

Use as Town Hall and School

THE MEETINGHOUSE had ceased to be used for church services in **1844**. In **1870** the town decided to remove the pulpit, gallery, and pews. A “middle floor” was added. The upper floor was used as the town hall, and the ground level floor for school rooms. By **1914** both the school and town offices had been moved to what is now downtown Jaffrey.



1922 VIS Restoration

In **1922** the **VILLAGE IMPROVEMENT SOCIETY**, founded in **1906**, worked with the town to restore the Meetinghouse closer to its original layout. The middle floor was removed and the three sided gallery restored, though facing east. The fluted columns were replaced and a stage was added. Often called the “Town House” in the **1920s**, the Meetinghouse began being used for concerts, plays, tableaux, and speeches. There were a few benches, but most of the seating was provided by the wooden “V.I.S” fold-up chairs that are still used today for overflow. The celebration of Jaffrey’s 150th anniversary of incorporation was held at the Meetinghouse in 1923.



Interior of the west end of the Meetinghouse after the 1922 restoration. Notice the fold-up chairs and lack of a railing in the gallery.

Restoration of 1991-1993

BEGINNING in **1991** a major restoration of the Meetinghouse was undertaken by the citizens of Jaffrey. \$155,585 was raised for the project; \$89,094 through town warrant articles and grants, and \$66,491 through private donations. The steeple was removed and replaced with a wholly new reproduction. Extensive foundation work was done, during which a civil-war era safe was found beneath the floor. It turned out to be empty.



The steeple of the Meetinghouse being removed as part of the restoration done in the early 1990s.

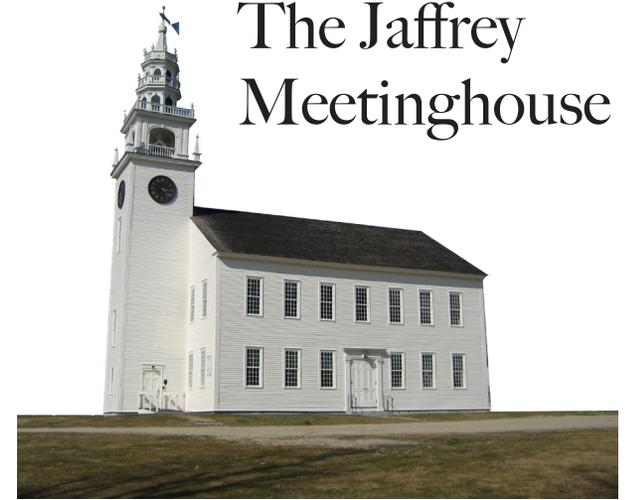
The Meetinghouse Today

THE MEETINGHOUSE continues to be reroofed, repainted, and repaired. In 1994 a railing to the gallery was added to comply with modern building codes. Exit signs, smoke detectors, and alarms have been added. The tower stairs were remade in 2023. The front steps were reset in 2025.

The Meetinghouse belongs to the Town of Jaffrey. It is used for meetings, lectures, theatrical productions, dances, and concerts. Just as the centennial, sesquicentennial, and bicentennial celebrations had been held there, the celebration of the **250TH ANNIVERSARY** of Jaffrey’s incorporation was held at the Meetinghouse. Those wishing to use the Meetinghouse may submit an application that can be found on the town website. ♣

This brochure was produced by the **Jaffrey Historical Society**. It is a composite of information contained in Jaffrey town histories and previous publications about the Meetinghouse. A version with citations may be found on the Jaffrey History website. (jaffreyhistory.org) Printed by Savron Graphics, Jaffrey, New Hampshire. **June 2025**.

The Jaffrey Meetinghouse



JAFFREY was officially less than a year old when its 351 inhabitants, many of them women and children, set out to build a “good and convenient Meeting House” as a condition of their charter. Money was scarce, and the job of framing and covering the Meetinghouse was given to the lowest bidder, Samuel Adams, from Rindge, who was twenty-four years old at the time. He subsequently moved to Jaffrey and is buried in the **OLD BURYING GROUND** behind the Meetinghouse.

The timbers of the Meetinghouse were cut on a lot east of Thorndike Pond and brought across the snow by oxen in the winter of **1774**. In May of **1775** the citizens of Jaffrey gathered to clear the Common. Though Samuel Adams had assisted in the framing of the Rindge Meetinghouse, it seems that he needed some “expert” assistance. He enlisted the services of his brother-in-law, Jeremiah Spofford, who came from what is now Bradford, Massachusetts. The “king post” trusses and double rafters, which can still be seen in the “attic” of the Meetinghouse, are testament to the quality of the original framing.

THE RAISING of the Meetinghouse occurred during the “week ending **June 17, 1775**” and has been called “the first important community event in the town.”

Legend has it that those raising the Jaffrey Meetinghouse “heard the rumble of guns” from the **BATTLE OF BUNKER HILL** in Charlestown, MA while they were working and during their noontime break.

