

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the New Durham Meeting House—its history, its physical evolution, its significant architectural features and its existing condition—in order to guide future decisions for the building.

Now nearly 240 years old, the Meeting House is a beloved fixture of the local landscape. It reflects the untold hours of time and effort many citizens have invested in it, as for the most part, the building is stable and structurally sound. The roof and foundation are solid, and assuming the building remains only minimally used, the interior framing sag is unlikely to move any further. The town is fortunate in that it can take the necessary time to determine best future uses for the structure.

After sitting in poor condition for many years, in private ownership, the building was donated back to the town in 1979. The following year, it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Not everyone supported town ownership of the building, and in 1987 a warrant article asked that it be burned. Fortunately, it did not pass. Instead, the town appointed two committees, both overseen by the Town Historian, to oversee construction projects. The first, undertaken in the late 1980s by a local volunteer group, entailed replacing the roof, siding, exterior trim, window frames and sash, and doors. The second project involved the grounds and included developing the walking trail and restoring the pound.

Another valuable advocate for the Meeting House has been the New Durham Historical Society. Since its establishment in 1991, it has championed the building's restoration, in part by raising funds and applying for grants and keeping the public aware of the building's importance. The Society has also held numerous events at, or on behalf of, the Meeting House. In 2001, it commissioned an architectural and collections assessment for the building.

In late 2006, the town reinforced its long-term commitment to the Meeting House by creating the Meetinghouse Restoration Committee composed of “committed individuals with areas of expertise in restoration, building elements, site preservation, grant writing, research, planning and communication, and cultural event organization.” The Committee's charges include creating a strategic plan for the building, and developing and implementing both a community use plan and a long term maintenance plan.

One of the Committee's first undertakings was to commission this report, funded *in part by the Land and Community Heritage Investment Program (LCHIP) and in part by the Town of New Durham*. It provides a wide range of data to assist the town plan for the future of the Meeting House. The chapter on its history helps understand how and why the building has physically changed. The chapter on its architecture, which is accompanied by photographs and measured drawings, describes its existing appearance and identifies the specific extant character-defining features from each construction era. The survey of existing conditions specifies what work items need to be addressed, while the section on preservation guidelines outlines the recommended treatment approach to achieve them. The report concludes with discussing how to mesh local ideas for future uses with the needed work.

It would be unrealistic to think that all of the needed work could be accomplished immediately, or that uses for the building will never change. But if this report is used similarly to a road map, it will ensure that all future decisions are informed decisions—ultimately the best decisions for the Meeting House.

History and Evolution of the Meeting House

Introduction

The New Durham Meeting House epitomizes the town's first commitment to a public structure. It is also significant as the site of the first services that the Free Will Baptist Church, which was formed in New Durham, ever held in a church building; the importance of this event was recognized by the town as early as the 1880s.

Located on a slight rise above Old Bay Road in what was once the village of New Durham Corners, the Meeting House was constructed in 1770, with later substantial alterations occurring in 1792 and 1838. Its appearance today largely reflects its conversion into a town hall in 1838. At that time, it was reduced from a two-story structure to a single story. If the main entrance was originally on the southeast eaves side—which was typical for 18th c. meeting house design—it was relocated to the northeast gable front, to face the road, at this time as well.

Brief History of New Durham Corners

A Masonian grant first established the bounds of New Durham in 1749. New Durham was a frontier town near the southeast edge of Lake Winnepesaukee, where the efforts to settle and improve the land were under threat by the Native American population in the region, especially during the French and Indian Wars. The first attempts to settle New Durham in the 1750s failed, because the inhabitants did not fulfill the requirements of the charter. It was not until the conclusion of the war that the requirements were met. The settlers petitioned for it and received the charter in 1762, allowing them to govern themselves. The name New Durham reflected that many of the proprietors came from Durham, New Hampshire. By 1775, the town's population was up to 268.¹

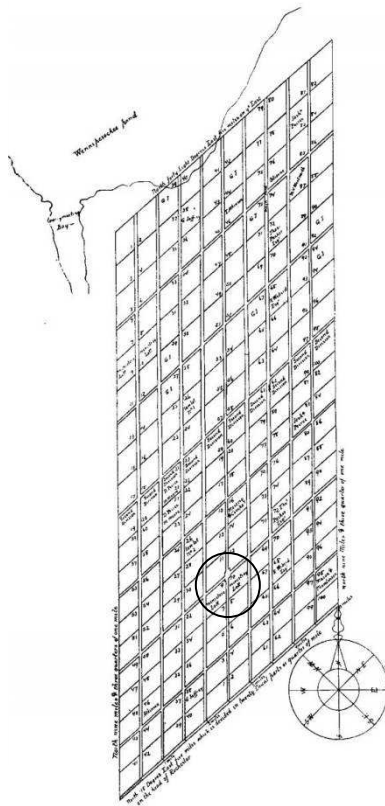
A plan for settlement was drawn up in 1750. The plan was a typical Masonian plan, delineated into near-equally-sized geometric lots separated by ranges, all superimposed on the landscape without account of the topography. The plan divided the town in two, creating two divisions of 100 lots each. The purchaser of lot #1 in the first division also gained lot #1 in the second.

