THE SECOND GREAT AWAKENING IN MIDDLETOWN:
A PARADOX IN PROGRESS

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The Second Great Awakening, I believe, hails the awakening of citizenry in Middletown to a need for change just as it also hails the reawakening of other concerned Christians to a need for a change in their religious activity. In Middletown, the course of the Second Great Awakening, to some extent, runs a parallel path. Enormous changes are taking place everywhere during this period in American history. I see the revivalist period presenting a paradox in the progress of women similar to the paradox of progress in religious activity. Although it is not the direction I predicted at the outset of my research, I am, nonetheless, more interested than ever about the type of awakening I found in Middletown.

To understand Middletown and the effect of the Second Great Awakening I will first explain the Second Great Awakening in a religious context and then place this wave of revivalism into the atmosphere and physical setting of Middletown as it was during the period of the 1830's.

Charles Grandison Finney was the master of ceremonies if the Second Great Awakening could be called an event. He preached that "God has made man a moral free agent." Then, he placed the burden of responsibility on man by calling on him to change his ways if they are not worthy by his community's standards. Evil is a choice "not a product of innate depravity", he told his followers in 1831. The time was ripe for such answers. People needed (some of them) a theology which met new
perspectives. They were ready to abandon the deistic rationalism of an earlier time for a common sense piety.
The old Calvinistic idea of God's relationship to man didn't answer their newfound needs. The clergy also found themselves listening to this new approach. To keep their positions many clergymen swam with the tide of revivalism that Finney's charismatic preachings swept across New England.

The wave of revivalism went against much of the earlier religious indifference and caught its followers up in a movement of creating a new social order to meet the changes in the towns across America. Middletown was a prime example. In the short period between 1810 and 1832, more than sixteen mills and factories were established in Middletown area. No longer were most of the farmlands owned by people who lived off their labors on the farm. People needed to subsidize their farm income. The primary business, shipbuilding, and ship-trafficing, was going downhill fast. Agriculture had been second, with exporting of timber, some grains, and potatoes last. Now, in Middletown, there was diversity of occupation, living arrangements, social structure, and people. There were ten ferries on the river to transport this more mobile society; there were thirty-five churches in the area to meet the diversity of opinions; there were losses of a significant portion of the 20-29 year old men to migration west and as in other towns in the New England area, liquor licenses were becoming the popular trend for grocers aiming to meet the new demands.

* see page 2A
In every way the country was changing. A visitor, Alexis de Tocqueville, saw the rise of capitalism built into the American manner of surviving under dire circumstances. He saw this ability to survive expand to an ability to succeed in the "opening up of enormous opportunities for self-betterment." For many, those with self-discipline, this was true. For others, especially during the Second Great Awakening, the local policing group the church helped one work on a self-discipline. Members policing each other provided a social protective network so one had a "net".

Indeed, piety was not an individual expression at all, but implied group activity during this period. Being a Christian in this period meant getting caught up in a voluntary community, not only in a psychological sense, but in a literal sense. Now that man was said to be able to change his ways as a moral free agent, something must be done to help those who had trouble with their self-discipline. Social reform was the answer. This explained the nature of the reform agencies which flourished—helping the drunkard, prostitute, opium addict, widows, orphans, blind, deaf, criminals in jails, and the mentally ill. Of course, all of this reform did not occur in Middletown. Nor did the reform that occurred here, at least according to my references, consist of reform as we would consider it.

Social reformists of the Second Great Awakening period believed if they could convert many of their downfallen flock to a Christian behavior and impress on them the virtues of true protestantism—industry, sobriety, thrift
and piety, they "couldn't help but rise in the world." In the Middletown area I found the social reform more of a preventative nature than of the evangelical or societal reform of missionary work or hospital work. Although in the larger picture of social reform in America rising out of the Second Great Awakening, changes would not be visible for many years at this time and in this particular setting, social reform took on a personal character.

The First Baptist Church was the particular religious sect I researched because it was a young, enthusiastic church of the times. More than fifty per cent of its members were women, a rarity in more than one way. Many of the women members were married to or daughters of men who were members of the more established churches. Also, in their membership they "claimed equal protection as members within the church." This distinction had already been given to Connecticut Quaker women much earlier because of the equality inherent in Quaker doctrine. Now, women in all denominations of protestant sects were realizing an equality quite apart from their normal roles. Even as late as 1835 women were not allowed to sue, contract or execute a will. In addition, any property a woman owned before her marriage was her husband's property when she wed, as she herself was. Women could not vote, but in church meeting in Middletown's First Baptist Church they were able to be heard and to play a role in actions by the church. When the Baptists attended Connecticut's Constitutional Convention in August 26, 1818 and fought for a statement allowing them
"full and complete enjoyment of religious liberty" they also meant, they in turn, would allow more religious liberty within their fold. This did not include blacks, nor did it tolerate for long, any males or females who were of doubtful character. But, the Baptist doctrine preached by the American Home Baptist Mission Society in 1832 in New England contained one of the more lenient philosophies of the times, thanks to an 1809 Brown Graduate, Jonathan Gaing who was the Society's secretary.

