

Construction of the Second Meetinghouse

Anne Krantz, Historian

The May 21 finale of our wonderful year-long 275th celebration of our church's humble founding on September 22, 1741, included a second hour program featuring NH architectural historian James Garvin, who spoke about our present second meetinghouse finished in 1774. Steve Fifield, whose construction company repaired the building sills and roof frame, and rebuilt the steeple in 1999 - 2000, explained this extensive structural restoration.

It is hard to believe that just 20 years after the fourteen families who settled Souhegan West, had grown to 110 resident taxpayers by 1760. Census records show that the booming town had grown to 858 in 1767, to 1,370 in 1773, and by 1775 there were 1,428 people. They had outgrown its first meeting house at Flanders corners. [http://www.nh.searchroots.com/documents/Hillsborough/History_Amherst_NH.txt]

While still a British colony, Amherst voted in 1770 to build an enormous second meetinghouse on the common. The Reverend Daniel Wilkins (1711 – 1784), who wrote and signed the 1741 founding covenant, was still the minister, not being retired until 1775. What a thrill it must have been for him to preach the first sermon on January 19, 1774 in this largest meetinghouse in the region!

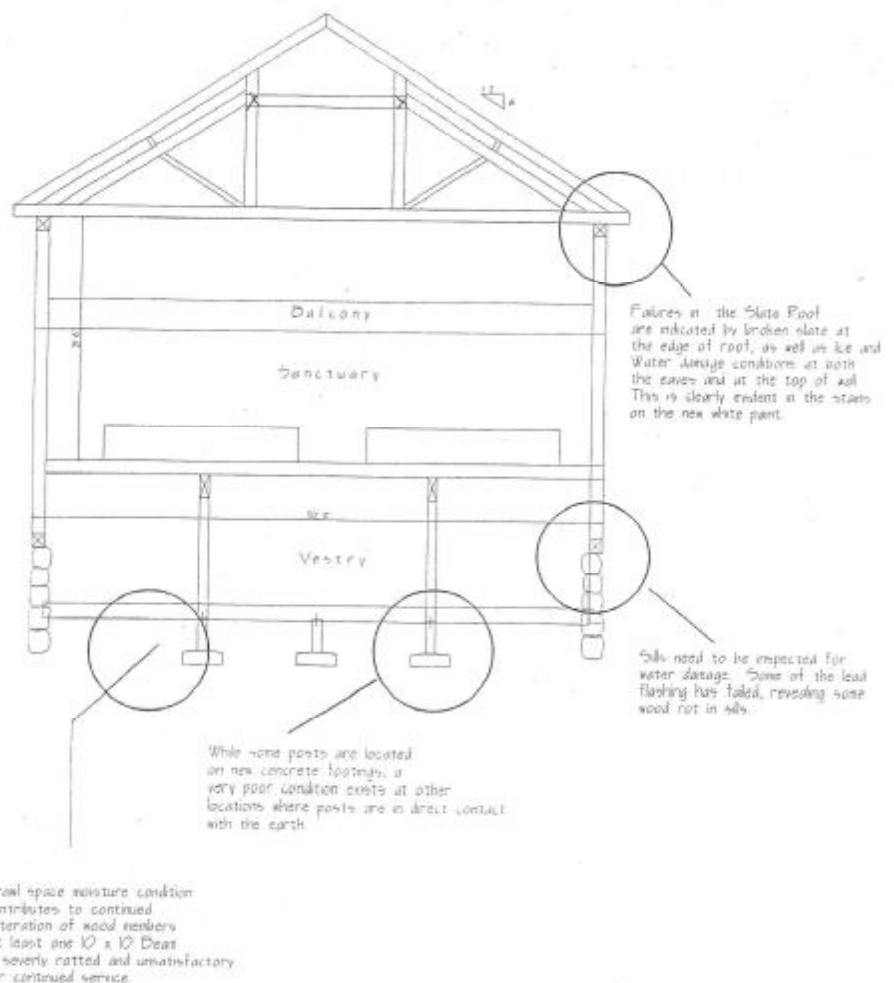
Once Amherst was selected as the shire town for Hillsborough County in 1769, the town anticipated the need for this huge meetinghouse. The young families who settled frontier towns like Amherst were producing lots children who attended services with their parents, filling their pew boxes. Also, what are now neighboring towns, Milford (withdrew in 1782) and Mont Vernon (withdrew in 1781) and the village of Monson, disbanded in 1770, all attended the Amherst church.

On "Oct 4 1770, the town voted to build a meeting-house for public worship 75 feet long and 45 feet wide." Also "to raise 150 pounds lawful money, to defray the expense of building said house." On October 25, they voted to reduce the dimensions to 70 feet x 40 feet, but added a steeple at one end and a porch at the other end. [Secomb, pg. 237] (Somehow these dimensions were altered and our meetinghouse is 50 feet wide and 75 feet long not including the 14 foot square steeple). The original structure on the common was about 42 feet tall to the ridge pole, but raised 8 feet when it was moved to its present location. Now it is 50 feet to the ridge pole, resulting in symmetrical and pleasing proportions on the gable end: 50'tall x 50'wide, with a 100' steeple.

