

## Architectural Description & Surviving Character-Defining Features

The New Durham Meeting House reflects three major eras of construction: 1768-1770 (building was framed and enclosed), 1791-92 (pews, pulpit, canopy and gallery added), and 1838-48 (building cut down to a single story and parts of interior finish). Its current appearance reflects that last era, although the frame dates from the original construction period, as does a small amount of interior finish.

The following narrative describes the building's current appearance and identifies surviving historic architectural features. All of the photographs were taken between October 2007 and October 2008.

### Site

The Meeting House sits on an elevated, granite ledge on the south side of Old Bay Road in the historic town center. It shares its six-acre parcel with the 1809 town pound and the town's first burial ground. The lot is wooded, and trees grow close to the building. Walking trails wind through the forest south of the building. An unpaved loop drive accesses the building from the road.



*Approach from the east*



*Approach from the west*



*Town pound southeast of the Meeting House*



## Exterior

The Meeting House is a 1 ½ story, timber-frame building, five bays wide and three bays deep. Constructed in 1768-1770 as a 2 ½ story structure, the current main story represents what was once the upper level: in 1838, the first floor was cut off, and the upper level lowered to the ground. The building rests on a foundation that is a mix of 19<sup>th</sup> century quarried granite block and fieldstone. (The granite block was added in 2006.) The roof is clad with asphalt shingles. (Sometime between 1979 and 2001, a brick chimney with a corbeled cap projected from the ridge, near the southwest gable end.)

Exterior materials and finishes reflects substantial renovation work undertaken between 1987 and 2000, at which time the clapboards, window sash and trim, and doors were replaced. Trim consists of flat corner and fascia boards, and window and door casings.



*Front (northeast) elevation. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> c. until the late 1980s, the front door had four panel. (at right: detail of a late 19<sup>th</sup> century photograph in the collection of New Hampshire Historical Society)*



*Southeast elevation*



*Rear (southwest) and southeast elevations*





*Detail of rear (southwest) elevation. Double doors date from late 1980s, installed to infill a barn-type opening created in 1912. After the building was cut down in 1838, there was a likely another window in the middle of this bay, placed similarly to that on the opposite gable end.*



*Front (northeast) and northwest elevations*



*Detail of replacement siding and trim*

**Windows:** Each of the eaves sides has four windows, leaving the middle bay blank. (In the late 18<sup>th</sup> c., an entry porch likely occupied this bay on the southeast side, and the pulpit window would have been in the lower part of the wall in the opposite bay explaining the two solid bays.) The front (northeast) gable end has a single window in each bay. The rear (southwest) gable end has only one window, located in the far left bay.

All of the window frames and sash date from the late 1980s. The sash are double hung, 12/12, with 7" x 9" glass. The opening for the window frame is slightly smaller than that which appears in the late 19<sup>th</sup> photographs. (The photographs also show the original windows had somewhat wider trim boards that abutted the eaves of the building.) A single, early, twelve-light sash survives in the building. Its muntin profile is more akin to a 1792 date than 1770, suggesting at least some window sash was replaced when the building underwent major work in 1792. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century photographs also depict 12/12 sash, it is likely the 1792 sash was retained



when the building was cut down. This one surviving sash would serve as a useful prototype should the existing windows ever need to be replaced again.



*At left: detail of a replacement window. At right: sole surviving historic sash, likely from the 1791-92 era*

**Doors:** Two exterior doors are found on the building, one at the front entry and one at the rear. The entry door was installed during the late 1980s renovation, replacing a four-panel door that, judging from historic photographs, likely dated from 1838, when the building was cut down to a single story. The opening measures 34.” The rear door, which also dates from the late 1980s, is double-leafed. A wood platform with a simple railing and two steps provides access. (Prior to the late 1980s, there was an exterior, vertical-board, rolling barn-type door here, set within an opening that occupied the entire bay and accessed by a shallow ramp. That door was added in 1912, likely replacing a window.)

## **Interior**

The Meeting House is entered from the middle of the northeast gable end into a small vestibule. On either side of the vestibule, there is a small room. Each of these three spaces was created in 1847 or 1848. The remainder of the interior is one open space. What must be remembered is that this entire space was the upper level of the building until 1838.



*Interior view looking south showing southeast and southwest (rear) walls. Interior posts are not original. Wide opening in far corner was created for a barn-type door in 1912.*



*Interior view looking west showing southwest (rear) and northwest walls. Interior post in foreground is not original.*





*Interior view looking north, showing doorways into small front rooms and vestibule (partitioned off in 1847 or 1848)*

*Framing:* All of the posts and the plates are visible from the ground level, and the roof system from the attic. The posts correspond to the building's four interior bents, although two inner posts remain, both on the fourth bent. Perimeter posts are covered with plain boards, nailed with cut nails, indicating the covers date from 1838 or 1848. They were probably added in part to finish off the building when it became a Town Hall, and in part to hide the holes for the wind braces, which were removed at that time to increase head room. In addition to the perimeter posts, there are two interior posts, both on the fourth bent. Neither is original.



*Interior view showing original (1769) posts and plate along eaves wall*

The roof frame, which dates from 1768-69, consists of hewn principal rafters, hewn purlins and vertical sheathing boards. Of six pairs of rafters, one is replaced and others have been repaired. Some of the sheathing boards are original and others have been replaced.