It was common practice in early New England that a town grant stipulate that the purchasers or settlers build a meetinghouse, carve out a minister's lot, and convince a set number of settlers to make

¹ *New Hampshire Provincial and State Papers*, vol. 28; vol. 7: 756; Catherine E. Orlowicz interview.

the new town their home by building a house and improving the land. New Durham's grant was no exception. It required that the town have a Meeting House built "for the Public Worship of God," within six years after the end of the French and Indian War, which came in 1763.²

In the center of the first (southern) division were the Minister's Lot (#9) and the Ministry Lot (#10). From Lot #10, the town was to carve out six acres on which to site a meeting house and school, as well as a training field and a burial ground.³ The town also later located an animal pound there.



Plan of New Durham, 1750

from New Hampshire Provincial and State Papers, vol. 28, p. 102

With these structures, New Durham Corners became the center of civic life for the town in the 18th and early 19th centuries. So named because of the intersection of Main Country Road with Cross Center Road, the Corners also had taverns, small shops, residences and farms.⁴ The role of the Meeting House was twofold

² *New Hampshire Provincial and State Papers*, vol. 28: 100.

³ See *New Hampshire Provincial and State Papers*, vol. 28: 102; *Masonian Plans*, Book 4: 84. *Masonian Plans*, Book 4: 84.

⁴ Maps of 1806, 1856 and 1892.

as the center of religious and civic life. Weddings, funerals, Sunday services, town meetings, court trials and community gatherings were held there, as in meetinghouses throughout the state.⁵



Map of New Durham, 1806, detail showing the Meeting House at center.
Collection of the New Hampshire State Archives

The Meeting House Years: Initial Construction

Warrant articles for a June 14, 1768 town meeting in New Durham included a “vote relative to building a Meeting house the present year for the Public Worship of God in said town” and another to “choose a committee to build the same.” These articles, addressed at a continuation meeting on July 11, 1768, passed as the town “voted that the Meeting house in New Durham shall be built of the following Dimensions Viz. 42 feet long & 35 feet wide & 20 foot Post with Proportionable timber fir for such a building.” A month later, the town voted “to let out the meeting house in New Durham to the lowest bidder To build. [And also] Voted that each whole right shall pay 20/ Lawfull money towards building the meeting house and other Incidental charges not taxed heretofore.” The committee was still collecting that tax money in 1769, when Major Thomas Tash and Ensign Jn’o. B. Hanson were charged to “receive the Meeting House and give the Dimensions of the Window Frames.” There were to be “but twenty five Window Frames in the aforesaid Meeting House and that the posts shall be but 18 feet between joints.”⁶

A town-wide inventory in January 1770 notes, “No. 9 Thar is the Meeting House Inclosed shingled & under floor Laid under pined & window frames in and no more finished towards it.” A similar inventory from April 1770 listed “a Meeting House” at Lot No 10

These records indicate that the Meeting House was erected and enclosed, with windows frames installed, by early 1770. Within another two years, and possibly earlier, the town was using the building for meetings; by then, windows and sash would have been in place. Both documentary and physical evidence suggest that the interior of the building, including permanent seating, remained essentially unfinished for another twenty years.

The main entrance to the building most likely was on the southeast wall—the longer eaves side—following traditional 18th c. meeting house design. This makes even more sense when one realizes that when the building was erected, there was a road that ran in front of the southeast elevation.⁸

⁵ Benes and Zimmerman, 1979: 2.

⁶ “Chapter in the History of New Durham,” 1907: 367-371. This article in the *Genealogical Register* is a transcript “of a document...in the unindexed Court files at Dover, NH...the original book of the proprietors of New Durham, from which these records were copied...is now missing” [359].

on six improved acres. Lot #9 still lacked any buildings, suggesting that a minister's house was not yet built. By then, forty-one houses had been elsewhere built in town. By March of 1772, New Durham's public meetings were being held in the Meeting House.⁷

Finishing the Meeting House: Pews, Pulpit and Porch

In 1791, the town finished the interior of the building after passing warrant articles for building pews, a porch and a pulpit, and accepting and altering the plan of the interior spaces. In March of that year, the town "voted to choose a committee to mark and number the pews in the Meeting house and draft a plan thereof and make return at next adjournment of this meeting."⁹ In April, the plan was received and a special meeting was set to auction the pews in June. Pews went to the highest bidders, who would own pew privileges only. This was a common practice and the decision of who sat where was both a political and financial one.¹⁰

A copy of this plan is not known to have survived.

