

Meetinghouse Chapter from:

MARSHAL  
THE  
WILLING FORCES

A CENTENNIAL HISTORY OF THE  
JAFFREY CENTER VILLAGE  
IMPROVEMENT SOCIETY

BY  
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JAFFREY CENTER VILLAGE IMPROVEMENT SOCIETY  
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## Chapter 4

# The Meetinghouse

*“The old meeting-house,  
surrounded by its green Common,  
with its ‘Verry Great Mountain’  
beyond, still stands as true of line  
as when the builders raised it . . . it  
is the town’s dearest possession.”*

—Albert Annett, *History of Jaffrey, New Hampshire*. Vol. I, p. 198.



TWO BUILDINGS have been central to the life and focus of the Society from its outset a hundred years ago right up to the present: The Meetinghouse and Melville Academy. First, the Meetinghouse.

Most everyone in Jaffrey knows something of its history: That its frame went up on the day of the Battle of Bunker Hill . . . and that the workers could hear the sound of the cannon in far away Charlestown. That it was first a church and a place for Town Meeting; then it housed the town offices and the high school; then it sat largely unused; and then it was refurbished and renovated to its appearance today. Jaffrey historian Albert Annett referred to the Meetinghouse as the town's 'dearest possession.' The founders of the VIS wouldn't disagree.

When the VIS was formed in 1906, the Meetinghouse—referred to alternatively over the years as the Town House<sup>1</sup>, Town Hall, Old Meeting House, Old Church, etc.—was still the site of Town Meeting and the town offices were still there on the second floor, though Conant High School, on the ground floor, had been relocated to East Jaffrey.<sup>2</sup> The building was also used for the occasional town event or entertainment.

When the interior was reconfigured to accommodate the offices and school in 1870, most of the original features were removed: the pulpit high up by the north wall, the box pews, the center door. "The character and spirit of the interior . . . were utterly destroyed," wrote Albert Annett in the Town History. But, looking back, one later feature was actually an improvement: the clock was added in 1906, the year of the Society's founding.<sup>3</sup>

The first mention of the Meetinghouse in the Society's Minutes was in 1911 when the Rev. Frederick W. Greene complained to the Selectmen that nothing "had been done to protect the building from further defacement by swallows." But in the same year, at the urging of the Society, the Meetinghouse was painted.

The next issue prompting attention was the Town Clock. It was experiencing some difficulties, despite its newness, and Mabelle Cutter was

asked to work up a petition to present to the Selectmen. At a September 1913 meeting at the Fox house

It was reported that the Selectmen had expressed a willingness to repair the tower and steeple of the old church and had employed Mr. Cann to do the work. It appears, however, that through some misunderstanding the desired result is not to be accomplished. It had been intended by the Society that the bell should be provided with an iron yoke. Mr. Cournoyer, who has the care of the clock, was asked to explain to the Selectmen that the Society, in asking that the tower be put in good condition, meant to include specially the thorough equipment of the bell for ringing as in former years as well as for striking the hour, and that it should be in condition to strike the hour in winter as well as in summer.

At the 1914 Annual Meeting it was reported that "Although the town clock does not always strike the hour, Mr. Cournoyer thought the work done by Mr. Cann at the request of the selectmen last fall to be satisfactory."

In 1921, also at the Annual Meeting,

Mrs. Robinson showed a window frame, which was once in the old Church on the side next to the Manse through which the Bell Ringer used to watch for the approach of Rev. Laban Ainsworth, presented by Mr. Mortimer Cutter. It was stated that Miss Swazey has in her possession a fan window which was originally in the old Church which she would probably be willing to give to the Society, and Mrs. Robinson was

appointed to interview Miss Swazey about this window.

These artifacts from the pre-1870 Meetinghouse may have gotten Mrs. Robinson thinking about what would soon become the Society's biggest undertaking, before or since. Later in the meeting, Mrs. Robinson

brought up for discussion the project of the restoration of the interior of the Town Hall, replacing its rather unattractive present appearance, with as much of the original atmosphere when it was a church, as may be practicable, without interfering with its present uses . . . Mrs. Harpham was appointed a Committee with Mrs. Robinson to see Mr. Noone about the old Sounding Board<sup>4</sup> which is understood to be in his barn; also to see Mr. Parker in regard to an Organ formerly used in the Church. Dr. Mills remarked that Mr. Annett is interested in the proposed restoration and would be willing to arouse interest in East Jaffrey. Mrs. Robinson suggested



The Meetinghouse as it was originally designed, after the addition of the Tower in 1822 and before the alterations of 1870.



This is how the Meetinghouse appeared in the early days of the VIS, sometime between 1906—when the clock was added—and 1922. The main doors had been moved one bay to the west when the building was adapted to school and town office use.

that we bear in mind the 150th anniversary of the founding of the town, in 1923, as an appropriate time for our goal in the restoration of the Church . . . On the motion of Mr. Wetherell, it was voted to appoint a Committee to investigate the feasibility of restoring the Church. . .

#### THE 1922 RESTORATION

The committee called for at the 1921 Annual Meeting was duly appointed and got to work.<sup>5</sup>

An architect, Allen W. Jackson<sup>6</sup> of Cambridge, was appointed, and at the 1922 Annual Meeting

Dr. Bixler asked if any estimate had been made of the cost of the restoration of the Old Meeting House, and Mrs. Robinson replied that Mr. Jackson thinks the work may be done for \$6,000. She read the draft of the letter she has prepared to send out to solicit pledges from those interested in Jaffrey, and remarked that even if we have to raise \$5,000, she believes we can do it, to which Dr. Bixler heartily responded—"I believe you can."

The restoration was newsworthy enough to be the subject of a 'Special Dispatch to the Boston Globe' on July 22, 1922. The article's headline read "Boston Summer Folk Mix Play with Work for Old Town Hall." Historical highlights of the Meetinghouse were included and the VIS was described with the Boston connections of the officers indicated.<sup>7</sup> It also went into some of the entertainments planned:

The Greater Bostonians who are summering in this town, enjoying the cool breezes from old Mt. Monadnock, are planning a strenuous season. Teas, parties, dramatics, musicales, lawn fetes, all sorts and conditions of entertainments are to follow each other in rapid succession. Not for the sake of entertaining, not for the sake of showing pretty costumes, not for the sake of social intercourse, but all for the sake of money.

