

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

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Opening the Gates

Revelation 21:25

You heard last week from our anniversary committee chair that two very brave members of our church recently climbed into the tower to inspect and later to make a minor repair to our 1840 bell. The bell was given to the church by Joseph Thayer who joined the church in 1835 just a few months after it was organized. Thayer moved to Springfield from Amherst, Massachusetts the previous year and ran a dry goods store and later purchased the Springfield Woolen Mills from another member of the church. He was elected to the office of elder a few months after joining the church. In those days, elders did not serve a three-year term as they do today. Thayer served for 42 years. It was a life term.

According to an early history of the church (D. S. Johnson), Thayer purchased the bell in Boston where he had business connections.¹ Those who have made the climb to see the bell have noticed an old wooden crate that rests near the bell. The origin and purpose of the crate is a mystery. It is not deep enough to have been the shipping crate for the bell itself. Intriguingly the letters EW have been carved into the wood. Some have wondered if the box might have belonged to a charter member named Erastus Wright.

But there is another possibility which hits closer to home for the donor of the bell. Joseph Thayer had a son who was attending Andover Seminary in Massachusetts when the family moved to Springfield. When he graduated in 1836 he came to Springfield, joined Second Presbyterian, and became the first member of this church to be ordained to the ministry. He served several congregations in Illinois including the Chatham Presbyterian Church. His name was Erastus W. Thayer, so the carved E.W. could well refer to him.

We know something about Erastus Thayer because James C. Conkling made a presentation at the 50th anniversary celebration in 1885 describing the young people of this congregation who entered full-time Christian service. There were nine young men who became ministers during the first 50 years of the church.

It is interesting that Conkling chose to give just as much space to describe the young women who became ministers' wives. Women could not serve as ministers in the 19th century, but many ministers' wives had significant ministries in their own right. There were also nine ministers' wives produced in the first fifty years. From the 18, there was one matched set where both minister and wife had been nurtured by Second Church.² The other ministry opportunity open to women was missionary work and there were two women from this church serving in that capacity. The example of Abiah Hale, wife of long-time Pastor Albert Hale, set a high bar for the role of mothers in nurturing their children at Second Presbyterian. Her son became a minister and the niece she helped raise served for 35 years as a missionary in China.

Conkling went to a lot of trouble to research and share this information because he recognized that for one congregation to nurture 20 young people for ministry leadership positions in a fifty-year period was quite impressive. That is one every two and a half years. The mothers of the congregation deserved much of the credit. But this was also an important issue for Conkling because he understood

that from the beginning this was a church that believed it was opening the gate to a different kind of future. They knew that this future would never come if their children did not share their vision.

The nature of the vision that inspired this church is described in the 21st chapter of the Book of Revelation. There John is carried away to the top of a high mountain. From this great height he has a vision of the holy city of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. This holy city represents for John the ultimate expression of the church's calling. It is the final goal toward which the Holy Spirit is leading the church.

The most significant feature that John notices is that the gates of this city are never closed. No one is excluded. No one bears the burden of racial or cultural prejudice. No social evil is beyond the healing power of this community. The church is called to give itself to open the gates of healing in a confused and frightened world.

It is this vision that Jesus has in mind in the 5th chapter of John's Gospel. There Jesus encounters a man who has been ill for 38 years and believes there is no hope for him. He has no friends and no family. He has been sitting beside a pool of healing for all those years and could not move quickly enough to compete for a place in the water. When Jesus asks him if he wants to be healed the man seems ambivalent. Healing would bring a scary kind of transformation to his life. It would require a deeper level of accountability to God. Opening the gate to a different kind of future might be nice but he doesn't know if he wants to pay the price. The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus ignores the excuses and orders the man to stand up, take his mat and walk into the future that God intends.

When Erastus W. Thayer arrived in Springfield fresh out of seminary he united with a church that was ready to open the gates to a different kind of future on this western frontier. Records show that nine months after joining the church he was part of an unusual small group. He was one of ten men from this tiny church who became charter members of the Illinois Anti-Slavery Society organized by Elijah Lovejoy. We don't know the profiles of all the members of this group.³ Some were already leaders in the church but there was at least one other young man (Isaac Bancroft, Jr.) who, like Erastus Thayer, would later become a minister.

As I studied these records it suddenly dawned on me that these young men were engaged in what we would call an internship. A month after joining the Anti-Slavery Society they helped face down an angry mob at the courthouse that was bent on preventing an abolitionist sermon from being preached in Springfield. A few months after that Lovejoy was murdered by another angry mob in Alton. But the commitment of the mentors and their interns to opening the gates of justice remained firm. They refused to sit on the sidelines when a new kind of future beckoned. The future ministers were learning lessons that no seminary could ever teach.

Endnotes

1. The bell was cast at the Holbrook Foundry in East Medwick, Massachusetts.
2. James C. Conkling, 50th Anniversary Presentation, from Clinton Conkling's *Historical Data*, Volume 1, pages 4-14.
3. Charter members of the Illinois Anti-Slavery Society from Second Presbyterian were Erastus Wright, E. B. Hawley, W. M. Cowgill, J. B. Watson, J. G. Rawson/Ransom, S. Conant, Z. Hallock, R. P. Abel, E. W. Thayer, and J. C. Bancroft. Three other Illinois Anti-Slavery Society charter members united with Second Presbyterian after joining the society. These include Isaac Bancroft, Jr., Oliver B. Culver, and Bishop Sealy.

