularly ignored.⁹ There can in fact be little doubt that he was responsible for the design, essentially a reworking on a smaller scale of that of the First Church in Springfield, which he built in 1819, and of which he was acknowledged to be "the Architect"¹⁰ (Fig. 2). Since Damon is known to have provided plans for buildings which he did not himself construct, and to have built from the plans of others as well as from his own, his appearance in yet another role in

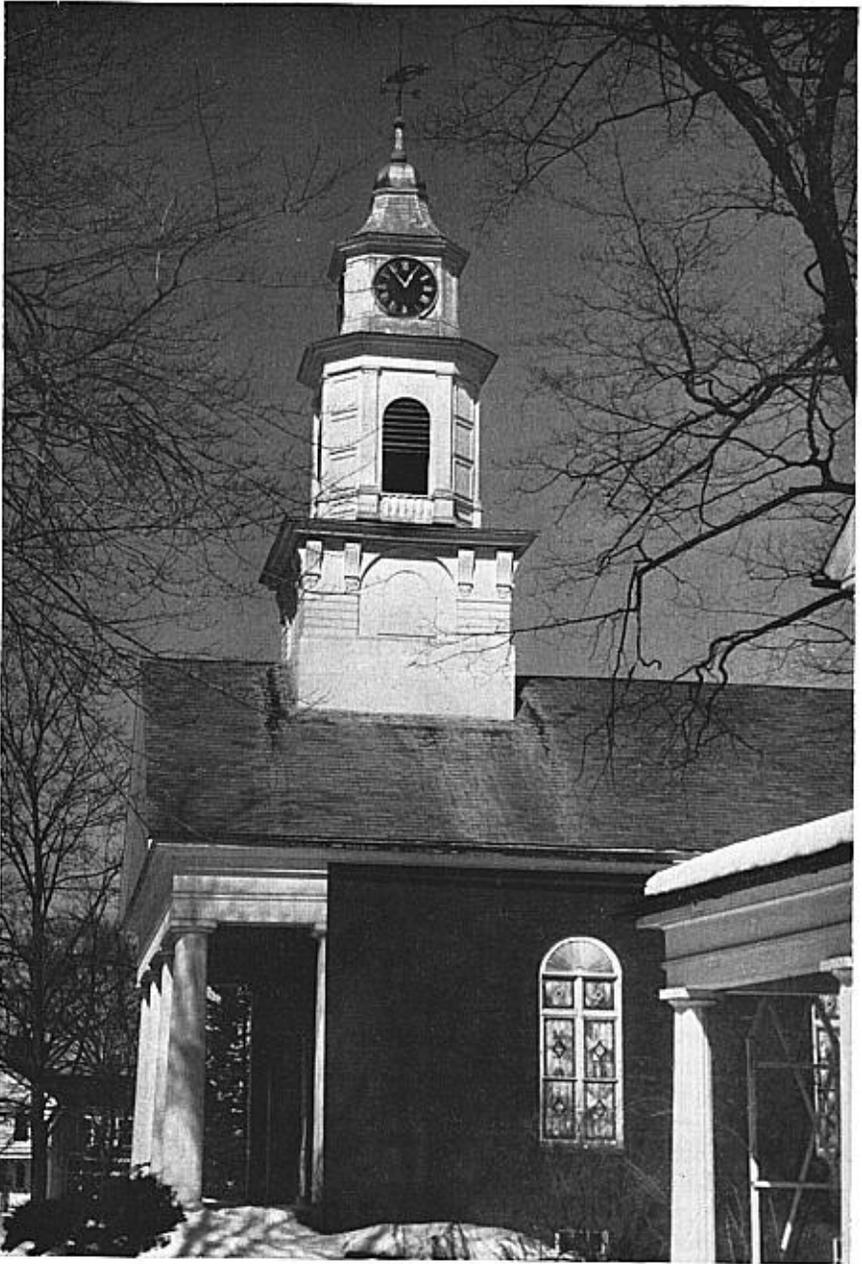


FIGURE 3. CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, MONTAGUE,
MASSACHUSETTS, 1834

Henry and Zebina Taylor, builders.