The new pew owners were responsible for having the pews constructed within eighteen months or their privilege was forfeited. Sums were to be paid in "merchantable white pine Boards or white oak lumber at Dover Landing at the current Market price at or on the first day of April next." The pews were to be built "as nearly alike as the circumstances of each pew will allow and in the usual form of pews in Meetinghouses in general."¹¹ A year later, the town included in its agenda for town meeting, considering "what order the town will take in regards to the privileges of the pews in the galleries," and "what steps the town will take for the fixing the common seats in the galleries." The pew plan was accepted at that June meeting.¹²

In New Durham, it appears that each pew owner was responsible for constructing his own pew, rather than just paying the town a set sum to have it built.

Given the era, the main floor pews would most likely have been open-top box pews (such as those that are still extant in the Danville Meeting House), so some basic guidelines and dimensions would have been critical to ensure they all fit together.

These town records indicate that the gallery seating was of two types: pews and "common seats," which may have been benches. It further appears that the town took responsibility for installing the latter, rather than selling them off.

⁸ Catherine E. Orlowicz interview.

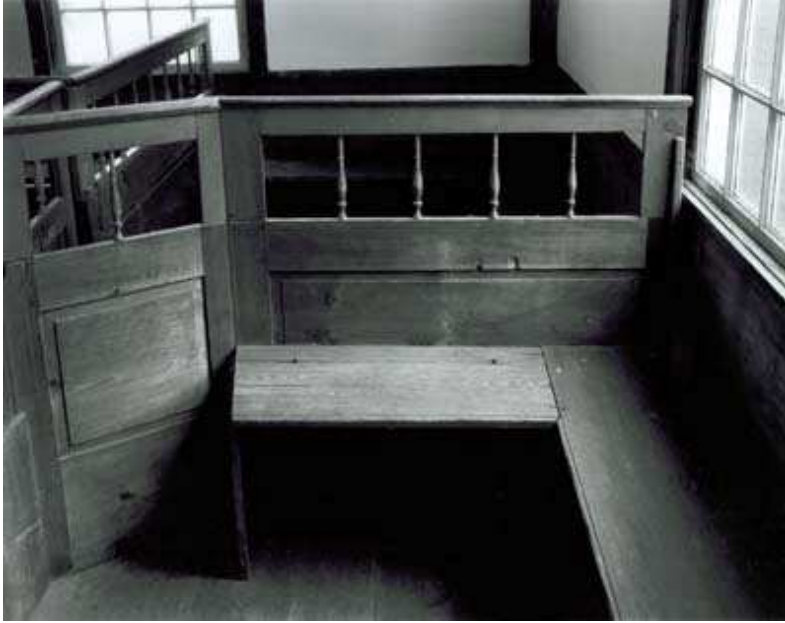
⁷ *New Hampshire Provincial and State Papers*, vol. 28: 105 and 107.

⁹ *New Durham Town Records*: March 28, 1791.

¹⁰ Benes and Zimmerman, 1979: 55-56.

¹¹ *New Durham Town Records*: June 6, 1791; Wiley: 60.

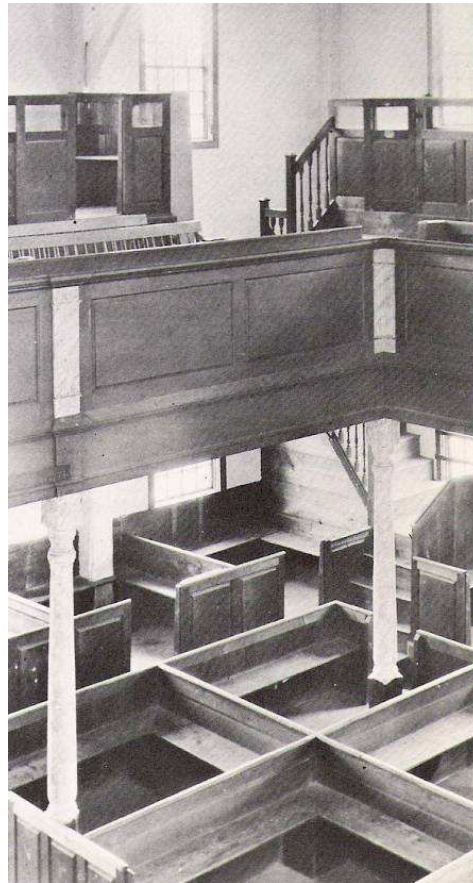
¹² *New Durham Town Records*: May 19, 1792, June 7, 1792, June 18, 1792.



Fremont Meeting House, NH, constructed 1800

The design of these box pews, with their fairly slender spindles, are likely similar to those placed in the New Durham Meeting House in 1791-92.

Photograph by Paul Wainwright



***Sandown Meeting House, NH,
erected 1774***

This view shows a typical late 18th c. arrangement of box pews on the main floor. Note that the gallery is fitted out with both box pews and benches, as was likely the case at New Durham. *From Sinnott, Meetinghouse and Church in Early New England (1963), p.57*



Rocky Hill Meeting House, Amesbury, MA, erected 1785

The bench shown in this photograph may well resemble those that were placed in the New Durham Meeting House gallery. Note the similarity of the wainscot to that in the New Durham building.