*"It seemed a very large undertaking for so small a society as ours, and there were skeptics who doubted its possibility. But faith can move mountains, and our society undertook the task with high hopes."*

*“It has had a long and honorable career as church, school and Town Hall, and we hope that for many years to come it may serve as a center and stimulus for the best community life.”<sup>8</sup>*

Money with which to restore the interior of the Old Town Hall.

The scheme is to be pushed to success by the Jaffrey Village Improvement Society, an organization consisting almost wholly of Summer residents, having its meetings only during the Summer season, supported chiefly by funds contributed by Summer sojourners, who are trying, and have been trying for several years to make the old town of Jaffrey even more beautiful than it is by nature. . .

The series of money-raising events for this fund started this week with two performances by the Cape Cod Marionettes, in charge of Miss Melanie Elizabeth Leonard of Sandwich, Mass. Miss Georgia Emery was hostess for the first tea and Mrs Lawrence H. Wetherell of Brookline was hostess for the second one. On Friday afternoon and Saturday evening of the coming week ‘The Old Peabody Pew’ will be given under the management of Mrs. Frank Sanborn, a former president of the Cantabridgia Club; Prof. John Hart of Harvard, who has a Summer residence on the slope of Mt. Monadnock, will be in the cast, which will also include C.P. Strong of Cambridge, Mrs. Walter B. Cheney of Connecticut, Mrs. John Poole and others. Mme. C.W. Harpham of Albany, N Y, will give vocal solos between the acts.<sup>9</sup>

Fundraising for the restoration continued in earnest. The Town had voted \$3,000 for the purpose and in September 1922,

it was voted unanimously, that the Society undertake the obligation to raise the necessary [remaining] funds for the restoration of the Town Hall, thereby meeting the requirements of the vote passed at Town meeting, on June 13, 1922.

Mrs. Robinson then reported that

During the past summer the following sums have been raised by our entertainments, Marionettes \$88. Play \$350. Miss Cann’s day at Tea room \$145. Mrs. Robinson talk at Shattucks \$76.10. Children’s two sales of flowers and candy \$60.90. Garden Party at Mrs. Lawrence’s \$38. Mrs. Spencer’s Bridge party \$88. Academy Bridge \$45, making \$891 in all.

And an article in the Peterborough *Transcript* noted that

Contributions were received from former residents of Jaffrey from places as far distant as Paris and Kansas City. The summer colony gave generously as well as many permanent residents.<sup>10</sup>

Also at that September meeting, when asked to “give a resumé of what is planned. . .” Mrs. Robinson summarized as follows:

The door is to be put back in its original position in the middle of the south side. Mrs. Nightingale has promised to give us back the latch which is in her possession. The pointed window is to be restored to its original position in the middle of the north side. The Tower door is to be used as an entrance in cold stormy weather, with a dressing room and two toilet rooms . . . The entrance to the stage is to be on the east end where there was originally a door. There are to be four small rooms, two on either side of the stage, one above and one below; three of these will be dressing rooms and one a store room, with electric attachments for heating water for tea, etc. —there is to be gallery around three sides of the hall, and two flights of stairs.

The Peterborough *Transcript* article mentioned that

A fine stage with four excellent dressing rooms, footlights, spot-lights, etc., has been arranged, and plans for a dramatic entertainment to help defray the remaining indebtedness on the building, are already underway.<sup>11</sup>

A year later at the Annual Meeting of 1923, the Minutes state that

There has been one important and all engrossing object of interest. There being only one, it will require but a short report. This one *great object* of interest has been the renovation of the Old Meeting House, Mr. Allen W. Jackson, architect, and Mr. B.F. Cann, contractor. It only requires a visit there to convince the most skeptical of the complete success of the undertaking, an opportunity which was afforded to the public for the first time last Sat. night. Marie Nichols of Boston gave a delightful concert there, with Mr. Edward Ballantine as accompanist and assisting artist, which netted the Society about \$160. The cost of the renovation has been considerable, but contributions and

entertainments have helped, and we are not burdened with a large debt; and we rejoice now that the work area was done right, and that the dignified and beautiful interior will be a credit to us and a joy to future generations.

Only a few days later, during the week of August 11–18, 1923, Jaffrey celebrated the 150th Anniversary of its incorporation. This occasion marked the completion of the restoration and many of the events of that week were held in the beautifully adapted building. Mrs. Robinson opened the Anniversary Exercises by giving an address which appeared in the Peterborough *Transcript*. She said, in part:

We have gathered here today with a double purpose—to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the incorporation of the town of Jaffrey and to celebrate also the restoration of this beautiful building and its rededication to community uses. It is wholly fitting that these two events should be celebrated at the same time, as the history of this building is closely interwoven with the history of the town from its very beginning. . .

A building of such historic interest, which has served the town for nearly a century and a half as church, school, and as the center of government, has strong claims upon the loyalty and affection of the people of Jaffrey; and two years ago our Village Improvement Society conceived the idea of restoring as much of the original beauty and dignity of the hall as is consistent with its present day uses, and of accomplishing this if possible

before Aug. 17, 1923, the sesqui-centennial of Jaffrey's incorporation. It seemed a very large undertaking for so small a society as ours, and there were skeptics who doubted its possibility. But faith can move mountains and our society undertook the task with high hopes. Today is Aug. 17, 1923 and you can judge for yourselves of our success.<sup>12</sup>

#### CONTINUING VIS INVOLVEMENT

Whereas Melville Academy is the Society's headquarters and museum and the site of the Annual Meeting, it is The Meetinghouse that has been and continues to be the main venue for VIS social and fundraising affairs. This is clearly evident in reading the chapter 'Events & Entertainments.'

A sense of possessiveness on the part of the VIS has naturally developed over the years and the Society has never been shy in encouraging the Town to paint the building or repair the clock or install a new furnace. But if there was any reticence on the part of the Selectmen, then the Society would more often than not undertake the work itself or raise whatever funds were called for. Here are just a few examples over the years:

"Mr. Cournoyer was asked to report on the work of laying out the grounds around the Town Hall. Mr. Cournoyer and Mr. Chamberlain



The plaque on the west end of the Meetinghouse commemorating the 1922 restoration.