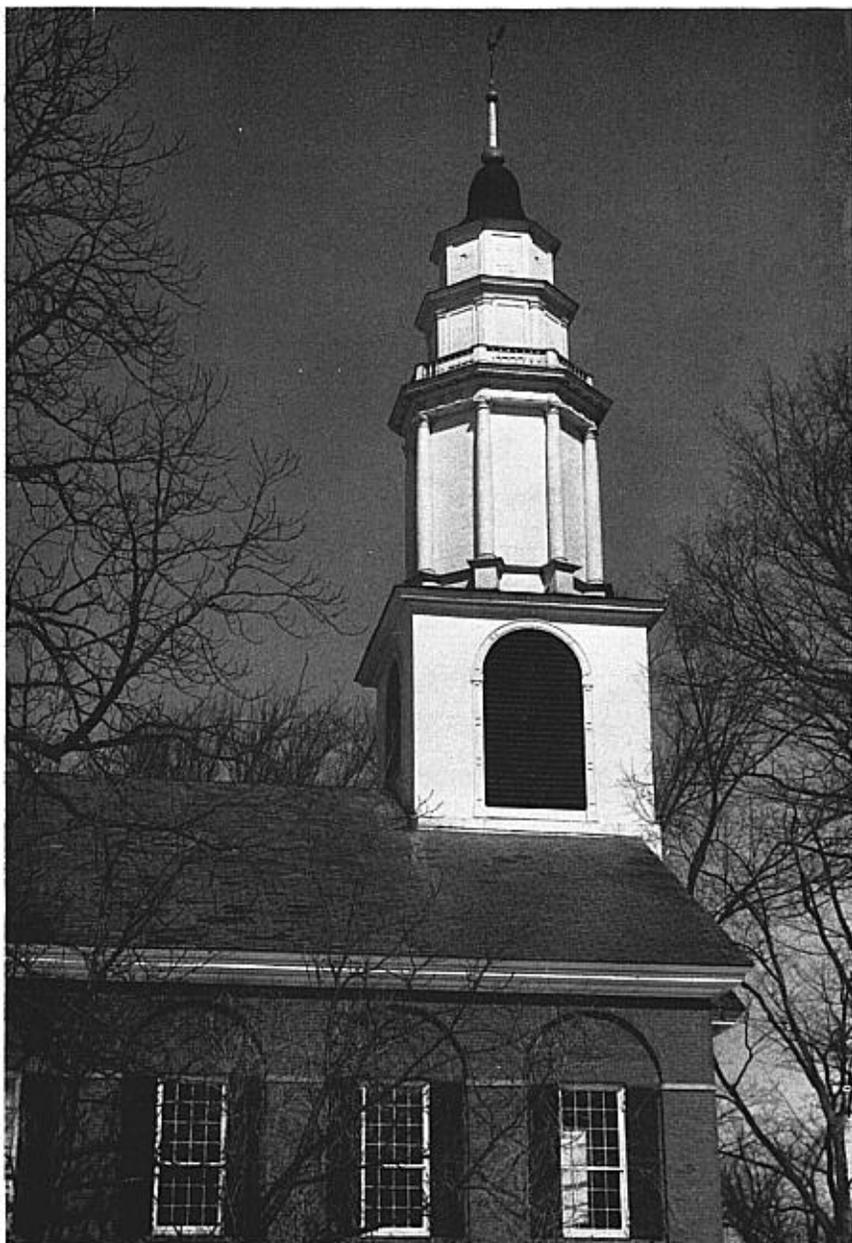


FIGURE 4. TOWER OF THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,
DEERFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS, 1824

Winthrop Clapp, architect.

Southwick tends to make quite academic in his case the traditional distinction between architect and carpenter-architect. As "first contractor," he was evidently in a position to supervise the execution of his design without taking a major part in the actual construction. In this he approximated the role of today's architect, except that he had a financial as well as an artistic interest in the undertaking, a financial interest not his client's but his own.