Photograph by Paul Wainwright

1792 was a year of major construction activity in the Meeting House. That the Meeting House was crowded is evident from a vote to close the two doors at the ends of the building in order to fit additional pews in.

At one of the June meetings, the town also voted “to let out the building of the porch to the Meeting house to the lowest bidder and to be of the following dimensions namely it shall be 10 feet wide by the Meeting house and 12 feet deep and the Ridge pole to be even in height to the eaves of the Meeting house and it is to be finished and completed in the following manner, to wit, there shall be two doors below and one window in the front and a pair of Stairs of three flights and a door to enter into the gallery-and to be shingled and clapboarded and underpinned in a suitable manner.”

The 1806 map of New Durham depicts the Meeting House with a door on a gable end, as well as an eaves side, thus following traditional meeting house design. Both this reference of the 1792 town meeting and the drawing affirm that there was likely a door on the other gable end from the outset.

Porches—actually enclosures—were a common feature of meeting houses in the late 18th century. Their primary function was to house the stairwells to the gallery. By placing them on the exterior of the building, it freed up interior space for additional pews. Meeting

George Davis won the bid to build the porch for 39½ dollars.¹³

Less than two weeks later, the town resolved that “the pulpit and canopy be built according to that in Mr. Powers Meeting house in Gilmantown”¹⁴ and that the building of the pulpit, canopy, window, Deacon’s seat and stairs be completed within five months by Samuel Runnels and Josiah Edgerly for 98 dollars.¹⁵

houses had either single-porch stairwells, such as New Durham appears to have had, or twin porches, which were placed on each gable end. The single-porch form was common in eastern and coastal areas of New Hampshire and Maine, but it also appeared somewhat further inland, including in areas south of Lake Winnepesaukee. For instance, the town of Middleton voted for a single-stairwell porch in 1789. And Wolfeboro voted to imitate Middleton in 1792, the same year that New Durham voted to construct one.¹⁷

The “two doors below” likely were two-leaf doors within a single opening; the window would have been above them. The term “flights” actually refers to “runs” on a flight, so the stairs would have had three turns as they extended from the first to the second story.

The depiction of the meeting house on the 1806 map (above) without a porch does not necessarily mean it lacked one. All of the buildings on the map are drawn stylistically, rather than realistically. In addition, adding the porch would have meant a three-dimensional representation—far harder to draw. Similarly, the chimney is probably artistic license, as the building probably lacked one as early as 1806.

¹³ *New Durham Town Records*: June 7, 1792. The shutting of the end doors was not passed at the following meeting on June 18th.

¹⁴ The above-referenced Gilmanton structure was a Baptist meetinghouse built in 1774, but taken down in 1842 and replaced with a new church building. (Garvin, 2002).

¹⁵ *New Durham Town Records*: June 18, 1792.

¹⁷ Benes, 1979: 50. For more information on meetinghouse porches, see Benes, 1979; Sinnott, 1963; and Speare, 1938.

Need for additional space prompted yet more changes in the fall of 1792, when the town voted to remove the singing seats into the galleries and reduce some of the alleys between the pews from three feet to two and a half. The broad alley and the door alleys were to remain unchanged. Finally, after the completion of the pews came the building of “the parsonage pew and long seats on the floor four in number and the placing of the pillars.” Josiah Edgerly also received this commission, for 13½ dollars.¹⁶

Singing seats were elevated platforms. That New Durham voted to remove them “into the galleries” suggests they were relocated, rather than taken out altogether.

The term “alley” is interchangeable with “aisle.”

“Pillars” would be the columns that supported the outer edges of the galleries. In the New Durham Meeting House, if the gallery was on three sides, one column would have been placed at each interior bent, and two additional ones along the second and fifth bents, for a total of six to eight. However, since the building was later dropped down to a single story, there is no surviving physical evidence of their placement.

This finish work coincided with a revival in New Durham’s Freewill Baptist congregation, which was then using the building. In the 1780s, attendance at Freewill Baptist church services had been dwindling, and there was a serious threat of the sect disbanding altogether. In 1791, a new covenant was made. This scheme for revival apparently worked, and the congregation grew again, prompting a Freewill Baptist revival throughout New Hampshire and Maine. The restored religious interest may have influenced the renewed interest in finishing the New Durham Meeting House.¹⁸

Town records from 1805, in mentioning the need for further repairs to the meeting house, make specific reference to Josiah Edgerly’s finishing the “two porches” according to the contract with the town.¹⁹

This 1805 reference is the first—and only—time two porches are mentioned. Given the building’s comparatively diminutive dimensions, a single porch would be more probable. Photographs of the work undertaken in the 1980s indicate the front gable end never had a porch (and thus,

¹⁶ *New Durham Town Records*: September 22, 1792.