We noted a mistake or two in the process of actually “cutting” the frame and its framing components back in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The building was probably in the process of construction when these mistakes were discovered. When the framing system was “figured,” each gable-end of the truss was short one corresponding stud. Someone probably ran out to the woods, cut a tree about the size and length needed, and then placed this “new” stud in the correct mortise hole as the gable end framing was being erected. This new “last minute” stud would not be noticeable to the public in the unfinished attic.





*Roof framing system, showing original (1769) hewn rafters and purlins. The white patch shows an area that had gotten wet and may need to be repaired (or replaced with like material if it is not salvageable). The left vertical brace is one that was added to keep the collar tie from sagging. The sheathing boards seen in this photograph are replacements.*

**Walls:** Walls are covered with split/accordion lath, secured with cut nails and, nearly everywhere, plaster. In several areas, what is clearly 19<sup>th</sup> century writing, as well as perhaps some early 20<sup>th</sup> century writing, and drawings appear on the plaster.

An unpainted wainscot comprised of two horizontally positioned boards extends around the perimeter of the exterior walls, including in the small rooms at the northeast end. The boards are fastened with wrought iron nails, indicating they date from 1792, when the gallery was built. The angled cap on the wainscot, however, is nailed with cut nails, and probably dates from 1848, ten years after the building was cut down to a single story and at which time the walls were plastered (with the existing plaster). The wainscot on the interior walls of the two small rooms was installed in 1847 or 1848, when those rooms were partitioned off.



*Detail of 1792 wainscot, showing also the 1838-1847/48 wainscot cap and post covers.*



*18<sup>th</sup> c. butterfly wrought iron nail found in wainscot*





*Detail of split/accordion lath on walls*

*Ceiling:* The ceiling is split/accordion lath; none of the plaster remains.<sup>1</sup> Cut nails hold the lath in place to the ceiling joists, indicating the existing ceiling dates from either the 1838 or 1848 remodeling activity. (Oddly enough, there is no physical evidence of an earlier plaster ceiling and/or framing: the building has its original collar ties, and there is no sign of joist pockets in the ties. If the ceiling was above the ties, one would expect to see a plaster shadow line—again missing. Yet, a meeting house open to the roof frame would have been highly unusual.)

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<sup>1</sup> The missing plaster is due to structural failure. When the building was cut down in 1838, the town removed the wind braces, in order to acquire better head room. However, in so doing, they undermined the roof system. Years of snow load pressure on the rafters, coupled with the weight of the ceiling joists and lath, caused the ceiling to flex and ultimately break the plaster keys, making it disengage and fall.



*Detail of ceiling, showing split/accordion lath and joists*



*View of ceiling joists and lath, as seen from attic*



*Floor:* A new sub-floor was installed during the 1987-1990 renovation. When the building was cut down, it was probably lowered onto the original ground level flooring system. (Logistically, if they had removed the ground level floor system first, they would not have had a very good surface from which to operate. Also, since the second floor had a gallery, they would have had to patch in new framing and flooring in the open area.) In 1912, when the building became a barn, some of the flooring was likely replaced.

*Window & Door Casings:* Some historic window casings survive, all dating from the 1830-40 period. They are flat, unpainted boards. Similarly, the door casings leading into the three small spaces at the northeast end of the building, dating from the late 1840s, survive; they, too, are flat and unpainted.



*1830-40s door casings located at doorways to small front rooms and vestibule*

*Interior Doors:* As late as 1987, mid-19<sup>th</sup> century doors opened into the two small front rooms.



*Mid-19<sup>th</sup> c. doors that once led to the two front rooms and vestibule, photographed ca. 1987. New Durham Historical Collection*

*Additional Architectural Features:*

- **Chimney:** Part of the chimney that serviced the stoves remains at the southwest end of the building. (It originally extended above the ridgeline.) It is constructed of brick and plastered over. The chimney was in place by 1848 and possibly earlier.





*Remains of chimney near southwest (rear) wall*

- Stove openings: Two small, square openings are found in the northwest wall, indicating individual stoves provided heat to each room. The pipe from each space would have joined at some point before reaching the chimney. The openings probably date from 1848, when the rooms were created and a stove installed.



*Looking northeast toward the two small rooms at the front of the building. The square openings once held stove pipes connecting the stoves in the small rooms with the chimney on the southwest wall.*

- **Moderator's box & Speaker's platform:** In the middle of the main room, near the southwest wall, there is a wood moderator's box. It is roughly finished, made of two horizontal boards, an intermediary batten, and a baseboard along the front face, and vertical boards on the two sides. In front of it there appears to be the remnants of a speaker's platform. Both were probably built shortly after the building became the town hall in 1838.
- **Seating:** No historic seating survives, but rudimentary benches existed around at least parts of the wall perimeter as late as 1987. Photographic evidence precludes dating them from 1792, but they may have been installed during the 1838-1847/48 renovation period. Shadow lines of the benches remain visible.



*The benches that lined some of the outer walls are visible in this photograph, taken in 1987.*



*Moderator's box with remnants of speaker's platform*





*Interior view showing moderator's box at center. Interior posts are not original.*