

Balconies Before and After Moving the Meetinghouse in 1836

Anne Krantz, Historian

The move, reorientation and rebuilding of the meetinghouse in 1836 entailed redesigning the interior to correspond to its new south gable entrance. Consistent with the Greek Revival architecture style that was at the height of its popularity at that time, the floor plan was changed to an assembly hall layout. The old box pews were replaced with benches in rows facing the pulpit at the north end of the sanctuary, the same as today.

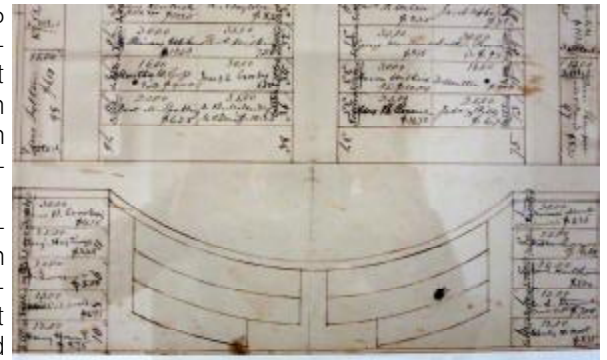
The original 1774 meetinghouse, when on the common, had a balcony around three sides: the two east, west gable ends, and the long south wall opposite the pulpit. The access to the balcony seating was by a staircase in the east porch (a two-story bump out), and a staircase in the west tower. Before moving the meetinghouse, the porch was detached and sold to Hugh Moore for \$15. (See framed documents across from the office, *3 Receipts for Moving the Meeting house in 1836*). The pews in the balcony are shown on the pew chart of 1774 -1836. This and three subsequent pew charts hang in the hallway by the main office. The 1774 chart shows the two levels of pews in two drawings on the chart, one above the other. They are oriented crosswise on the page, because at that time the pulpit was along the long north wall. The pulpit is at the top, now a hole in the paper, with the pews facing the pulpit. Look below this ground-floor drawing for the bottom schematic drawing of the balcony or gallery pews; a single row of pews along three walls. The three later charts show a balcony at the bottom of the page, over the front entry. The center of the balcony is represented by curved lines with no owner names, in the center, unfinished balcony area.

When the meetinghouse was moved and pivoted so the previous west gable or steeple end faced south (the street), the steeple end was redesigned with a flat front. The corners were extended to line up with the front of the tower which added more space inside. The straight, flat front with the gable superimposed on the tower gave the building the Greek Revival look. The added space provided the entry space for the two additional front doors and the hallway at the top of the stairs on the sanctuary level. The staircases leading to the balcony are in each corner. These steep and narrow stairways are unchanged since 1836, according to Charlie Vars who rebuilt the balcony in 1997. He explained that in 1997, the center of the balcony remained as it was left in 1836: an empty, unfinished space. At some point a wall was installed across the balcony lined up with the two tower posts cutting off all but two rows of balcony pews, as shown in the photo to the right.

But by the time Charlie joined in 1975 this partition had been removed, exposing the unfinished center balcony area; a primitive and unsafe situation. Access was by an aisle from the top of each stairs, running along the side of the pews with steps going down to the bottom pew. There were only four bench pews remaining, because one row had been removed for the wall. A row was added - the one with the panel end. These pews had doors and the hinge cutouts can still be seen. Doors were a good idea because the aisle ramp had no railing, and the center balcony space was the level of the narthex ceiling below that created a significant drop from the top of the stairs

In 1979 Charlie recruited a team of volunteers to finally build the center balcony seating. This was a major construction project because the floor in the center space was failing and couldn't support any weight. They attached huge wooden beams to the steeple posts and hung the cross beams for a solid floor. The tiered risers for the pews were built on top. The Varses donated the new center pews adding lots more seating. These four rows of new pew benches provide seating for 50 to 60.

The front side of the balcony wall with the lovely paneling is the same as it looked in 1836. The 1774 meetinghouse gallery/balcony at this west tower end would have been inside our present sanctuary, in front of the tower. Now the balcony is pushed back under the tower; the huge pillars toward the front of the balcony hide the original 13" square posts holding up the tower. The other two tower posts are enclosed in the front walls.



