

A View From
Meeting House Hill

A History of
Sandown, New Hampshire



Richard Holmes

Peter E. Randall
PUBLISHER
1988

© 1988 by Richard D. Holmes
Printed in the United States of America

Second printing: July 2001

Additional copies available from
Friends of the Sandown Library
Main Street, Sandown, NH 03873

Peter E. Randall Publisher
Box 4726, Portsmouth, NH 03802

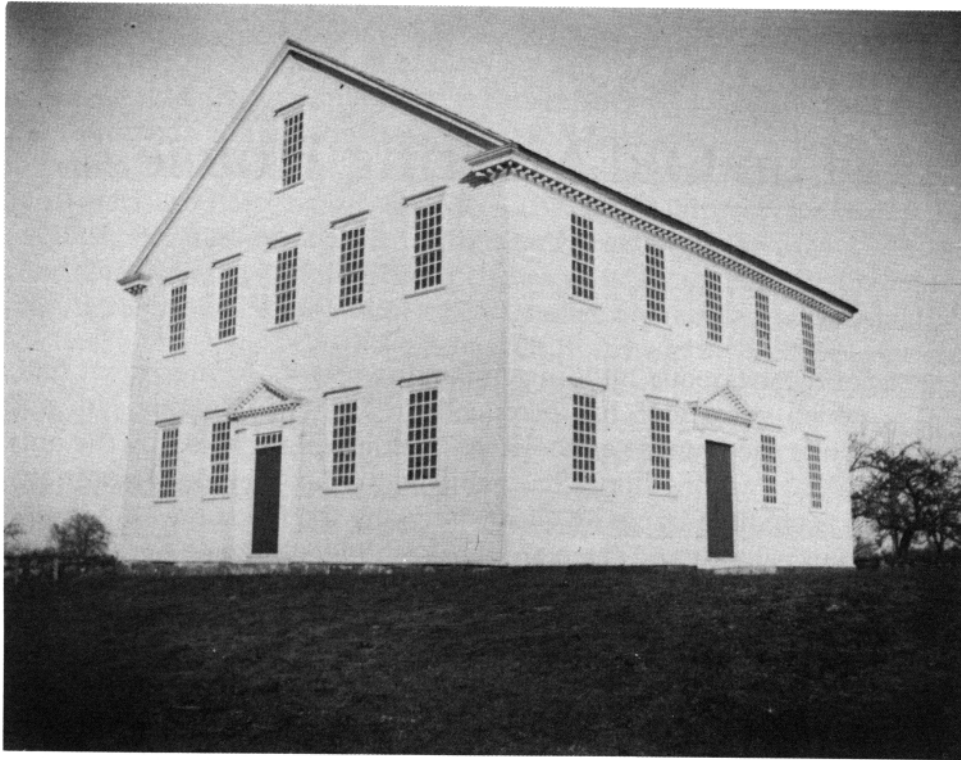
The Old Meeting House

The most famous building in Sandown is its former town hall, which since 1835 has been called "The Old Meeting House." While the town as a whole has been largely ignored by the outside world, its meeting house has gained a marked degree of notoriety. Sandown is credited by many with possessing the finest meeting house in New Hampshire—and there are those who would go so far as to say the finest in America. The photographers and historians who have made their pilgrimage to Meeting House Hill to view this shrine of colonial architecture have spread far its fame. Sandown—the town and its people—has been happily content to ride on the coat tails of this grand old building.

In dozens of books and magazines, the Old Meeting House has received praise for its purity of design. Millions have seen the building in an internationally distributed government film. A replica of part of its woodwork toured the world as an example of the skill of the nation's colonial craftsmen. It may well be true that Sandown's Old Meeting House is the most famous meeting house of its type in America. Since 1978 the building has been on the National Register of Historic Buildings. It is claimed that it is the oldest unrestored Congregational meeting house of its kind in the world.

The praise of outsiders, while always appreciated, is not the chief reason that the townspeople honor this building. To the residents of Sandown, this old building is the encapsulation of their town's entire history, for within its walls has passed the pageant of the community's past. 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. This building was, to a great extent, the capitol of a small, semi-autonomous republic operating inside New Hampshire.

At the Old Meeting House, voters cast their ballots for every president from George Washington to Herbert Hoover. In the hall, the men of



The Old Meeting House circa 1900.

this small town debated the merits of the new Constitution of 1787. From its pulpit, the Word of God was amplified and explained to a believing congregation. This building has seen the boys of Sandown march off to fight in a half dozen wars. And it was to this Old Meeting House that a grieving town gathered again to memorialize their honored dead. During more than two hundred years, the warp and woof of the town's history has been woven together with that of its meeting house to form a common fabric.

The term "meeting house" conveys a special meaning in the colonial period. A church building by definition is primarily a house of worship, with any other function being secondary. A meeting house, by contrast, is used for both secular and religious purposes on an equal basis. Sandown's Old Meeting House would serve as a worship site on Sundays, but during the week might be utilized as a schoolhouse. On some nights, the ladies' social circle would meet there; other times it would host a singing class. On many Friday and Saturday nights, a dance and oyster

supper would be held at the meeting house. Thus, the building operated on several separate planes within the town: a religious chapel, a political meeting place, and a social function hall. It was always considered the property of the town and never belonged to any religious denomination.

The Old Meeting House was not Sandown's first meeting house. Between 1756 and 1774, the town meetings and religious services were held at a small, crude building which was located a few hundred feet to the northeast of the present town hall. In 1772, the growing town met to debate the merits of building a new and grander meeting house. Without question the primary cause for the discussion was that the old hall was just too small and crowded for a town of six hundred souls. Likely of equal importance to the citizens was the belief that an impressive new meeting house would be a symbol of civic pride to present to the world.

The first decision to be made in the process of building a new meeting house was where exactly should it stand. Everyone wanted the meeting house in their own corner of the town and could give solid reasons why their particular neighborhood was deserving of the building. All sides had visions of being able to roll out of bed on Sunday morning and walk five minutes to the chapel. A political tug-of-war ensued. It was the Wells Village people versus those along the North Road, Angle Pond district against Phillips Pond district. Certainly this was a no-win situation.

