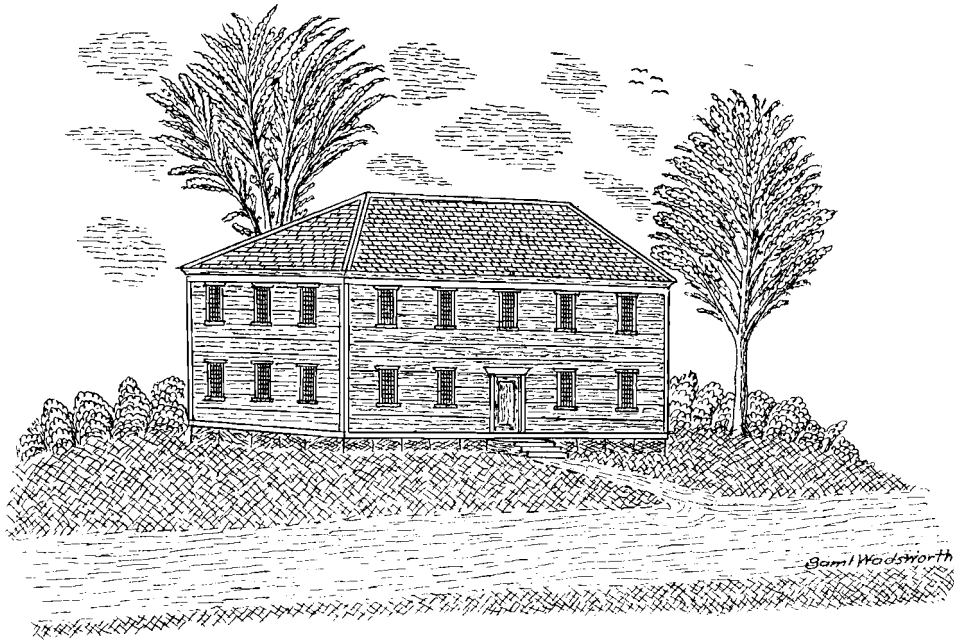


THE STORY
OF
CENTRAL SQUARE
KEENE, NEW HAMPSHIRE

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CENTRAL SQUARE
KEENE, NEW HAMPSHIRE
By CLIFFORD C. WILBER

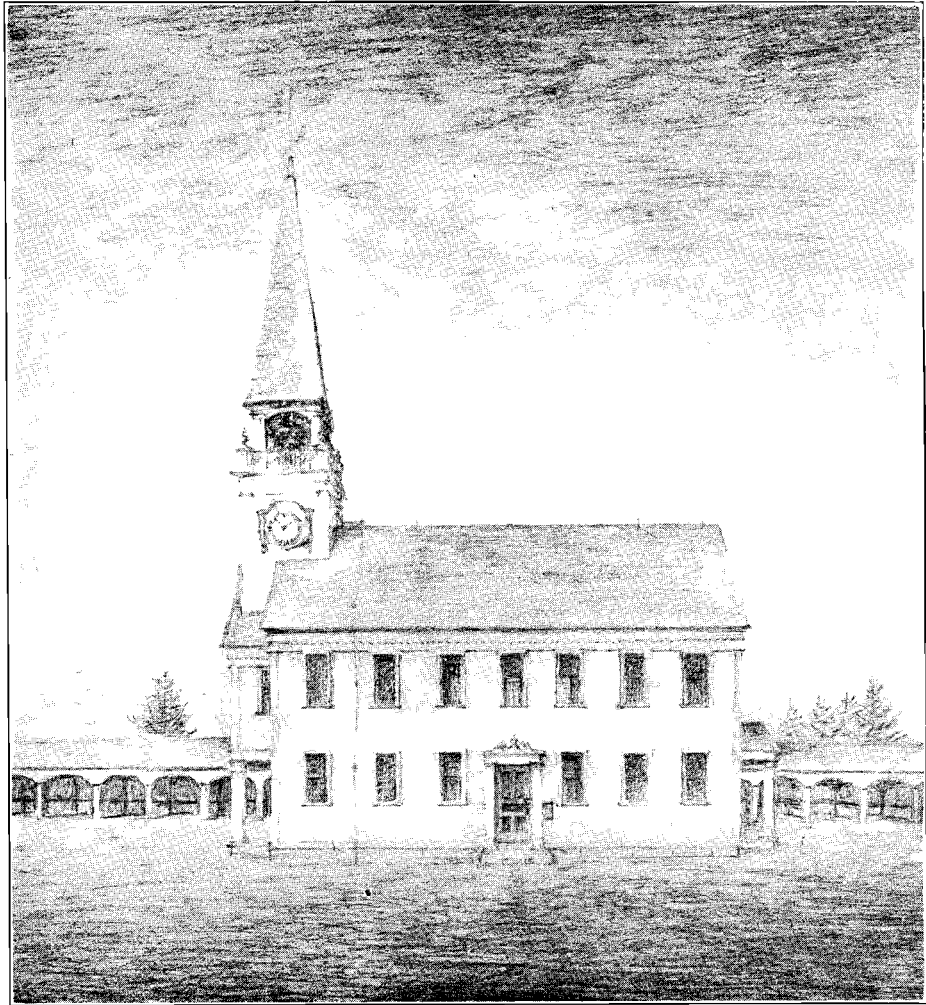
1945



Keene's Third Meeting-House Built 1754-60

FROM A DRAWING BY THE LATE SAMUEL WADSWORTH

Began in 1754, but not finished until 1760 owing to the threat of Indian troubles. Besides its use for Divine worship, tow'n meetings and other gatherings were held here. By the temporary removal of some of its fixtures, it was used as a court house, the first session of the Inferior Court for Cheshire having been holden here in October, 1771. It was the rallying point of the muster occasioned by the Lexington alarm. A new wooden court house was built in 1796, but the old third meeting-house still exists, one-half as a part of the establishment of General Mills, Inc. on Railroad Square, and the other half as a dwelling at 26 Maple street.



Meeting-House and Horse Shades on Common About 1794

FROM A DRAWING BY HERBERT C. ALLEN

This was the fourth meeting-house in Keene, and was dedicated Oct. 29, 1788. A bell was added in 1792 and a clock in 1794. The meeting-house was turned one-quarter round, removed to the head of the Common, and remodeled in 1828-9. Again remodeled in 1859-60. The horse shades, extending nearly across the head of the Common, were built in 1789.

THE STORY OF CENTRAL SQUARE

Strangers who visit Keene for the first time, frequently remark on the lay-out of Central Square, and the almost geometrical precision with which the principal streets radiate from it.

From The Keene National Bank, a view down Main street, made famous by Thoreau, who said it was "so wide, so level, so straight and so long that you could see a chicken run across it a mile off", also arouses the admiration of the beholder.

Keene began to be settled in 1734, and at the drawing of outlying lands in 1737, it fell to the lot of David Morse to make the first pitch of 100 acres.

Roughly described, this pitch was bounded southerly by the present railroad tracks, westerly by School street, northerly by Cross street, and easterly by Beaver brook, thus including all the land that is now upper Main street and Central Square, as well as a large part of what has become the compact part of the city.

Our Central Square was then a wooded area, untraversed by any road, the route to the saw-mill on Beaver brook passing it further to the east.

Near its easterly border, a small brook flowed toward the Ashuelot river, which in times of freshet became a torrent, undermining the roots of trees, which, toppled by the winds, built a deposit of fallen timber in the earth to an unknown depth, which was perhaps a flourishing growth a thousand years before the discovery of America.