The town voted to proceed with the project, after due discussion on October 4, 1770. But more discussion and legal maneuvering followed at several town meetings, where on March 11, 1771 a proposition was made "to reconsider the vote already passed for setting said house on the plain." Legal shenanigans are nothing new! This proposal was rejected along with others to stop or alter the building project and the building committee proceeded. [Secomb pg. 239]

Post and beam construction permitted huge open interior spaces with no interior supports. The six roof trusses and the two gable ends hold up the eight 50 foot long ceiling tie beams that connect to the side plates. This construction was only possible because virgin timber was still to be found. Virgin white pine was much denser than pine lumber of today because it grew slowly in the shady forests. These huge straight timbers were used for the critical load bearing posts and beams, as well as for the hundreds of additional timbers required.

The first task of our church deacon and master builder Ephraim Baker was to locate in the surrounding forests the timbers for the long plates and sills: four seventy-five foot long, by 18 inch square, straight timbers. Transporting these monster logs, weighing tons, from the forest to the site was done in



the winter when the ground was icy and oxen and dragging sleds could be used. Nevertheless it seems impossible.

Unbelievably, the timbers were hewn, the trusses prefabricated and the frame was ready to be raised by August 26, 1771. So the wood was still fairly green and heavy. Beams 12 inches square were used and a single beam could weigh over a ton at 50-60 pounds per cubic foot! Furthermore, all this weight balances precariously on the four corner posts. All the framing was held together with mortise and tenon joints and wooden pegs. Great skill was required to make the mortises, the rectangular holes or pockets that receive the tenon, as these naturally weaken the beams. How did they ever raise the frame, and how did they ever get the six tie beams that connected the two side frames at the ceiling level lifted in place, not to mention jack up the six roof trusses which could weigh 10,000 pounds each? The tower is constructed of four 13 inches square posts, fifty feet tall and over a ton each. Having the tall tower posts at one end probably was helpful in hauling up beams, but no records remain, and exact techniques are unknown. [Reference: *Colonial Meeting-Houses in New Hampshire*, Eva A. Speare, pgs. 25 – 29.]

There was a virtual building boom of huge meetinghouses in our region: the Jaffrey building of 1775 is similar in size and design to ours, with a steeple 'porch' at one end the way our's originally was built in 1774. The Jaffrey meetinghouse has an elaborate clock and bell tower but a much shorter steeple. It is said that the workers could hear the guns of the Revolution as they hurriedly finished the tower and steeple.

For an interesting comparison of area meetinghouses, read Mr. Garvin's REPORT ON THE GROTON TOWN HOUSE GROTON, NEW HAMPSHIRE https://www.nh.gov/nhdhr/publications/documents/groton_townhouse.pdf.

Groton church – forty-two by fifty-three feet
The meeting house in Amherst, built in 1771, measured forty by seventy feet. The meeting house of 1773 in Wilton Center measured forty-five by sixty feet. Both were considered unusually large for rural meeting houses of their period.

The meeting house in Hampstead (1749) measures forty by fifty feet,
that in Danville (1755) measures thirty-seven by forty-nine feet,
that in Sandown (1770) measures forty-four by fifty feet,
that in Jaffrey Center (1775) measures sixty by sixty-five feet,
that in Washington (1789) measures forty-five by sixty feet,
that in Lempster (1794) measures forty by fifty feet,
and that in Fremont (1799) measures thirty-seven by forty-seven feet.

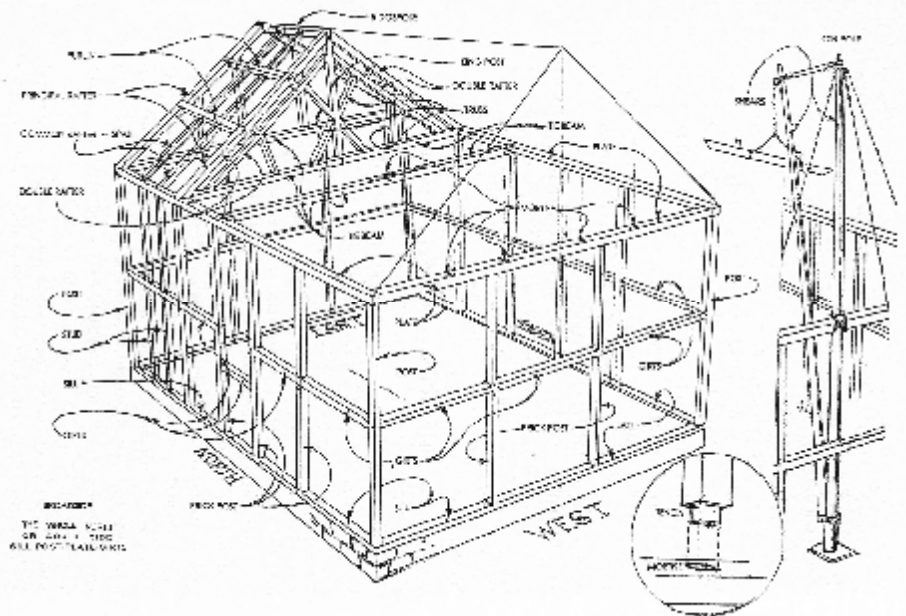


FIGURE 1. The parts of a meetinghouse frame. Drawing by John W. Hatch.