¹⁸ Baxter: 28-29; Buzzell: 132-136.

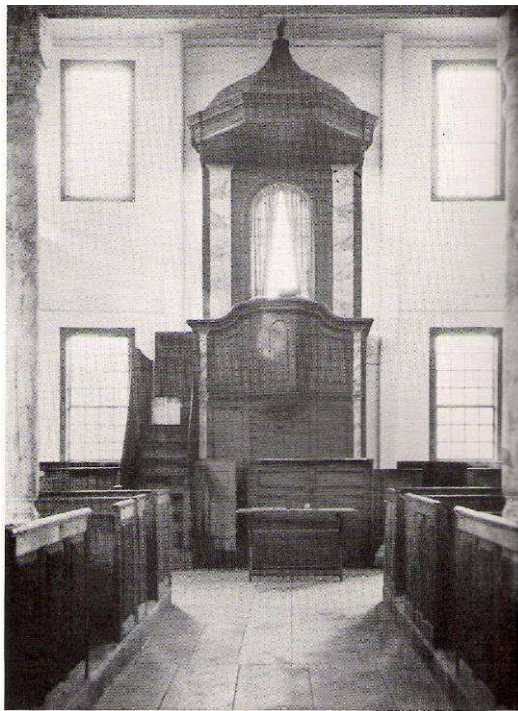
¹⁹ *New Durham Town Records, 1803-1821*: 12, 13, 31, and 37. Edgerly was a local man who lived on the Bay Road and made a living as a joiner. He also held town positions and a tavern license (Jennings, 1962: 84).



Alna, ME, Meeting House, built 1789

This porch is similar to what could have adorned the New Durham Meeting House. *Photograph by Paul Wainwright*

likely, nor did the rear gable end). If the clapboards along the southeast and southwest eaves wall are ever removed, the question of where—and how many—porches the building had may well be resolved. In the meantime, the only clue is when the lower board of the wainscot was pried off during the course of this study, two mortises in the girt were revealed. Whether they were holes for an entry porch frame, or whether the girt is even original will remain a question until an opportunity arises for a more thorough physical investigation.



Sandown Meeting House, NH, erected 1774

The pulpit, canopy, pulpit window, stairs leading to the pulpit, and Deacon's seat below the pulpit are on the eaves side of the building, opposite the main entrance, the typical placement in late 18th c. meeting houses.

From Speare Colonial Meeting-houses of New Hampshire (1938), p.12

A pulpit and canopy (also called a sounding board) were the most dominant interior features of a meeting house. They were often painted with color and exhibited architectural details, fabric drapery and cushions. The pulpit was generally located at the center of the eaves wall opposite the entrance. The pulpit window, which often had an arched upper sash, was immediately above the pulpit, midway between the first and second stories.

In the New Durham Meeting House, the most appropriate location would have been on the northwest eaves wall, as the entrance was on the southeast side, overlooking the pond. The girt in the middle bay of that wall is also thicker, suggesting it may be a replacement, added when the pulpit window would have been removed in 1838, when the building was converted to a town hall.

By 1803, the exterior of the building needed repair. The town voted “to strip all of the old and put on new good clapboard

There is no record as to whether any of this work was ever completed.

shingles cornerboards weatherboards window crowns & likewise to can the plates and put a cornice under the eaves and make a good hassom door with good hatcan over it.” George Davis again received the commission to work on the building, this phase at \$130. In 1805, as already mentioned above, Josiah Edgerly was called in to finish the “two porches.”

As already mentioned, whether New Durham received one or two porches cannot be determined until the siding is removed.

The Meeting House lot also contained the Town Pound, where the town corralled stray animals until owners could be summoned. Proposals for a pound first appear in town records in the 1790s. After several postponements, it appears the pound was finally completed in 1809 by John Taylor. The specifications written in 1808 indicate that the pound was to be 30’ square, enclosed by a stone wall 6’ thick at the bottom, 2’ thick at the top and 8’ high, “including a wooden leap one foot square,” with a sufficient gate, lock and key. It was to be at the “southerly part of the lot in front of the Meeting house.”²⁰

This reference to the location of the pound in relation to the Meeting House makes it all the more likely that the original entrance was on the southeast eaves side, thus placing the pulpit on the opposite (northwest) wall.

