

MONADNOCK PERSPECTIVES

Commentary on Rural and Urban Design

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Meetinghouses and Historic Churches: A Rich Regional Resource

By Robert B. Stephenson

Much has been written about what makes for an aesthetically pleasing and culturally rich village. What are considered to be some of the essential ingredients? Often mentioned: a post office, "general store," inn and similar gathering spots where residents are able naturally to come together, converse, trade news and gossip, all with the feeling, often unconsciously, of being part of a community. A common or green, a burying ground, some "street furniture" such as a Civil War statue, a bandstand, a watering trough, a flagpole, all help as well to give some identity to a place.

If such ingredients happen to be architecturally attractive, are historic in the sense of having been around for awhile, and contribute substantially to the town- or village-scape, so much the better. On the other hand, if these ingredients are largely lacking, then the village tends to be little more than a collection of houses; indeed, it's not really a village at all.

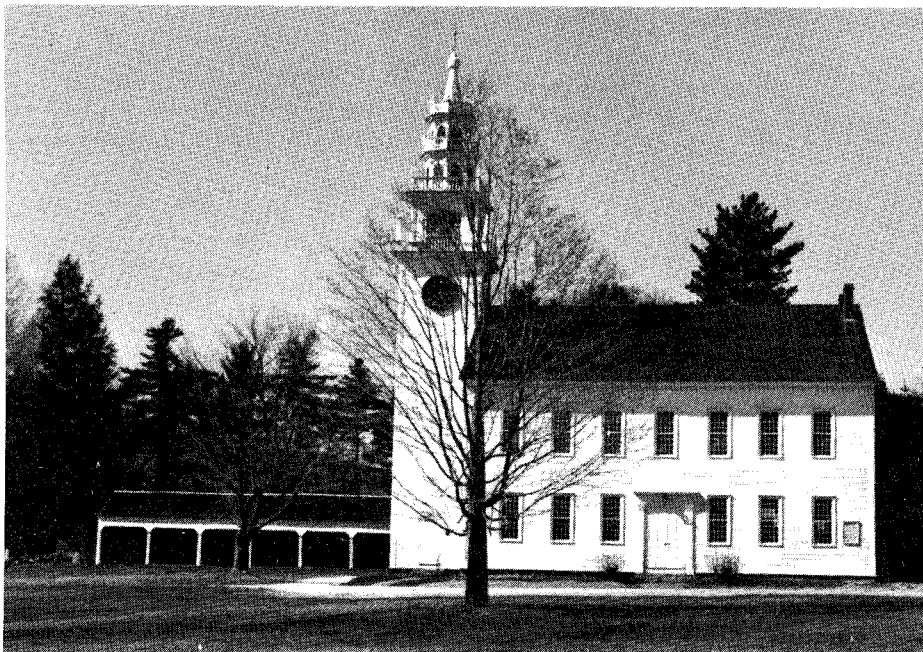
Perhaps the strongest ingredient of all is a church or meetinghouse, particularly, again, if it is historic and has a certain architectural merit, and, because of this or its setting, is the visual focus of the village, something that one immediately thinks of as the community's identifying image.

The Monadnock Region is particularly rich in its collection of historic churches, meetinghouses and church-like buildings; many of them immediately come to mind when a particular village is mentioned.

True meetinghouses are less common and therefore all the more to be treasured. In the settlement of the region, the usual stipulation laid down by the proprietors was that a suitable meetinghouse be built within so many years of the town's establishment. These were to serve as the religious center for the community and as the place for town meetings and civic-community events and often as a refuge in time of danger or disaster. Some towns never did get around to raising a meetinghouse. In other towns (Dublin, Marlborough, Peterborough and New Ipswich are examples) the original meetinghouse either burned, was replaced or abandoned or otherwise disappeared from the scene.

Today, those remaining meetinghouses in the Monadnock Region present a picture of great diversity with respect to use, ownership,

Continued on next page



◀ Jaffrey Meeting House (1775). The frame was raised on the same day as the Battle of Bunker Hill (June 17) during which the muffled sounds of artillery fire could be heard from the direction of Boston. (photo: Robert B. Stephenson)

Continued from previous page

administration and support. Some are owned by the town (Jaffrey, Fitzwilliam), while others are churches (Park Hill in Westmoreland, Acworth). Some combine the two: use or ownership by both church and town (Rindge, Hancock). Francestown presents another approach, ownership by a non-profit organization. Use often is unrelated to ownership. In Fitzwilliam and Troy, for instance, the meetinghouse accommodates the town offices, while in Jaffrey, the town-owned meetinghouse is used for a variety of civic, community, educational and social events.

As such important ingredients of community character, these buildings deserve special recognition and a high level of care and stewardship . . .

