

Colonial Meetinghouses in New Hampshire

Some examples of surviving colonial-era meetinghouses in New Hampshire
Text from Eva Spear's 1938 book*, and personal recollections
Photographs by Paul Wainwright

For exact (GPS) locations, see: www.colonialmeetinghouses.com

Allenstown, New Hampshire (1815)

The Allenstown NH meetinghouse is now located in the middle of Bear Brook State Park. No, it was not moved here. As with several of the meetinghouses I have photographed, the population center of Allenstown has moved, and is now about 2 miles away from where the town used to be. Other than the building, there is no indication that a town was once centered here.



Belmont, New Hampshire (1792)

When it was originally constructed, the Province Road Meeting House in Belmont, New Hampshire was thought to have conformed to the classic meetinghouse design: the building measured 52 feet by 40 feet with the south-facing main entrance along the long wall, two story open interior with galleries (balconies) on 3 of the walls, a raised pulpit on the 4th (north) wall, additional doors on the east and west walls, and box pews.



Bridgewater, New Hampshire

This was probably the most difficult meetinghouse for me to find, because it is located in the middle of nowhere. Following sketchy directions obtained from a local police officer, I drove 5 or 6 miles along very steep dirt roads, and finally located this little oasis of serenity in the middle of a New Hampshire forest. As with Allenstown, the town of Bridgewater is now no longer anywhere near where it was when this meetinghouse was built.



* Speare, Eva A., *Colonial Meeting-Houses of New Hampshire*. Littleton, N.H.: D.C.W., 1938.

Canaan, New Hampshire (1793)

The Canaan Meeting House, built in 1793-96, was of a "typical" meetinghouse design, with the long wall facing south, doors on the east, south, and west walls, galleries also on those walls, and box pews both downstairs and in the galleries. By 1970, it was evident that the evolution of the Canaan meetinghouse, coupled with the growth of the town, made the structure unsuitable for much of anything.



Cornish, New Hampshire (1793)

This is another Anglican "meetinghouse," built by the early settlers who were members of the Church of England. Known as Trinity, this structure has preserved the Anglican form of worship since 1793. It is surrounded by "God's Acre," a term used in earlier times for the church's graveyard.



Dana Hill Meetinghouse, New Hampton, New Hampshire (1803)

Located near the town of New Hampton, NH, the Dana Hill Meetinghouse was built in 1803. Although its small size prevented the builders from following the "typical" plan (see Sandown, Freemont, Amesbury, or Danville), nonetheless there are the 3 doors and multi-paned windows that are hallmarks of the colonial meetinghouse.



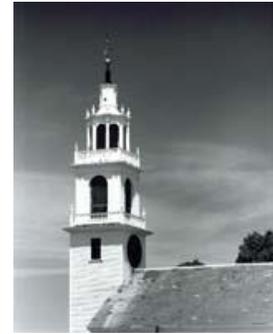
Danville, New Hampshire (1755)

The meetinghouse at Danville is austere in its simplicity, except for its wonderful woodwork. Only in the frame of the south doorway and the hoods over the front windows were the outside walls embellished; wisely the beautification of the interior received the benefit of the meager taxes. Here is the oldest high pulpit in New Hampshire, displaying craftsmanship in every line of its panels and fluted pilasters and shapely sounding board.



Derry, New Hampshire (1769)

The meetinghouse at Derry, NH was built by Irish settlers. In fact, the graveyard behind the meetinghouse (now the Congregational Church) contains the graves of some of the original immigrants who were born in Ireland. The graveyard is a fascinating place to visit in its own right. The meetinghouse has been substantially modified from its original form, including being cut in half sometime in the 19th century to allow an enlargement to be placed between the two ends.



Derry has the distinction of being the first place in America where the potato was grown, brought to this country by the Irish who settled here.

Fremont, New Hampshire (1800)

The meetinghouse in Fremont, NH was what started me on this project of photographing colonial meetinghouses. The Fremont Historical Society had an open house in their meetinghouse, and there was an article in the paper. I saved the article, and about a year later I dug it out, contacted the society, and visited the place. The rest is history, as they say.



Gilmanton, New Hampshire (1774)

Building a meetinghouse in those days often took a long time. The country was in the midst of its Revolution, and young manpower was scarce. The frame for the meetinghouse was raised in September of 1774, and the roof was finished the next summer. The floor was laid in 1777, pews were built in the following years, and more work was done on the interior in 1786. The meetinghouse was finally finished in September of 1790 - sixteen years after it was begun.