The settlement of Keene was abandoned in 1747, owing to the hostility of the Indians. When the settlers returned from Massachusetts about 1750, they found that the meeting-house, fort, and 27 of the 31 dwellings which had been erected had been burned.

It appears that the first building to be erected in what is now Central Square was the third meeting-house. The first was burned, and the second only a temporary structure, with no floor but the earth, and situated near the present St. Bernard's church.

Construction of the third meeting-house was begun in 1754, but with the threat of further Indian troubles, it was not finished until 1760.

This building, about 35 x 45 feet, with its length east and west, stood a little easterly of the present Soldiers' monument, its south side nearly on a line with the north side of the present West and Roxbury streets. It had no steeple, bell or chimney, for in that day the people depended upon the preaching to keep them warm.

On the east side of the house, a new road to the saw-mill on Beaver brook was being traversed, the first in Central Square, and corresponding to our Washington street, but it was not formally laid out until 1761.

In 1770 Capt. Josiah Richardson came to Keene and acquired the land westerly of Main street, northerly of the present railroad tracks, and southerly of Medlanic street, which included the greater part of the land in Central Square.

In 1773 he built the Richardson tavern, on the site of the present Y. M. C. A. building, and was granted permission to change the course of the "road to Ash Swamp" so that it would run by his tavern directly to the common. The easterly end of the old road to Ash Swamp, which had turned off Main street near the Lamson block, and run diagonally to School street, was discontinued.

Courts had been held at Portsmouth and Exeter, but in 1771 the act dividing New Hampshire into five counties took effect, and the first session of the Inferior court for Cheshire was held in the third meeting-house, in October, 1771, and of the Superior court in September, 1772. This third meeting-house was also the rallying point for the muster following the Lexington alarm.

A new meeting-house to be dedicated exclusively to Divine worship being about to be built, in 1786 the town bought of Josiah Richardson about one acre of land north and west of the third meeting-house, bounded south and east on the roads, and west by Mr. Richardsons garden. The land which the town purchased, together with the roads, composed the larger part of our Central Square.