A church-building spree occurred in the region and throughout New England in the 1820s and 30s, largely as a consequence of various Toleration Acts that had the effect of separating church from state and ending taxation in support of religion. Again, the result is a rich regional heritage of buildings which share with the generally earlier meetinghouses many of the same architectural details and fulfill the same importance as "definers" of a village. Some local examples include the Harrisville and Nelson Congregational Churches, the Dublin Community Church, the Marlborough

Federated Church and numerous others.

Often of similar importance are the "church-like" buildings which also abound in the Monadnock Region. Easily mistaken for churches because of architectural similarities, particularly towers and spires, they include grange halls, schools, town offices and other public and institutional buildings. Peterborough's G.A.R. Hall and the Town House, Jaffrey's Melville Academy and Chesterfield's Town Hall are good examples.

Another category of buildings that can be included with the above are re-cycled church buildings. The old Baptist Church in Peterborough has served many uses since its days as a church, most recently as the Mari-onette Theater.

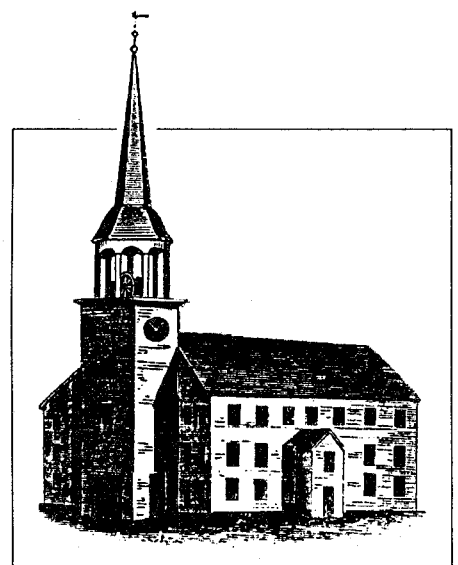
As such important ingredients of community character, these buildings deserve special recognition and a high level of care and stewardship, and happily in the Monadnock Region they seem to receive it. In recent years major restoration projects have been undertaken in Jaffrey (the Meetinghouse and the Cutler Memorial building), Peterborough (the Town House), Hancock (the Meetinghouse steeple), Francestown (the Old Meetinghouse), to name just a few. There seems to be a broadly held natural acceptance that these buildings deserve such attention. So important are they to some that, in the case of churches, for example, their preservation often develops a constituency that transcends religion. A case in point is Brandon, Vermont, where the crusading proponent to replace a steeple long ago dismantled by a hurricane has no formal connection with the church in question. More churches might give greater consideration to enlisting such sympathetic though unaffiliated supporters when contemplating maintenance and restoration campaigns.

Meetinghouses and churches and the attention they have and should

receive is appropriately the focus of two upcoming events (see sidebar on opposite page for details):

On Friday the 14th of June a major conference will be held in Jaffrey on *Meetinghouses, Steeples, Tower Clocks and Weathervanes*. Attendees are expected from throughout New England and all those interested or involved in the subjects are invited to attend. The conference agenda will mix presentations on the historical-cultural-architectural aspects of meetinghouses and churches and their components with panel discussions and case histories from numerous communities, particularly in New Hampshire and Vermont. The conference will offer an excellent opportunity to pick up ideas and guidance from other attendees and from the many consultants, steeplejacks, painters and other contractors who will be present. One hoped-for outcome of the conference is the realization that a need may exist for a meetinghouse organization (possibly as a division of an established non-profit) which could serve as a clearinghouse of information and resources related to historic churches and meetinghouses, and which could, as well, create and oversee an active survey database of structures throughout New Hampshire or even New England.

Continued on page 4



UPCOMING EVENTS

Meetinghouses, Steeples, Tower Clocks and Weathervanes

An all day conference in Jaffrey at the Meetinghouse.

Date: Friday, June 14th

Time: 8:30 A.M. (registration) to 4:45 P.M.

Cost: \$20 (\$25 at the door)

Brochure and registration information may be obtained from Robert Stephenson, P. O. Box 435, Jaffrey NH 03452. Tel: 532-6066. E-mail: rstephenson@top.monad.net. Website: <http://top.monad.net/~rstephenson/>

Who should come: Open to all. Encouraged to attend are persons associated with historical societies, historic churches of any denomination, meetinghouse committees & associations and similar; and town officials, code enforcement officers, contractors, consultants, architects, engineers, preservationists, carpenters, artisans and all those interested in Meetinghouses, Steeples, Tower Clocks & Weathervanes.



Inherit New Hampshire, Inc.—Annual Meeting, Reception, Talk & Dinner

Date: Friday June 14th

Cost: Reception & Meeting (5 P.M.) \$8; Talk (6 P.M.) Free; Dinner (7:15) \$25.