Early Ministers & the Freewill Baptists

New Durham’s first minister was Nathaniel Porter, a Congregationalist, who accepted the post in August of 1773. In 1777, Rev. Porter resigned, after unreconciled disputes with the town over his salary. Two years later, the town brought Benjamin Randall to preach in the Meeting house. Randall was born in 1749 in Newcastle, NH. After coming to New Durham, he became a nationally significant religious leader in the Freewill Baptist movement. He came to serve New Durham by special invitation from residents who had heard him speak as an itinerant minister in nearby towns. He moved his family permanently to New Durham in 1778 and remained there until his death in 1808. Randall had agreed to settle in New Durham with the proviso that he not be confined to any one church or community, but rather be “every person’s minister.” True to his word, Randall traveled frequently and extensively—by his own accounts, he traversed 2,593 miles in 1807 alone—to minister to congregations around New Hampshire and Maine. He helped to establish churches in many towns and baptized converts throughout the area.²¹

As an adult, Randall joined first the Congregational church and then the Baptist. At about the time he came to New Durham, he split from the Baptist church to become an Evangelist, later called a Freewill Baptist. In 1780, near his home on New Durham Ridge, Randall and a handful of converts organized the first enduring Freewill Baptist congregation in the country. Their first meetings

²⁰ New Durham Town Records, 1803-1821.

²¹ Buzzell, 1827: footnote 25.

were in the New Durham Meeting House and for some forty years, they continued to meet here sporadically. The history of the Freewill Baptist movement has focused on New Durham as the cradle of the denomination. For that reason, annual or quarterly gatherings have taken place in the town since 1792.²²

Other ministers preached in the Meeting House concurrent with Randall. This was not uncommon, as a meeting house was to serve the townspeople, who often represented differing denominations.²³

The “Town House”

Two events, which both coincidentally occurred in 1819, dramatically impacted the future course of the Meeting House. That year, the New Hampshire legislature passed the Toleration Act, which prohibited taxation to support ministers, effectively separating religious activity from civic. Many of the state’s meeting houses that were built for such dual purposes became either churches for the primary denomination in town or “town houses.” 1819 also marked the year the Freewill Baptists finished building a church on New Durham Ridge, near where their founder had lived and where the sect had first been organized some forty years earlier.

Neither event had an immediate impact on the Meeting House, as it seems Freewill Baptist services took place at both locations for a period; other religious organizations likely continued to use the Meeting House for services, as well as weddings and funerals; and the town did not set about converting the building into a town house for some time. As late as the 1850s, the resident Freewill Baptist minister, Rev. David L. Edgerly, noted several times in his diary that he preached “at New Durham Corner,” as well as in the Freewill Baptist Church at New Durham Ridge, where he lived.²⁴

Many New Hampshire meeting houses retained dual civic and religious uses for a number of years after passage of the Toleration Act. For example, Washington’s meeting house remained in town ownership after 1819, but the Congregational Church continued to use it for another twenty years before it built its own church. It was not until then that the pulpit was removed from the meeting house. Likewise, the meeting house in Pelham served the dual purposes for twenty-three years, long after the 1819 mandate.

By 1831, New Durham residents began discussing how to “repair

²² There are many biographical sketches of Elder Randall, including Baxter, 1957: 1-64; Fullonton, 1878; Scales, 1914: 444-445; *Souvenir of the Centennial*, 1892: 40-42; and Wiley, 1915. The earliest source is John Buzzell’s 1827 *The Life of Elder Benjamin Randall*; Buzzell was a contemporary and a convert of Randall’s. The records of the Freewill Baptist Church begin with Randall’s ministry in New Durham starting in 1780 and document the church’s meetings, services, correspondence and other incidental notes. The records, on microfilm at the NH State Library and difficult to read, continue long after Randall’s death. Of note, there are several pages in the film of “loose papers” that would be helpful to any research on the building of the Freewill Baptist Church on New Durham Ridge in 1818-1819.

²³ Buzzell (1827), e.g., mentions another minister in New Durham (p. 92).

²⁴ Edgerly’s diaries from 1848-1891 show a number of meetings and services at several locations in the town and neighboring area. They also list locations such as schoolhouses, the “Academy,” the “meetinghouse” (perhaps the one at New Durham Corners). This propensity to minister in several towns and locations is in the tradition set by Benjamin Randall, who traveled often, not binding himself to a single congregation. (Baxter: 21-31; Buzzell; Fullonton; Wiley; et al).

the Old Meeting house so as to answer to the purpose of a town house.” Between 1831 and 1838, warrants appeared annually on the town agenda to repair the “Old Meeting house” and “make it “tenantable to do their town business in.” However, each year, they were either vetoed or just passed over. One exception occurred in 1835, when the town voted not to renovate the “Old Meeting house” into a “Town House,” but instead “the Inhabitants of the town of New Durham do relinquish all their right to the Old Meeting house in said town to the owners of the Pews in said Town.” The original article clarifies the purpose of the act: “so that the Pew holders may repair said house for public worship.”

