

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SMITH MEETING HOUSE

GILMANTON, NEW HAMPSHIRE

by

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A mere recounting of those events in the life of this church of which we have records does not add very much to our understanding of the life and times of the people who worshipped here, and that, after all, is the real history of the meeting house. But if we stop to take a look at the bits and pieces of knowledge that we have in the light of related happenings we begin to get a clearer picture of what the Smith Meeting House was, and what it meant in this community.

One really should understand something of the history of religion in Colonial New England to appreciate the circumstances surrounding the establishment of Gilman-ton's first house of worship. All of us are familiar with the circumstances of the flight of the Puritans from England — the charges of religious persecution which drove a band of men to flee England so that they could worship the Lord in their own way. Edmund W. Sinnott, who has made a study of New England meeting houses, has described the Puritans as "complex and contradictory as their own theology. Compelled to the harsh, physical labor of the pioneers on a reluctant soil, they delighted in the things of the mind and kept brightly lighted the lamp of learning in their colleges. Intelligent above most men of their time, they could descend to depths of credulity and acts of superstitious infatuation that are entirely inconsistent with the brighter side of their character. Intolerant and bigoted to the degree that a dissenter from their beliefs in but minor matters of doctrine was often exiled or even put in peril of his life, yet they bore the seed that was to unfold into the most liberal religious thought of any age."¹

Although the first New Hampshire settlements at Portsmouth, Dover, Exeter and Hampton were not Puritan, they soon came under the dominance of the stronger Massachusetts Bay Colony which imposed its uncompromising Puritan practices on these towns. The standing order, the Puritan philosophy, was the only order; the

¹*Edmund W. Sinnott: Meetinghouse & Church in Early New England, 1963, P. 12*

government and the church were one, and citizens were taxed to support the one as much as the other. No dissent was tolerated and severe punishments were meted out, for the mere harboring of Quakers, who were the religious non-conformists of the day. Worse penalties, even cruel, were inflicted on the Quakers themselves until finally it was ordered that "if any Quaker or Quakers shall presume, (after they have once suffered what the law requireth) to come into this jurisdiction, every such male Quaker shall for the first offense have one of his eares cutt off and be kept at worke in the house of correction till he can be sent away at his own charge and for the second offense shall have his other eare cutt off." (Sic.)

Nonetheless, during the 17th century, the dissenters (the Quakers, as well as the Anglican Episcopalians) persisted in their faiths, and religious intolerance began to abate if only very slowly. But while the tensions between the Puritans on the one hand and the Quakers and Anglicans on the other, may have eased by 1700, the enmity towards, and the fear of, the Papists was freely expressed. In effect a Puritan or Congregational Monopoly existed in the official religion of New Hampshire.

The beginning of the end of this monopoly came in the early eighteenth century. In 1700 there were only five churches in the entire province of New Hampshire — all Congregational. The population of 6,000 inhabitants was concentrated near the sea coast. As the population began to swell and scatter, demands for new churches and new towns had to be met, and although the Congregationalists were still in the vast majority, the other sects were demanding recognition. They were, indeed, aided in their demands by an enlightened and forward looking provincial council who decreed an official policy of "freedom of conscience (except to Papists)". The emergence of other churches was now possible as the colony spread out. By 1732 the population of New Hampshire had doubled to 12,000 and since the danger to new settlers from the indians had seemed to lessen, there was a great impetus to the settling of the interior of the state.

In the charter of each new town, there invariably appeared the requirement that a meeting house be built

(usually within four years) and that a proprietor's share, that is, a large tract of land, be reserved for (1) the parsonage, (2) the personal use of the first settled minister and (3) for the benefit of a school. In fact, the danger from indians in many places had not lessened and settlements were delayed for many years. Gilmanton's charter was granted in 1727, for example, and yet it was not until 1761 that it became possible for the Mudgetts to become the first settlers and build their cabin up on the road to Pancake Hill.

