

FINANCIAL EMBARRASSMENTS OF THE NEW ENGLAND MINISTERS IN THE LAST CENTURY.

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It may be remembered that at the last annual meeting of this Society one of our older and most learned members suggested as a fit subject for investigation the history of the Christian ministry in Massachusetts, and specially noted "the perplexing and difficult relations of the ministers with the parish at the time of the depreciation of the currency." The materials for an adequate treatment of this subject are not less abundant than the materials which Mr. Weeden has used so admirably in his "Economic and Social History of New England." But they are widely scattered through town and church histories, and their proper collocation would require much more time than has been at my disposal since I was asked to prepare a paper for this meeting. I can hope only to make a slight contribution toward the illustration of the subject, based for the most part on original documents preserved among the Belknap Papers in the possession of the Massachusetts Historical Society, and soon to be printed.

Of that society Dr. Belknap was the recognized founder, and besides holding a foremost place among our older historians he was also a parish minister of conspicuous fidelity and usefulness. Jeremiah, or, as he was commonly called, Jeremy Belknap, was born in Boston, June 4, 1744, and graduated at Harvard College in 1762. After teaching school for a few years he was called at the age of twenty-two to be minister of the church in Dover, N. H., as colleague with the Rev. Jonathan Cushing, who was then far advanced in life and died a few years afterward. At that

time there was an apprehension prevailing among many persons that the contract between a minister and people is like the marriage covenant, "binding for life." By the terms of the call to Mr. Belknap and his acceptance he was to receive one hundred pounds lawful money (\$333.33) yearly, and a further sum of one hundred and fifty pounds (\$500) on his settlement, "which is to provide himself a comfortable house to dwell in during his ministry amongst us." Before accepting these terms he consulted friends better qualified to judge than he was, on the question whether the proposed salary would be sufficient for his "comfortable subsistence in life," if he should have a family. It was their opinion that as he was not to have any parsonage land, there ought to be added to his annual salary "so many cords of wood as will be necessary for the use and convenience of a family during the year." He accordingly expressed a hope that some provision of that kind would be made for him, if he should live to see some of their present expenses terminate. His hope was not realized. It was not, however, until he had been settled ten years that he found himself involved in serious difficulties. He had been ordained in February, 1767,—twenty churches being represented in the Council convened on that occasion; and in the following June, he was married to Ruth Eliot, sister of Samuel Eliot, a distinguished benefactor of Harvard College.

With the addition of a growing family, and the rapid depreciation of the currency which began soon after the opening of the war of the Revolution, he found himself deprived of a large part of his salary and with debts pressing heavily on him. For the three years, 1777-1779, there was due to him, according to the scale of depreciation, upward of one hundred and twelve pounds, or more than one-third of his salary. At this time, some attempts were made to relieve the minister from his embarrassments. So early as March, 1777, he wrote to the parish selectmen

that in consequence of the increase of his family and the dearness of some of the necessaries of life he found it impossible to live on his salary. After several adjournments of the annual meeting of the parish, it was voted to make their reverend pastor a present of twenty pounds. At a special meeting held in the following January, it was voted to make him a grant of sixty pounds, lawful money, "for his better support," but as this vote was found to be "insufficient to answer the end in view," and, "disagreeable to many persons," it was reconsidered six weeks later, and nothing further was done during that year. In April, 1779, Mr. Belknap submitted to the parish a plan "for his future support" ingeniously calculated to make his salary, whether paid in the necessaries of life or in money, equivalent to what it was for the first seven years of his ministry. When it was communicated to the parish meeting the parish voted not to act on the plan at present, but "to let it lay." They were either unable or unwilling to face the difficulty of a depreciating currency, and they contented themselves with voting Mr. Belknap "a present of four hundred pounds." About one-half of this sum was paid in Continental bills, and the other half, Mr. Belknap took off the rate list from the names of such persons as paid him the full value of their last year's taxes. In November of the same year, it was "voted, to make an addition to Mr. Belknap's salary of fourteen hundred pounds for the present year." At the time this vote was passed, the grant, according to the scale of depreciation, was "equal to nearly three-quarters of his salary, but before it was all paid was not equal to one-fifth." The next year his salary was fixed on the price of corn, "the plentiest and cheapest article then in the country." But the relations between the minister and the parish were still much strained, and they so continued during the remainder of his residence at Dover.

In August, 1782, he gave from the pulpit a detailed account of his relations with the parish from his settlement

down to that time, with a statement of the difficulties under which he was then laboring. In conclusion he told them that if no regard was paid to what he had then said he should be under the painful necessity of laying the whole affair before an Ecclesiastical Council. Another parish meeting was thereupon held, at which it was voted "to pay the deficiency of his salary occasioned by the fluctuating situation of the paper currency," if any should be found by a committee appointed to examine into the matter. This committee found that there was due to him £112. 7. 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ lawful money, as already stated. Their report was accepted, and a note for the amount was given to Mr. Belknap; but no part of it was paid during the next two or three years except about £30, for which one of the collectors assumed a debt due by the minister. Early in 1784, a demand was made on him for the payment of a note due to the estate of one of his deceased creditors in Boston; and in settlement of it he assigned to the administrator the parish note. Payment of the note, however, was evaded; and in June, 1785, a suit was brought against the parish, on which judgment was entered, in September, for £85. 10. 5 damages and £4. 12 costs. Execution was issued and levied on the body of one only of the three wardens by whom the note was signed, and was made returnable at the April Term in the following year. Meanwhile, it was proposed that lumber instead of cash should be given in discharge of the execution, and this proposition was accepted; but less than one-third of the required quantity was delivered before the last day on which the execution was returnable. Under these circumstances the unfortunate parish warden must have gone to jail; and in order to prevent this unsatisfactory issue of the suit, Mr. Belknap, acting in behalf of his creditor, indorsed satisfaction on the back of the execution and paid the costs, thus releasing the parish from their debt, while his own liability to his creditor remained.