Jaffrey was beset by financial difficulties in those early years. Even the barrel of rum used to celebrate the raising of the Meetinghouse was bought on credit. While the building was complete enough to hold town meeting under its roof in June of **1775**, much of the rest of the structure would not be done for another twenty-five years.

The original structure was rough. Called a “barn-type” Meetinghouse, it sat on temporary wooden blocks and stones. It had two one-story porches at either end (see illustration), and no stove.

Money was raised to finish the interior by selling “box” pews. Many of the pews were made by John Buckley, a resident of Jaffrey who had come to North America as a Hessian soldier fighting for the British. Remnants of the original pews may be viewed on the second floor of the VIS’s **MELVILLE ACADEMY MUSEUM**.

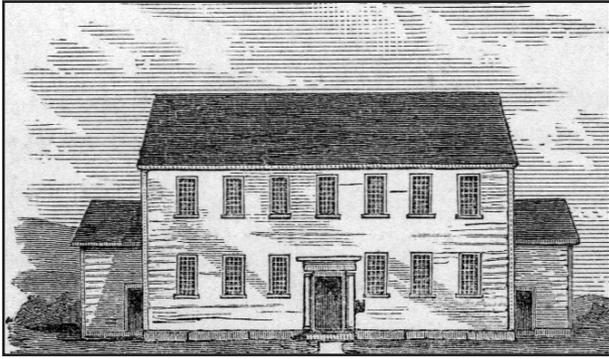


Illustration of what the original Meetinghouse may have looked like. From the *History of Jaffrey* by Daniel B. Cutter, 1881.

Religious Uses

THE ARCHED window on the north side of the Meetinghouse originally illuminated a pulpit. “Body” and “Wall” pews filled out the main floor, with area in the center of the room holding plank benches known as “free seats.” Similar to what you see today, there was a three-sided gallery supported by fluted columns, but it faced the pulpit. From the beginning, the Meetinghouse was used for both civic and religious meetings. Early expenditures for the Meetinghouse were often listed as “support for preaching.”

Jaffrey ordained its first settled minister on December 10, **1782**. Laban Ainsworth served as the Congregational minister of Jaffrey for 76 years.

The early sabbath meetings in the Meetinghouse had no heat. The first stove was installed in **1822** with the town making no provision for cord wood. Singing in services was at first unaccompanied. In time, some instruments were allowed, and eventually a wooden pipe organ was constructed by Almon Bailey. “Fisher’s Hornpipe” was the first tune played on the instrument.

In **1819** the State of New Hampshire passed the **TOLERATION ACT**, which prohibited towns from



A panel from one of the Meetinghouse pews. Many of the pews were made by former Hessian soldier turned Jaffrey resident, John Buckley. The balusters were turned by John Eaton at his mill in Squantum. This panel is on display at the VIS’s Melville Academy Museum.

taxing citizens to support a minister or maintain a meeting house. In Jaffrey, the town initially complied by allowing all of the denominations the use of the Meetinghouse proportionate to their contribution in taxes. In **1829** the apportionment was as follows: “*the Congregationalists, 21 Sabbaths; the Universalists, 13 Sabbaths; the Unitarians... and the Baptists, 9 Sabbaths each.*”

By **1831** the Congregationalists had built the “Brick Church” that sits on the east side of the Common. The Universalists were the last to leave, holding Sabbath services in the Meetinghouse until **1844**.

Repairs of 1792-1801

THE FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES of the town meant that the original structure, still unfinished, was so poorly maintained that it needed significant repairs by 1792. “The roof leaked, the windows were broken, and the door steps were hewed logs or temporary planks...” Financial constraints stretched the repairs out over almost a decade, but in that time the Meetinghouse was set on the foundation stones upon which it still rests, the clapboards and doors were fixed, the steps in front of the main entrance were set, and new handles were added to the doors. The Meetinghouse was also painted. It was, perhaps, the first structure in Jaffrey to be painted. The painting was organized by Dr. Adonijah Howe, and took three years to complete. The painters boiled flaxseed oil, white lead, and a pigment known as “Spanish Brown” to create the paint. It’s unknown what that first color looked like. It may have been a light gray or “stone” color.

The Tower & Bell



THE ORIGINAL MEETINGHOUSE did not have a tower. The tower was added in 1822 as part of another round of repairs. It was built by Joel O. Patrick, of Jaffrey, and fastened to the main body of the Meetinghouse with two long beams that stretch two-thirds of the length of the building. It is called a “Christopher Wren” tower because it sits on its own foundation, rather than the roof of the main building. The steeple of the tower is similar to many other steeples in southern New Hampshire, and follows the storied steeple design of Elias Carter, the architect of the Templeton, Massachusetts, Meetinghouse.

The town purchased the bell that still hangs in the Meetinghouse tower in **1823** from the Revere foundry in Boston for \$440.30. In **1850** it cracked, and was reformed by Henry N. Hooper of Boston. It was used to announce church services, weddings, funerals, alarms, and the time until April 1, **1904**. By then it had been replaced by other town clocks near the center of town.

The electric clock, which strikes the hour to this day, was added in **1906**.

