

Mr. Towne Redecorates Sanctuary in 1902

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Benefactor James W. Towne, who was born in Amherst, but moved to East Orange, New Jersey, maintained ties and affection for his hometown. In 1902 he offered to remodel the interior of the church:

"Mr. Towne made overtures to the church suggesting these changes, offering to bear the total expense of the same, if the pew holders would cooperate with this, so far as to take measures looking to the ultimate surrendering of the individual ownership of the pews. This being accomplished, he sent from New York an architect who had made plans and suggestions for a complete remodeling of the interior of the church without in any way disturbing its general style and shape...Towne has a committee to co-operate with him to bring this result about."

"The extensive changes involved a new steel ceiling, redecoration of interior throughout, oak wainscoting and heavy oak doors, solid oak pews upholstered in Egyptian red plush; red body Brussels carpet; oak pulpit furniture upholstered in red, vestibule and Sunday school rooms remodeled and hall fitted with Florentine glass; hall and stairs re-carpeted; and all thoroughly painted and finished to match."

This extensive remodeling was completed in a just a few months and the building was reopened on November 9, 1902, with a special service that included ministers from all over the region. "The result of this (renovation) has been to give the people an elegant appearing place of worship to compare to any newly constructed church in the state." [Cabinet, Nov.13, 1902]

Although he did not reveal his personal cost, estimates were from \$4,000–\$5,000, which would be in the \$125,000–\$150,000 range in today's money. Mr. Towne made several visits to supervise the work and order changes as necessary to assure the completion in the fashion he desired. [A Sleeping Town Awakens, 1881 – 1882, Amherst Historical Society, pg. 38.]

Note in the photo the improvements mentioned, especially the painted design on the border of the steel ceiling. The postcard photos of the church from 1874–1902 show a white metal ceiling with the lowered ceiling edge similar to the way it looks now. The photo shows that the former Gothic Revival style pulpit furniture with sharply pointed backs of the chairs, was replaced with rounded chair backs, and grooved fluting decoration on the furniture wherever possible. According to the period post cards, the gas chandelier that was shown in the 1874–1902 postcard was left as is by Mr. Towne. The curious 'flying' cross seems to have literally flown away. It does not appear in some the photos of this Towne décor. This sanctuary look remained until 1950, "when members, whose tastes then differed from Towne's "modern" ones of 1902, had it restored to a Colonial motif." [A Sleeping Town Awakens, Pg. 39.]

Tastes changed so much that not one piece of the Towne furniture survived. This suggests that the postwar congregation of 1950s was able to sell all the sturdy oak furniture and pews. Perhaps it is serving in another NH church today.



James W. Towne



Pulpit 1902–1916