A Solomon-like solution was finally conceived. The meeting house would be placed in the exact center of the town. The town meeting of November 12, 1772, voted that Nathaniel French, Captain Nathaniel Batchelder, and Captain David Sleeper would find the geographic center. They would start at the west end of the two-hundred-acre grants and measure from the Hampstead town line to the Fremont town line. The actual carrying of the surveyor's chain was entrusted to church deacons Samuel Sleeper and Benjamin Tucker. The surveyors were each paid six shillings, three pence for their labor.

A town meeting was convened on November 20, 1772, to receive the report of French, Batchelder, and Sleeper. They reported that the center of the town was at a "stump and stone" to the south of John Colby's land. It was on the crest of a high hill and only a few feet from Fremont Road. This was the perfect spot for the new town hall. A meeting house set on a hill cannot be hidden.

Despite the fact that Meeting House Hill was a wonderful location for the new public building, it was, however, not the exact center of town. The selection of the site was, in fact, a solution to a problem that

the surveyors discovered on their safari. The exact center of Sandown was, in reality, almost a half mile to the east—right in the middle of the Cranberry Meadow!

Apparently without asking the permission of anyone, the surveyors and the deacons just moved their line west to avoid the quaking swamp. In those days before accurate maps, there was no one who was aware that truth was being adjusted to satisfy a changed situation. To this day, it is still the accepted canon that the Old Meeting House is set on the exact center of the town.

As the “exact center” was found on John Colby’s land, the selectmen approached the old Indian fighter to see if a deal could be struck between him and the town. Tradition has always said that John Colby agreed to deed the land to the town if the plot would be enclosed with a stone wall. He also demanded the ownership of the highest pew in the new building. It is always been said that he wanted the highest spot so he could see everything that was going on at meetings. Such a spot also would allow him to be the center of attention at all public forums. It has thus come down through history that John Colby was a conceited busybody. This might actually not be the case, for if one takes “the highest pew” to refer to a spot in the balcony, then the reason for John Colby’s demands tells a different story. The southern gallery, with its wall of windows, would receive the most sun-warmth in winter. Being in the balcony, Colby would also receive the benefits of all the heat that rose from the lower level and would not be hit by drafts from the doors. It is likely that all he wanted was a warm place to worship on those bitterly cold days of winter.

To raise funds to construct the new meeting house, it was voted to auction the ownership of the pews among the parishioners. Jethro Sanborn, Jonathan Colby, Jr., Ensign Reuben Clough, Captain Nathaniel Batchelder, and Deacon Samuel Sleeper were appointed to manage the sale. Only Stephen Batchelder cast a dissenting vote against the sale. The results of the auction have not been preserved, and so we do not know which family owned which pew. As it took a decade to pay off the builders of the Old Meeting House, it may be presumed that the 1774 auction was not overly successful in raising large amounts of cash.

It was the citizens of Sandown who did the muscle work of erecting the oak frame of the meeting house. The town books list the names of 27 men who worked on this stage of construction. This was not volunteer labor, as each received between one and six shillings as pay for their services. The framing fathers of the Old Meeting House are:

Robert Collins	Samuel Bean	Nathaniel French
Jonathan Colby	Benjamin Hunkins	Ela Dow
Ebenezer Colby	Peter Colby	Samuel Sleeper
Captain David Sleeper	Smith Blake	Ensign Reuben Clough
Stephen Long	Abraham Hook	Isaac Ladd
John Sleeper	Jacob Tucker	John Colby
Sherburn Tilton	Lt. Samuel Sanborn	Moses Hook
Josiah Fowler	Samuel Judkens	Timothy Tilton
Deacon Benjamin Tucker	Jethro Sanborn	John Sanborn

The boarding and rough carpentry was also likely done by these same 27 men.

The design and finishwork was most certainly not done by local workmen. Such fine craftsmanship, as is found in the pulpit and its sounding board, was probably the work of experts from the Salem–Amesbury, Massachusetts, area. A likely candidate for the artisan would be Timothy Palmer, the master builder who designed the 1783 Rocky Hill Meeting House in Amesbury, Massachusetts. A few houses in Chester, New Hampshire, contain molding details that are similar to Sandown's Meeting House. This has led artisan Malcolm McGregor, Jr. to speculate that whoever did build the Old Meeting House worked in the area on a number of different projects over many years.

A number of plausible but unconfirmed town legends have been handed down about the construction of the meeting house. One story says that in 1773–74 a search of Sandown failed to turn up enough suitable wood for the building and that all of those fine wide pine boards and oak timbers were actually imported from upstate New Hampshire. This tale certainly has the ring of truth. At the time in question, the forests of Sandown had already been harvested for at least forty years. It is likely that all the old growth oak and bull pines had already been vanquished for ships' masts and timber. To find oak trees that could produce foot-square beams in fifty foot lengths and to find pine trees that could yield boards over two feet in width, one would probably have to go north of Concord to the still virgin forests near the Coos Valley.

Another story claims that during the raising of the massive oak frame, the foreman shouted his directions so loud that his voice was hoarse for the rest of his life. Anyone who has ever worked on a construction gang would acknowledge that this story could be true. To frame a large building like the meeting house would require a high degree of coordination between all workers. One man would have to stand to the side and shout directions so that everyone performed his

tasks correctly and in unison with the others. With an untrained crew, such as was the case in Sandown, the foreman could quite easily be very hoarse by day's end.

The most repeated story on the building of the Old Meeting House deals with the workmen. A barrel of New England rum had been provided to quench the thirsts of the laborers. Framing a building was strenuous work and spirituous liquor was perceived as a means of combating fatigue. When a worker began to get tired, he would belly up to the barrel for a pick-me-up as was the common practice throughout all of colonial New England.