As the century progressed there seemed to be a further gradual breaking down of the narrow and extreme orthodoxy of Puritan Congregationalism. While the law of the province required each town to settle and support a minister, by 1740 there were several different churches serving their communities. They included Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Quaker, as well as Congregational – and the first Baptist church was soon to be established in 1750. Even among the Congregationalists there was ferment. During the period of religious revival known as the “Great Awakening” from 1730 to 1750, a schism formed within the Congregationalists and the “New Lights” caused the “Old Lights” much anguish. Although Congregationalist orthodoxy still held sway, by the time of the American Revolution in 1775 it is clear that a broadening of the religious base had been started and that, as a result, a certain degree of wrangling in most towns over pastoral financial support was becoming common. The citizens were no longer ostracized for speaking up against mandatory support for a faith not their own.

THE GILMANTON SETTLEMENT MEETING HOUSE

The town of Gilmanton was settled in 1761 and almost immediately an effort was made to “obtain preaching for the settlers.” By August 1, 1763, the Rev. William Parsons had been engaged and had moved his family into town. For the next ten years wherever he could, he preached in houses, barns and schools and always according to the traditional orthodoxy. In the spring of 1773 an article appeared in the town warrant to see if the town would build a meeting house, but as there

was anything but unanimity among the early settlers the article was dismissed. It appears that Gilmanton had a large group of Baptists and they were not inclined to vote for any church which was not Baptist.

In the fall of 1773, however, a group of citizens had heard the Rev. Isaac Smith preach and were so impressed that, at a special town meeting, they succeeded in overcoming the considerable opposition of the Baptists and it was voted in February, 1774 to build a meeting house. The success was tenuous at best. At the regular annual town meeting held one month later in March, the vote was reconsidered so that "a full hearing could be given," and it was again voted by a small margin to build the meeting house at the northwest end of the school lot. Again on the 16th of April another vote was taken and again the Congregationalists were able to maintain their majority and this time the town voted to build the meeting house and to make it 60 feet long by 45 feet wide with a porch at each end. On the 30th of May, a fourth meeting was called in as many months at Jotham Gilman's barn (where now Arthur Daigniault's farm is located and where the town farm was located in Lancaster's time) to see if the town would recall its vote regarding the location and building of a meeting-house and "if not, to see if the town would vote to divide into two and determine at what place they would divide." But this tactic was to no avail. It was clear that the Baptists in town wanted no part of the Congregational orthodox church, but they did not have the necessary votes to prevent its establishment. As a result, frames for both the town church, publicly supported and the Baptist church, privately supported, were prepared for raising in September of 1774; the Congregational, on the spot where the Smith Meeting House now stands, and the Baptist, on the "training field" as it was then called. The foundation stonework of the old Baptist church may still be seen in the field near the Carlson orchards which the Bingham family now owns. The Congregational Committee having won the battle for the church, hired Isaac Smith to do the preaching for a year and he began in May, 1774 at Jotham Gilman's barn.

The erection of a building of the size of a meeting house framed in hardwood entailed many hazards, and the raising of Gilmanton's Meeting House was not without incident. During the raising, a certain Lowell Sanborn was perched 25 or 35 feet high on one of the timbers when suddenly he toppled down to earth among the stones, timbers and tools. Everyone, of course, thought the motionless form was dead but he startled everyone when he simply got up, brushed himself off and climbed right back up the frame again. However he soon became faint and decided he had better get down again. The roof was not closed in until the next season so no services were held in the meeting house during the winter of 1774-1775.

It is unfortunate that we have no pictures or drawings of the meeting house as it was built, but from the descriptions which we do have and a knowledge of the degree of uniformity which prevailed in New England's country meeting houses of this period, we can easily reconstruct in our minds something of what the original meeting house looked like. Mr. Harold Jordan of Gilmanton Iron Works has sketched his impression of the Smith Meeting House from the Society. We know that it was sixty feet by forty-five feet with a main double door in the center of one long side and that there was a porch on each of the narrow sides with entrances and stairs to the gallery. We know that there was a broad aisle of six feet and a narrow aisle of four feet from the East to West doors. We know that it had a gallery on three sides. There was a high pulpit, which was domed, that is, provided with a domed sounding board overhead; and there was a singing pew in the gallery. We know the building was lathed and plastered.