The interior of the Meetinghouse following the 1922 restoration. With the exception of a different wall scone and the addition of the gallery railing, it looks the same today.

have worked in accordance with the plan made by Mr. Whiting last Fall, improving the grading, widening the road, and moving it further from the building. Mr. Joel Poole's gift of \$100 had been appropriated to this work, and Mr. Cournoyer said that it had been accomplished for \$80." (July 26, 1924)

*"Mr. Cann stated that he had examined the Tower of the Town Hall and had found some little defects which could easily be repaired when next painted, but that the hatch above the bell should be covered this fall, and the pigeons dislodged and kept out."* (July 26, 1924)

"Mrs. Wetherell also stated that lightning rods had been installed on the Town Hall, and the tower repaired; that more work being needed than was at first thought necessary, she had interviewed the Selectmen who finally agreed to pay for it from the Conant fund. So now the roof is waterproof and there will be no more leaks. While on the subject of the Town Hall, Mrs. Wetherell spoke of the desirability of a new Stage entrance, and said that Mr. Cann had drawn up a plan which she had with her for inspection; the estimated cost being \$375. It would also be desirable now that the roof is repaired, to do over the inside of the Hall, paint and ceiling, and Mr. Cann had estimated the cost of this at \$400 . . . Mrs. Wetherell left these two things for us to think about, and said she'd bring them again before the Society at the next annual meeting." (July 26, 1924)

*"In regard to the Curtain for the Stage, Mrs. Robinson stated that the Committee had decided to get the curtain in time for the play, and that it had been put up today, at which there was applause. It is a handsome red velvet curtain, bought at Paine's, at a cost of \$600 payable the first of October."* (July 31, 1926)

"Mrs. Wetherell reported on the installing of a furnace in the Town

Hall last fall, at a cost of \$600." (July 27, 1929)

*"Mr. Chamberlain reported that the Town had paid for some shades for the windows in the Town Hall—and it was voted that a letter of thanks be sent to the Selectmen for doing this, and for the other things that they had done for the Hall."* (July 27, 1929)

"There remained one important piece of business to be considered, the question of installing lightning rods on the old Town Hall. Mrs. Wetherell had consulted the Hawkeye Co. of New Hampshire. They had figured the cost at \$275. She had consulted the Selectmen with the view of inducing them to help bear the expense, and after considerable persuasion, they had agreed to go halves." (July 26, 1930)

*"The theme of the evening of main importance were necessary repairs on the Town Hall. While repairs on the inside of the hall are largely under the jurisdiction of the V.I.S., the outside of the hall is not. In that the Town Hall needs 2 coats of paint this next year as a matter of preservation as well as beauty, it was voted that Mrs. Wetherell be authorized to take this matter up with the selectmen and proceed as necessary to have an article inserted in the warrant for annual town meeting. The primary item of importance was the enlargement of the belfry entrance to town hall, the present conditions being unsanitary and inconvenient. It was voted that the present toilet be removed and all necessary repairs be made as plastering, painting, installing a rail for coat hooks, also a lower one for the children, for a sum not exceeding \$45. This to be done later by Mr. Chas. E. Chamberlain."* (July 27, 1935)

"Report on the installation of a flush toilet in the Old Meeting House. Mr. Mei gave an estimate of \$325 plus \$50 for digging. The digging price would depend upon whether or not ledges would be encountered. It was

decided to proceed with this work. . ." (June 14, 1957)

*"Some improvements on the Old Meeting House were discussed, such as a Tablet describing the history of the Old Meeting House, new lights over the entrances in keeping with the architecture of the building." (June 21, 1958)*

"The plaque has been placed on the Meeting House, at a cost of \$80.00 and . . . the lanterns have been installed at a cost of \$45.50 (\$38 for the lanterns & \$7.50 for cost of installation." (October 11, 1958)

*"The president next brought up the question of painting the interior of the meeting house. Two bids have been received. . ." (October 11, 1958)*

"A contract has been signed with Goodnow Bros. for window shades, individually cut and fitted and ready to be installed when the painting is done. Cost \$150.00." (May 19, 1959)

*"Dr. Millard read a letter from Dr. and Mrs. Norman Torrey generously asking that they be permitted to have built a proper stage in the Meeting House in honor of Jonathan Torrey, Dr. Torrey's son." (February 14, 1967)*

"There was a discussion of the squeaking floors and stairs of the Meeting House. It was agreed that they should be repaired. . ." (September 10, 1969)

*"Voted: to buy six benches at a cost of \$460.00." (July 15, 1970)*

"Mr. Krause had drawn up specifications for the painting of the interior of the Meeting House and the meeting voted to accept the bid from Mr. Excel of Keene for \$6,140." (February 1, 1972)

*"The need for new lighting fixtures at the Meeting House was discussed. . . . The four large chandeliers purchased in Boston cost \$1,195. Mary Kidd donated the two wall fixtures. The*

*chandelier in the tower vestibule was purchased in Fitchburg . . . for \$54." (February 1 & June 27, 1972)*

"The repairs at the Meeting House have been completed. This included louvres for ventilation of the foundation; new back stairs; new lock in tower door; window glass replaced; fire-proofing curtain; lightning rods renewed; and fire extinguishers." (June 26, 1973)

*"The most expensive item requiring approval was the \$750 for gold leaf on the Meeting House clock and weather vane. The Chairman . . . had first tried to economize by having gold paint used, but this economy met with little support." (June 26, 1973)*

"Repairs to Meeting House including painting, sanding floors, stage draperies, \$5,196.20." (Treasurer's Report June 15, 1978–June 15, 1979)

*"Since the Annual Meeting and as a result of the Save-the-Windows Party at the Monadnock Inn, \$8,000 has been given to the window fund. . ." (October 16, 1984)*

"The V.I.S. installed new shades in the Meeting House." (July 25, 1987)

*"The toilet in the Meeting House was properly connected to town sewer at the expense of the V.I.S. On motion it was voted to provide painted wooden signs in the Meeting House designed to cover the subject of no smoking, no eating, no drinking." (December 3, 1989)*

"The benches are being painted by our caretaker, Charlie Ishmael, at \$20 a bench." (July 28, 1990)

*"Fireproofing curtains \$400.00." (Treasurer's Report. January 1–December 31, 1991)*

"George Cox made a motion that the VIS fund railings at the Meetinghouse, light fixtures over both doors, and the fee for the design plan for the Meetinghouse Common." (April 23, 1993)



The top goes back on, May 21, 1993.