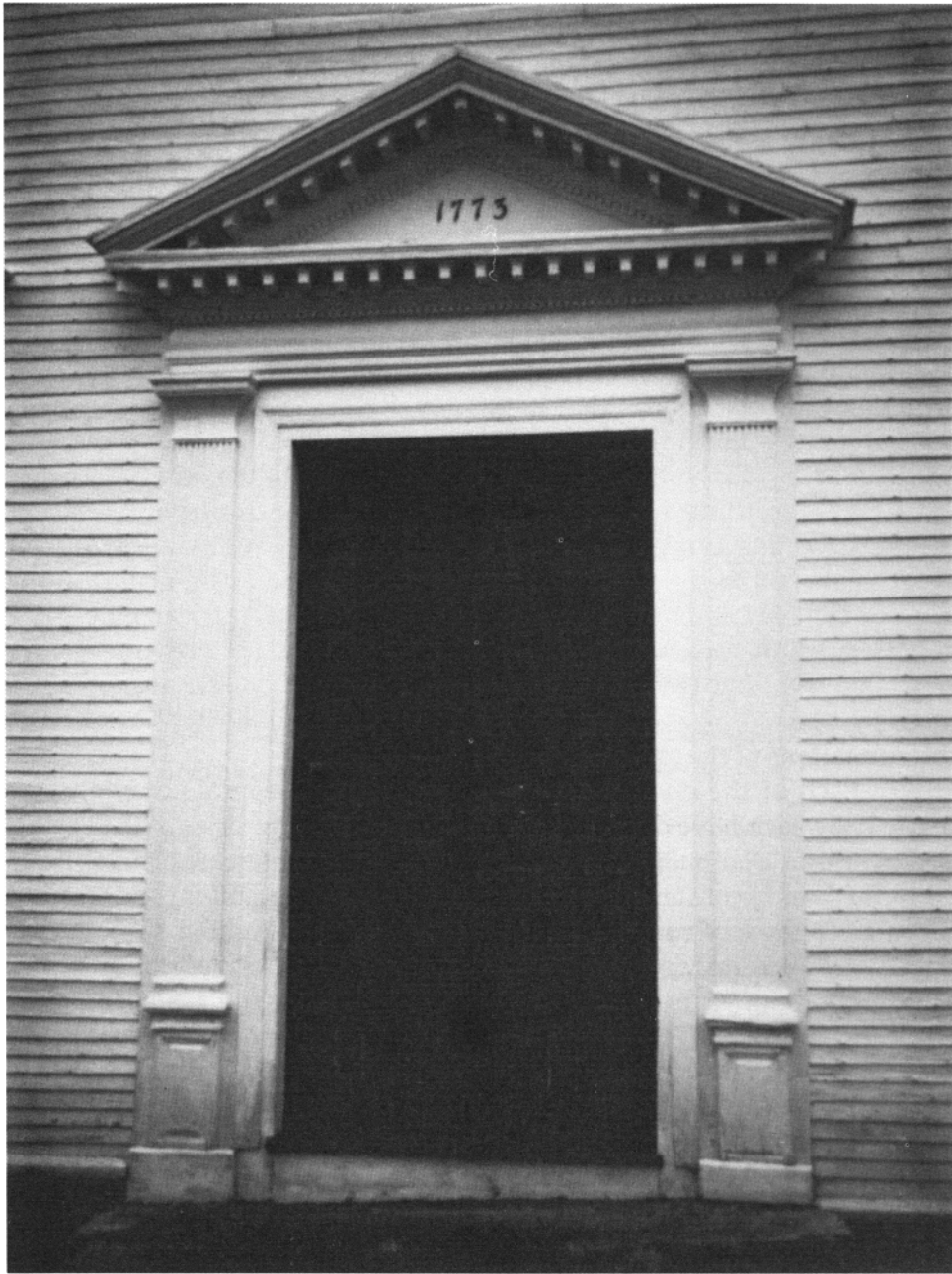
All was going well until the men discovered the rum barrel had run dry. A meeting of the workmen was quickly called. All were in agreement—no rum, no work! The men laid down their tools and sat on the piles of timber. There they waited, refusing to do any more work.

All that afternoon and into the night, former Selectman Steven Batchelder drove a wagon and team along the dirt roads south to Newburyport, Massachusetts. There he purchased another half barrel of good New England rum and, without pausing to rest, turned his team back to Sandown. He arrived just at sunrise. With the liquor supply now replenished, the workers once more began to build the meeting house.

Former Governor Francis P. Murphy, in a 1937 speech, referred to this strike as the first labor disturbance in the history of the state. Some would even claim that it was the first sitdown strike in the nation's history. This story of the strike is not, however, mentioned in any of the town records, diaries or letters. It is a folktale passed down through ten generations. Its basis in fact will probably never be known with certainty but is earnestly believed true by all true sons and daughters of Sandown.

One unusual feature of the Old Meeting House was recently discovered in a crawl-through examination by local contractor Richard Drowne. Under the floor is the complete skeleton of a pig. Was it left there as part of the dinner served to the work crew in 1774? Did some prankster put a live pig under the floor, where it died and has been undiscovered until now? Or was it an Old Testament-type sacrifice intended to bring the blessings of God on the town? The foundation stones are very tight, so it is unlikely that an animal could simply stray there on its own, then or now. Even the wood shavings put there in 1773-74 are still fresh in this crawl space.

The building that was finally erected is a very impressive piece of work. It measures forty-four by fifty feet and stands a full two stories



The south door of the Old Meeting House.

