

## 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.