A similar procedure was apparently followed in the case of the church which Damon built in Greenfield, Massachusetts, in 1819. Since he was also engaged in that year in the construction of the Springfield church, it may be that this expedient was forced upon him at that time. In any case, one of the contractors to whom he "let out" work on the Greenfield building was the same Elijah T. Hayden of Deerfield whose name appears in this capacity in the Southwick column papers.¹¹ Hayden's partner on the earlier job was a Clement Coffin; the meticulous accounts of the treasurer of the Greenfield proprietors¹² contain frequent references to payments made to Hayden and Coffin on Damon's order. These accounts give no indication, however, of the names of the workmen who in turn were hired by them, let alone of the towns from which they came. This information is therefore particularly welcome in the Southwick papers, as it establishes that even ordinary workmen might travel considerable distances to a construction job at this time, being drawn by a contractor from towns scattered all around his own county, rather than from the county in which the project was located. This helps to place in perspective the rather contradictory impression given by a clause in the contract which Damon

drew up in 1820 for a church in Granby, Massachusetts:¹³

It is expected by the said Damons to give preference to any of the Inhabitants of Granby who at a fair price and seasonably would furnish materials, Carpenters work or team work necessary on and about said building.

That such parochial concerns did not always affect the composition of the working force actually employed is evidenced by the absence of local workmen from the Southwick lists and is further emphasized by the inclusion of a far-ranging specialist, the pew maker, Mr. Daniels of New Haven or "Gilford." Indeed, the existence of a more or less regularly migratory group of workmen implies a considerable degree of specialization and this in turn helps to explain how Damon's influence spread.

Asher Benjamin has given us the conventional image of the "country builder,"¹⁴ earnest but untutored, cut off from informed architectural counsel, and dependent on the clarity of such books as Benjamin's own builders' guides for enlightenment and example. Such an image, though flattering to its author's ego and encouraging to its publisher's expectations, would seem to make slight allowance for the effects of a system of apprenticeship both broadly based and surprisingly mobile.

Some of the effects of that system can be seen in the Congregational Church in Montague, Massachusetts, built in 1834 by Henry and Zebina Taylor¹⁵ (Fig. 3). The body of this church, indeed, is taken directly, if somewhat naïvely in the matter of scale, from a published design of Asher Benjamin's.¹⁶ The tower, however, is a remarkably faithful adaptation of that used by Damon both in Southwick and in Greenfield. It has suffered somewhat from vertical compression in the