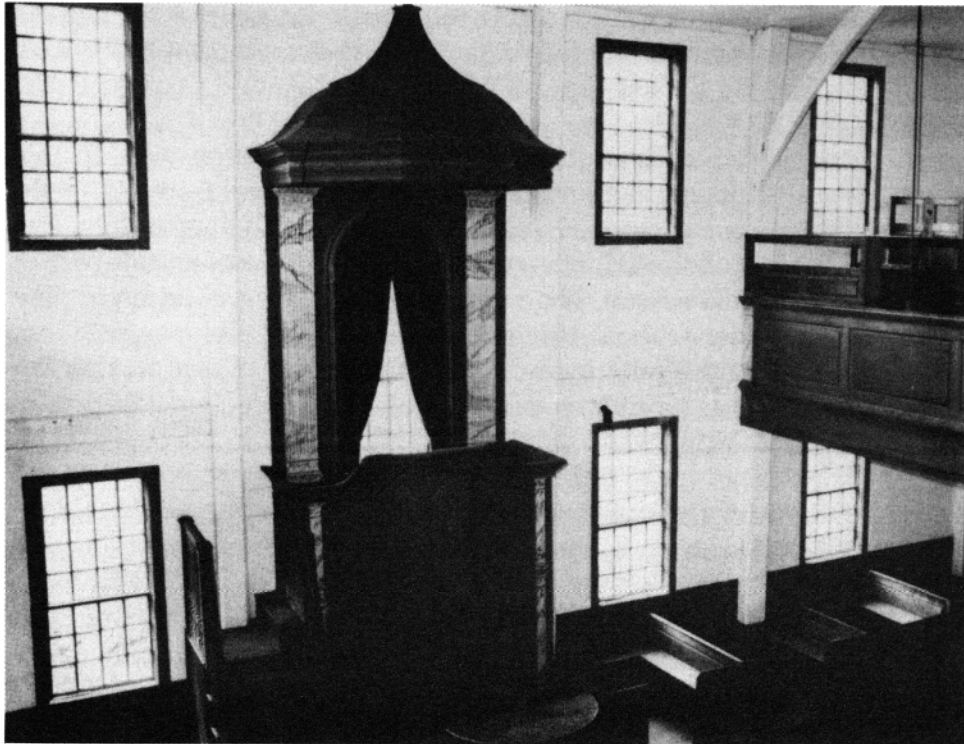
plus attic. Its frame consists of sixteen white oak posts, each a foot square. The interior surface of each post is left partially exposed like a medieval half-timbered building. The large attic has an extremely complicated series of king and queen post trusses which allows for the auditorium to be unobstructed by roof supports.

The meeting house has three doorways. Because only the south or main door has a lock, the east- and west-facing doors are secured by an oak bar which fits into wrought-iron staples. Each door is constructed of double planks and swings inward on large wrought-iron strap hinges. Although there are those who believe that the thickness of the doors was to provide a means of fending off Indian attacks, the 1773–74 date of construction rather precludes that possibility. By the latter part of the eighteenth century the prospects of Indian attacks were very remote and existed only as dimly remembered historical events of the past.

The building's three doors are six-panel or double Christian design. Over the east and west doorways are five-pane window lights. Each of the three door frames and their pediments differ slightly in design. The reason why there is such a disharmony is unclear. One story suggests that the doorways are the result of a year's work by three separate craftsmen. If this is true, then it is possible that the variance in style can be explained by assuming that the three joiners had slightly different interpretations of the same basic design.

Each of the doorways do, however, share several common features. They each have delicately fluted pilasters on the sides of the casing and overhead triangular pediments. The pilaster devises are also replicated in the interior of the building. The dentil molding of the pendants are repeated in the roof cornices. Over the south door is written 1773 and on the west door is inscribed 1774. Reportedly, there was a dedication of the building in both years. It seems that the building has always been painted white. In July 1774, it was voted by the town meeting to color the building the same as the Chester, New Hampshire, meeting house.

There are no stained glass windows in the old building. The plain glass windows are there only to let in the honest, unadorned sunlight. The designers of the meeting house knew that the building needed more than "spiritual light" to illuminate the worshippers, for unlike the cold dark meeting houses of the past, this new style of architecture bathed the interior in light. Moreover, this warming sunlight would doubtlessly be a considerable comfort in the cold, blustery days of winter. Altogether there are 38 windows, each containing 28 panes of seven-by-nine-inch glass. Behind the pulpit is a palladian window of 34 panes. Altogether



*The goblet pulpit and sounding board in the Old Meeting House.
Photograph by Peter E. Randall.*

there are 1,080 panes of glass within the building, which from dawn to dusk allow the worshipper enough natural light to read his Psalter without the aid of candle or lamp. An estimated one-third of the window panes appears to be contemporary with the 1774 construction date.

Pews

Scattered throughout the hall are 53 sheep-pen family pews. In the center of the ground floor are 12 pews on either side of the grand alley leading to the pulpit. Each pew is almost six foot square and is raised about eight inches off the floor. Along the outside perimeter of the ground floor are 20 more pews, each a little smaller than the center ones. These outside pews are raised about a foot off the floor. In the gallery, the 18 pews are elevated three feet above the second floor to allow for a clear view of the pulpit.

All of the pews seem to have been built during the 1773–74 phase of construction, except for those in the center of the ground floor. Ori-

nally there were benches in this area to provide for general seating. As more and more families wanted to purchase their own pews, this area was divided up. By 1793, it appears that the entire ground floor consisted of family pews.

Surrounding each of the pews is a three-foot-high wall. In this way, each worshipper is shut inside a little room set apart from his neighbor. To gain entrance to the pew one has to open a small hinged door. The reason for these walls and doors was primarily to serve as a draft-barrier during the long cold season. The walls also allowed the children to play or sleep on the floor without being observed by the entire congregation. Because each family legally owned its own pew, it may also be that the pew walls served as boundary markers and thus were as reassuring to the pew owner as stone walls were to the landowner.

Each of the family pews have board seats that are hinged to the walls so that during the long standing times, the worshipper could fold up the seat and lean his body against the wall. This would certainly be a comfort during the pastoral prayer, which often required the congregation to stand for half an hour. As soon as the prayer was over, the seats would be dropped to their normal position. It has long been said that parishioners would slam their seat down very hard to signify their displeasure in having had to stand for so long. The noise, it was told, was deafening.

