

Reverend Isaac Braman

By Christine Comiskey

The church had a difficult decision to make. In the eight years following the death of our first minister, Reverend James Chandler, our congregation relied on supply ministers and occasional candidates for the preaching of the gospel (64 different ministers in all!). During this time, a division arose within our church and other churches in this area between those who called themselves Calvinists and those who embraced the Hopkinsian beliefs. This made it very difficult for the members to agree on a candidate.

In January of 1797, the church voted to extend a call to twenty-six-year-old Isaac Braman to be our second settled minister, and he accepted. The vote was NOT unanimous. Reverend Braman explained the congregation's choice this way: *As to myself, I had not studied divinity systematically, and consequently, was not particularly versed in the isms which prevailed here, nor in any other theological ism of the day. My object was to exhibit the Gospel in its purity, without considering whom it might please or displease. The consequence was, they knew not on which side to place me, and some of the more prominent persons of both parties favored my settlement, and some of both were opposed.*

Isaac Braman was born in Norton, Massachusetts on July 5, 1770. He graduated with honors from Harvard College in 1794, where his sharp wit earned him the nickname "Razor." He was ordained at the Old South Church on June 7, 1797 and received an annual salary of \$300 plus ten cords of wood. Even Ordination Day wasn't without its controversy. Hundreds of people came from miles around to witness the important event. That morning, the church council met at the home of Benjamin Adams on Central Street. The council consisted of ministers and delegates from sixteen area churches. Their usual pre-ordination proceedings were interrupted when a group of men presented a petition to try to put a last-minute stop to Mr. Braman's ordination, claiming that they didn't agree with his preaching and that, among other things, he didn't preach like Reverend Chandler.

The Ordination was delayed by many hours as the council painstakingly addressed the concerns of the petitioners. Meanwhile, hundreds of people sat in the packed and hot church, waiting and waiting. The only ones who were happy about the delay were the vendors, who had come to sell their wares, including food and drink, on the church green.



Portrait of Rev. Isaac Braman, 1854

A few weeks after his ordination, Isaac returned to Norton to marry Hannah Palmer, a beautiful young woman with excellent manners and great executive ability. Shortly after her arrival, her fashionable hairstyle became the latest rage among the young ladies of the town.

The couple bought a forty-acre farm on Andover Street, where they raised their five children: Harriet, Milton, Isaac, James, and Adeline. Cuffee Dole, a former slave, also lived in the Braman household and assisted in the running of the farm.

Reverend Braman was a conservative, quiet man who disliked controversy. When people would try to draw him into a discussion which he preferred not to join, his reply would be, "The scriptures are silent upon those points." He was known for his punctuality as well as his brevity at weddings and funerals. He wrote two sermons each week, which he delivered in a clear

and rapid style, seldom looking up from his notes. “Father” Braman, as he was affectionately known, became dearly loved by the church and community. He regularly called on each of his parishioners. Food and drink was always offered, and after several visits, his gait would sometimes become unsteady, as the drink offered was sometimes alcoholic. Upon leaving, he would sometimes embrace the woman of the house. A kiss from their pastor was supposedly considered quite an honor, although there is no record of what their husbands—or his wife—thought about it. How times have changed! Can you image the reaction to that kind of behavior today?

During Reverend Braman’s long pastorate, the church witnessed a time of considerable growth and change. The Old South meeting house was enlarged twice to accommodate the growing congregation, our Revere and Sons bell was purchased in 1815, the Sunday School was established in 1817. The church began to support foreign missions. The list goes on and on.

It was a time of great change in the community, too, and of changing minds about certain previously accepted practices. In 1830, the Temperance Society was established, with Reverend Braman as its first president; alcohol became taboo. Itinerant preachers came through town, holding revivals and trying to draw people away from the established churches. An Anti-Slavery Society was established in town in 1837, with the more radical members, known as Come-outers, causing the church considerable grief with their disruption of services. Through it all, our minister and congregation remained strong.

Reverend Braman’s wife, Hannah, passed away in 1835 after a long illness at the age of sixty-two. Two years later, sixty-seven-year-old Isaac married Sarah Balch of Newburyport, a woman “of wealth and good breeding,” who was twenty years his junior. In 1841, Isaac’s recently widowed daughter, Harriet, moved back home, and together the two women helped care for the aging pastor. He later sold the family farm and moved to a house on Elm Street, close to the old church.

As Reverend Braman’s health began to deteriorate, the congregation decided that it was in their best interest to hire a colleague pastor. Although Isaac Braman was still considered the Senior Pastor, he no longer received a salary. His final year as a salaried minister was 1842, when he earned \$300 plus \$24 for wood. No increase in salary in 45 years! What do you suppose he thought when the new Junior Pastor was given an annual salary of \$600?

On June 17, 1847, the church held a grand celebration of the 50th anniversary of Reverend Braman’s ordination. The Senior Pastor delivered an interesting discourse recounting his long life, from his early memories of the Revolutionary War, to the many changes he had seen in our community over the years.

In September of 1858, Reverend Braman became ill with typhoid fever and his health continued to deteriorate until his death on December 26, 1858 at the age of 88. His final words were, “Remember that you have a soul to be saved or lost.”

Reverend Isaac Braman is buried in Georgetown’s Union Cemetery. His gravestone (pictured right) is in the shape of a pulpit with an open bible on top. Engraved on the bible is: *Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.*