The conversation of abandoning the Meeting House altogether continued in 1836, when the town began to consider constructing a new Town House elsewhere in town. The first warrants came in March that year: “to see if the town will vote to sell the lot on which the Old Meeting house stands or any part of it” and “to see if the town will vote to build a Town House.” While these articles were passed over at the meeting, the town instead voted that the selectmen should appoint a committee to “draft a suitable plan for a town house and make an estimate of the probable expense of building the same and also to locate a spot to build said house upon.” This plan was accepted at the November meeting, but any further discussion of a town house was passed over later that meeting and again at the March 1837 meeting.²⁵

In the end, the measure to start anew was cast aside in favor of substantially remodeling the Meeting House to suit modern needs, and perhaps aesthetics. In 1838, the vote passed “that the Old Meeting house shall be cut down to a one-story house and that the Selectmen shall superintend the doing of the same and that they shall cause said house to be repaired in a manner sufficient and comfortable to hold the annual town meeting in next March.” The first floor of the Meeting House was removed and the upper story was lowered and set upon the foundation, thus preserving the original roof system. The entrance was moved from the southeast eaves side to the northeast gable end. The pulpit and canopy were likely dismantled at this time in favor of the existing moderator’s box and speaker’s platform set into the southwest end of the building opposite the new entrance.²⁷

The town never did turn the building over to the pew owners.

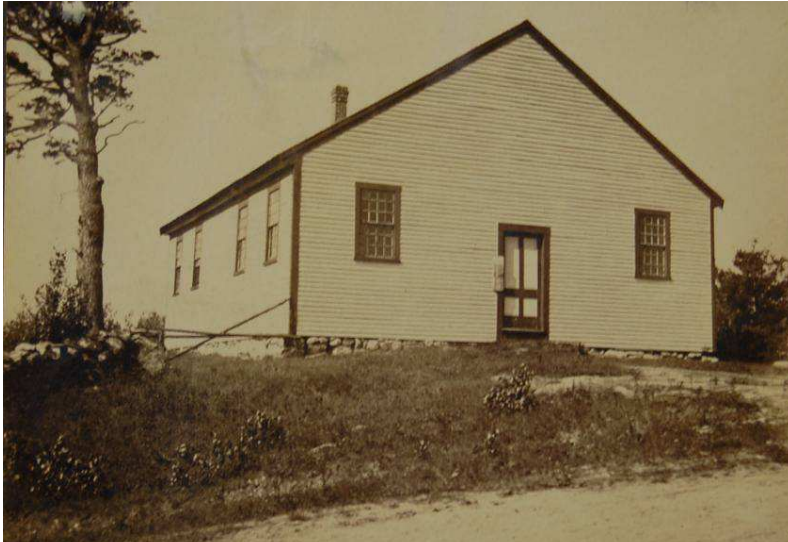
This mention of repairing the building for public worship further suggests that there were other denominations in town using the Meeting House at this time. For example, in 1836, there were two “regular organized [religious] societies” in town—the Freewill Baptists and the Quakers.²⁶

It remains unknown whether the building was cut right above the first floor and again immediately above the gallery floor level, allowing it to drop onto—and thus reuse—the 1770s floor. Or it may have been cut right below the gallery level, thus reusing the gallery floor and infilling what had been the open area. An ideal time to have determined this would have been when the subflooring and joists were replaced in the late 1980s.

²⁵ New Durham Town Records, 1827-1838.

²⁶ Jennings (1962) notes that there was a Quaker meeting house in 1856 on New Durham Ridge and may have been one elsewhere in New Durham in 1833 (p. 54). The Congregational Church was established in New Durham prior to Benjamin Randall’s tenure, but it is unknown how long that church continued (Stewart: 44). Lawrence (1866) notes three ministers currently preaching in New Durham, but mentions only the Freewill Baptist denomination (p. 338).

²⁷ New Durham Town Records, 1827-1838.



Northeast (front) and southeast elevations, showing the building much as it would have appeared after it was reduced to a single story in 1838.

Photographed ca. 1900.

New Durham Historical Collection

Such drastic remodeling of meeting houses was not uncommon in New Hampshire in the 1820s-1850s. A surprising number of two-story buildings were cut down to single-story structures once they no longer served dual purposes and became either a town house or a church. The alteration resulted in a building more appropriately sized for the town's needs and cut expenses for upkeep and heating. In addition to the practical reasons for such a change, aesthetic motivations were behind some of the remodeling, as by the mid-19th century, the Greek Revival style, had taken hold. Greek Revival buildings usually had the main entrance in the gable side of the building, rather than the eaves side.

New Durham's meeting house was one of many that had its entrance relocated thus. Some towns took the remodeling even further by physically rotating the building to ensure the gable end was prominently oriented toward the road.

Other New Hampshire meeting houses that were reduced from two to one-story buildings include those in Belmont, Groton, Milton, Plainfield (Meriden) and Thornton; some of these buildings were also rotated.