There is sufficient room in the center of each pew for a few chairs to be placed, and foot rests are fastened to the walls of some of the pews. A few of the pews have arm rests nailed to the walls, presumably an aid to the fathers when writing down their sermon notes. It is entirely possible for a dozen people to be crowded into a single family pew.

Additional seating in the meeting house was provided by a long double row of built-in plank benches along the east and west front edges of the balcony—one side was for the boys, the other for the girls. It can be imagined that the view across the balcony would be of more appeal than watching the pastor pounding his pulpit. At the north end of each of the benches is a small enclosed pew. These were the slave pews. The town never had a large slave population—probably never more than a very few at any given time—and so those pews never had much use. Tradition says that newly married couples would be allowed to occupy the slave pew on the Sunday following their wedding, and it was expected that during the sermon the couple would stand on the pew seat and display their finery for the whole congregation. The pastor was supposed to continue preaching as if nothing was happening.

The ground floor pew to the immediate west of the pulpit was

traditionally reserved for the pastor's wife and family, and directly in front of the pulpit was the bench where the two deacons sat facing the congregation. A folding table top of marble-painted wood covered the front of the pew. This was where the deacons set communion and where the church members would come one at a time to deposit their tithes and offerings in full view of the rest of the congregation. In the second pew to the west of the pulpit is a board fastened to the side of a pew. The knife marks and knife holder tell all that this is where the communion bread was cut two hundred years ago.

Along the front rows of the lower box pews is a plank bench which traditionally has been designated as the free bench. There the poor and elderly could sit without being compelled to purchase a pew of their own. There are those who claim that repentant sinners would be made to sit on this bench as part of their penance. The bench is incredibly uncomfortable. A beam extends the whole length of the back rest and cuts sharply into the back of anyone who sits there. It is not known if this tortuous design is accidental or on purpose.

The front rows of the southern gallery was originally for the young unmarried ladies of the parish. In 1778, it was voted by the town meeting that men could join the ladies in this section to form a choir. This so-called singing pew must have proved too popular with the young people, because in 1781 the town voted to abolish it. It was reinstated in 1788 and voted out again in 1794. It was apparently started up once more as it was abolished a third time in 1798. The pew was removed circa 1860 when a pump organ was installed.

The Pulpit

As the visitor enters the building via the south door, he is immediately confronted by the sight of the great pulpit looming at the end of the grand alley. Certainly it is successful in creating a feeling of awe on those who walk down the center aisle past the sheep-pen pews and the turned marble-painted posts. With each step, the pulpit grows in height. The tall pulpit is entered by climbing a narrow stairway of ten steps and then passing through a pew door. In the pulpit pew there is room for three men to sit while a fourth stands and preaches. Former Governor Thomson, during an Old Home Day speech, said that from the pulpits great height he felt he was standing very close to Heaven.

The pastor in the pulpit is 11 feet above the floor of the meeting house and almost at eye level with those in the balcony. The elevated pulpit assured that everyone could see the preacher and that there were no

bad seats in the house. It is said that once during a fit of exuberant preaching, the pastor knocked the large altar bible off the pulpit. It fell straight down and struck a deacon squarely on the head. To the amazement of everybody, the poor deacon wasn't killed instantly by the falling book. Instead he was just knocked a bit groggy by the word of the Lord.

The style of this altar is known as a goblet pulpit and is fairly common among the so-called "type two" meeting houses. Its form rather resembles the chalice used during Holy Communion. The deacon's communion table is like the plate used to hold the element of bread during communion.

Suspended from the ceiling high above the pulpit is an elaborate piece of woodwork called a sounding board. This hemisphere of raised paneling was supposed to aid the acoustics of the building. It is secured to the frame of the building by wrought-iron brackets and is 19 feet above the floor. It is easy to imagine a child sitting in the congregation getting fidgety as the service goes into its second hour. In his imagination, he changes the sounding board into a candle snuffer and down it comes and extinguishes the pastor.

The pulpit and sounding board are stained a reddish brown to resemble either cedar or cherry. The front of the gallery, which is also that same color, has its brown hue broken by pilasters of wood painted to resemble marble. The palladian window on the rear of the pulpit is also flanked by marble-colored pilasters. The sunlight streaming from this window into the darkened auditorium must have made the preacher a glowing God-like apparition.

Directly facing the pulpit, nailed to the gallery wall, is a small board painted black containing an extremely fine example of calligraphy. In gold letters it proclaims that "This church was founded in 1759 and this house was built in 1774." This dedication plaque is to remind the pastor that the meeting house is only a building; it is the people who are the true Church of Jesus Christ.

Nineteenth Century Preaching

With the death of the Congregational Society after 1800, the meeting house was apportioned between a number of denominations. Each body of believers were given the use of the Old Meeting House for a set number of Sundays each year. A group of followers would hire a local or itinerant minister of like faith to preach on their turn at the pulpit. The schedule given below is for 1835-36, the last year the Methodists were without their own meeting house.