The building committee divided the inhabitants of the town into ten classes, and appointed persons "to convene the classes to agree what materials that class he belongs to will procure on the assessment of 300 pounds toward building said house."

These classes being convened agreed to furnish timber to the amount of 274 pounds, each stick being specified as to its dimensions. "Cattel" were also pledged to make up the sum of 300 pounds.

After the assessment was made a plan of the house was drafted and the pews sold in advance to furnish the principal source of revenue for the construction of the edifice, and in this manner was raised 941 pounds, but these pews were, for the most part, paid for in cattle and grain at the prevailing price in Keene, as only a few could pay their share in money. In this barter of commodities many losses were sustained. After the bills were all settled the clerk of the committee reported the amount received in actual cash as only 130 pounds.

The times were hard, and in the building of this meeting-house great financial difficulties were encountered. The rate of wages may be illustrated by the agreement with Eli Metcalf for "setting the glass and painting the sashes inside and out, and finding paint and putty, the said Metcalf is to have 2 pence and 1 farthing per light, and is to take his pay in cattle and grain at the common price in Keene."

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Erection of the new meeting-house was begun in 1786, a little northwesterly of the old house, and located within the present limits of the park. It was 70 x 50, its length east and west, with a belfry and steeple on the west, and a porch on the east end, and with the main entrance in the middle of the south side.

Two years were occupied in the building. It was dedicated Wednesday, October 29, 1788, the exercises being conducted by the Rev. Bulkley Olcott, of Charlestown, N. H., and the Rev. Fessenden of Walpole, N. H., and the Rev. Aaron Hall, the pastor.

The old third meeting-house, built 1754-60, was deeded to the county for a nominal consideration for use as a court house. It was removed to what is now the northwest corner of the Square about where Court street enters.

October 10, 1789, Josiah Richardson deeded to 29 individuals a narrow strip of land on which the horse shades had already been built. The deed says: "Begins at the southeast corner of said shade and runs westwardly, bounding on the sill of said shade, 252 feet to a corner, being 14 feet west of the southwest corner of said shade", from which it appears that this line of horse shades in October, 1789, was 238 feet long.

It also appears that the shades were 25 in number, the deed to 29 individuals showing some to have been jointly occupied. The line of shades extended from near the east line of Court street to the vicinity of the easterly wall of The Keene National Bank.

In 1792 a bell was purchased for the new meeting-house, and in 1794 it was exchanged for a larger one, weighing 1,000 pounds. In this year Luther Smith made a clock for the meeting-house tower, having one exterior dial, facing to the south.

In 1796 the old third meeting-house used as a court house had fallen into disrepair, and a new wooden court house, also to be used by the town for its meetings, was built on the same site.

The old house was sold to Eliphalet Briggs, and in after years was cut in half, and still exists as a dwelling at 26 Maple street, and the easterly part of the store of General Mills, Inc. on Railroad Square.

Travel to Keene from the Walpole road had been by the way of School and West streets, there being no road corresponding to the present Court street. In the year 1796 a road was laid out from the Walpole road, in the vicinity of the former Sun tavern, to the Common, passing the wooden court house on the west side, the traveled way being over land now occupied by the buildings on the west side of the Square.

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In 1799 land on the east side of the Common was leased by Dr. Thomas Edwards to Amasa Allen, who erected a building for a store, the first to occupy the site of the present Colony block. The only other buildings on the Common at this time which have not been described, were the law office of David Forbes, near the site of the Bridgman block, and a blacksmith shop near where Knowlton & Stone's store is now located.

The Proprietors of the Third Turnpike Road in New Hampshire had been incorporated Dec. 27, 1799. In 1808 the turnpike was straightened where it entered the Common by moving the wooden court house westerly to land now occupied by the Tilden and Bullard & Shedd stores.

A deed to the land was secured from Josiah Richardson, "to have and to hold the same for the use of a court house thereon, and for so long a time as said county shall choose to use it for that purpose, and no longer."

In 1815 Phineas Fiske bought of Dr. Thomas Edwards land on the corner of the Common and Roxbury street, and a wooden store building was erected thereon. The property soon afterward was bought by William Lamson.

In 1815 Justus Perry bought the Amasa Allen store on the east side of the Common. Wings were added to hide the gable, giving it an imposing appearance, and it was known as the "Prima Facie Building."