After ca. 1841, records and maps began to call the Meeting House the "Town House," reflecting the change in its structure and function. In 1841 and again in 1844, warrant articles appear to "see if the town will vote to finish a small room in the town house for the use of the selectmen to assess taxes in." Both times, the article was passed over. At town meeting in July 1847, a motion to "repair and finish" the Meeting House initially passed, allowing for "lathing, plastering, putting in the windows and a stove," indicating that the interior of the single-story structure was still

While the wall lath and plaster date from 1847 or 1848, the horizontal wainscot boards, which are secured with wrought iron nails, are part of the original gallery finish, added in 1792. The boards in the middle bays, where the gallery entrance and pulpit window would have been, are

unfinished. However, this vote was followed immediately by a motion to “reconsider the above vote.” The following year, in March, a vote passed to repair and finish the Meeting House “under the directions and management of the Selectmen.”

from this period, but must have been relocated from another location—perhaps from the first floor.

The Meeting House was likely used in this era for purposes in addition to town meetings. In 1864 a warrant article—though passed over—hints at additional potential uses of the building: vote “to authorize the Selectmen to let the Town House in said town for public meetings, exhibitions, parties and such other purposes as the Selectmen may think proper.”²⁸

Town records make no mention whether the building had a stove (and thus, a chimney) prior to 1847. Few meeting houses had stoves prior to 1815, largely for fear of fire, but they were gradually added between 1815 and 1840.³²

In 1870, the debates of the 1830s were echoed when warrants appeared to “vote to sell the Town House and lot or any portion thereof” and “to vote to buy a new lot and build a new Town House” with money raised by taxation. The issue was passed over that year, repeated in 1873 and again passed over. In 1876, the town selectmen began to plead for the repair of the building “as a matter of economy,” certainly more prudent than allowing it to fall to ruin and then go into debt building a new town house “which, necessarily will cost some \$2500.” In 1883 and 1884 these words were finally heeded, and the Meeting House was repaired. In their annual report of 1884, the selectmen summarized with pride that the town had a positive balance at year end despite a few major demands, including completing the repairs on the Meeting House, which totaled \$316.80. Expenses show purchase and labor costs for shingles, lumber, ironwork, masonry, clapboards, and paint. “Thus,” the selectmen concluded, “we have not only preserved a building that will be useful to the town for many years to come, ...but also one that is of great historical interest.”²⁹ They added the caveat: “unless, since the town can boast of its freedom from debt, the number of inhabitants should increase so it may become necessary to furnish larger accommodations.” This foresight would prove true twenty-three years later.³⁰

In 1907, New Durham erected a new Town Hall in the section of town known as Downings Mills or The Plains that had evolved into the industrial and commercial center and through which the railroad passed. The old Town House in New Durham Corners village now lacked a public purpose.

²⁸ New Durham Town Records, 1841-1855 and 1856-1872.

²⁹ The selectmen end this sentence with “since it was the first Freewill Baptist church ever erected.” The facts are slightly incorrect however, as the building was not erected *as* a Freewill Baptist Church, but was rather the first place the denomination practiced after forming in 1780.

³⁰ New Durham Annual Reports, 1870-1876, 1883 and 1884.

³² Nylander, 1979: 87-88.



Front (northeast) and northwest elevations, photographed 1942. By this time, the building was used for agricultural storage.

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In 1912, neighboring farmer Zanello D. Berry purchased the Meeting House and its lot for \$251. He used the building to store farm equipment, and he or his successor added a sliding barn door in the rear of the building, replaced the flooring, and may have undertaken slight interior modifications. In 1979, one of Berry's descendants, Lua Pike, gifted the building, the town pound and its six-acre lot to the town. Shortly thereafter, the Meeting House and pound were placed on the National Register of Historic Places for architectural significance and associations with local government.³¹



Northeast (front) and southeast elevations, 1979
from National Register Nomination Form

³¹ Garvin et al, 1983: 6; New Durham Annual Reports, 1913 and 1979.

From 1987 to 1990, a major town-led renovation campaign rescued the building from oblivion. During the course of the renovation effort, the roof, clapboards, exterior trim, windows, front door, and sill were replaced under the direction of master carpenter Ernie Vachon. Berry's sliding barn door was replaced with double doors and the opening reduced in size. It was not until 2003 that the clapboard replacement was complete, thanks to an Eagle Scout project. With the exception of the barn doors, the repairs removed materials associated with the meeting house or town hall years.

Foundation work undertaken by JR Graton and Kevin Fife in 2006 repaired the fieldstone foundation seen in historic photographs, adding 19th century spilt granite blocks in a few places.

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Maps & Plans

1750 Plan of New Durham, Masonian Plan Book 4, p84. Collection of the New Hampshire State Archives

1806 Map of New Durham, Collection of the New Hampshire State Archives

1816 *Map of New Hampshire* by Philip Carrigain, Collection of the University of New Hampshire

1856 *Map of Strafford County, New Hampshire* by J. Chace, Jr., Philadelphia

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Photograph Collections

New Durham Historical Collection

New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources

New Hampshire Historical Society

Paul Wainwright Photography www.paulwainwrightphotography.com

Interviews

Catherine E. Orlowicz, Town Historian, February 2009