Division of the Meeting House for 1835–36

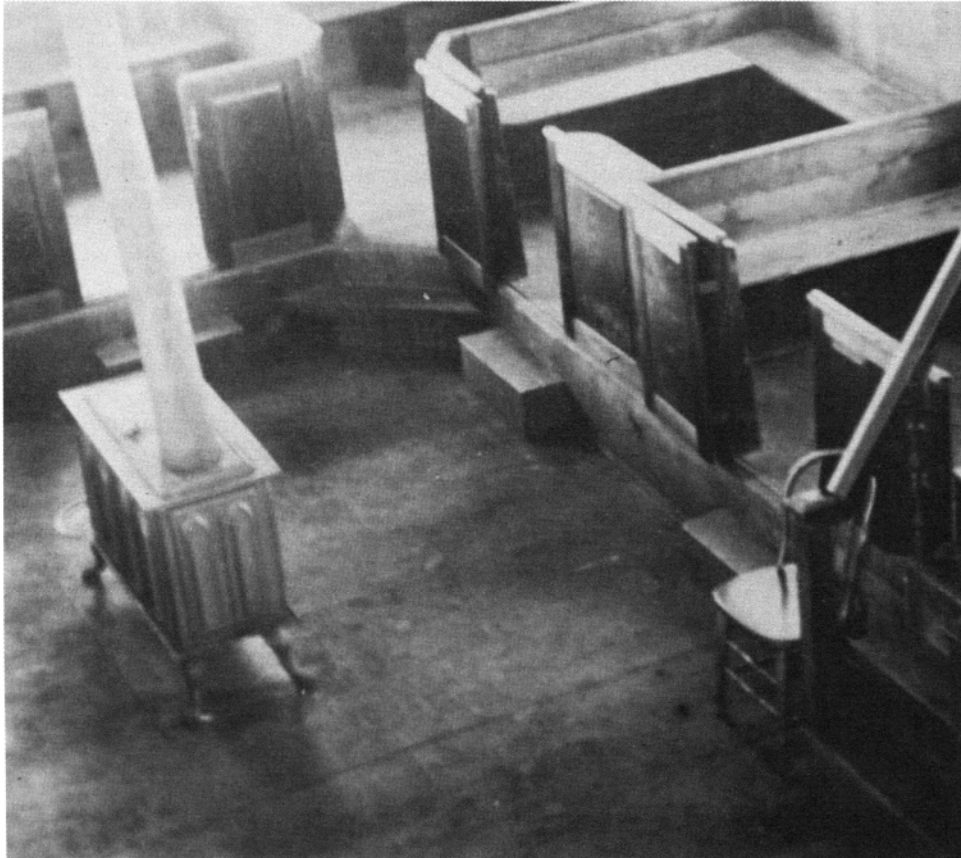
May 3, 10	Congregationalist	November 1, 8	Congregationalist
17	Methodist	15	Universalist
24	Free Will Baptist	22	Free Will Baptist
31	Calvin Baptist	29	Congregationalist
June 7, 14	Congregationalist	December 6	Congregationalist
21	Universalist	13, 20	Methodist
28	Free Will Baptist	27	Congregationalist
July 5	Methodist	January 3	Congregationalist
12	Universalist	10, 17	Methodist
19, 26	Congregationalist	24, 31	Congregationalist
August 2	Methodist	February 7	Free Will Baptist
9, 16	Congregationalist	14	Calvin Baptist
23	Methodist	21	Methodist
30	Free Will Baptist	28	Congregationalist
September 6	Universalist	March 5	Congregationalist
13, 20	Congregationalist	12	Free Will Baptist
27	Calvin Baptist	19	Congregationalist
October 4	Universalist	26	Methodist
11	Free Will Baptist	April 2	Congregationalist
18	Universalist	9	Free Will Baptist
25	Methodist	16	Calvin Baptist
		23	Congregationalist

Dozens of different preachers came from nearby towns to preach to their denominations on Sundays at the Old Meeting House, and the practice continued during much of the nineteenth century.

Several times during the nineteenth century, a preacher of major fame came to this remote town to speak at the Old Meeting House. In 1829–31, Thomas Whittemore (1800–1861) made numerous visits to the church. He was the leading Universalist theologian of his day, as well as being an editor, a railroad president, and a financier. When he came to Sandown, he was so impressed with the Old Meeting House that he named the rise “Zion’s Hill.” On one speaking occasion, he was backed by a choir and orchestra led by former resident Gardner Wood. Another Universalist leader, Reverend Hosea Ballou (1796–1861), the first president of Tufts College, was also an occasional preacher in Sandown.

Toward the latter part of the century, the Old Meeting House became a stopover for Mary A. R. Livermore (1820–1905). She was one of America’s most famous platform speakers who, through her lecture tours, had developed a large national following. The major thrust of her talks was women’s rights and temperance. She was to speak in Sandown six times between 1880 and 1884.

According to contemporary newspaper accounts, one of her visits generated the largest crowd ever to assemble in the town. Reportedly,



The interior of the Old Meeting House circa 1900 showing the woodstove that was removed in 1929.

men and women from 12 different area towns came to Sandown just to hear her speak. One of the speeches she gave in Sandown, entitled "The Battle of Life," is printed in her autobiography, *The Story of My Life*.

Stoves

For the first 50 years after 1774, there was no heat in the old building. Those who demanded warmth during the cold season had to bring portable charcoal stoves, small, pierced tin boxes encased in a wooden frame. Filled with hot coals right before the service, they might give off heat for over an hour. According to legend, there was an outdoor fireplace in the meeting house yard where the worshippers could replenish their supply of hot coals at noontime.

The first request for a meeting house stove was made at the town meeting of 1825. It was turned down cold. The next winter must have been a particularly harsh one because then the voters warmed up to the idea and voted to install a stove. It was purchased from C.B. Bosquit for \$48.35. The story has been passed down about a female member of the anti-stove faction who put on a public display of being faint from the heat given off by the new stove. It was later revealed that there was actually no fire in the stove at the time.

A second stove was installed in the meeting house in 1839 by Nathaniel Clark and Josiah Clough. Apparently the two did this on their own and without the authorization of anyone. The town meeting refused to pay Clark and Clough for their outlay. The town also knew a good thing when they had it and refused to allow the two to reclaim their stove.

These two stoves heated the building until 1879 when the town replaced them with two new stoves. These small six-plate units would remain until they were moved to the new town hall in 1929. There, they continued to be used until the mid-1950s, when they were replaced by a modern oil system.

The two stoves in the Old Meeting House were connected by a black stove pipe which went across the front of the pulpit area and then met and ascended straight up to the attic. In the attic, the pipe was attached to a freestanding brick chimney. The chief reminder of these stoves are a pair of burn marks on the floor where the stoves used to stand. Directly in front of the pulpit, the floor is stained black from soot coming out of the stove pipe. In the ceiling the stump of the pipe can still be seen. The chimney is now gone and has been replaced by a sky light.