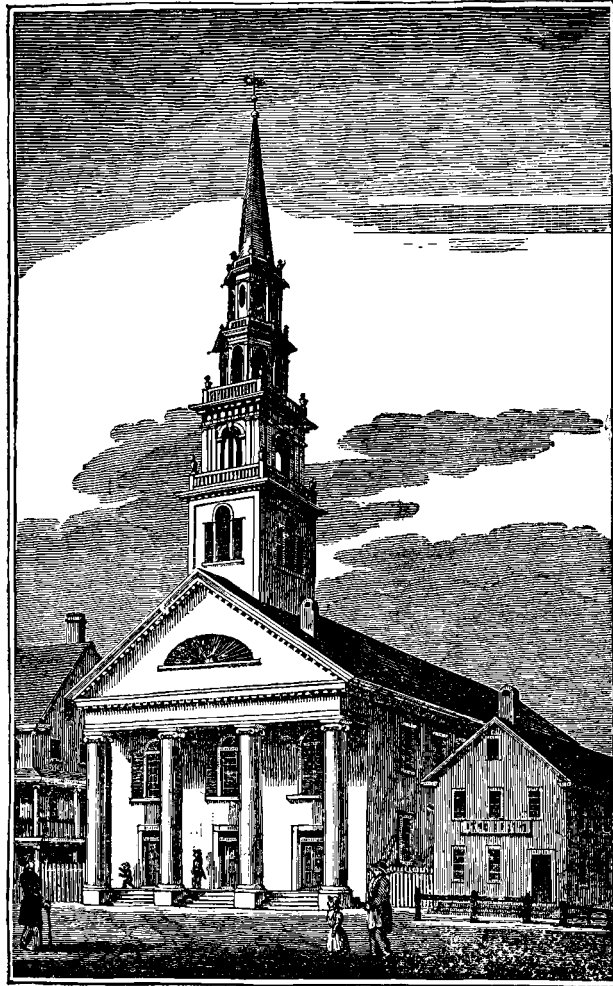
A new court house being needed, Joseph Dorr and his wife, Rebecca, the heirs of Josiah Richardson, in 1824 re-conveyed the court house land "so long as the building erected thereon is occupied as a court house, and no longer."

It was built of brick in 1824. It had a cupola for the bell and a portico in front supported by massive pillars. The present Bullard & Shedd store is the northerly half of this court house, and has been less changed in outward appearance than the other half, now the Tilden store, which has been remodeled and a story added, as is mentioned below. The old wooden court house was removed to the site of the present Barker block on Court street, where it was burned in 1861.

In 1825 John Prentiss built a brick block on the west side of the Common, now the Whitcomb block, where the "Sentinel" was published until 1871, when it was removed to the Bank block.

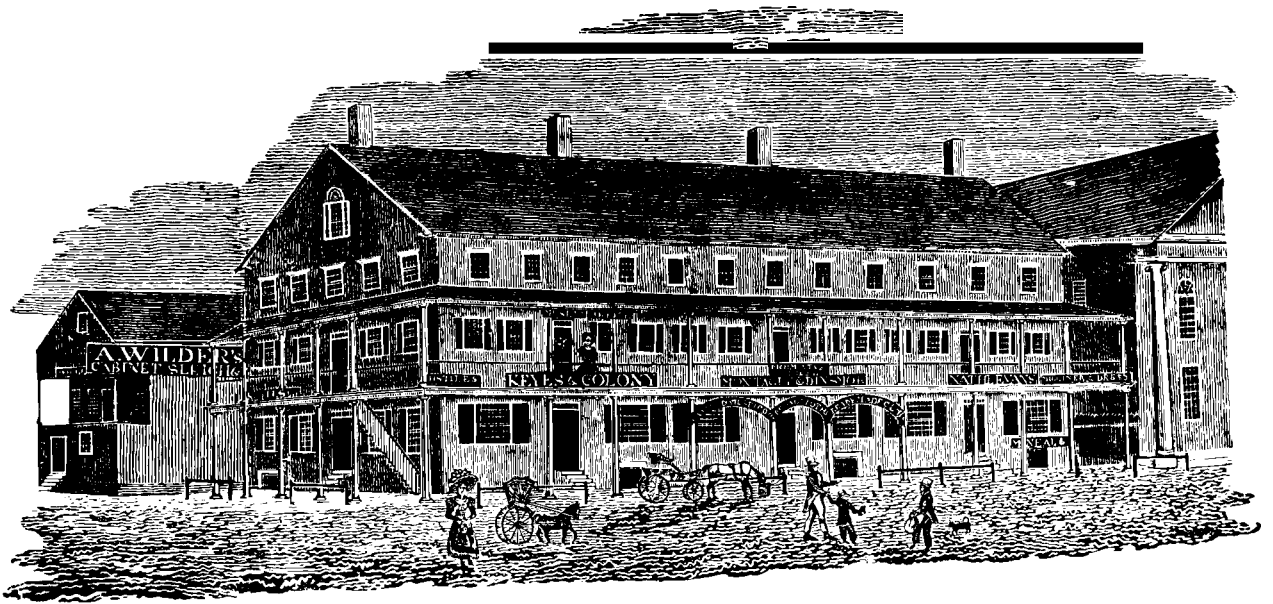
In the same year Samuel A. Gerould built a brick building between the Prentiss block and the court house. In 1857 he bought the south half of the brick court house built in 1824, and in connection with his block built in 1825, remodeled the whole into a four-story building, part of which was taken down in 1904 for the building of the Chamberlain block.