*“The V.I.S. agreed to pay for the Meeting House balcony railing . . . The cost of this was in excess of \$4,200 and was built and installed by Andy Webber with the painting being done by members of the V.I.S.” (July 23, 1994)*

“We still hope to finish the restoration of the Meeting House Clock this year. This includes the four faces, numerals and hands—restoration and gilding.” (July 16, 1995)

*“Margo Johnson and Nancy Lloyd reported for the committee to replace the stage curtains at the Meeting House. It was moved, seconded and voted to ask the town for \$4,000, enough to start the work. Nancy Lloyd will write the request. The V.I.S. will undertake to raise or find the approximately \$4,000 more that probably will be needed to complete the project.” (June 30, 1999)*

“Mary [Payson] reported on the status of the Meetinghouse cushions. Seven have been ‘purchased’ for a total of \$1,225. The cushions will be made this winter.” (November 15, 2003)

*“Twelve more cushions using the old stage curtains for a total of 23 have been delivered.” (June 24, 2005)*

#### THE 1991 RESTORATION

In the spring of 1990 it was *déjà vu all over again*. No, Yogi Berra wasn’t in town, but a new generation was about to find itself in the same situation as Mrs. Robinson and her colleagues seventy years before.

There was a growing realization that some of the village treasures might be in need of attention. Perhaps an expert investigation was called for. On April 4th a ‘Request for Proposals’—prepared by the Historic District Commission, the Historical Society, the VIS and the Amos Fortune Forum Committee—was

sent to 31 consultants. In response, eight proposals were received.

The ‘treasures’ of concern? The Meetinghouse, of course, and also Melville Academy, the Little Red Schoolhouse and the Old Fire Station. The investigation? “To inspect the buildings and undertake whatever appropriate analysis is called for and 1) to report to the client . . . the results; 2) to make recommendations for corrective action, if any; 3) to suggest techniques and approaches for any such action and what the cost implications are likely to be; and 4) to suggest appropriate maintenance and inspection schedules and procedures.” The consultants chosen were Conor Power of Structural Technology, Inc., and Sara B. Chase. Their final report was presented in December, 1990.

The two buildings of most concern to the VIS were the Meetinghouse and Melville Academy. The news wasn’t good for either. The attention of those reading the report was gripped by some of the descriptive phrasing of the consultants. Regarding the Meetinghouse: “local differential settlement occurs throughout the structure . . . mortar washout . . . sill rot . . . missing roof shingles . . . chimneys require repointing . . . noticeable roof sag . . . severe foundation block tilt . . . excessive damp conditions. . .”

Melville fared no better. (As we shall see in the next chapter, it was determined to be ‘structurally unsound’ which led to its closure and the launching of yet another project for the VIS.)

The Meetinghouse was closed to the public as well ‘out of concern for safety.’ There was only one thing to do, just as it had been done back in 1922—form a committee!

In early 1991 the president<sup>13</sup> “asked for volunteers to help raise money for the renovation of the Meeting House.” The COMMITTEE FOR THE RESTORATION OF THE MEETINGHOUSE was duly formed, this time with a bit more balance perhaps

than its predecessor of seventy years before.<sup>14</sup>

The President went on to say that the “town has suggested starting a capital fund to maintain the inside and outside of the Meeting House. This calls for a request at Town Meeting for \$35,000 to be put into the town budget to start the fund . . . We hope more townspeople will help in the fundraising as this is not solely a VIS project but a joint project with the town.”

In two weeks time it was announced that ‘informal fundraising’ had “raised \$10,500 in pledges so far in hopes that the town will be encouraged to vote the maintenance fund of \$35,000.”

At Town Meeting that year the article setting up a Meetinghouse Trust Fund passed as did the companion article appropriating \$35,000 towards the restoration.<sup>15</sup>

Although the two-year project was broadly supported and the amount publicly raised impressive, the private fundraising that had been going on for months was equally productive. There were memorial gifts, support from businesses and institutions, and scores, indeed hundreds, of generous gifts from individuals and families. A benefit dance was held in the Meetinghouse on August 29, 1991, and a second one—a ‘Steeple Stomp’—at Pratt Auditorium on Valentine’s Day 1992.<sup>16</sup> At the end of the project, when all the dollars had been counted, \$66,491 had been raised privately to go along with the \$89,084 in public money to meet the total cost of \$155,585.

Early in 1993 it was

reported that the work on the Meeting House continues, and should be completed in a month or two . . . The Belfry tower will be replaced soon and the weathervane will be ‘gold leafed.’ It seems appropriate that the V.I.S. supply the commemorative book and glass case to record the restoration. Eleanor McQueen will oversee the book and complete the memorials and list of donors in calligraphy. Charles Royce has donated seasoned black cherry [from the slopes of Mt. Monadnock] for Andy

Webber to fashion the standing glass case. On a motion duly made and seconded, Voted: to accept the quotation of Andy Webber for \$300.00. On a motion duly made and seconded, Voted: to expend \$500.00 for Walter Hautanen to ‘gold leaf’ the weathervane of the Meeting House.

George Cox, in charge of buildings for the VIS, reported in early June 1993, “on the renovations of the Meeting House. Progress is slow and feelings are being frustrated and people are discouraged.”

All were anxious to see Jaffrey’s ‘dearest possession’ back together again. The upper stage of the Tower, above the bell, had been removed on June 13, 1991. In a sad state, it was trucked away and replicated in new materials; and nearly two years later the new version reappeared and was lifted up again into place on May 21, 1993.

A month later George Cox was more optimistic in his report to the Annual Meeting when he said that “it was with pleasure that our spire was again in place with the weathervane turning with the winds of summer and winter. Though few will ever see the work done in excavating the cellar hole and installing the cement footings, and the 2x12 pressure treated framing, this work will last for many generations.”