Preserving the Building

The fact that the Old Meeting House has been so perfectly preserved is chiefly the result of benign neglect. The voters and their elected leaders have basically always left the building alone. They would maintain it, keep a roof on it, and slap a coat of paint on the clapboards but never vote any money for improvement. It is unknown if this hands-off policy was due to Yankee stinginess or because they wanted their meeting house left exactly the way their fathers had built it.

Regardless of the reasons why the meeting house has been preserved, the building is truly a capsule view of times past. It stands unchanged as a monument to the ten generations of men and women, who successively preserved, protected, and honored this house on Zion's Hill.

In 1857, the town meeting turned down a petition to alter the Old

Meeting House into a meeting hall and town hall. A similar request was made in 1868. In that year, the petitioners wanted to remove the balcony and replace it with a second floor. The pulpit and its sounding board would be ripped out and probably sold as scrap lumber. They proposed that with some effort the meeting house could be better designed for "religious services and also a hall for the purpose of holding town meetings, scientific lectures, and political meetings." This modernization scheme was turned down by the voters. The iconoclasts tried again in 1876 and lost by a vote of 54-61. A shift of only four votes would have robbed the future of one of its most remarkable pieces of public architecture.

As the years passed, the town began to appreciate the value of its Old Meeting House. The first actual bequest occurred in 1879 when Mrs. Joanna Peters of Cincinnati, Ohio, donated \$200 for the perpetual care of the grave of her grandparents, Benjamin and Polly Carlton. She stipulated that any surplus interest would be used to keep the Old Meeting House in repair. This trust does not seem to be a still active account in the town's trust funds.

In 1884, a grand levee and oyster supper was held to raise money to preserve the building. The organizers pledged these funds to "keep it as our fathers kept it—a place to worship God." Three hundred people came to the gala. Kerosene lamps were set in each of the windows. The music was provided by Berg and Towles' Orchestra of Haverhill, Massachusetts. Everyone was invited to put their name on an autograph quilt at ten cents a name. It would later be awarded to Mrs. Emma C. Sanborn. Later, a recitation called "The Smack in School" was offered by Miss Gordon of Haverhill. When, at the end of the night, the money was counted, it was discovered that \$150 had been collected.

After the town moved its town meetings in 1929 from the Old Meeting House to its new town hall, the old building ceased to have any active town function. On September 20, 1929, a group met to form The Old Meeting House Historical Association, with the stated goal of maintaining the building for the benefit of the future residents of the town. The first officers were Dr. Willis P. Odell, President; Bernard A. Love, Vice President; Daniel A. McKay, Secretary-Treasurer; and Mrs. Gertrude Langley and Mrs. Edna French, Auditors. The other charter members were Albert Langley, C. Burlon French, Clarence I. Drowne, Thomas R. Shaw, Ralph S. Sherbert, Woodbury Pervere, Ralph E. Kelley, Raymond K. Bassett, Mrs. John D. Kelley, and Miss Lena M. Kelley. As of this writing (1988), only Mr. Sherbert still survives as a charter member. A lifetime membership can still be purchased by paying one dollar to

the Association Treasurer. There are no annual dues.

Aided by various fund-raising programs, the Association has made the Old Meeting House their only project. Many of the spindles in the pews and stairs have been stolen over the years by visitors. A number of the pew doors were missing. One pew was completely destroyed during a town meeting melee. The Old Meeting Association employed craftsman Malcolm McGregor, Jr. in 1982 to reproduce and replace the spindles and pew doors. Those who donated \$50 toward the project got to have their name inscribed on a pew door of their choice. In 1974 and 1984, local artist Arlene Holmes Bassett designed commemorative plates to raise money for the Association. In 1974 the Association organized a townwide celebration of the building's 200th birthday. Governor Mel Thomson spoke to a large crowd on that occasion.

Old Home Day

For every year within the present century, the Old Meeting House has been central to the celebration of "Old Home Day." The event has always been a time for former residents to return to the town of their childhood. Old Home Day was also a day for the townspeople to gather together to honor their town's past and to pray for their future. The gathering site has always been the Old Meeting House.

Toward the end of the 19th century, there was a movement to establish an Old Home Day in every town in the state. Each year, more and more towns were on the list. Sandown was rather late in the parade of towns that instituted the celebration. The first meeting to investigate the possibility of having a celebration of Old Home Day was in July 1901. A committee was formed, led by Mrs. Nellie Sanborn and George Washington Hunt, which set aside August 24, 1901, for the town's first Old Home Day. The group knew full well that they were starting a tradition. On August 16, they extended their hopes that next year the visitors could come to the town on the newly proposed electric trolley line.

The first celebration began on Friday night with a bonfire on Griffin's Hill. The next morning, the crowds began to arrive early at the center of the town. The passengers on the 10:00 a.m. train were met by a brass band and wagons to carry them to James Hunkin's Grove on nearby Lake Phillips. At the grove, a stage was built with a palladian arch festooned with flags, hemlock boughs, and flowers. The sign over the stage simply said "Welcome Home." The morning was spent in sports and conversation.

At noontime, a dinner called "a collation with waiters" was

served, and at two in the afternoon, there were speeches on the history of the town and group singing. In a baseball game against Hampstead Peak, the Sandown team won 11-9. In the evening, despite rain showers, 19 couples danced to the music of Edny's Orchestra.

That Sunday in 1901 was marked by a gathering of 300 at the Old Meeting House. A sermon preached by the Reverend A. B. Howard of Danville concluded the Old Home Day activities for that first year. The spirit of the festivities is captured in a poem by Mrs. Cyrus W. Hill of Chester entitled "Old Home Day."

The day was bright, the skies were clear,
All things in glad array
When Sandown called her children home
To celebrate "Old Home Day."

From North and South and East and West
They came with happy hearts.
A crowd of pilgrims seeking rest
In joy to take a part.

By Phillips Lake, a sparkling gem
Where freshening winds stole o'er
And fanned with softest gale the crowd
That gathered on the shore.