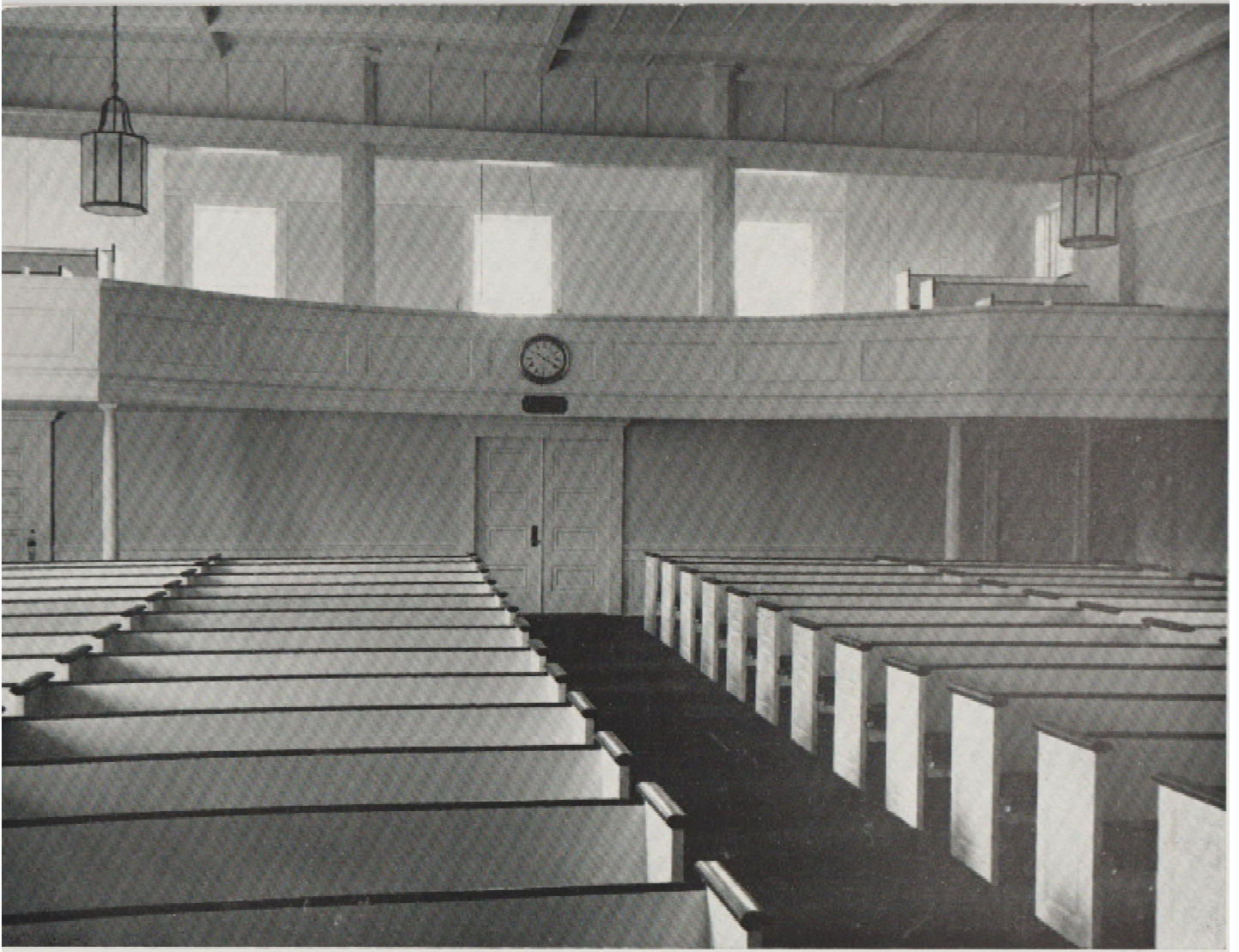
Pew Chart



Balcony with Wall



Balcony Today



Balcony 1950