THE BUILDING OF THE HOUSE

Building a meeting house in those days often took a long, long time. The country was now in the midst of its Revolution and young man-power was scarce. Money was even scarcer and, we must remember, in Gilmanton, the Baptists were building their own Church. The perseverance of the people was remarkable; and although it took by current standards, an extraordinary amount of time, the building was eventually completed.

Here is the time table. The frame was raised in September of 1774 and the roof was finished the next summer. In 1777 a committee was instructed by the town to lay the floor, build the pulpit, finish the seats and the pews, sealing up the back parts as far as proper, make the end doors and putty in the glass on the lower floor. "On the 29th of July, 1778 the proprietors of the town sold the privilege on lot No. 18 of the 2nd range to Moses Morrill, the proceeds to be turned over to the Congregational church so that they could proceed with finishing their meeting house, provided that he would construct and operate an iron works. The proceeds amounted to £180.

In 1779 Joseph Badger and Deacon Stephen Dudley were appointed to sell the pew ground in the gallery and to finish the seats and pews. But such was the scarcity of funds that the sales could not be made and General Badger was permitted to have the entire gallery to be disposed of as he saw fit provided that he finish the gallery. The town was to finish the joists, find the boards and nails and build the stairs. General Badger had the responsibility of the singing pew. Apparently there was some dissatisfaction with this arrangement and a committee finally finished the gallery and in August, 1783 the gallery pews were sold at auction. The auction of pews was a public auction and the numbered pews were sold to the highest bidder for family use for as long as they retained ownership. In many cases deeds were actually prepared and recorded at the court house. The votes for the lime and glass for plastering and glazing and for the nails and boards for lathing were passed in 1785 and 1786; and the meeting house was finally finished in September of 1790 – sixteen years after it was begun. Toward the end of this time it became so difficult to raise money that the church tax was permitted to be paid in beef (at 20 shillings per hundred) and corn (at 3 shillings per bushel).

In those days as now, it was apparent that a few men assumed most of the leadership and over and over again we hear the names of Stephen Dudley, General Joseph Badger, Antipas Gilman, Thomas Cogswell and Summersbee Gilman.

THE REVEREND ISAAC SMITH

The ministry itself quite obviously was in very good hands. The town had been fortunate in obtaining the services of a man destined to be one of the finest preachers and pastors of his day. An untiring worker, the Rev. Isaac Smith, from his ordination in November of 1774 labored diligently among his people for almost forty-three years. The early church records indicate that he was ever ready to travel the country-side to minister to his people. He had a fine background and education. His father was a well-to-do husbandman in Sterling, Connecticut who had eleven children, eight of them sons. All were successful in life and became leaders in their communities. Isaac was only sixteen when his father died leaving him a tidy inheritance as well as training as a shoemaker. This trade stood him in good stead when he decided to get an education and enter the ministry. He was graduated from Princeton in 1770 having paid his own way through college by buying leather among the Dutch in upper New York State, making shoes, and returning to sell them there. After graduation he continued his studies in divinity and of the various calls which he received ultimately settled upon Gilmanton.

The Puritan religious beliefs had undergone quite a change by the time of Mr. Smith's ministry. No longer was it practically unknown for church members to dissent from some of the minister's teachings. No longer was it unheard of for members to complain about the way services were conducted. It was even becoming reasonably acceptable within the community for members of one church to leave (with or without permission) and join another. This new liberalism did not fail to shock the "Old Lights" however, and the church records contain many tales of negotiations with dissident members who objected - even stayed away from services - because of the "new singing" or because of the introduction of heat into the meeting house.

The liberals had managed to introduce what to us is conventional hymn singing instead of the old style where the precentor (usually a deacon) would "deacon the hymn" - that is, read two lines and then have the choir sing them, read two more and let the choir sing those, and

so on — certainly an uninspiring procedure. The subject of heat in the meeting house seems to us to be even more ridiculous. It had been a Puritan custom that no heat whatsoever was provided in the meeting house. The only compromise was that the ladies would often bring their tin foot warmers with lighted charcoal burning within to keep their feet warm while the men would endure the cold. It was not uncommon for the preacher to wear his overcoat and gloves while delivering both morning and afternoon sermons — each two to three hours in length.