But finally, all was done and finished (for the moment, that is) and the Jaffrey and the VIS celebrated. The Grand Re-Opening of the Meetinghouse happened on Saturday, the 3rd of July, 1993, “from 2 to 4 o’clock on the Meetinghouse Common.” There were family relay races; storytelling and songs; an art exhibition; historical displays; horse & carriage rides (Alfred Sawyer) and antique car rides (Charlie Bacon and Dan Johnson); and musicians and dancers. There were Open Houses and Tours and “leading citizens in period costume.” All were followed by soft drinks, popcorn and a chicken barbecue.

Near the end of the afternoon, all went into the Meetinghouse and Dr.



Mary Payson, Walt Hautanen and Sally Roberts with the newly gilded weathervane, March 19, 1993.

Theodore P. Greene, moderator for the day and a direct descendant of Jaffrey's first minister, Laban Ainsworth, called the meeting to order. Acknowledgments were given, the Book of Record was presented and official remarks were made by the Chairman of the Board of Selectmen, Peter B. Davis. Then the featured speaker, Mr. P.J. O'Rourke, arose and related his 'THOUGHTS ON FREEDOM, MEETINGHOUSES, JAFFREY AND LIFE ITSELF.'\*

The following day—The Fourth of July—strawberries were served on the Common by the United Church of Jaffrey and the American Legion Band of Keene gave its traditional patriotic 4th of July Concert in front of the Meetinghouse.

So another restoration, more fundraising, another celebration. And when it's *déjà vu all over again* time, the VIS will no doubt be there, too.

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*Postscript:* Since the 1991–93 restoration, the Meetinghouse has prospered. It's gone through its periodic paintings and re-roofings. Responding to building code concerns, the Town in 1993 required that a temporary railing be installed along the edge of the balcony. David W. Torrey, a Boston architect and direct descendant of Laban Ainsworth, offered his services, and an appropriate design was developed which was carried out by Andy Webber—and volunteer painters—at a cost of more than \$4,000, advanced by the VIS. In 1996, the four clockfaces were removed by Gilmore Construction and transported to Goffstown where they were refurbished by Philip D'Avanza. This was not an insignificant project, the total cost being over \$8,000 which was also met by the VIS. Among the fundraisers for this was a raffle for birdhouse fashioned as a replica of the Meetinghouse and a benefit Line Dance.

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\* The text of this discourse appears in the Appendices.

There are now cushions on the benches. A fire alarm system has been installed. American and New Hampshire flags now stand on the stage, presented in memory of John D. Batiste, Colonel USA, 1922–79. New stage curtains have been hung and most recently all 50 windows have once again been restored. And the Tower is about to be painted, and not for the first time.

Perhaps most worthy of mention has been what is now an annual summer patriotic tradition. The Minutes record that "we are suggesting a reading of the Declaration of Independence on the 4th of July in the Meetinghouse. Following the reading there would be a walking tour of the village and a reception at Melville." The VIS brought together the Historical Society, the Historic District Commission and the Meetinghouse Committee as co-sponsors and the first reading at Noon on the Fourth of July in 2001 was before a 'full house.' No one could have predicted such enthusiasm. This town event is about to celebrate its sixth year. 🐾

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Town History "on July 5, 1855 ... it was named the Town House, its true and legal designation today." *History of Jaffrey, New Hampshire*. Vol. I, p. 197.

<sup>2</sup> By 1914 the town offices had moved to the upper floor of Clay Library and Town Meeting was held at Union Hall on School Street where the grade school stands today. When it was founded in 1870 Conant High School held its first year in Melville Academy while alterations were underway in the Meetinghouse. Once these were completed, Conant established itself on the second floor, but in alternate years school operations shifted to Union Hall in East Jaffrey. Eventually, there were so few students in the western part of the town that the school left the Meetinghouse entirely.

<sup>3</sup> The clock was made by the George M. Stevens Company, a prominent Boston clockmaker. The Town History relates that the "bell at the old Meeting-house was rung, at least to mark the noonday, until April 1, 1904. But by 1906 the people at Jaffrey Center missed the sound to such a degree that the present town clock was installed at an expense of \$553, \$350 being appropriated and \$203 being raised by popular subscription." The clock and the one in Cutler

Memorial were electrified after a Town Meeting vote in 1977.

<sup>4</sup> The Sounding Board mentioned by Mrs. Robinson led to an interesting and eventually futile quest over a period of years. "Mrs. Robinson and Mrs. Harpham . . . found Mr. Noone away, and his wife assured them that he did not have it [the sounding board], as she had never heard of it. Miss Kate Fox stated that Mr. Noone had shown it to Miss Sheldon in his barn, and Mrs. Robinson proposed to take the matter up again with him."

That was in 1921. At the Annual Meeting in 1927 the search was still on. "Miss Kate Fox stated that Miss Lillian Sheldon had called on Mr. Albert Noone, and interviewed him about the old Sounding Board which was originally over the pulpit in the Old Meeting House. He [said] that it was still in his possession, and that he would be glad to give it to our Society, together with some objects of interest."

A year later: "Mr. Mills then brought up the matter of the sounding board, formerly belonging in the old meeting house, promised to the Society by Mr. Noone. Miss Kate W. Fox reported that the letter mentioned in the report of the last meeting had been sent to Mr. Noone, but nothing further had been heard from him, and that the sounding board had not been received."

Another year elapsed and at the 1929 Annual Meeting "Miss Kate Fox reported, in regard to the Sounding Board, that Miss Sheldon had been to see Mr. Noone, and that he said it could not be found anywhere on his premises and he was of the opinion that he never had had it."

The apparent end of the story was in August 1966, when Mr. Greene said he "felt that the sounding board should be restored to the Meeting House from the horse sheds where it now lies." No further mention of the sounding board appears in the Minutes and its location remains a mystery.

<sup>5</sup> The Committee consisted of Mrs. Robinson, Miss Kate Fox, Miss Tilton, Mrs. Strong, Mrs. Buck, Miss Emory, Mrs. Harpham, Mrs. Wetherell, with the addition of Mr. Cann, Mr. Mayo and Mrs. Mitchell. *From the Minutes of September 10, 1921.*

<sup>6</sup> Allen W. Jackson was a Boston-area architect well known for his colonial and tudor revival commissions particularly along Brattle Street in Cambridge.