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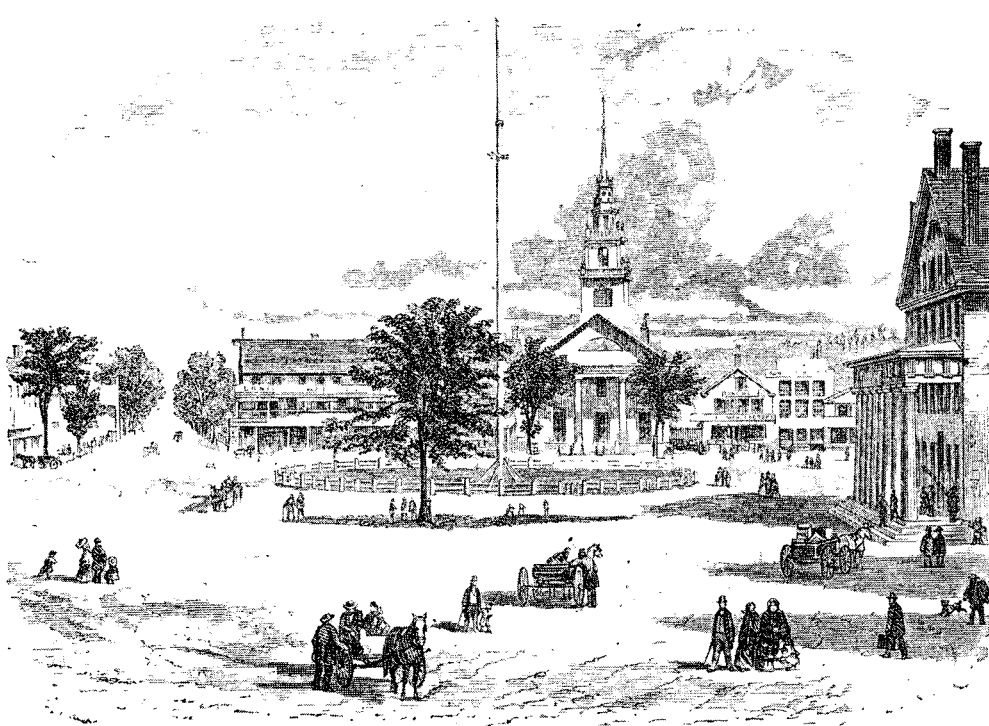
The Beginning of Central Square

Showing the meeting-house removed to the head of the Common and as remodeled with a new front and steeple in 1829 at a cost of \$1,820. Wilder's Building on the left, now the Ball Block, was completed in September, 1828. On the right, the Dexter Anderson hat shop was removed to Winter Street and replaced by a larger building, formerly the west end of the Clarke Block, torn down when The Keene National Bank was built in 1927.



Wilder's Building in 1835

Built in 1828, after 1849 it was known as Pond's Block, and since 1863 as the Ball Block, now owned by William Pearson. On the east end, third floor, was located Keene's first High school. The postoffice was in this building from 1829 to 1841. A store was added to the west end by the Ponds in 1849. Note the rails for hitching horses.



- Central Square.

Central Square in 1858

The earliest picture of the Square known. From a photograph by Chester Allen, A. R. Waud, draughtsman, and F. E. Fox, engraver. The three-section flagpole of the Fremont presidential campaign was erected Sept. 5, 1856, and felled by the ax Jan. 14, 1862. On the site of The Keene National Bank is the hat and cap manufactory of Pond & Co., and on the right, Clark's Bonnet Rooms, and the Albe Cady house. On the left, the First Congregational Church, as it appeared before the remodeling of 1860, and Pond's Block, with the furniture warerooms of S. D. Osborne on the upper floor. The portico of the first brick court house, now' the Tilden and Bullard & Shedd stores is shown, and on Court street, a portion of the sign of William A. Norwood, stove dealer, in the second wooden court house, removed here in 1824, and burned Aug. 7, 1861. In the center, the Walker elm, or "auction tree", set out in 1842 and removed Oct. 19, 1900. The portico added to the former Phoenix Hotel is shown as utilized in building the Cheshire House; note the barber's pole at its south end, also, the prevalence of jay-walkers.



Clarke's Block in 1865 and after the Fire of March 24, 1880

The upper picture is of the northeast corner of Central Square, and the present site of the buildings of The Keene National Bank and the Public Service Company of New Hampshire. The house with its gable fronting the Square was built about 1799 on Prison street by Abel Wilder, and was said to have been the finest in town. It was Dr. Amos Twitchell's first location in Keene, and afterward owned by Albe Cady. In 1847 it was moved southerly to the location illustrated. About 1849 Edward Farrar constructed apparatus with which he transmitted the music of a melodeon from his office in this building over wires to the Town Hall, many years before the telephone of Alexander Graham Bell had been heard of. The low'er picture is of the ruins of Clarke's Block after the fire of March 24, 1880.