Many anecdotes have been written about the old men and women who were loud in denunciation of the oppressive discomfort from the new stoves — sometimes even before the fire had been lit! We do not have the date when the huge fireplace was added to the South corner of the Old Smith Meeting House and while it was not there when built, we do have a record of its later existence.

Other changes were coming about which affected the old meeting house. The first settlers had chosen an impressive hill-top, centrally located, but, as the town grew the centers of population drifted toward the Academy Village on the one hand, and toward the Iron Works Village, on the other, and the difficulties in reaching the meeting house were borne with less and less resignation. In 1797 the use of the meeting house was discontinued for town meetings, the court house in the Academy having been designated for the use of the town. Furthermore, demands were being heard in the legislature to separate town governments and the church in-so-far as the imposition of the ministerial tax was concerned. The result of all this is that the church money was becoming increasingly more difficult to raise. After a clap-boarding job done on the old meeting house in 1810, there is no further record of repairs being made to the building.

In 1810, too, a severe blow was dealt to the “establishment” when no Minister Tax was voted by the town and, to add insult to injury, the ministerial lands were taxed to the minister. Mr. Smith began a long drawn-out series of negotiations with the town ending in a law suit, odious to many of the citizens, against the town for his back salary and for the relief of the taxes assessed against him. It would

appear that Mr. Smith must have had a case regarding his salary since the law of the state still required town support of the settled minister.

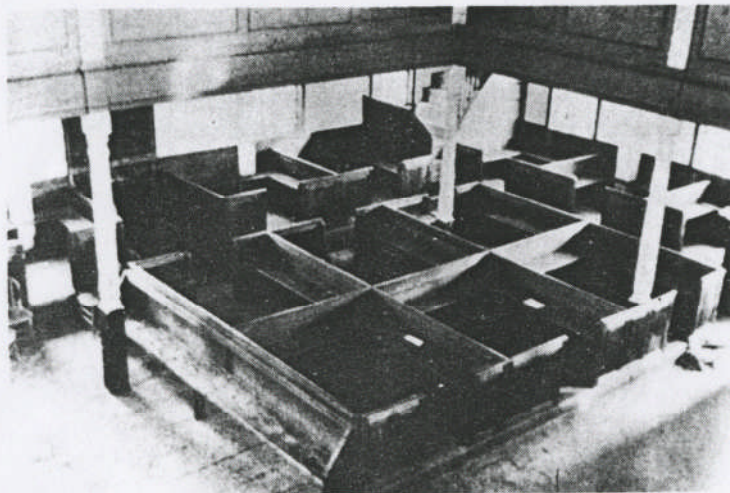
This premature action by town meeting certainly gives us an insight into the mood of the citizens during this period, and by 1819, the famous Toleration Act had been passed by the New Hampshire legislature. As a result of this act, citizens throughout the state were no longer required to belong to, and be subject to taxation by any religious sect. Any assessments and taxes henceforth had to be raised by an incorporated Society which had the power to levy a tax, but on its voluntary members only.

The die had been cast in Gilmanton in 1815, however, four years before the passage of the Toleration Act. As a result of the Rev. Mr. Smith's legal action, the town meeting voted that the First Congregational Church itself should negotiate with Mr. Smith and attempt to make a settlement with him, with the proviso that no one belonging to another religious society should be obliged to pay anything towards the settlement. A committee was appointed and did make a settlement with him for his back salary, but Mr. Smith got no relief as far as his property taxes were concerned. In fact in March, 1816, the town confirmed the tax on Mr. Smith's property and voted to continue the tax in the future.

In June, 1817, a charter was granted to the corporation known as the First Congregational Society and the separation from the town government was complete. Unfortunately, Isaac Smith was not to live to see it. Now 72 years of age he must have been disturbed greatly by all this controversy and in March, 1817, he caught a cold during a trip to Rochester which developed into what must have been pneumonia and he died a few days later.