<sup>7</sup> "The officers of the V.I.S. are: Mrs. B.L. Robinson of Cambridge, President; Rev. James Bixler of Exeter, Rev. Charles S. Mills of New York, Mrs. Silas E. Buck of Cambridge, Miss Lucia Cutter and Rev. David C. Torrey, of Jaffrey, vice presidents; Mrs. Emma Mitchell of Cambridge, recording secretary; Mrs. Charles P. Strong of Cambridge, corresponding secretary; Miss Kate Fox of Jaffrey, treasurer."

From a *Boston Globe* clipping contained in the *Memorial of the Jaffrey Village Improvement Society during the Presidency of Mrs. B.L. Robinson, 1909-1928. Illustrated Chronicles.*

<sup>8</sup> From a clipping—unidentified but likely to be from the *Peterborough Transcript*—contained in

the *Illustrated Chronicles of the Jaffrey Village Improvement Society*, bound version, p. 83.

<sup>9</sup> *Boston Globe* clipping contained in the *Memorial of the Jaffrey Village Improvement Society during the Presidency of Mrs. B.L. Robinson, 1909-1928. Illustrated Chronicles.*

<sup>10</sup> *Peterborough Transcript* clipping contained in the *Memorial of the Jaffrey Village Improvement Society during the Presidency of Mrs. B.L. Robinson, 1909-1928. Illustrated Chronicles.*

<sup>11</sup> See note 10 above.

<sup>12</sup> See note 10 above.

<sup>13</sup> Mary R. Payson, VIS President 1989-93 and 2001-05.

<sup>14</sup> The twenty members were Homer J. Belletete, Joanne A. Buck, Carol J. Carbonneau, George H. Cox, Peter B. Davis, Gerald A. DeGrandpre, William M. Driscoll, Toni Gildone, Owen R. Houghton, Margaret A. Johnson, Nancy H. Massey, Robert K. Massey, Eleanor D. McQueen, Mary R. Payson (chairman), Sally J. Roberts, Jennifer Roth-Quinlan, H. Charles Royce, Jr., Robert B. Stephenson, Jane W. Torrey and Virginia Warfield.

<sup>15</sup> This was the first of several Town appropriations for the restoration effort. At one point the Chairman of the Budget Committee commented that 'you could have built a whole new building with the money we've spent.'

Appropriated in the first two years (more would be spent later):

March 16, 1991.	Article 13.	\$35,000
	Article 17.	\$100 (to create the Trust Fund)
March 14, 1992.	Article 16.	\$35,000
	Article 18.	\$3,000 (to the Trust Fund)

<sup>16</sup> Hunter Rieseberg, the Town Manager, saw a fundraising opportunity when news came that a safe had been found underneath the Meetinghouse. Some of the excavation was done by 'residents' of the jail in Westmoreland. While digging away they found a large, old safe. (It was about this time that Al Capone's safe was opened on live television with disappointing results though wide viewership.) The safe was hauled out, but unfortunately it shifted in the process, the door popped open, and the contents were exposed for all to see. Absolutely nothing, as it turned out. The safe was in all likelihood the town's vault when the first floor of the Meetinghouse accommodated the town offices. How did it end up there? Perhaps the floor fell in under all that weight, or rather than moving it downtown when the offices relocated, a hole was simply cut in the floor.



The Meetinghouse today.



Jaffrey Center from the air, January 5, 1980. The old Shattuck Inn at the upper left; the Meetinghouse and Brick Church, overlooking the Common, in the center; Melville Academy at the upper right. In the center is the triangular Cutter Park bounded by Main Street and Meetinghouse Road. The large structure left of center is the Ainsworth Manse. The second house in on Thorndike Pond Road, which comes into Main Street in the lower right, is the present MacCready house, where the first meeting of the VIS was held on August 27, 1906.

## Meeting House Birthday Party

June 17, 1975

by

Helen Bean Krause

TWO HUNDRED YEARS ago, as the roof of this building was about to be raised, there were indeed such hard times in Jaffrey that the Building Committee could not provide the traditional barrel of rum for the raising. Captain Coffeen, a public spirited citizen, came to the rescue by providing rum on credit. Over the years there has been great discussion as to whether or not the guns from the Battle of Bunker Hill were really heard in Jaffrey that historic day of roof-raising. Evidence has been produced *pro* and *con* from reliable sources, the Rev. Laban Ainsworth for one; however, I was always a great admirer of my mother's solution of this historical quest: Too much rum!

As readers of the Town History know, there are no photos of the Meeting House as it first existed, but the Meeting House at Rockingham, Vermont, is nearly an exact replica and that is what is pictured in the History to illustrate the gallery and pew arrangement prior to 1870. In July 1855, by vote, the Meeting House was named the Town House, its true and legal designation today and in 1870 was remodelled by the removal of the pulpit, gallery and pews and the addition of a middle floor with town hall above and school rooms below. Though meeting the immediate needs of the town, the character and spirit of the interior of former meeting house was destroyed. By 1914 due to shifts in population the place for town meetings and town business moved to old East Jaffrey. During this period from 1870 to 1914 the use of the building centered around the social, political and educational life of the villages. One young old timer, Mr. Harold Royce, relived some of these social days for us. "The social life upstairs in the big hall was active and the best," says Mr. Royce. "People

don't know what a good time is anymore! Dances every week with sometimes only Walter Heath playing the piano and sometimes a fiddler or two . . . no charge for admission, just passed the hat!" Walter Heath: he was a small man with very few teeth and missing fingers, yet he could play the piano in a real toe-tickling way. His poetry was simple but effective. He was a familiar sight in summer, driving through town with horse and wagon with flowers for sale. The History says this of him, in part: "He lived to be 72 and never made an enemy. His gift was the gift of friendship with which was mingled the joy of song."