Upon its rippling surface plied
The boats with pennants gay.
A race was on and merry shouts
Greet the winner of the day.

A royal welcome Sandown gave
Her children all that day.
Remembered long will be the scene
When we are far away.

Friends greeted friends, hearts spoke to hearts
In love and loyalty,
To the fair old town, the good old town
Place of nativity.

Sweet music floated on the breeze,
What memories were mine,
As on the air there floated far
The strains of "Auld Lang Sine."

But all too soon the bright hours fled
Fair lake good bye to you.

We part with hope and courage strong
Till Nineteen hundred two

With such a successful first year, there was no doubt that Old Home Day would be rescheduled each year there after.

After 1929, the annual Old Home Day would be under the control of the Old Meeting House Association. During most years, it would be the only service held at the old building. The silence during the rest of the year was broken only by the occasional tourist or wedding. In recent years, the Methodists have been holding a Thanksgiving service at the meeting house.

One of the most important facets of Old Home Day was the opportunity to hear a prominent cleric or politician. Since 1901, there have been more than a hundred of these speakers. By profession they are a varied lot indeed. Among the speechmakers and sermonizers have been Ambassador to Great Britain John G. Winant, Army General Charles F. Bowen, Senator H. Styles Bridges, Historian Leon Anderson, and Bishop Edwin Hughes of Chicago. Occasionally, the speaking task has been given to local talent such as the Reverends John Rae Chapman and Ronald Pinard.

During the economic hard times of the Depression, the Old Home Day speakers were a major drawing card. After a huge crowd in 1935, it was decided to have two services each Old Home Day—a religious meeting in the morning and a patriotic service in the afternoon. The old hearse house behind the meeting house was converted into lavatory facilities. The 1936 gathering attracted a crowd of 2,000. Several hundred drove by without stopping, being put off by the large crowd although additional seating was provided on benches outside the meeting house. A rented sound truck provided amplification to those who were forced to sit outside.

During the second World War the numbers attending Old Home Day began to decline. Gas rationing and war work was given as the excuse for the erosion in the crowd. During the decades that followed, the numbers still continued to sink. Despite the procuring of excellent speakers, such as *Christian Science Monitor* editor Erwin Cannon and former Governor Wesley Powell, only a hundred or so would show up for the services. By 1968, it was decided to revert to a single service. At noon-time, those few who came would enjoy the traditional dinner offered by the good women of the Methodist Church.

The reasons behind the decline in attendance at the Old Home Day service are varied and complex. Two explanations stand out: (1)

many of the older residents have retired to warmer regions that are far away from the cold of Sandown, and (2) many of today's current citizens are Roman Catholics, who feel that the service is a Protestant celebration. Furthermore, it must be realized that 90% of the current residents have lived in the town for only a few years and do not feel Sandown is their "old home." Only the future will answer the basic question as to whether the Old Meeting House Association can keep Old Home Day alive into the twenty-first century.

Fame of the Meeting House

The residents of Sandown have become rather complacent about their Old Meeting House being placed in the national limelight. Among the publications that have printed pictures and articles on the building have been *Yankee*, *Profile*, *Antiques*, and the *Country Journal*. There are also dozens of books and pamphlets that have given special attention to the meeting house. Several photographs of the building were placed on permanent display at the Museum of Immigration at the Statue of Liberty.

During the early years of the depression, Henry Ford offered the town \$40,000 for the building. He wanted to move it to his museum-park at Dearborn, Michigan. Apparently civic pride stood between the auto magnate's offer and the town's need for money, for during those years the town certainly could have used the extra revenue. The man from Detroit did, however, manage to purchase the Clark Mill in Sandown, a coopers shop in Danville, and a house in Derry.

The bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence in 1976 brought new and expanded recognition of the old building. The state of New Hampshire used several photographs of the Old Meeting House in its nationally distributed pamphlet on the state's role in the Revolution. What better symbol for the bicentennial could there be than a meeting house unchanged since the day when Patriot Josiah Bartlett first read the Declaration of Independence from its pulpit.

The actions of the federal government demonstrate well that the Old Meeting House ranks high among the historic and architectural treasures of the nation. During the depression, the W.P.A. sent an architect to make detailed plans of the entire building. These blueprints, which run for dozens of sheets, are deposited in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Copies may be found in the selectmen's office in Sandown and in the New Hampshire Historical Society in Concord.

During the celebrations in 1976, the official National Bicentennial Committee in Washington, D.C., made a motion picture with worldwide

distribution that showed scenes from America's history. The first few minutes of the film were devoted to Sandown's Old Meeting House. That same year, the south doorway of the meeting house was reproduced by a craftsman for the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission. Through this replica passed hundreds of thousands of people to view the exhibit "The World of Franklin and Jefferson." It was displayed throughout Europe and Mexico. In the United States, it drew large crowds in Chicago, Los Angeles, and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. While Sandown always knew her Old Meeting House was something special, it's nice to have that belief confirmed by the larger world.

On August 8, 1937, former Governor Francis P. Murphy spoke to a Old Home Day gathering. He spoke long about the history and beauty of the old building. In closing, he quoted a poem that his secretary, Charles F. Bowen of Manchester, had written for the occasion. This verse does indeed capture the spirit of the building—and the love and respect offered by a town it has served long and well.

Venerable edifice
 Which has cradled God's house
 Wise, old walls
 That have echoed words
 Of the humble and those of fame!
 Impart to us
 from you ancient hoarding
 Of wisdom, increased measure
 Of faith in God.
 Renew your strength, our courage
 Out of your accreted treasure.
 Faith! To accept
 Religion's steady council,
 Guiding when, uncertain, we need light
 Strength! To endure
 The wicked seige which enemies
 Lay against men's every right.
 Courage! To falter not
 In securing more abundant life
 for all, regardless of station
 O Time! Exact light toll
 Of this hallowed milestone
 In a people's path to salvation.