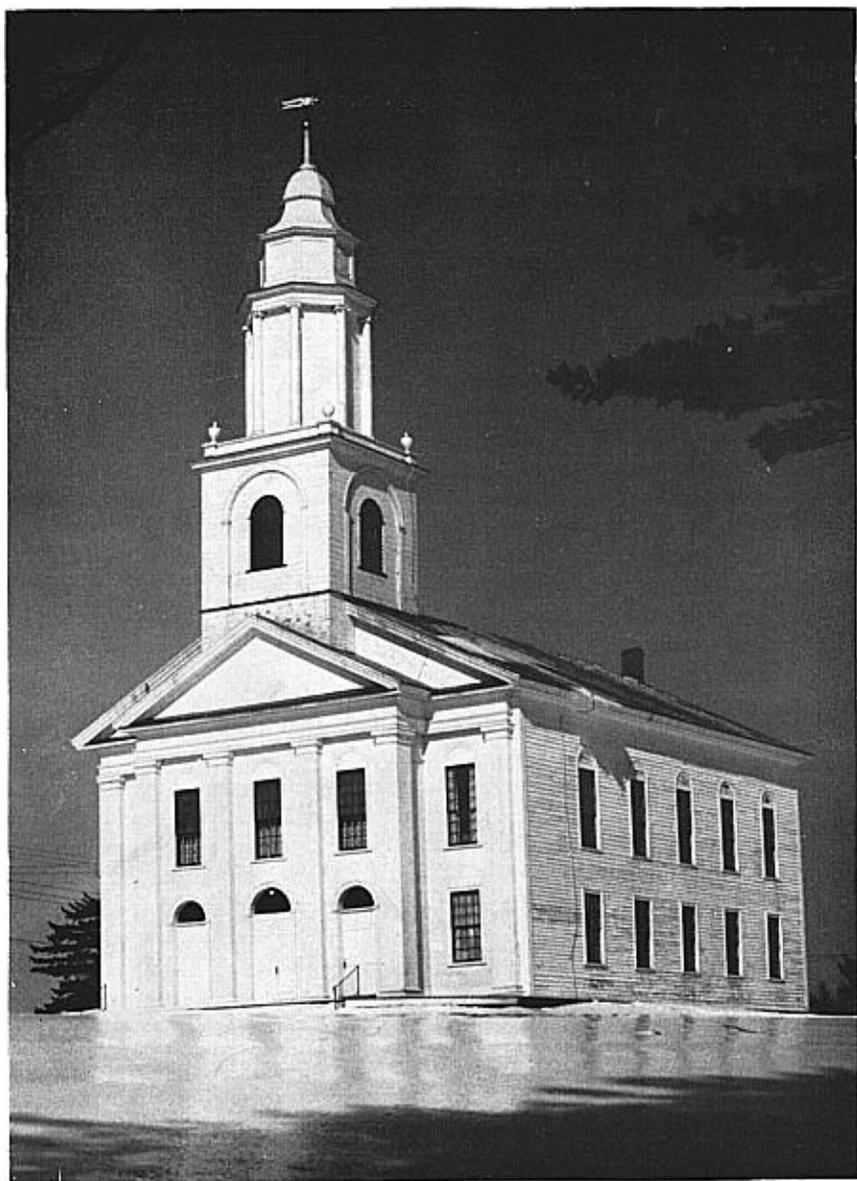


FIGURE 5. CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, BLANDFORD,
MASSACHUSETTS, 1822
Isaac Damon, architect.

square base stage and lost something of the elasticity evident in the proportions of the panels on the angle faces of the octagonal stages, but these changes serve to reconcile it with the more nearly "Grecian" proportions of the rest of the building and are perfectly consistent. While the names of Henry and Zebina Taylor do not appear on the Southwick lists, that of David Taylor of Montague does, suggesting that the Montague tower design may well derive not from casual adaptation of a convenient model but from direct experience in the creation of that model.

The likelihood that this inference is a valid one is enhanced not only by the authorship of the second list by another inhabitant of Montague, Erastus Bardwell, but by the more adequately documented case of still another Montague figure and exact contemporary of Damon, Captain Winthrop Clapp (1781-1834). Primarily a joiner by trade, Captain Clapp took part in the building of the Greenfield church and the records indicate that he continued to be involved with Damon after the completion of that project.¹⁷ In 1824 Clapp designed and built the brick meetinghouse which still stands in Deerfield, Massachusetts¹⁸

(Fig. 4). Often mistakenly attributed to Damon on stylistic grounds, this building is composed of elements from two of his churches. The exterior is taken directly from Greenfield, except for the tower; this, together with the plan of the interior, derived from Damon's church of 1822 in Blandford, Massachusetts¹⁹ (Fig. 5). The Blandford records are sufficient only to identify Damon as the "principle architect,"²⁰ but Captain Clapp took part in the construction of Damon's second Northampton Courthouse in 1823,²¹ and it seems quite likely that he may have had a hand in the execution of the Blandford church the year before. His Deerfield tower contains an additional stage at the top and perhaps betrays the attitude of a joiner rather than of a carpenter in the proliferation of "inlaid" blocks in the frame surrounding the belfry opening. The greater size of that opening, too, is suggestive of a fundamentally different approach. Still the obvious debt of this building to those of Isaac Damon would seem to imply that the builders' guides of men like Asher Benjamin, though widely read and profoundly influential, served as a supplement to, rather than a substitute for, the direct communication of architectural ideas.

NOTES

¹ Throughout much of his career, Damon spelled his name with a final "s", (Damon's) partly, perhaps, to avoid confusion with a distant but exactly contemporary cousin of the same name who lived not far from Northampton. By 1849, however, he had reverted to the more familiar spelling used here. His title of Captain is supposed to have derived from a period of service in the militia in Boston, though he is only recorded as having reached the rank of Cornet.

² The only published account of Damon's work of any length is found in the context of an article by George Clarence Gardner entitled

"Colonial Architecture in Western Massachusetts," in *The American Architect and Building News*, XLVII, 40-41. It was reprinted in the collection of articles from that periodical subsequently edited by William Rotch Ware and published under the title of *The Georgian Period* (Boston, 1899-1902), Part V, pp. 65-71.

³ Gardner mentions plans and "very interesting papers" in the possession of the architect's daughter at the time he wrote. Damon's house on Bridge Street in Northampton, according to tradition, built and occupied by him shortly after his arrival there, was left to the North-

ampton Historical Society by his granddaughter at her death in 1942, but only a pair of house elevations were found among his effects.