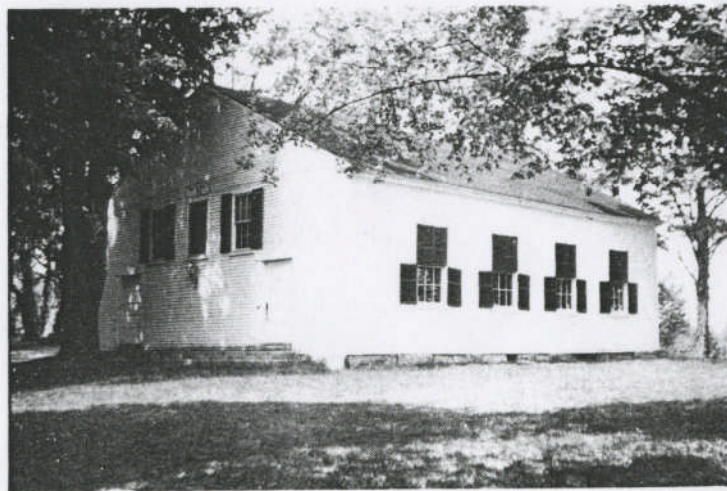
*Mr. Smith's Meeting House
Circa 1800
drawn by Harold V. Jordan*



Interior of an old Meeting House



*Smith Meeting House
Circa 1895*



*Smith Meeting House
Today*

His monument in the burial ground just a few feet away from the meeting house reads:

Sacred
to the memory of the
Rev. Isaac Smith
Pastor of the
Congregational Church and Society in Gilmanton
who died March 25, 1817, aged 72
in the 43rd year of his ministry.
He was a native of Sterling, Conn.
was educated at Princeton College, N.J.
and was ordained Minister over the
people in Gilmanton, soon after its first settlement.
As a husband and parent he was affectionate,
he held strictly to the doctrines of grace, was
indefatigable in his exertions to promote the
spiritual interests of his people, was a solemn and
searching preacher, and exemplified the truths
of the Gospel in his life and Death.

“Life speeds away
From point to point tho seeming to stand still,
The cunning fugitive is swift by stealth.
Too subtle is the movement to be seen
Yet soon man’s hour is up and we are gone.”

The church in Gilmanton erect this
monument as a memorial to their respect
and affection to their beloved Pastor.

Lancaster, in his history of Gilmanton describes Isaac Smith as "tall and slender in his person, rather bony" broad shoulders and large frame, and in later years his hair was perfectly white. His motions were quick, of great vivacity; an animated and pointed preacher and a discriminating theologian. Lancaster, Daniel. The History of Gilmanton, N.H. 1845, p. 212. His death was a severe affliction to the church.

THE DECLINING YEARS

The Golden Age of the meeting house on the hill, named now for its first pastor, Smith Meeting House, had come to an end.

Increasing difficulty was experienced now in collecting the church tax. Mr. Smith's successor while capable and properly trained, lacked the vigor of his illustrious predecessor, and in January of 1825 after six years of labor, Rev. Luke A. Spofford asked for dismissal because of poor health. He in turn was succeeded by the Rev. Daniel Lancaster, famed as the author of the History of Gilmanton. It was to be Mr. Lancaster's fate to be pastor when the church's financial difficulties grew worse and worse. In February, 1826, twenty-five members requested dismissal to form the new church in the Academy Village, and on October 12, 1830, thirteen more left to form a church in the Iron Works Village. Although two revivals were able to restore the numbers, its affluent resources were gone. Various attempts were made to try and share the services (and expenses) of its pastor with other churches, but by July, 1832, Mr. Lancaster was dismissed at his request, and no ordained Pastor has been settled since.

The First Congregational Society was not prepared to give up, however. Although the building itself was suffering badly for need of repair, the persistence of the church organization was unflagging. Various men supplied preaching to the church, mostly faculty and students of the Theological Seminary at the Corner. Attempts at revivals were modestly successful but never sufficient to bring the church back to its former glory.

By 1838, the meeting house was in such a state of disrepair that it was necessary to tear the old structure down, and in the summer of 1839, a smaller (37' by 47') "neat and comfortable House of the First Church" was raised from its materials. As we have noted, the town meetings had long since been moved to the Academy and now a simple church was designed to take its place — technically no longer a meeting house, and no longer Rev. Isaac Smith's. Yet no one will ever know it by anything else than the Old Smith Meeting House.