In 1827 the wooden store at the corner of Roxbury street built by Phineas Fiske, was cut in two, one part being removed to the site of the present Sturtevant Chapel, where it was burned in 1869, and the other part to land near the present Bridgman block, where, owned by Charles Bridgman, and known as the "white store", it was burned in 1862.

Mr. Lamson built a new building of brick in 1827, which he later sold to George H. Richards. It had an auditorium called Music Hall in the third story, and the block was known as the "building with the round corner."

The idea of removing the meeting-house to the head of the Common and the development of a "Square" which had been advocated by Abijah Wilder, Jr., and Azel Wilder, began to take definite shape in 1828.

In this year the Wilders, having bought the horse shades, erected their brick building at the north side of the Common. Near the close of the year, the meeting-house steeple was pulled over., the building turned one-quarter round, and moved to the head of the Common on a lot given to the Society by the Wilders. A new front and steeple was built by Tewksbury & Goodwin of Charlestown, N. H. In 1860, when the church was remodeled as at present, it was again moved back four feet to the north.

In 1849 the Wilder building was sold to Amos and Henry Pond, who in that year built the store on the west end. The property was sold to George W. Ball in 1863, and has been since known as the Ball block. The third story has since been removed and the building modernized by the present owner, William Pearson.

Soon after erecting the Wilder building in 1828, the Wilders built a small wooden buildillg next easterly of the church, where now stands the Keene National Bank, which was occupied by Dexter Anderson for a hat shop.

This building is said to have been removed to form a part of the residence, now removed, of the late Dr. G. C. Hill.on Winter street, but another and larger building was erected at the head of the Common to take its place.

Easterly from the Anderson hat shop to Washington street was the garden of the Albe Cady house, situate a few feet to the north on Washington street. This garden was enclosed by a fence and had a frontage of about 44 feet on the Common. The late William S. Briggs said that in the proper season cabbages and beets grew where now stands the new building of the Public Service Company of New Hampshire-.

Probably in the fall of 1847 the Cady house was moved southerly to the head of the Common, and the intervening space between it and the Anderson hat shop

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filled to form what was afterwards known as Clarke's block, by its conveyance to Elbridge Clarke in 1857.

It was from the Cady house, then removed to front on the Common, that Edward Farrar made his early experiments with the telephone, transmitting the music of a melodeon over wires to the Town hall, or present City hall, perhaps about the year 1849.

In 1832, Winter street was laid out from the Common to School street, and in 1833 was erected on the west side of the Common, the Ashuelot Bank building, two stories in height, and having a stone front, since remodeled and now occupied by the Keene Savings Bank.

Also in 1833, directly south, and on the corner of West street, Elbridge Keyes and Joshua D. Colony built a brick building for a store. On the upper floor was a dance hall, having a spring floor, the only one in town. In the old days the Keyes" advertised their store as being located at the "Cheap Corner." The building was torn down in 1895 and replaced by the Russell block. The postoffice was removed to this building in 1896. It is now the Ashuelot-Citizens National Bank.

In 1840 the County of Cheshire bought of Henry 'Coolidge, then clerk of the court, 2,600 square feet of land upon which was erected a fire-proof granite building, 28 x 32 feet, for county offices and records. In exchange therefor it was ordered by the court that the county treasurer execute a valid deed to certain lands on Washington street, belonging to the county, also:

"All the right and title which said county has to the two offices in the basement story of the court house, being rooms in said house which are now occupied by the clerk of the courts as his office, with the appurtenances thereto belonging, unto Henry Coolidge, of Keene, his heirs and assigns, for the consideration of \$1", etc.

In 1840, Henry Coolidge obtained from Joseph Dorr and wife, a quitclaim deed of the land on which the brick court house built in 1824 was standing. At the completion of the stone county building, Mr. Coolidge removed his office to it, and rented his former offices in the brick court house to Phineas Handerson, Dr. A. S. Carpenter, and others.

Henry Coolidge died in 1843. In 1848, his heirs, Lawson and Alexander P. Coolidge for the consideration of \$1,000, quitclaimed to Samuel Wood of Keene, all their interest in "about eleven square rods of land" upon which the court house stood.

Suit was brought against the county by Samuel Wood, who claimed the whole property as forfeited in view of broken condition, and about six years later, the Supreme court rendered a decision in December, 1855, that the conveyance to

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Coolidge was a breach of the condition and a substantial alienation of the building from the use intended, and the county lost its court house.

