

CHAPTER XVI

THE OLD MEETINGHOUSE

In 1922 the Village Improvement Society, in conjunction with the town, remodeled the interior of the Old Meetinghouse and re-established the original location of the door. A new stage was built, the balconies were rebuilt, new electric fixtures were installed, and the electrical wiring was updated. It remained very much the same for the next 70 years.



The Old Meetinghouse

The hall has been used for the Amos Fortune Forum, Monadnock Music concerts, musicals, dramatic presentations, dances, weddings, and meetings.

In 1990 a casual inspection showed the ravages of time were eating away at the vitals of the building, there was rot in the underpinnings and steeple. A committee was formed in April 1990 that asked for restoration proposals from building preservation consultants. The committee accepted the proposal of Structural Technology, Inc., Boston, Massachusetts (Conor M. Power), and Sara Chase, preservation consultant, Lexington, Massachusetts.

In December 1990 a final report was presented that indicated there was massive deterioration in the foundation and steeple. Based on this, the committee decided to close the building to forestall any possible lawsuits. It meant canceling all summer activities, an

action which was met with dismay, so a stopgap measure was proposed. A contractor was hired to clean out the crawl space and shore up the floor to make the building safe for the season.

On June 13, 1991, the steeple was removed from the meetinghouse tower and placed on the common. It would stay there for months until Dovetail, Inc. moved it to Winchester, New Hampshire, for renovation. This was completed on May 21, 1993, when it was replaced on the tower. In 1993 the work was completed and plans were put in motion for a gala celebration to reopen the meetinghouse.

The festivities started on July 3 with leading citizens in period costumes portraying historical figures: William Driscoll as George Jaffrey; David Torrey as Rev. Laban Ainsworth; Hester Ames as Hannah Davis; and Homer Belletete as Samuel Litch. The program of rededication was held at 4:30 P.M. in the meetinghouse with Dr. Theodore P. Greene as moderator, George H. Cox acknowledging all participants in the project, Mary R. Payson presenting the book of record and the display case, and Peter R. Davis, chairman, board of selectmen, officially opening the renovated building. Dr. Greene introduced the featured speaker, P. J. O'Rourke, columnist, humorist, and author, who spoke on "Thoughts on Freedom, Meetinghouses, Jaffrey, and Life Itself." The day's festivities ended with a dance on the new meetinghouse floor. The next day, Sunday July 4, the celebration was brought to a rousing conclusion with a band concert on the common with the meetinghouse as the backdrop.

The total amount spent on this project was \$155,585, with \$89,094 raised publicly and \$66,491 from a private fund drive. In the intervening years it has been necessary to install a new cedar roof at a cost of \$18,710 and to paint the exterior for \$16,189. In the near future it will be necessary to repaint the interior. With completion of this phase in the preservation of our meetinghouse, we should be assured of many more centuries of community use.