

John Davis Williams French

John Davis Williams French was the perfect parishioner for the new little church in North Andover—fabulously rich, motivated, connected, and benevolent. He was joined by a cadre of similarly blessed and motivated parishioners.



Born into Boston wealth, he was raised on the family's prestigious estate in Roxbury with his brother and two sisters. His grandfather a Weld, his father married a Williams to complete the amalgamation of great family lines. While his older brother went into business, John was sent to Harvard for a more classical education. Graduating in 1863 he went to the front with the US Christian Commission during the Civil War and then joined his family's business – seemingly in Far East trade—with offices at 160 State Street. The family moved from Roxbury to the newly developed and fashionable urban center of Comm. Ave in the new Back Bay area. John was the Sr Warden and treasurer of Good Shepherd Church and a member of the Boston Common Council. A long time Episcopal family,

he was undoubtedly well connected with the church.

With an unlimited pallet of choices, John was drawn to North Andover and to his real passion—agriculture. It's unknown if his attraction was due to earlier visitations to North Andover for summering activities—as had been fashionable with Bostonians for decades—or some other connection, but in 1868 he purchased the old Samuel Johnson farm at the north end of Lake Cochichewick and constructed a model farm, styled appropriately Chochichewick Farm, and said to be one of the two most significant farming operations in the area. In that timeframe, North Andover had become famous for its model or gentleman farms and estates. John's primary focus was raising Ayershire cattle for milk production, but he was also a sheep breeder, and engaged in horticultural studies. His plantation of European Larch won prizes. A man who could afford to do whatever he want, he chose farming and styled himself as a farmer and editor, for the magazine and newsletter articles that he wrote. An engaged and generous man, his obituary lists membership in 9 agricultural groups, 12 religious organizations, and 15 civic and humanitarian groups. In his will he left 90% of his estate to those charities and associations. Of his family, only his older brother married, and the family left no heirs.

John's magnificent farm on Cochichewick was left in trust to his sister Cornelia, who was also a great benefactor of St Paul's. She maintained the farm until her death in 1915. The housing development French Farms marks the location today. John's magnificent farm and self-defined life style in North Andover in 1880 was ideal. Deeply

religious, all he needed was a church. The attempt by Grace Church to form a mission in North Andover was a perfect magnet for his attention.

Whether J D W French attended the original organizing meeting is in dispute in the records, but that French was a key initial player is very obvious. After about 6 months of successful operation, discussions began on the erection of a chapel. At a full meeting of the mission in mid May 1881 formal plans were begun for the subscriptions of funds to finance the chapel. The committee was loaded with the affluent and the prime workers. French was of course on the committee. When the committee met again two weeks later they reported that about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the funds had been subscribed—but that part was conditional. John French stated his conditions:

1. that it be a free church
2. how much land can be obtained
3. that it be an ornament to the town
4. sufficient money be pledged before it be started

Those points became guiding principles for the new St Paul's. Within another month, the funds would be subscribed and the building project begun. The church was finished and the first services held on Easter Day, April 9th, 1882.

During the years late '82 to late '85, concurrent with the years John French served as Sr Warden of Good Shepherd Boston, his name is missing from the leadership roles of St

Paul's. He returned in Sept 1885 and was elected to the Executive Committee. He served on that committee and later the Vestry, and was the Jr. or Sr. Warden for about 13 years, until his death. In 1888, French and Sutton were the leaders that spearheaded the purchase of the first rectory—the substantial Blanchard house still standing at 16 Elm Street. The records credit “the exertion and liberality of Gen Eben Sutton and Mr. J D W French” for the purchase. His crowning achievement was the gift of the new parish house—known today as the French Memorial, given by he and his sister Cornelia, in memory of their mother.



John D W French died unexpectedly on a trip to Atlantic City in 1900, concluding 20 years of service to St Paul's. While no

memorial window marks his service, the altar that for 130 years has served the parishioners of St Paul's was his gift to the parish and represents his remaining presence in the body of St Paul's.