Now, the philosophies of the larger Baptist Society filtered down through the hierarchy to the Brothers and Sisters in Middletown. While there was "a mighty effort to be made ....and made soon, or ignorance, heresy, and infidelity will entrench themselves too strongly to be repulsed", the efforts in Middletown appear to have been more of a punishment of evil rather than an encouragement of good. Indeed, the Baptists "became staunch republicans, agitators for reform."

The minutes of the First Baptist Church attest to a zealous air of reform through the early 1830's. The church committee was the common vehicle for policing its own members. The church would learn of an activity that deserved investigating, one that was reprehensible by their standards, and would assign a small group, three or four members to be dispatched to investigate the particular matter. If an offense, did indeed, occur, and the person in the wrong, after a warning by the church deacons did not mend his or her ways, then the church
would call the member before the full church meeting group for a public reprimand. If no further wrongdoing occurred and the fallen one mended his errant ways, all was well. But, if the person reverted to his or her former offense, then the church would be forced "to withdraw the hand of fellowship" as it did countless times each year. Thus, the person was effectively shunned and the behavior publicly condemned as unacceptable. This provided the societal norms for the group.

The committee held a certain power in the church, and in Middletown because of the large membership of women, it consisted of many women-membered committees. This new power for women caused some problems among the men members they policed. On one occasion, J.P. Sizer, a male member, was explaining his absence from church at a church meeting, complaining that there were "slanderers, standardizers, and backbiters in the church who were endeavoring to injure him." The committee which found Sizer guilty earlier of missing Church and unChristian attitudes made a "direction to Brother Sizer to name individuals above alluded to." Sizer, however, much the gentleman, refused to name his accusers and, instead, was content to have the church withdraw the hand of fellowship for his actions. He said it was acceptable to him because he could no longer attend church or take communion anyway with such slanderers in his midst. This provides evidence that a transition for women from their role in the home to one of increased power outside the home may not have been harmonious
in all respects.

A shift in the ministerial views about women and their place in the world outside the home also helped bring about significant change during this period, even if the change was not exactly what the ministers hoped for. No other public institution courted the women's loyalty with such fervor as the church. The new idea that prevailed among the church hierarchy placed much importance on the maternal role for improving society. Mothers were"entrusted with the morals and faults of the next generation" thus enlarging the scope of their role according to the church. All women were considered an important influence in shaping future generations because of the significance of their teaching capacity in and outside the home. Between 1825-1860 one quarter of all native-born New England women were school-teachers for some years of their lives. Those who did not teach were becoming more educated than an equal percentage of males during this period causing almost all New England women during this period to be able to read and write, a doubling of their literacy since 1780. With this resource at their use, it is no wonder the ministers prevailed on their female membership more and more. In Middletown, it was no exception.

This period of American revivalism, of evangelicalism, of reawakening, is more than the history of a religious movement. To understand it is to understand the whole temper of American life in the 19th century. In Middletown we see
one segment of it vis a' vis the First Baptist Church. The activity there mirrored the activity going on in the larger society reflecting the concerns with problems encountered in this rapidly-changing society.

Some of the occasions of close physical contact with one's employer, perhaps in an outbuilding, perhaps in his house, or even a "ten-footer" were no longer in evidence in the factories. Now the employer was behind a glass door, or beyond another wall. There was no longer a togetherness between employers and employees. People were separate. No longer were men sharing a drink with their boss at the end of the day. Instead they were beginning to drink separate from families and employers. The factory worker was becoming isolated. The employer was moving away from his work establishment. There was a changing social order. Drinking became a problem to the church-oriented society and with their concern came their social reforms. Of course, for their times, it was unusual treatment according to present day views. Ostracism from one's church was the prescribed treatment of the Baptists.