The stone county building was taken down, and a large part of its materials were used in building the present court house, which was first occupied by the court in March, 1859.

After the removal of the meeting-house from the Common in 1828, the "Square" which had been formed became a dusty area, crossed by roads in every direction, and without a single tree.

It became the established parade ground for the May training and the military reviews held annually in the fall, which would be witnessed by thousands of spectators. But in 1844 the Forest Tree Society, its objects being the beautification of the town, were given permission to fence and ornament a small portion of the Common as should be approved by the selectmen.

A strong opposition arose to any encroachment on the unobstructed use of the Common as a public market and highway. While the merchants alleged that trees planted in the Common would obscure their signboards, the greatest popular objection was that it would interfere with the evolutions of the annual military reviews. But on October 2, 1850, due to changes in the militia system, the last regimental review was held.

Therefore in June, 1851, a small beginning of the park was made to test public opinion, and the result encouraged the Society to further the work by the planting of seven elms from the "Statia" farm on October 24, 1851. Since then the park has been enlarged and it was enclosed by the present stone post and iron rail fence in 1856.

In the political campaign of 1856 which sought the election of John C. Fremont to the presidency, a flag-pole, 187 feet high, composed of three sections, was erected at the southeast border of the park, where it stood until having become a menace in high winds, it was cut down, January 14, 1862. In-1855 there was built a band stand in the north part of the park, soon afterward burned in a Fourth of July celebration.

In 1848 the Town hall, or present City hall was built, and dedicated Feb. 28, 1849 with a concert and dance, with music by Kendall's Band, of Boston. It was then a smaller building than now. The tower was added in 1864, the bell in 1868, and the sidewalk awning was built in 1865.

This awning, and the one in front of the Ball block, also the one over the sidewalk at Clarke's block, removed at the building of The Keene National Bank in 1926, are still remembered, but there are many who do not remember the structure

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over the sidewalk from Bullard & Shedd's corner to the Ashuelot Bank, of which the part in front of the Whitcomb block is all that now remains.

In 1858 the old "Prima Facie Building", on the east side of the Square, formerly the Justus Perry store, was sold to Shelly & Sawyer. They sold land on the south side of the lot to the Cheshire Mills, who in 1859 erected a building with an iron front, painted white, and having marble floors. Shelly & Sawyer also built a three-story brick block on the old Perry site in 1859, which they sold to H. & A. T. Colony in 1864.

In 1863 a wooden building was moved from Davis street to land directly south of the Town hall by Thomas M. Edwards, who fitted it for a postoffice. On October 19, 1865, fire originating in the cellar of the Richards block swept northerly, destroying all the buildings on the east side of the Square. The wooden postoffice was torn down to save the Town hall. The loss was \$70,000, less than one-half being covered insurance.

Water to extinguish this fire was obtained from the town well, at the head of Main street. This well was sunk in 1814, and in 1845 it was connected by aqueduct with seven other wells about the Square, but at this fire the supply failed and bucket lines were formed to Beaver brook. Aqueduct water from Goose Pond having been brought into the Square in November, 1869, the old well was filled, and a band stand, with six lamp posts was built over it. It was removed in 1900.