Hampstead, New Hampshire (1745)

The meetinghouse at Hampstead, New Hampshire now serves as a community center. The interior has been substantially modernized, and a floor has been added at the former balcony level. However, the exterior is kept in its original style, and is well maintained by the town. It is also one of the oldest surviving meetinghouses. It was built in 1745, although the interior was not completed until



1792. The belfry boasts an original Paul Revere bell.

Henniker, New Hampshire

In Henniker, New Hampshire, the meetinghouse now serves as the town hall. The interior has been substantially changed, and a floor has been added.



Holderness, New Hampshire (1797)

In the 17th and 18th centuries, most New Hampshire religious buildings were meetinghouses, with the entry in one long lateral facade and the pulpit on the opposite wall. Only the Episcopalian churches adopted what later became the standard plan, with the entry in one gable end and the pulpit at the opposite end of the building. Trinity Church is therefore far more significant in the architectural history of the state than its modest size and simple details would suggest.



Jaffrey, New Hampshire (1775)

The town of Jaffrey, New Hampshire, boasts one of the most picturesque meetinghouses, at least from the outside. The frame was raised on June 17, 1775, which was also the day of the battle of Bunker Hill. Tradition has it that the sound of the distant cannon fire could be heard by the workers. The building is currently used as a community center, and the interior has been substantially modified to be a small theatre. Thankfully, a second floor was never added.



Langdon, New Hampshire (1801)

For over 200 years, Langdon residents have appreciated the role that their Town Hall (the Meetinghouse) has had in their lives. It began as both a place of worship and the seat of town government, and is still used as the center of social and community activities.



Lempster, New Hampshire (1794)

The Lempster meetinghouse was built as a Congregational Church and for civic affairs. When it was first constructed it was a large, tall, and rectangular building with double side entries with double holy doors. Opposite the main entry was a raised pulpit with a window behind the pulpit. The exact location of the first meetinghouse is not clearly known, only the general vicinity of the building.



Middleton, New Hampshire



New Hampton, New Hampshire (1798)

The New Hampton meetinghouse was probably of similar design to the typical meetinghouse, but now is half its original height. The interior has also been greatly modified, and is used for town meetings.



This building is not far from the Dana Hill meetinghouse, and it is not clear why two such structures would be built in the same neighborhood. Maybe there were 2 groups of people who didn't get along with each other. Town politics has not changed much.

Sandown, New Hampshire (1773)

The most famous building in Sandown is its former town hall, which since 1835 has been called "The Old Meeting House." Sandown is credited by many with possessing the finest meetinghouse in New Hampshire - and there are those who would go so far as to say the finest in America. For 155 years, the good men and women of Sandown gathered at this building to set their own taxes and to draft their own laws.



Salem, New Hampshire (1738)

The meetinghouse in Salem, New Hampshire was built in 1738, making it older than most of the surviving meetinghouses. It was moved to its current location in 1840 when the "new" Congregational church was built. In 1846 the town of Salem took it over, added a floor at the balcony level, and used it for their town offices for more than a century. It now serves as the town's historical society museum. The clapboards have been replaced, leaving no trace of the original location of doors or pulpit window.



Star Island, New Hampshire (1800)

Several meetinghouses were built, only to be burned by the ungodly fishermen, according to tradition. In 1800, a stone chapel was erected with its interior furnishings made from the timbers of a Spanish shipwreck. The village has disappeared, and, except for the grass-grown cemetery, all traces of the former settlers are lost. Many monuments mark historic sites, memorials to those who once lived on the islands. Above them all, the little stone chapel guards the graves of the forgotten people.



Washington, New Hampshire (1789)

The meetinghouse in Washington, New Hampshire, was built in 1789, and originally resembled the one in Sandown. The exterior still strongly resembles a colonial meetinghouse, however a floor has been added at the balcony level, and it now serves as Town Hall.



Webster, New Hampshire (1791)

The meetinghouse at Webster, New Hampshire is relatively untouched from its original design, except for the addition of a 2nd floor at the balcony level. It was built in 1791, and was used for worship until 1823 when the "new" church was built. After that, it was used for town business for many years.

Today it seems to be used as an historical society museum, although there does not seem to be a lot of activity.

