

Reverend Charles Beecher

By Christine Comiskey

Charles Beecher was a member of a famous family of activists. Born in Litchfield, CT, on October 1, 1815, he was the son of Congregational minister and abolitionist Lyman Beecher and his wife, Roxanna (Foote) Beecher. Among his famous siblings were Henry Ward Beecher and author Harriet Beecher Stowe. Charles married Sarah Coffin in 1840 and they had six children.

Charles began his career, not as a minister like so many others in his family, but as an organist and choir director, as he was quite passionate about music. He worked for a while as a church organist in Louisiana, where he witnessed the atrocities of slavery. Some of his stories of this time provided inspiration to his sister Harriet, who wrote her famous novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in 1852.

Charles later worked as an organist at the church of his brother, Henry Ward Beecher. The two brothers collaborated on a book that revolutionized Christian worship services around the world – the first hymnal to combine words and music in an easy-to-read format, known as the Plymouth Collection. During his time at Henry's church, Charles found his calling as a minister and was ordained at the age of 31.

In 1857, Charles Beecher was hired as Colleague Pastor to Reverend Isaac Braman at the First Congregational Church of Georgetown and became Senior Pastor after Reverend Braman's death in 1858. He and his family lived in a house on East Main Street, now the Brocklebank Museum.

Never one to shy away from controversy, he began making waves in town in 1860 when he urged his parishioners to go against President Buchanan's proclamation for a National Day of Fasting, as well as a Constitutional amendment, in response to hostilities between North and South. Beecher said the president was "in treacherous conspiracy with rebels to overthrow the government"

Most preaching back then was very Bible based, but Charles was a man ahead of his time, and some of his subjects were controversial. Some parishioners disapproved of his preaching, particularly his views on pre-existence of the human soul, the atonement, the state of souls after death and Divine Sorrow. In June of 1863 they petitioned for an Ecclesiastical Council to meet to hear their complaints.

Shortly before the trial began, Charles received word that his oldest son, Frederick, had been severely wounded at the Battle of Gettysburg and may not survive.

In July 1863, after two days of testimony, the Council found in favor of the petitioners. Beecher was charged with heresy and violation of covenant. The Council advised the church to dismiss Beecher immediately. The Church went against the council's recommendation 27 to 21, saying the council had overstepped its bounds.

In November of 1863, Beecher, feeling it was in the best interest of the church, submitted a letter of resignation. The Church refused to accept it.

In January of 1864, eighty-three members, those that were opposed to Beecher's preaching, asked to be dismissed to form a new church.

In June of 1867 Beecher submitted a letter of resignation (#2), stating a wish to go to Florida to work with the Freedmen. He stated his desire to remain a member of the church. The members again refused his resignation and instead granted him a leave of absence.

Plans of moving to Florida were put on hold after a devastating family tragedy in August of 1867 and another in September of 1868.



Reverend Charles Beecher

In 1869, he again submitted a letter of resignation (#3) and again was granted a leave of absence instead. He and Sarah moved to Florida.

After the hiring and resignations of two colleague pastors in five years (Charles was still considered the Senior Pastor), Beecher again submitted a letter of resignation (#4). The Church refused again. A year later, he tried again (#5), and in 1881, the church finally voted to accept his resignation.

Charles and Sarah moved back to Georgetown in their later years, where they lived in the Central Street home of their daughter, Mary Noyes, until their deaths. They are buried in Harmony Cemetery.

The Beecher Family Tragedies

Charles and Sarah had six children when they arrived in Georgetown in 1857—two sons, Frederick and Charles, and four daughters, Helen, Mary, Esther and Harriet. Helen had a disability and is described on the census as “idiotic.”

On a beautiful August day in 1867, five young cousins went sailing on Pentucket Pond. A mishap occurred, the boat capsized, and only two survived. Fifteen-year-old Esther Beecher and her thirteen-year-old sister Harriet, daughters of Charles and Sarah, drowned, as did their twenty-year-old cousin, Albert Beecher, son of Rev. Dr. Edward and Isabella Beecher.

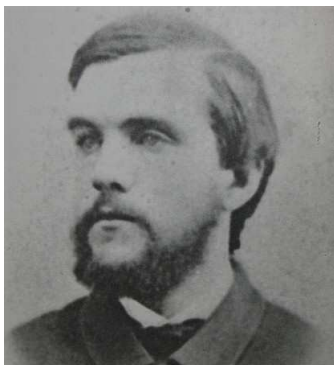
Charles and Sarah’s oldest child, Frederick, graduated from Bowdoin College in 1862. Like so many of his generation, instead of getting a job, he headed off to war. He enlisted in the 16th Maine in June. In December he was wounded at Fredericksburg (shot in the thigh) and returned home to recuperate.

In April of 1863, despite still being in considerable pain, he returned to the 16th, and in July was severely wounded as the 16th fought heroically and at great cost at Gettysburg. His mother brought him home, where for months (during the time of his father’s heresy trial) he barely clung to life, but eventually recovered, although he was left crippled, as an exploding shell had shattered his knee.

After the war ended, Frederick worked for a while for The Freedmen’s Bureau in North Carolina. In 1866 he was sent to the Fort Wallace Army Post in Kansas, where he helped with the construction of buildings at the Fort. Indian raids were often a problem, and on September 17, 1868, he was killed in the battle of Arrickaree Fork, Colorado Territory, later named the Battle of Beecher’s Island, after Frederick. He is buried there.



Sarah, Charles, Edward and Isabella Beecher at the grave of their children in Harmony Cemetery



Frederick Beecher