

The 1770 New Gloucester Meetinghouse

A Mystery Solved Leads to New Questions

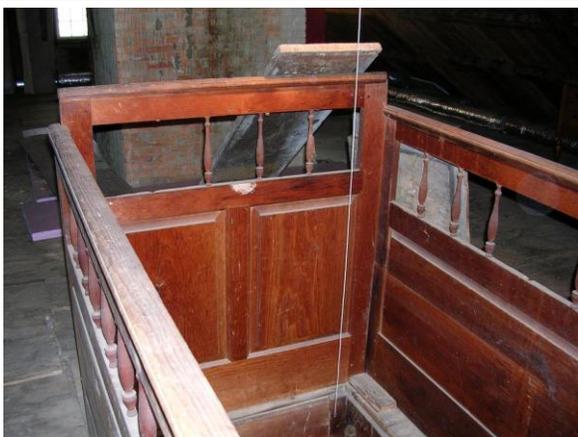
When the Rev. Samuel Foxcroft was ordained in 1765, services were held in the blockhouse. By 1770, a decision was made to build a Meetinghouse on a lot set aside for the purpose by the Proprietors of the town. It was to be built on Lot 25 of the First Division of lots, where today's church (1838) now stands, though Lot 25 was originally the width of the current lot, but ran the length of what is now Church Road, up to Estes Road. (Hmm, when did that change? And why?)

We have the original ledger book kept by Isaac Parsons for the committee to build the meetinghouse. (I say original, but it is clear that Isaac Parsons copied early entries made on some other paper into the book he purchased for the purpose in January of 1772: "By parchment & making this Book & 2 Days entring accounts: 2 [pounds] 10 [shillings]."

It is apparent from the account entries that the building of the meetinghouse took place in fits and starts, beginning in 1770 with scouring the woods for suitable oak trees for the frame, and many days of hauling logs and rocks with oxen. [It would be quite interesting to digitize this ledger, which is organized by names of those who bid for pews, against which their work on the meetinghouse and cash was applied, and put the work in chronological order. We would then have a record of the special skills and resources of the town's residents of that time, as well.]



In July of 1771, the framing went up. We have the floor plan of the meetinghouse in several versions, from which it is apparent that the meetinghouse and its eventual appointments (pews, pulpit, sounding board) looked quite a lot like the Old Ship Meetinghouse in Hingham, MA, (left) although quite a bit smaller, with out the palladian windows behind the pulpit, and not having the much older style hipped roof of Old Ship. Our pulpit area, however, was on the long side of the building, with one staircase to the left as you face the pulpit--quite like Old Ship. Also, like Old Ship, our pews were paneled, and had "ballusters" at the top (rows of turned spindles). We know this because pew panels from our original meetinghouse still exist in town, reused in an attic. (photo, left)

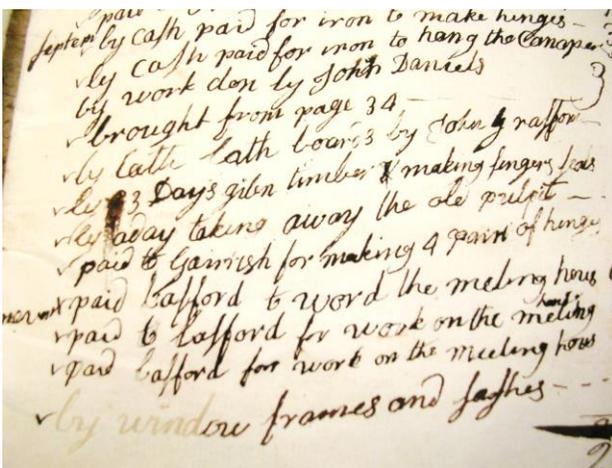




But, see that Old Ship pulpit...paneled to match the pews. Here is a photo of the pulpit we have long referred to as the “pulpit from our original meetinghouse.” Having now seen actual panels from our meetinghouse pews—with their beautifully finished raised panel sides—it’s hard to believe that the meetinghouse pulpit of the same era would be so crudely constructed.

Then, during a 250th Anniversary Planning Group meeting, I spied an entry in the ledger, on Peleg Chandler’s account, dated September 1791, “a day taking away the ole pulpit 1 [pound] 5 [shillings].”

We know that the effort to build the meetinghouse in the first decade after 1770 resulted in a building not much more than closed in against the weather, but fully in use as a worship space. We may now presume that among the rude furnishings of that first stage of building was a pulpit which was replaced when the finish work was done on the interior, beginning in 1789 (not actually complete until 1798). We think it quite likely that the pulpit we have long been told was the pulpit from the first meetinghouse is just that...though a temporary one in use until September of 1791, when Peleg Chandler hauled it away...but never disposed of it.



Perhaps one day someone will, by looking at the Old Ship example, and the panels of Barnabas Winslow’s pew, discover that they have part of the finished pulpit of the New Gloucester Meetinghouse, reused or stored in their old home or barn. We can only hope!



On to a new question. We know that the pulpit we usually use in the sanctuary was purchased for the church during the 1890’s (Victorian) sanctuary renovation. What pulpit was used between the construction of this sanctuary in 1839 until 1895? Elsewhere in the building, often used in the vestry, but now supporting a magnificently elderly Christmas cactus, we do have the bottom of an old lecturn/pulpit. Is that the one? It has been painted several times, but it is made of very sturdy stuff, and is of a style that could make it “right,” though it seems somewhat small for the size of the sanctuary. Hmm. One of you may have the answer. Or perhaps the ledger of the 1838 building program will shed some light on the question. But that will have to wait for another day.