A committee appointed to wait on Brother Israel Bailey reported that he was was intemperate and habitually confirmed in that practice. The church having heard this report and confiding that any further labours with him would be unavailing withdraws the hand of fellowship for the crime of intemperance. Women were not absolved from the crime as the case of May Gilbert attests in the same minutes. The committee reported she also was "intemperate and addicted" and, similarly, withdrew church membership.
There were other lesser crimes the church took upon itself to mend among its members. Failure to take care of one's bills properly was also a matter of concern as Brother Peter Forbes found out. He owed $13.80 in back payments to another member of the church. The church appointed its usual "committee to wait on Brother Peter Forbes requesting him to pay $13.80. Otherwise the church will take up labour with him and request him to attend our next church meeting." (I suspect the money may have been church pledge but it appears a large amount compared to the annual listing of pledges so it may have been for a much longer period if it was pledged.)

I hesitate to leave the impression that the First Baptist Church was engaged only in reducing evil although many of the five years of minutes I researched indicate much of their recorded activity was in this area. However, as early as 1831, a committee was appointed to make accomodation in the gallery for "people of colour provided the expense shall not exceed $20 and when completed to invite them to take seats there." I see the benevolent attitude in their inviting blacks to their church, but the gallery seating and the term "not exceed $20" rankles when it is juxtaposed with the information that in 1842 Robert Paddock gave an additional $2,000 to help build the new 75 x 56 feet church which cost $12,500 total. Also, in this period the church was actively donating funds for missionary work in Burma at an annual per capital estimate of $23.75.
Although I have earlier stated my personal view about the lack of Christianity evident toward blacks in one's own midst, the missionary work for places afar was very much in evidence in Middletown's First Baptist Church. This mode of reform was in keeping with the Second Great Awakening philosophy of spreading the word, and if possible, converting the heathens of the world. One doesn't have to dwell next to the heathens, but one should convert them appears to be the idea. In 1832 the Middletown church with the aid of the female population were noted by the Connecticut Baptist Convention for generous contributions of "gold ornaments" to the missionary work.

The anti-slavery cause was another that the First Baptist Church picked up as early as 1835 and continued to work for until the Civil War. Women, too, picked up the anti-slavery movement for their own cause, saying "by the concentration of our efforts in this way, we not only advance the cause of emancipation of the slave, but...the fettered mind of woman is fast releasing itself from the thralldom in which long existing custom has it bound." The high membership of women in churches such as the First Baptist in Middletown, I believe, is the reason why such movements as the Temperance movement and the Anti-Slavery Movement gained such momentum.

As women saw the bondage of slavery inhibiting the human rights of others, they also saw themselves in similar bondage though not as severe. In doing this, women saw the
symmetry between their position and that of slaves. In fighting slavery and temperance women were attacking the double standard of morality for the slaves and themselves, and in their temperance crusades, they had power outside the home in their church work to help change a situation that in their homes they had less control over.

According to the minutes of the First Baptist Church, intemperance reigned as one of the more unmanageable evils the church had to handle. And women were attempting to handle it. This working to control morality was considered within the realm of a woman's duty. It was a wife's duty to keep her husband steady, sober, pious, but she must do so in a submissive manner. Thus, the role outside her home, her place in the church enabled her to have more control over her life. Furthermore, women were learning how to speak in public, how to face adversity outside the home, how to organize themselves into groups, and to force others to think of themselves as a unified force. Indeed, the cohesiveness is evident in the way church doctrine was shaped through the Second Great Awakening period in the Middletown minutes. There is always a male at the head of the church, but the women's voice is clear.

Once outside the isolation and influence of their home, whether it was church work, school-teaching, factory labor, or merchandise-related establishment work, women began taking charge of their lives. Until now, for many, the
role of mother occupied much of their time while waiting for motherhood took up another large portion of their existence. The fall of the birth rate in Middletown at this time can be seen in several ways, one in which women can be said to start taking control of their own lives. An increased awareness of themselves as individuals gave women a sense of community with other women needed to help define their roles. Also, in this community they gained approval for choosing a specific way of defining their roles. Many saw this increased awareness and made a conscious decision not to have as many children. I realize socio-historians traditionally argue this decline in birthrate quite differently, saying the lack of land kept sons from marrying as young, thereby reducing the number of offspring. I think that may have been a contributing factor, but feel we must not overlook the women's changing role at this time. Although the age for marrying may have been delayed for men, they still had a longer reproduction period than women, and in many cases they were not marrying their peers, but marrying younger women. Women still had as many opportunities to have numerous children even in later marriages, perhaps more, because more live births by this time were recorded. Instead the birth rate nearly halved nationwide. This also coincided with the introduction of better medical care for women.
De Tocqueville saw many of these changes of the 1830's, in addition to the rise in capitalism, as a "quest for community and emotional stability." The commercial revolution in agriculture, rapid territorial expansion, beginnings of urban growth, and evangelical revivalism all played a part in building a new order in this fast-moving country, he said. Revivalism was a means of gaining social control over the chaos of growth. It appears to be evident in Middletown at least. In the First Baptist Church, reform through revivalism did help to retain some semblance of social control in the chaos of growth here. It is clear in both the church accounts and the newspaper accounts of the day that the society was still willing to police itself through social pressure.