Another popular event upstairs was the box supper party, where the ladies packed a box lunch which was auctioned off to the highest bidder who then had the privilege of eating supper with the lady who had prepared it. Some of the ladies decorated the boxes in high fashion, but according to Harold those often were not the best eating! After the supper, there was usually marching. Percy Cutter was a great admirer of this entertainment and often led the group in the evening's march. Harold Royce also remembers touring companies putting on plays upstairs, his very first memory of such being a heart rendering performance of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.' Local talent, notably Mrs. John Poole, used to give recitals and take part in plays. But the highlight of his childhood memories of the events upstairs was the annual community Christmas party. Such excitement. Children from all parts of town attended. When all were assembled in that big room upstairs, a thumping would be heard on its ceiling and then sleigh bells rang and then, if you can imagine this, down through the big ventilator in the ceiling came Santa Claus on a rope! Yes, indeed, according to Harold that's how it was. Frank Lawrence, owner of *The Monadnock Inn* and father of Annie Bunce, was often Santa as was Peter Proctor. Percy Cutter took a turn also but not often for, as many of us remember, Percy was very tall and very thin and had to use too many pillows in the Santa suit to

get through the ventilator comfortably!  
What a picture this all creates and, as Harold says, makes you wonder if those really weren't the best of times!

To come down to present times, we see the building still used as a center of social life of Jaffrey: dances, wedding receptions, fairs, antique shows, etc., and to maintain the tradition of public debate, the famous Amos Fortune Forum has been held in this building for nearly 30 years.

This building has gone through many changes in the 200 years of its life—a big barn of a building at the start, a church and town hall and school, almost lost to us when, in 1795, it was nearly moved northward since it was in such bad condition it was a hindrance to the entrance of Capt. Joe Cutter's Tavern. Finally restored to its original design, today it is our pride and joy, thanks to tender loving care of the VIS and Town of Jaffrey. But most of all, while reflecting the spirit of this community it is our daily silent but strong reminder of what this country is all about. Happy Birthday! 🐾

# Thoughts on Freedom, Meetinghouses, Jaffrey and Life Itself

by  
P.J. O'Rourke

WE ARE HERE today to rededicate the Meetinghouse on this great patriotic holiday. Of course, today is only July 3rd [1993], not July 4th, but we modern Americans have turned mere Independence Day into something far more august and impressive: Independence-Long-Weekend-Plus-A-Couple-Of-Sick-Days-Taken-Off-From-Work.

This is as it should be. Let us never forget that one of the founding principles of this nation is having a good time. It's right there in the Declaration of Independence:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

(Which certainly means that if the boss can play golf on Wednesday mornings, I can take sick days on the 4th of July.)

"That all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights."

(Such as the right to spend all day roasting weenies and blowing my fingers off with fireworks.)

"And that among these rights are Life, Liberty and *the Pursuit of Happiness*."

We are the only country in the world based on fun. Search as you will the sacred creeds of other nations and peoples, read the Magna Carta, the Ten Commandments, the Analects of Confucius, the Communist Manifesto, Plato's Republic . . . and find me any fun whatsoever.

218 years and 16 days ago the timbers of this Meeting House were raised by the citizens of Jaffrey. And they had a good time doing it.

The historical records have been lost, so we don't know exactly how good a time they had. But we do know that, a few years earlier, raising the timbers of a similar meeting house in Londonderry was accomplished with the aid of four hundredweight of cheese, two thousand biscuits, three barrels of rum and five

barrels of hard cider. And we do know that in Jaffrey, at the end of that day in 1775, one John Eaton stood on his head on the ridgepole up there. So I think it can probably be said that the local citizens of yore had more fun raising the timbers of this Meeting House than we're having rededicating it.

And I think the next time a major repair—and, hence, a rededication—of this structure is required, the organizers of the event should be mindful of historical precedent and arrange for a few barrels of rum, or at least a gin and tonic on the speaker's platform.

It is a proud Jaffrey tradition that, on the day this framework was erected, the townsfolk could hear the cannon fire from the Battle of Bunker Hill.

It has sometimes been opined that those townsfolk had had a little more rum than was strictly necessary for the purpose of rehydration during heavy manual labor on a hot spring day. And perhaps they mistook, for cannon shots, the sound of enormous timbers being dropped on their toes. Or maybe that boom was the noise John Eaton made falling off the roof.

But Albert Annett, in his very, very long history of Jaffrey, published in 1937, argues persuasively—or, any rate, exhaustively—that it is possible to hear a Bunker Hill battle in Jaffrey, if the weather's right. And certainly in modern times some awful noises made in Massachusetts have been heard up here loud and clear. I give you Senator Ted Kennedy just for instance.

The Battle of Bunker Hill was not, of course, a victory for the revolutionary forces. Nonetheless, June 17th, 1775, was a very important moment in the history of our embryonic nation. The British were able to take Bunker Hill, but only at the cost of more than a thousand casualties. Thus weakened, they were never able to break the siege of Boston, and in March of the following year they were forced to withdraw and surrender that city.

I believe it was something of a portent that the timbers of Jaffrey's Meetinghouse should have been raised upon such a glorious day—a lucky omen for Jaffrey's great future.

Oh, I don't mean a great future full of heroic deeds and cataclysmic events. Nothing terribly dramatic—on a national or international scale—has ever happened in Jaffrey.

Thank God.

'May you live in interesting times' is supposed to be an ancient Chinese curse. 'May you live in interesting *towns*' is a curse that's just as bad—Mogadishu, Sarajevo, New York City. The great future that was in store for Jaffrey in 1775—which is the great right now that we have in Jaffrey today—was a future of calm, decent, regular ordinariness. A future that would be pretty much law abiding.

(If you don't count a little bit of signaling German submarines from the top of Monadnock and some loitering on the bridge downtown.)

A future that would be pretty much prosperous if Clinton doesn't stay in office too long.

And a future that would be pretty much happy—as much as mortal life can ever be so.

This is what humankind has striven for throughout its entire history. And we've got it in Jaffrey. We've *got* that life, liberty and pursuit of happiness.

And if we bungle the life—with too many barrels of rum, for instance. Or if we encumber the liberty with silly elected officials and dumb motions passed in town meetings. And if the pursuit of happiness leaves us panting and exhausted at the side of the road with a bad cramp in our leg. At least we have no one to blame but ourself.

