



The Amherst meetinghouse as it may have looked from 1774 - 1836, as depicted by an artist named Avery in 1975. The main entrance was along the south side, opposite the pulpit on the north side, so the steeple faced west, which was the custom. Note all the windows in the tower and building that were removed when the gable end that now was the front, was rebuilt straight across.

Getting Ready to Move

Anne Krantz, Historian

Moving our huge meetinghouse from town property on the common to its new location across Church Street entailed careful preparation, including selling unneeded building parts and digging and building a new foundation. Daniel Secomb, in his *History of the Town of Amherst*, devotes an entire chapter to the Second Meeting-house. It is a chronology of meeting records that provide some details leading up to the sale of the 'house' to the Congregational Church and Society in 1832. [pgs. 244 – 247]

Going back a decade, it is interesting that at the March 1821 town meeting, the town voted to shingle the meetinghouse and repair the clapboarding and doors, also to paint the building. A committee was appointed to "procure the work done. They were also authorized to examine the steeple, and, if they thought proper, take it down and build a cupola in its place." No further mention of how or why they decided to leave it, but what a close call—Amherst could have lost its iconic steeple!!! That the town considered such a drastic option indicates that the cost of maintaining the meetinghouse was considered a burden by some taxpayers.

The passage of the New Hampshire Toleration Act in 1819 ended the practice of towns paying the salary of the 'settled minister.' Existing ministers were grandfathered, which meant that Reverend Nathan Lord was paid by the town until he resigned in 1828. That year, the church formed a 'society' to support a minister by collecting a minister tax from its members. (See *June*

2016 Spire.) After the passage of the Toleration Act, new denominations and religions began to be organized in Amherst: The Universalist Society in 1819, followed by Baptists in 1824, Methodists in 1829, and others. The Congregational Church no longer had a monopoly, explaining the lack of interest from members of these new denominations to continue to pay taxes to support the established town minister and church.

This sentiment culminated in a movement to sell the building at the March 14, 1832 town meeting. Appropriate articles were in the warrant calling the meeting, and they passed: The town voted to sell the meetinghouse at auction, with the following reservations:

- The town reserved the right to use the house for all town meetings.
- The town reserved the bell, clocks, belfry or tower, the purchaser to have the right to pass and repass through the west doors, as now used, also the right to ring the bell for funerals, public worship... (The building, when on the common, was positioned with the gable ends facing east and west with the main entrance on the south side as shown above.) The steeple was at the west end.
- The rights of owners of pews in the house were reserved to them, and the owners of the organ and stoves were to have the right to remove their property from the house.
- The house would revert to the town if not kept in repair.
- Before the sale the pews were to be appraised... and the purchaser, before receiving his deed, was to take and pay for all such pews as the owner might wish to sell, provided...
- The purchaser was to receive a deed with the above reservations and conditions as soon as the pews were paid for, and receive possession at the time of receiving his deed.
- If the buyer did not comply in 15 days, the deed would go to the next lowest bidder and so and on... but not for less than \$100.

A committee as appointed to carry out the above pew sale transactions. Katrina Holman who researched the deed, found this: "The Committee appointed by the vote aforesaid having caused all the pews in said Meetinghouse to be appraised according to the fifth condition of said vote and advertised said house to be sold at public auction on Saturday 14 th April (1832) instant at 4 o'clock afternoon, offered said House for sale at that time at public auction, and it was struck off to "The Congregational Church & Society of Amherst" for the sum of \$100 said Society being the highest bidder – and the Committee of said Society having paid to us for said Town the sum of \$100 and purchased and paid for all the pews offered for sale under said 5 th condition."

The huge building was valued less than the pew boxes! The requirement to move it was a staggering problem and financial factor, and townsfolks already discovered that it was a white-elephant to maintain. But fortunately the town accepted the maintenance of the tower and steeple with its continued ownership.