

## Samuel Dexter Declines a Call to Become Westborough's First Minister, 1723

Westborough was incorporated in 1717, but did not have a regularly settled minister until the ordination of Ebenezer Parkman on October 28, 1724. During those years, the town relied on the preaching of Daniel Elmer and then several candidates for the pulpit, including Samuel Dexter, John Hancock, Jacob Eliot, and Parkman. Elmer, a graduate of Yale College, had preached in Brookfield, 1714-1715, and New Haven, 1716-1717, before coming to Westborough in 1717.<sup>1</sup> As Parkman later recalled:

Mr. Daniel Elmer, a candidate for the ministry from Connecticut River, preached here several years, and received a call from the people; but there arose dissensions, and though he built upon the farm which was given for the first settled minister, and dwelt upon it, yet by the advice of an ecclesiastical council he desisted from preaching, and a quitclaim being given him of the farm, he sold it, and with his family removed to Springfield in 1724. He was afterwards settled at Cohanzy, in the Jerseys, and, I suppose, died there.<sup>2</sup>

In his twentieth-anniversary sermon, Parkman alluded to the difficulties that the town had faced in its attempt to choose Elmer as its minister: "But then again, it is not to be forgotten how the Lord was pleased to appear for the people, and extricated you out of great perplexity and temptation when you had fallen into hot strife and contention, and your attempts to settle the ordinances of Christ among you were rendered abortive."<sup>3</sup>

It is not clear how long or in what capacity Elmer preached in Westborough, but by the end of 1722, the town invited 22-year-old Samuel Dexter to preach. Dexter, a graduate of Harvard's class of 1720, had already preached and been invited to settle as the minister of Brimfield and Medford.<sup>4</sup> As he wrote on December 5, 1722, "This Day beyond my Expectation and Thought Came one from Westborough to get Me to preach with them." He preached in Westborough on December 16, adding that "Mr. Elmore [i.e., Elmer] pray'd in the Afternoon," indicating that Elmer still had a ministerial role.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For a sketch of Elmer (1690-1755; Yale 1713), see Franklin Bowditch Dexter, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College with Annals of the College History, October, 1701-May, 1745* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1885), 110-11. On January 15, 1718, the first town meeting "Voted to Chuse Committee to wait on the Reverend Mr. Elmer and to treat to Continue to Be our minister and to provid for his Comfortable Substenance, As thay Shal See meet." <https://archive.org/details/townrecords01west/page/2/mode/2up> (accessed Dec. 1, 2022).

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Heman Packard DeForest and Edward Craig Bates, *The History of Westborough, Massachusetts* (Westborough, 1891), 51.

<sup>3</sup>Sermon CCLXVIII on Gen. 31:38, Oct. 28, 1744, as quoted in *ibid.*, 127.

<sup>4</sup>Samuel Dexter, "Extracts from the Diary of Rev. Samuel Dexter, of Dedham," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register (NEHGR)* 13, no. 4 (Oct. 1859), 306 (May 1, 1721). For a sketch of Dexter (1700-1755), see John Langdon Sibley and Clifford K. Shipton, *Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts* (18 vols.; Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Boston, 1873-1999), 6:376-80 (hereafter referred to as *SHG* for "Sibley's Harvard Graduates"). Sibley authored v. 1-3 (1873-85); Shipton, v. 4-17 (1933-75); Conrad Edick Wright and Edward W. Hanson, v. 18 (1999). Dexter served as minister of Dedham, 1724-1755.

<sup>5</sup>Dexter, "Extracts," 307 (Dec. 5, 1722), 308 (Dec. 16).

The people of Westborough were eager, indeed, perhaps desperate, to obtain a settled minister. Their eagerness was undoubtedly partly a reflection of piety — that is, the desire of believers to have the word preached. But the mandates of law could not have been far from their minds. According to “An Act for the Settlement and Support of Ministers and Schoolmasters” (1692), “the inhabitants of each town within this province, shall take due care, from time to time, to be constantly provided of an able, learned, orthodox minister or ministers, of good conversation, to dispense the Word of God to them.” If any town was “destitute of a minister” for six months, the county Court of General Sessions of the Peace was authorized, upon complaint, “to make an order upon every such defective town, speedily to provide themselves of such minister as aforesaid.” That failing, the court was empowered “to procure and settle a minister qualified as aforesaid, and order the charge thereof and of such minister’s maintainance to be levied on the inhabitants of such town.”<sup>6</sup> The people Westborough undoubtedly had no desire to be declared “defective,” much less to have a minister and his maintenance imposed upon them.