Jaffrey is not heaven. But compared to what most people experience—all through the ages and all around the world—it is close. It is about as close as we're going to get on this earth. And, for some of us, it's about as close as we're going to get, period.

Now let us look upon what we have accomplished here. We have collected a considerable sum of money—partly from private donations and partly from public revenues—and we have used that money to repair and preserve an object of great beauty.

Some people will say there are other things we should have done with that money. That we should have given the money to the poor.

Would the amount of money we've spent here eliminate poverty? Yes. For a couple of people. For a little while. And then they'd be poor again and the Meeting House would be a low pile of old lumber. (Plus I don't think people are going to drive here from all over the nation to admire Jaffrey's poor.)

Or we could have sent this money off to those officials in Washington who are so much wiser than we are, so they could spend it on one hundred millionth of a B-1 bomber or a couple of haircuts for the President.

But, instead, we chose to splurge on beauty. Was this a frivolous expense? I don't think so.

We have here in Jaffrey Center a place to rest the spirit and refresh the eye. And a place to see some very funny tourists during leaf season. Surely that's worth something.

And the Meeting House teaches lessons. Its handsome form and proportions give us an education in the virtues of simplicity. The endurance of its humble materials provides a regular college course in the value of craftsmanship.

By preserving this building we are preserving the memory of our forebears and the memory of the sacrifices that they made and the hardships they endured for our sake.

These people barely had the wherewithal to buy shoes. And some didn't have that. They were walking around the forest primeval in their stocking feet. There were hardly a dozen frame houses in the town. And even in these they were still keeping pigs in their kitchens. The first citizens of Jaffrey faced enormous material challenges. And yet they chose to take the time and money—of which they had so little to spare—and use it to build a building that could stand without embarrassment in any great city of the world. And the reason the Jaffrey pioneers undertook this remarkable enterprise was in order to have a suitable place to practice self-government and worship God.

I wonder if democracy and religion would be the first two things on *our* minds if *we* were tired, broke and lonely in the wilderness.

Our restoration of the Meetinghouse

is not only a thank you to the Jaffrey residents before us, it is also a gift to those who will come afterward.

Maybe they won't give a damn about it. Maybe those future Jaffreyites will think we should have sent this money to Washington after all. Maybe they'll let the Meetinghouse fall down or be made into condominiums. Or maybe they'll treasure it even more than we do. We can't know. But we today are making those coming generations a present—we're giving them the option to make up their own minds about the Meetinghouse, something they can hardly do if the Meetinghouse doesn't exist.

Lastly, I think that our keeping and cherishing of this most attractive man-made object is a kind of recompense to the Creator. He gave us, in New Hampshire, an enormous endowment of natural beauty. And we have been only middling custodians of this gift. Here, at least, is a small pay-back.

But now I want to tell you what I *personally* like best about our Meetinghouse. What I like best is that this is a government building—and it stands empty most of the year.

That is just what a government building should do. I hope I live to see this excellent example followed with government buildings everywhere—downtown, in Concord, in Washington and at The United Nations.

And this brings us to the very heart of the matter of rededication. What *does* this Meetinghouse really stand for? I like to think it stands for—not very much.

And by no means do I intend that as an insult. The people in Jaffrey have no complicated unifying ideology, no elaborate political or social agenda, no catechism or dialectic, no great plan for humanity. We, in these parts, have no 'vision thing' as our ex-President would say. Or, as our current President would say, we have no Hillary.

What we do have is the belief that people should do what people see fit to do—unless that causes harm to other people. And it had better be clear and provable harm. No nonsense about second-hand alcohol fumes or hurtful, insensitive Halloween costumes.

I don't know what's good for you.

You don't know what's good for me. We don't know what's good for mankind.

And it sometimes seems as though we are the only people who don't. It may well be that, gathered right here in the state of New Hampshire, are all the people in the world who don't want to tell all the people in the world what to do.

This is because we believe in freedom... Freedom—What this country was founded upon.

What the Constitution was written to defend.

What the Civil War was fought to perfect.

(And what's printed right on our license plates: LIVE FREE OR DIE.)

Freedom is not empowerment. Empowerment is what the Serbs have in Bosnia. Anybody can pick up a gun and be empowered.

Freedom is not entitlement. An entitlement is what people on welfare get, and how free are they?

Freedom is not an endlessly expanding list of rights—the "right" to education, the "right" to health care, the "right" to food and housing. That's not freedom. That's dependency. Those aren't rights, those are the rations of slavery—hay and a barn for human cattle.

Freedom is not that easy. Freedom is not that simple. Freedom is the sum of the infinite potential of man (depending, of course, on his VISA card credit limit).

And because freedom is not one particular action or idea, not one little tidy concept that can be summed up in a phrase and enshrined in a building—because of this, I propose that we dedicate this Meeting House to *nothing*.

Not the nothing of despair or the nothing of ignorance or of sloth, but the nothing which stands between us and our dreams in this country.

To the nothing we can be kept from saying under our Constitution.

To the nothing that anyone can force us to think or believe.

To the nothing which can be taken from us without the due process of law.

And to the nothing that we can be told to do by that law without free debate and democratic vote.

So let us this day make a vow to

perfect that wonderful nothing. And let us present this Meetinghouse—rendered sturdy and sound once more as a token of that vow.

And that said. . .

Let's go find a barrel of rum. 

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Noted writer and humorist, P.J. O'Rourke was a Jaffrey resident for some years. He now lives in Sharon. We thank P.J. for allowing this to appear here.

## PHOTO SOURCES AND NOTES

The photographs and illustrations that appear here are from various sources, mainly the collection of the author and the VIS. All of the modern photographs were taken by the author. Notes and sources are identified below by page number.

- Cover Running Horse design. Original artwork by Frankie Bunyard. Author's collection.
- Frontispiece. Detail of a map of Jaffrey by J.D. Gibbs, 1850. Author's collection.
- [8] Fox house. By the Author.
- 11 F.W. Greene. From the Greene Family Collection at the Manse.  
All others. VIS.
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- 20 Cutter's Hotel. Author's collection.
- 21 Map. Detail from D.H. Hurd's 1892 Atlas of New Hampshire. Author's collection.  
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