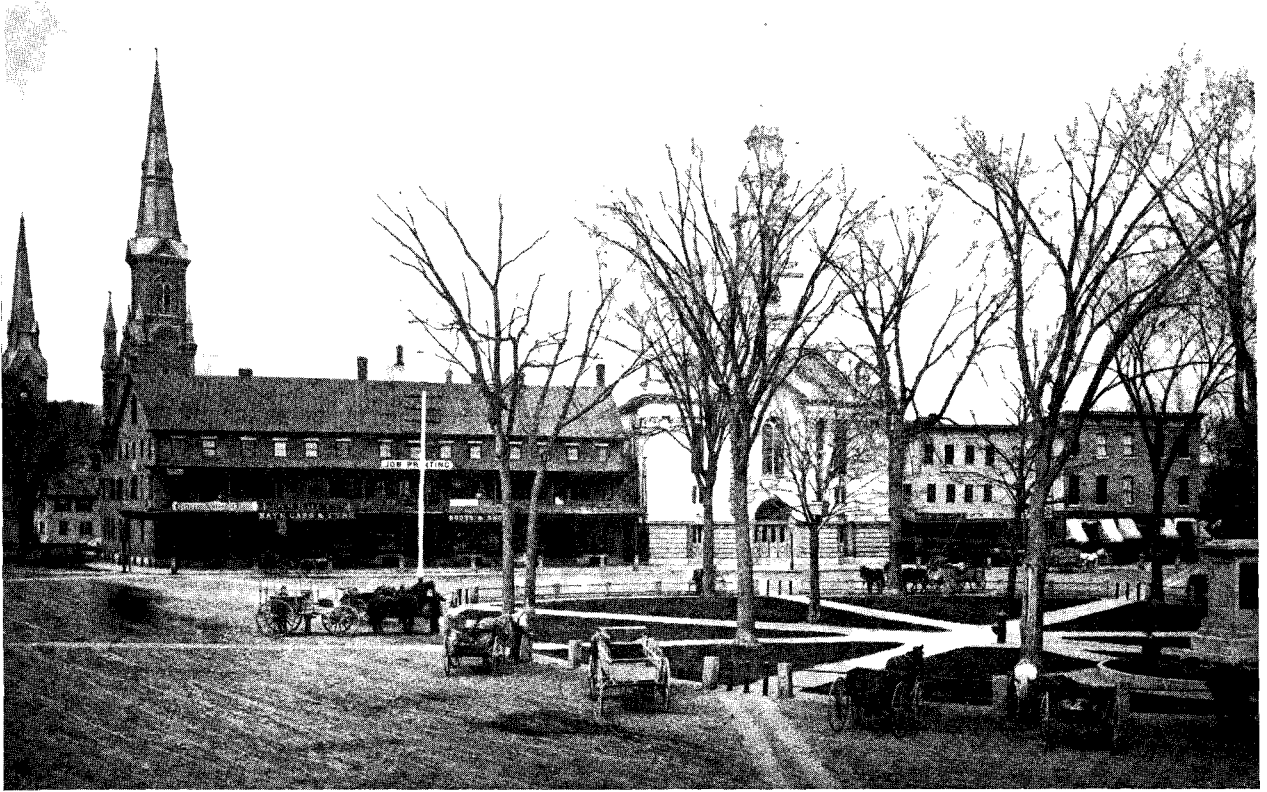
On the area devastated by fire on the east side of the Square, the Sprague block, now Knowlton & Stone, and the Bridgman block were built in 1866. The land to the south, known for about four years as the "burned district", was covered by the Colony and Bank blocks in 1870.

\$7,500 having been appropriated for the purpose, the Soldiers' monument was erected in 1871. It was dedicated October 20th, and among the distinguished guests was James A. Garfield, afterward President of the United States.

The 32 pound cannon on either side of the monument, the gift of the U. S. Government to John Sedgwick Post, No.4, Grand Army of the Republic, came from the Portsmouth navy yard. They were placed in the park in April, 1899.

At about 10:45 p. m., on March 24, 1880, fire broke out in the northeast part of Clarke's block. It was a bitterly cold night and the brisk wind which was blowing made the menace to property so great that the church bells were rung, and a large crowd was soon assembled to assist in removing goods from the building. There was thought to be no chance of saving the First Congregational church or the Ball block, and that a large part of the city would be reduced to ashes.

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The Head of Central Square in 1885

Little changed in its appearance for nearly fifty years, this view will stir the recollections of our older people. On the east Clarke's Block is shown as rebuilt after the fire of 1880. On the west, the piazza on the Ball Block was removed in October 1891. The first substantial change was the building of The Keene National Bank in 1927, followed in 1939 by the removal of the third story of the Ball Block, now owned by William Pearson, and the erection of the new building of the Public Service Company of New Hampshire in 1940. Several bird-houses which may be seen with a glass, were placed in the park trees in November, 1874, for the English sparrows imported in that year from New York. Many will remember the drinking fountain in the park, with a tin cup attached by a chain, the walks radiating in nearly every direction, and the large number of horses and oxen usually standing around the park railing. It will be noted that no fence had yet been built around the Soldiers' Monument.



The Head of Central Square III 19-15

From a photograph made Sunday, January 28th. From the building of The Keene National Bank in 1927, new or thoroughly modernized buildings have supplanted the old structures, The Ball Block, with its third-story gable roof removed in 1939, and the building of the Public Service Company, completed in 1940, have lent increased dignity to the central figure, the First Congregational Church.

Keene had no steam fire engine until 1883. Notified by telegraph, a steamer and two hose carriages were loaded on cars at Fitchburg to be brought to Keene. But they were not needed, for by the gallant and almost superhuman efforts of our firemen, aided by a shift in the wind, the fire was brought under control, with a loss estimated at \$43,000. The old Cady house and the rest of Clarke's block westerly to the present location of The Keene National Bank were destroyed. Mr. Clarke rebuilt the burned portion with a brick block, having an auditorium called Liberty Hall on the third floor.

In 1910 Central Square was paved with brick, and noticeable are the improvements, particularly at the head of the Square, which have been made in the past few years. On the west, the Ball Block, with its third-story gable roof removed, and minus the former sidewalk awning, would hardly be recognized as the old Wilder Building, and on the east, the buildings of the Public Service Company and The Keene National Bank have displaced the old Clarke Block.

And in the center, the church, with its noble architecture, the oldest of them all, properly occupies its place of prominence at the head of Central Square.

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