At present we know less about the probable appearance of the interior of this church than we do of the earlier meeting house. The pulpit is the original. There were thirty pews; and the total cost of construction using materials from the old building was \$625. The First Congregational Society has in its possession a receipt for pew No. 11 in the amount of twenty eight dollars.

It remained quite a struggle to keep going. On two occasions (in 1851 and again in 1879) the members voted to sell the Parsonage land and buildings but the sale was never consummated. Instead, the farm land which the early town charter had provided for support of the church was leased out and became a principal source of income over the years, yielding from \$10 to \$30 per year, along with the taxes which the church was now required to pay on its property. The money thus raised was usually designated to be used for preaching up to eighteen sixties but more often the money was used to keep the church or the parsonage building in some degree of repair.

During the period following the Civil War, little activity was centered in the Smith Meeting House. Annual meetings of the society were often not held and despite votes to repair the deteriorating buildings, the funds were just not available to effect them. After 1886, no meetings of the society are recorded until 1900.

Mrs. Hattie Kelley of lower Gilmanton, recalls that in 1895 as a very young girl, she accompanied her grandfather, Sylvester J. Gale, to the church. Windows had been broken, the floor had holes, the wood rotted, and when Mr. Gale warned young Hattie that she might fall through the floor, she hurried out and concentrated her curiosity on the outside of the old meeting house.

THE RECONSTRUCTION YEARS

Sylvester Gale was the leader of a group of sensitive and civic minded men who grieved at the sight of the ailing building. These men, among whom were Thomas Cogwell, Daniel Gale, George Gale, and Daniel Ayer, to name but a few, scraped together materials and man hours enough to effect a halt to further deterioration and planned for the salvage and rehabilitation of the long neglected and almost ruined meeting house.

Subscriptions were sought near and far for funds and gradually enough was accumulated so that the building could be used, and by the summer of 1898 the community prepared for "The First Annual Entertainment and Fair." The organization which was formed to coordinate the improvement of the Church - "The Old Smith Meeting House Improvement Society" - had an immediate success on its hands.

Let me read from notes which Mrs. Kelley has written in her scrap book:

"Fred Parker Ham addressed the people and also gave free use of his gramophone.

"The ladies worked hard and a long fancy table was completely filled with useful and ornamental articles which found a ready sale.

"At 5:00 P.M. supper was served and over 200 people partook. The evening was spent in listening to recitations by Miss Mary Wight, Miss Winnie Page, Thomas Cogswell, Jr. and others. Songs by Miss Dooley, a summer tourist, and Miss Sadie Orange. Music was furnished by Blake's orchestra. The proceeds were about \$150.00.

Naturally such a "fun" affair was to be repeated over and over again. By 1902, the starting time had been advanced to 9:00 A.M., the price had advanced to twenty cents, and for the first time we are advised that this was to be "Old Home Week".

The church by now was in pretty good shape - true the pews had been removed so that a new floor could be laid, but at least it was useable for an occasional religious service and perhaps as often for social activities.

So successful was the renovation of the Smith Meeting House itself that in 1905 a group of many of the same

individuals formed an association to reclaim the long neglected cemetery.

The rest of the story is told in the appearance of the church, its little schoolhouse which it acquired from the school district, and the cemetery. "The Old Smith Meeting House Improvement Association", now "The Old Home Day Association" has conducted Old Home Day annually all these years, and it has become traditional for a religious service to be held in connection with Old Home Day. The nature of Old Home Day has changed slightly over the years but the successes and the purpose have not changed at all. Without the funds from Old Home Day it is difficult to see how the splendid area could be preserved. The Cemetery Association has continued, too, and one wonders where a more attractive, peaceful resting place could be found for the dead.

At the second annual Entertainment and Fair in 1899, Mary Wight of Gilmanton Corner read a poem written for the occasion by Mary H. Wheeler of Pittsfield and entitled simply, Smith Meeting House.