

An Interview with Mrs. Mary Brigham
Approaches Her One Hundredth Birthday on February 20, 1934
By Reverend George S. Brookes

(Editor's Note on the following story- When a photograph is donated to the Society, we try to get as much information as we can about the subject, any people pictured, the date, and the reason for the photograph. Some photos come well documented, while others have very minimal information. We are always pleased when we find a source that will provide additional insight into one of our photographs.

Recently the relative of a long-time member of Union Congregational Church gave the church historian several copies of Reverend George Brookes' self-published magazine, "The Union Church Loom". The following article appeared in the February 1934 issue. Accompanying this reprint of the article is a copy of the photograph of Mrs. Brigham which appeared in the Society's publication, Vernon and Rockville in the 20th Century, with the following caption. "In 1933, Mary Brigham of Brooklyn Street stands proudly in front of her new Chevrolet Master Eagle four-door sedan. Active for years in the community groups, Brigham always walked to meetings. At the age of 99, she decided it was time to buy a car (purchased for \$595) to help her stay in touch with friends. Her grandson offered to be her driver." In Rev. Brookes' interview, we come to know the woman in this memorable image.)



It was the first day of sunshine Rockville had enjoyed for two weeks, and not being able to guess how soon the next snowstorm would block traffic, I decided to accept the challenge of old Sol's smiling face, and make a few afternoon pastoral calls.

That minister is wise who rings up his parishioners to inform them of his intended visit. Sometimes it saves disappointment, and occasionally even embarrassment. I shall not soon forget an explosion, when unceremoniously I burst into the kitchen of a friend, only to find her washing her feet in the good old-fashioned way! Now, after knocking a door or ringing a bell, I never fail to ask, "Anybody home?"

According to the record in the sacred family Bible at No. 49 Brooklyn street of this city, Mrs. Mary Brigham was born in Lebanon, Conn. on February 20, 1834, and looking for a subject of interest for the February issue of the Loom, I concluded that in interview with this member of our recently organized Octogenarian Club would furnish splendid "copy". So, possessed with the same passion, a painter feels in painting, I boldly started out to discover for my own benefit, as well as for the profit of my readers, how one feels on the approach of the one-hundredth birthday.

To be sure, I made an appointment with the lady. No more casualties for me. I reached her over the telephone, through her private secretary, Miss Mildred who courteously informed me that Mrs. Brigham would be taking her usual afternoon tour in her new Chevalier sedan at 4 o'clock and that 2 p.m. would be a convenient time for my proposed call.

As I passed through the garden gate, I was conscious of her presence at the window. She was ready to receive her minister. How many of my calling she had greeted in the same familiar way through the years I do not know. It is certain that scores of preachers-Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal, Lutheran and Congregational- have met and congratulated her on the occasion of her birthdays. But this time it was the Union Congregational minister to see her. The door was locked, as usual, I don't know why. Everybody in Rockville is honest. Maybe, a locked door gives prestige. It certainly affords an opportunity for the display of dignified decorum and formal ceremony. In due time, however, I was ushered into the large reception room, where the lady was waiting.

What a wonderful woman! One hundred years old on the 20th day of the month! Yes, there are a few visible signs of age-slightly impaired hearing, eyesight which requires the aid of a magnifying glass for reading, and a little feebleness of step- but the great blessings of life are still hers: a clear mind which she can trust more than ninety years away: a very good appetite, which gives her the necessary daily reinforcement: a clear conscience, by whose gentle approval she sleeps the sleep of the just: and a simple philosophy of everyday living. When the question was asked of her: How do you account for continued health and strength through all these hundred years? She replied without a moment's hesitation. "Well, I never worry about things, and I am careful about my habits." And surely her long life is the reward for the faithful practices of those principles.

Mrs. Brigham was never regarded as a great leader among women. Indeed, she had no ambitions for leadership, but preferred to occupy a place among the rank and file. during the three generations through which she has lived. On the other hand, she has not been inactive. For a number of years she acted as president of the local branch of the W.C.T.U [Women's Christian Temperance Union-an anti-liquor organization]. The Burpee Woman's Relief Corps, an organization which has honored her time and again, recognizes her as its only living charter member. She took an active part in the discussion of current topics in a delightful class of women held at the Library Hall, under the leadership of Mrs. Howard Turner. She presided with grace over the meetings of the local Temperance Society, and for many years served assiduously as a deaconess of the Union Congregational Church. Through that office she ministered constantly of the needs of the sick and shut-in members by her pleasant visitations.

Among the many interesting events tucked away her memory are three she narrated to me with much enthusiasm that day. "I shall never forget the Cold Water

Army,” she said, “founded by Rev. Horace Winslow. It was composed of young people enlisted in the cause of temperance. I remember a great celebration on the Fourth of July. We went to the American Mill that year for dinner, and then marched through the town. We thought we were pretty important that day.”

She told me of a disastrous fire which destroyed the Second Congregational Church and the Skating Rink adjoining. It was the habit of the saints to pray that the wicked Skating Rink might be consumed by fire. Their prayers were finally answered, but Providence did not proceed in exactly the manner the saints desired, for the fire, starting in Palmer Dickinson’s store in the basement of the church, first destroyed the church and afterward demolished the Rink.

Mrs. Brigham claims that one of the greatest thrills of her life came with her visit of Gettysburg in September, 1891. That trip will remain a tender memory. I rather think, however, that a more important event occurred, when on November 27, 1879, she pledged her troth to George Needham Brigham, a captain of the famous 14th regiment of Connecticut Volunteers in the Civil War. The happy couple went to live in the house she still occupies, and it will be of interest of estate owners to know that the lot on which the house was built extended from High street to the Hockanum River, and was bought for the sum of \$200.

Mrs. Brigham attended the Methodist Church in her girlhood days, but transferred her allegiance to Congregationalism when she became a bride. She watched with interest the building of Union Congregational Church in 1889 and is still a loyal member. We are all so grateful that she has been permitted to live so long and so well.