The Sentinel and Witness are prime exponents of the revivalist attitude of publicly lauding or condemning such behavior as the immediate society deems acceptable or unacceptable. Backsliding was a frequent topic of discussion in the paper. Also, temperance pledges and incidents of drunkenness were popular topics.

A July 2, 1834 issue deals with noting far away incidents of observing temperance. "Boston 'Trades Union' unanimous vote to dispense with the use of distilled and fermented liquors. (ed. This is a pleasant fact which shows to what extent the principles of temperance pervade the community.)"
Abstinence is lauded in another issue when "all the members of Union College, N.Y. have signed a pledge of entire abstinence from ardent spirits to be binding during the whole of their college course." Another warning in the same paper calls on the reader to be temperate because "The Boston Advocate says a man was found dead in the woods in Framingham on Wednesday with a bottle partly filled with rum by his side." Local efforts by churches were also noted by the paper as readers are invited to attend a "temperance address at Zion's Church before the Home Temperance Society next Sabbath."

While we can see the impact of the Second Great Awakening on Middletown through the church records, the newspapers, the Stetson Ryan History, and the tercentenary records, we can also see the distance that we have come from those times. The paradox I see of progress for women and for religious activity is that we still treat blacks and women as second class citizens. Despite the steps we have come, past emancipation, past legal rights to give blacks and women their vote, and past some forms of discrimination, the blacks are still assigned in many respects to a gallery and the women must still work in submissive ways to achieve their goals in the world. The Equal Rights Amendment has little chance of passing, yet its birth was the revivalist beginnings in the Second Great Awakening. Blacks are still feeling the pain of racism, yet they were supposedly invited in to share Christian life in 1834. A paradox in many ways.
I do not claim for the majority of people in Middletown during the 1830's that they were fully aware of the reasons for the social problems of their day or that any of them were of great social vision in shaping their religious activity. But I do believe that through the rising awareness created by the Second Great Awakening the seeds of feminism and freedom for blacks were germinating. They were productive, and perhaps, with the resurgence of this decade's awareness of human rights for all, will continue to grow. So, in the way that progress has taken a step sideways before a step forward, the Second Great Awakening helped in the eventual progress of women and blacks. Also, the treatment for intemperance, vagrancy, immorality, spendthriftness, and other "crimes" by the Middletown First Baptist Church paved the way for more tolerant social reforms of the nineteenth century. Thus, the Second Great Awakening is not without its redeeming value.
New industry in Middletown

1810..........................Middletown Manufacturing Co. (woolen factory)
1812..........................Watkinson's Factory (woolen)
1813..........................Starr's Sword Factory
1813..........................North's Pistol Factory
1815..........................Johnson's Rifle Factory
    Phoenix Mill (grinding, dye wools)
    snuff mill
    nail factory
    paper mill
    powder mill
1816..........................clothing mill
1817..........................ivory comb factory
    pewter factory
    block-tin-button factory
1832..........................W.B. Douglas Pump Works
FOOTNOTES

3. Ibid., p. 3.
5. Ibid., p. 4.
7. Ibid., p. 8-12.
10. Field, op. cit., p. 43.
16. Ibid., p. 12.
18. Ibid., p. 56.
20. Cott, op.cit., p.5.
24. First Baptist Church of Middletown records, entry March 2, 1832.
25. Ibid., entry February 4, 1833.
26. Ibid., entry January 21, 1833.
27. Cott, op.cit., p.146.
29. Cott, op.cit., p.35.
32. Church records, March 2, 1832.
33. Ibid., February 13, 1832.
34. Ibid., December 2, 1831.
37. Ibid., p.23.
38. Ibid., p.29.
40. Peretz, op.cit., p.32.
41. Cott, op.cit., p.196.
42. Hall, class notes, 11/24/80.
43. Degler, op.cit., p.252.
44. Johnson, op.cit., p.9.
45. Ibid., p.136.
46. Middletown Sentinel and Witness, July 2, 1834, p.2.
47. Ibid., p.2, January 22, 1834.
48. Ibid., p.3, January 22, 1834.
49. Ibid., p.2, February 11, 1835.
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