By this time his patience had become wholly exhausted;

and on the last day of April he made an address from the pulpit formally resigning to the parish for himself, his heirs, and all persons claiming from, by, or under him, all right and title to any salary which might after that day become due to him by virtue of any contract or engagement between him and them. "The consequence of this," he said, "will be that in future my connexion with this parish will be altogether voluntary, and may be dissolved at the pleasure of either party, or if continued will be upon a different footing from what it has been heretofore." This declaration led to another parish meeting, at which a committee was chosen "to converse with the Rev^d Mr Belknap relative to the difficulties subsisting between him and the parish." The conference was in writing; and the committee asserted on their part that they had no doubt "respecting the present validity of the contract between him and the parish, being fully convinced from reason that a contract entered by the joint consent of two parties cannot be legally dissolved, but by their mutual consent and approbation, or by some jurisdiction competent for the purpose." To this Mr. Belknap rejoined in writing that his opinion as to the dissolution of the contract remained unchanged "because my reason teaches me that a contract unperformed on one part and given up on the other is really dissolved." However, that nothing might be wanting to make the dissolution complete, he desired that a parish meeting should be called "to dissolve the contract which is now supposed to subsist, or join with me in choosing and calling an Ecclesiastical Council, to whom the question concerning the validity of the contract or the propriety of dissolving it may be submitted for their opinion and advice." Finally, on the 27th of September, 1786, the parish voted that the contract should be dissolved "in compliance with the desire of the Rev. Mr. Belknap."

Subsequently some unsuccessful attempts were made to agree on a new contract, with a view to Mr. Belknap's remaining in Dover; but they need not be detailed here.

After considerable delay a final settlement of all the financial questions was effected, in February, 1787, by Mr. Belknap's making a free gift of £84. 19.— $\frac{3}{4}$ to the parish, and their giving him a note on interest for the balance of his claim, £16. 1. $2\frac{1}{4}$; and on the 8th of March, the brethren of the Church voted "that the pastoral relation betwixt the Rev. J. Belknap and this Church be at his request dissolved." He had already accepted a call from the Church in Long Lane, Boston, afterward widely known as the Church of William Ellery Channing and Ezra Stiles Gannett; and on the 4th of April he was regularly installed over it. By the terms of his call he was to receive a weekly salary of two pounds eight shillings (\$8); "and in case our society shall increase and the pews be all occupied, the salary shall then be increased to a comfortable support." That was a day of small salaries. In 1796, the largest salary paid to any Congregationalist minister in Boston was to Peter Thacher of the Brattle-street Church, who received a weekly salary of seven pounds four shillings and his wood and house rent. Dr. Freeman at King's Chapel had an annual salary of £250 and twenty-five cords of wood. The other salaries were much smaller. Dr. Belknap's salary at that time was eighteen dollars a week, having been increased three times in nine years. He died suddenly of apoplexy, June 20, 1798, honored and beloved by his people.

The difficulties of Mr. Belknap at Dover were not exceptional. The balance of the salary due to his venerable colleague, Jonathan Cushing, was not paid until fifteen years after Mr. Cushing's death, when his heirs obtained a judgment against the parish. This judgment was satisfied out of money raised to pay Mr. Belknap. When Mr. Thacher went from Malden to Brattle-street, in January, 1785, his parish owed him two hundred and nine pounds fourteen shillings and eight pence; and the story was circulated that he was nearly reduced to starvation. This he denied in an advertisement in the *Independent Chronicle*, in which he

said "Though I have suffered great inconvenience by my salary's not being punctually paid me, yet (for ought I know) the people there have been as punctual in their payments as other parishes in the country generally are." It is worth while to add that the Malden parish made a claim on the Brattle-street Church for pecuniary compensation on account of the loss of their minister; and accordingly a subscription of three hundred pounds (\$1,000) was raised among the members of the Brattle-street Society, out of which the debt to Mr. Thacher was paid. In March, 1780, Rev. John Eliot, minister of the New North Church in Boston, wrote that by the terms of his settlement the depreciation in the currency was to be made up every three months. "Before the fortnight expired after the three months were ended, I applied for my due. The deacons and others said I had better wait till after May meeting when they would pay all together. I knew that in this case much would be set down to my loss; and I therefore insisted upon the settlement before more time elapsed. I told them peremptorily that, if they did not call the Society together, I would; that I had kept firmly to my engagement, and only begged they would do the same. The consequence was they have done it, and I have now wherewithal to live on: otherwise I must have been naked and starved." In July of the following year, he wrote: "I am in a confounded strait for money; or at present spend as much as I get, though not so much as is due from my people. Saturday night generally makes me even with the world: and with regard to temporal things I am neither better nor worse than I was the week before. . . . Everything is so abominably high that it is difficult to procure the necessaries of subsistence, though the bounties of Providence roll in upon us like a flood. Ministers' salaries are inadequate to a support with a family." These instances will help to set in a clearer light some of the difficulties of a minister's life in New England, in the latter part of the last century, arising from the depreciation of the currency.

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