Inherit New Hampshire, our statewide preservation organization, will hold its annual meeting in conjunction with and immediately following the Meetinghouse conference. The meeting & reception will be at Melville Academy, a few steps from the Jaffrey Meetinghouse. The talk to be delivered at the Meetinghouse will be by the Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic of *The Boston Globe*, Robert Campbell. His title: *Architecture as the Art of Making Places*.

Following the talk there will be a celebratory dinner at The Monadnock Inn. To register or for additional information, contact Inherit New Hampshire in Concord at 224-2281 or contact Robert Stephenson at the above address and phone number.



The Grand Monadnock Steeplechase

Date: Saturday June 15th

Times: Various but generally between 11 A.M. and 4 P.M.

Cost: Free

Many Monadnock Region historic churches, meetinghouses, "church-like" buildings and a few historical societies will participate in the "Grand Monadnock Steeplechase," opening their doors and welcoming visitors. A self-guided tour brochure will be available locally or may be obtained by sending a stamped self-address business size envelope to Robert Stephenson at P. O. Box 435, Jaffrey NH 03452. Call 532-6066 for additional information. Open House signs will be posted outside each site and knowledgeable docents will be present to describe each site's history. Among the participants so far are sites in Dublin, Fitzwilliam, Frankestown, Greenfield, Hancock, Harrisville, Jaffrey, Lyndeborough, Marlborough, New Ipswich, Peterborough, Rindge and Westmoreland.

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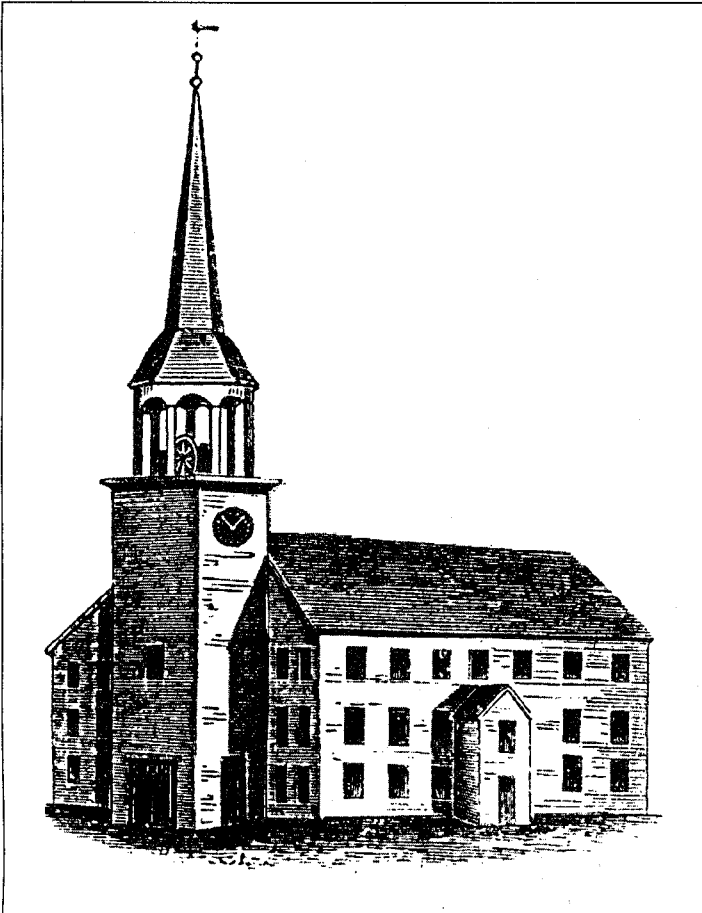
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Continued from page 2

Also of interest that same day will be *Inherit New Hampshire's* Annual Meeting and Reception which is set for 5 P.M. at Melville Academy in Jaffrey. Following at 6 P.M. will be a talk at the Meetinghouse by Robert Campbell, Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic of *The Boston Globe*. The talk will be entitled "Architecture as the Art of Making Places."

Inspired by the Meetinghouse conference, dozens of Monadnock Region historic churches and meetinghouses (and a few historical societies, too) will participate in the "*Grand Monadnock Steeplechase*," an open house day on Saturday June 15th. This will be an opportunity to visit some of the historic churches and meetinghouses that you may know but only from the outside. Participants can pick and choose their route and visit as many or as few sites as they wish. ▲

Robert B. Stephenson is the coordinator of the June 14th Conference on Meetinghouses, Steeples, Tower Clocks & Weathervanes. He is an historic preservationist and author of Towns of the Monadnock Region (1994), now in its second printing.

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