On the day after Dexter preached, there was a town meeting “in Order to Choose one to Settle with them in the Ministry.” Dexter was “the first in Nomination and then Mr. Hanckock,” a reference to John Hancock who later became minister of Braintree. The town decided to hold “a Day of solemn fasting and prayer for the Direction of Heaven in the Affair of their Choice,” with ministers John Swift of Framingham, Robert Breck of Marlborough, and John Prentice of Lancaster invited to officiate.<sup>7</sup>

Two days after preaching in Westborough, Dexter visited Swift in Framingham, “a very kind Gentlemen,” and spent the next day hunting with the Rev. Samuel Barrett of Hopkinton before returning home. He then returned to Westborough where the committee appointed by the town “to Acquaint the Persons Nominated visited me and left a Copy of the Town Votes with respect to that affair.” The following Sunday, he preached in Hopkinton.<sup>8</sup>

A month later, he “Receiv’d my Call to Westborough,” and asked himself, “what shall I do?” Four days later, he was still “at a great stand what to do. To Come to any Conclusion I Cannot, with Respect to my Call to W. I will therefore Committ my Cause to God.” He returned to Westborough on February 14 and “visited two or three Friends, some that did not vote in my Choice at W. but they abundantly declared their Desire of my Accepting their Invitation and show’d great willingness (one especially) to make Considerable additions to the Encouragement they had offer’d.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>“An Act for the Settlement and Support of Ministers and Schoolmasters,” passed Nov. 4, 1692, in *The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay: To Which Are Prefixed the Charters of the Province. With Historical and Explanatory Notes, and an Appendix* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1869), 1:62 (<https://archive.org/details/actsresolvespass9214mass/page/62/mode/1up>, accessed Dec. 2, 2022).

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 308 (Dec. 17, 1722). Swift (1679-1745; Harvard 1697) was minister of Framingham, 1701-1745; Breck (1682-1731; Harvard 1700) was minister of Marlborough, 1704-1731; Prentice (1682-1748; Harvard 1700) was minister of Lancaster, 1705-1748. See *SHG* 4:387-390 (Swift); *ibid.*, 515-18 (Breck); *ibid.*, 529-32 (Prentice). The anonymous editor of Dexter’s “Extracts” mistakenly identified Prentice as Solomon Prentice (1705-1773; Harvard 1727) who became minister of Grafton in 1731. For a sketch of John Hancock (1702-1744; Harvard 1719), who served as Braintree’s minister, 1726-1744, see *SHG* 6:316-19.

<sup>8</sup>Dexter, “Extracts,” 308 (Dec. 19-23).

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 309 (Jan. 26, 30, Feb. 14, 1723).

Despite this encouragement, Dexter did not accept Westborough's call. While he had committed his cause to God, perhaps more important in his decision were the advice of an uncle and the opinions of his friends. Eleven days later, he and his uncle "viewed the place and situation." His uncle advised against accepting the call: "he Could not advise me to fix there — he did not like the Accommodations." On March 1, he remained "perplexed," but "my friends being all so much Averse to my settlement there, that I have almost Concluded to deny them but would not do anything rashly." The next day, he planned to return to Westborough, but was "Disappointed by the Storm." Two weeks later, he "gave Westborough their Negative Answer," noting, at the same time, that the "People Manifested a great deal of affection and Respect to me, for which I desire to be thankfull."<sup>10</sup>

#### A Note on Sources

Samuel Dexter's diary is the only source that identifies him and John Hancock as candidates for the Westborough pulpit. The candidacy of Jacob Eliot was mentioned in the town meeting on January 6, 1724: "it was agreed and voted that Mr. Parkman and Mr. Eliot Be in nomantion in order for Electtion of a Gospel minister to Setel in said Town."<sup>11</sup> Shipton notes that Eliot preached in "the frontier parish of Westborough" but does not cite a source.<sup>12</sup>

Because a church had not been gathered when Dexter was a candidate, there are no church records that would identify him, Hancock, or Eliot. The early town records do not mention a meeting on December 17, 1722.

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 310 (Feb. 25, Mar. 1-2); *NEHGR* 14 (1960), 35.

<sup>11</sup><https://archive.org/details/townrecords01west/page/11/mode/1up> (accessed Dec. 3, 2022).

<sup>12</sup>*SHG*, 6:380.