⁴ First published in the *Northampton Free Press*, December 5, 1862, this notice was reprinted with slight alterations in *The Centennial Gazette*, a special memorial edition of the *Hampshire Gazette*, published September 6, 1886, and again in the same publication on August 4, 1904.

⁵ These papers are now kept in a bank vault by the church, which has inserted photostatic copies of them in the rebuilt columns.

⁶ A report of this discovery was included in a paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians in January of 1962 by Lee H. Nelson and Penelope Hartshorne of the National Park Service. The paper was entitled "The Assembly Room of the Pennsylvania State House—Scene of the Declaration of Independence."

⁷ Mario E. Campioli revealed the existence of these signatures in the course of his "Comparative Study of the Exterior Details of the U. S. Capitol Building," also presented at the 1962 meeting of the SAH.

⁸ The choice of the column as the location for builders' signatures in these several instances would seem to relate interestingly to the remarks on the symbolic importance of the column made by Professor Ernest H. Brandl, at the 1962 SAH meeting in the course of his illuminating paper on "Adolf Loos and the Chicago Tribune Building."

⁹ That the "status" of the architectural profession has changed drastically since his day is indicated by the fact that only buildings which Damon actually built or helped build were included in his obituary notice. Buildings he designed but did not execute were omitted.

¹⁰ The *Hampshire Gazette* on August 31, 1819, reprints an account from the *Springfield Federalist* for August 25 of the dedication of the new building on the previous Thursday (August 18), which refers to "Capt. ISAAC DAMON, the Architect." Though this title was often loosely applied, Damon's obituary notices made clear that the buildings mentioned were all "from plans of his own drawing."

¹¹ I am indebted to Professor Harley J. McKee for the information that this Elijah T. Hayden was one of two builders of the name who were active in this region in the nineteenth

century. The other was born in Williamsburg, Massachusetts, but spent most of his career in Syracuse, New York.

¹² These records, entered in bound notebooks, have been preserved by the church, while the building with which they were concerned was outgrown and replaced in just fifty years.

¹³ This contract is preserved among the court records of the lawsuit which resulted from a disagreement over the location of the building in question: *Records of the Supreme Judicial Court, Northampton*, April Term 1824, Vol. 4, 119-127.

¹⁴ Cf., e.g., the Preface to his *Practice of Architecture* (Boston, 1833), p. iii.

¹⁵ These are the only builders' names mentioned in the surviving church records, although, again, we must assume they were not alone in the project.

¹⁶ *The Rudiments of Architecture*, 2nd Edition (Boston, 1820), Plates A and B. These plates also appeared in *The American Builder's Companion*, 5th Edition (Boston, 1826).

¹⁷ The Treasurer's Book has an entry on page 86 dated "Sept 1 1820" and signed by "Isaac Damons." "To the Treasurer of the second Congregational Meeting House Please transfer to Hayden & Coffin two hundred & four dollars worth of stock in the said House which was sent me by the hands of Winthrop Clapp." The Greenfield meetinghouse was dedicated on November 10, 1819.

¹⁸ Juliette Tomlinson of the Connecticut Valley Historical Museum in Springfield, Massachusetts, first discovered the notice in the *Franklin Herald*, published in Greenfield, January 4, 1825, which describes the dedication of the Deerfield church on the twenty-second of December previous and pays tribute to the skill of Captain Clapp.

¹⁹ Both buildings originally were arranged with the chancel at the entrance end of the building occupying some of the space gained from the projection of the entrance bay forward of the main façade. In Blandford a second chancel was constructed at the opposite end and the pews reversed, together with other alterations, in 1866.

²⁰ The record book of the First Christian Society in "Blanford" has entered on the flyleaf the dates of the laying of the cornerstone by Damon (June 12, 1822), of the raising a

week later (June 17-19), and of the dedication in another four and a half months (October 30, 1822). The rest of this book deals only with the meetings of the society and not with the process of construction.

²¹ In Box 38 of the Files of the Court of Sessions in Northampton is preserved a Bill

“for extra work about the Court house” in 1823 which lists among other items “30 days on Boxes & drawers for Regs Probate & Clerks office @ 1.50” against the name of Captain Clapp. Less highly skilled labor was paid at the rate of \$.75 or \$.83 per day.

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