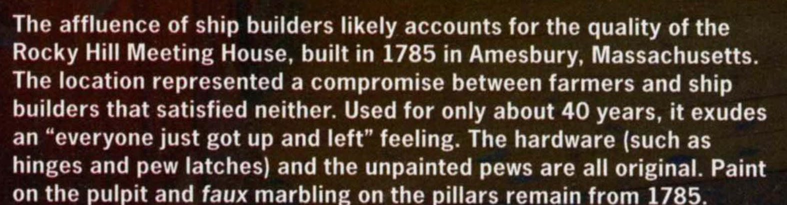
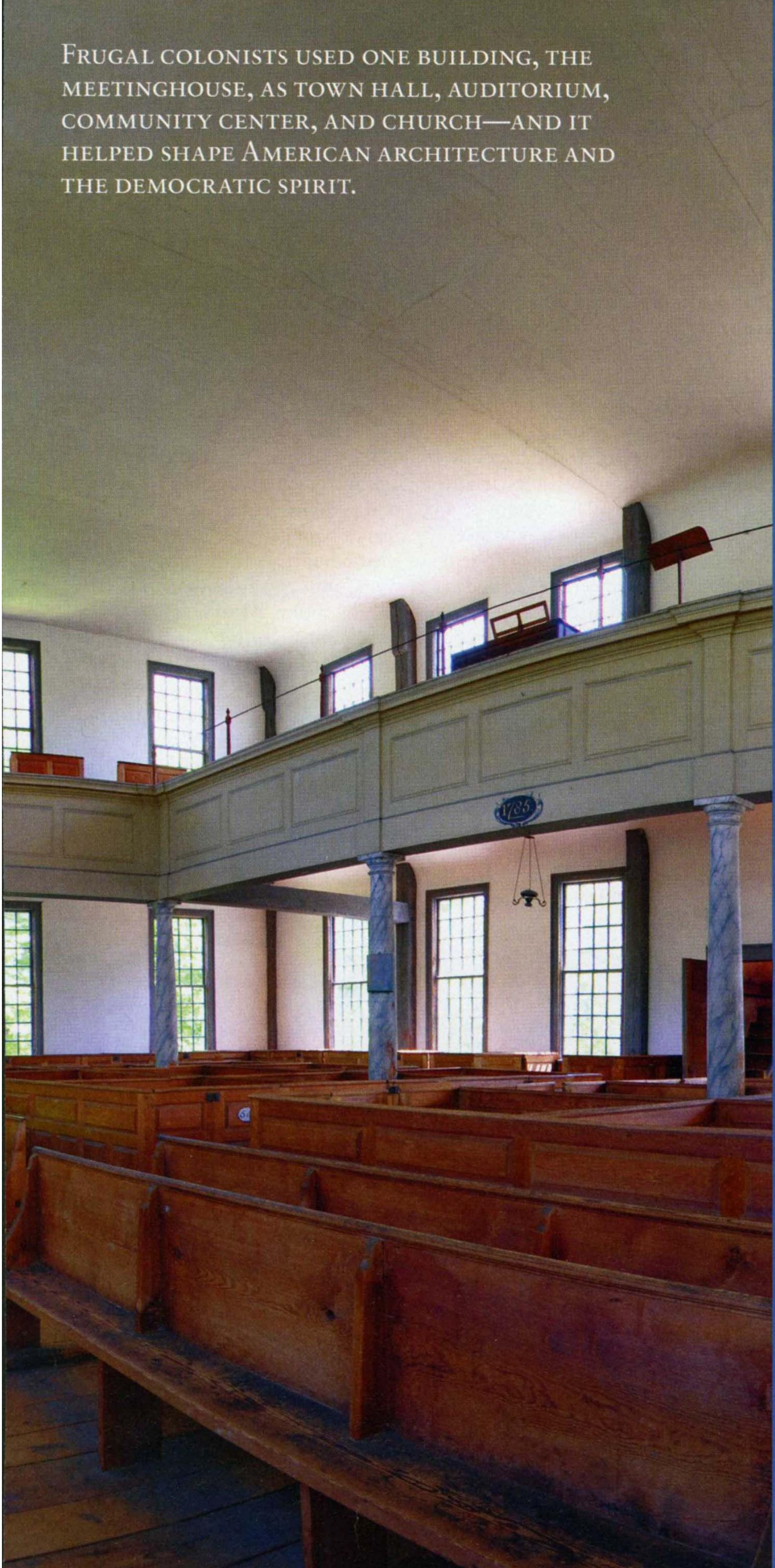
We Gather Together

BY VICTORIA WELLING
PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL WAINWRIGHT



The affluence of ship builders likely accounts for the quality of the Rocky Hill Meeting House, built in 1785 in Amesbury, Massachusetts. The location represented a compromise between farmers and ship builders that satisfied neither. Used for only about 40 years, it exudes an "everyone just got up and left" feeling. The hardware (such as hinges and pew latches) and the unpainted pews are all original. Paint on the pulpit and *faux* marbling on the pillars remain from 1785.



Frugal colonists used one building, the meetinghouse, as town hall, auditorium, community center, and church—and it helped shape American architecture and the democratic spirit.

New England colonists built their meetinghouses like themselves—practical and hardworking.

Rising in the center of the community, the meetinghouse stood as the centerpiece of civic and religious life—the seat of government, site of public gatherings, and place of worship.

Small in scale, symmetrical in form, simple in décor, and built of native materials, the meetinghouse helped define American architectural style just as it reflected the ideals of its builders, making space for what became two of the country's founding freedoms: the rights to assemble and to worship.

Although the meetinghouse served primarily as a church, early Protestants never called it that. For them, a church was a body of believers, not the building in which they worshiped.

In New England, the meetinghouse was typically the largest structure in the town, a public building funded by tax revenues and built to hold all of its people for a town meeting or hellfire sermon. At a time when a single religion bound each New England community together, no one complained about the tight embrace between church and state during Sunday services.

New England colonies were essentially theocracies, where church membership was required for participation in community governance and policymaking, and attendance at worship services was mandatory. The use of public space—and taxpayer funds—for religious purposes was therefore fully sanctioned.

When congregants folded their prayer books away, the meetinghouse became the secular center of society. Unlike England where royalty and lords controlled the government, every American citizen had his voice in the community and raised it in the meetinghouse. Real democracy ruled the town meetings there, giving the government the strength of the people and establishing a tradition that would be formalized in the Constitution.

Because of the vital role of the

meetinghouse, its construction was a matter of high priority for community leaders, especially in the 17th Century. Some meetinghouses then were essentially forts, erected first and foremost for defense against enemy attack.

Between 1630 and 1830 New Englanders built about two thousand meetinghouses—about one for every one hundred fifty families. The few that remain today—only about one hundred eighty still stand—are icons of New England.

All but one of the remaining meetinghouses date from what historians term the second period, built between 1715 and 1800. Only one first-period (1640 to 1715) meetinghouse remains, the Old Ship Church in Hingham, Massachusetts, built in 1681.

The two periods differ in style as well as age. First period reflects more of our Puritan roots—austere interiors, practical exteriors. Reformed Protestants saw religious ornamentation and ritual worship as barriers to direct communion with God, so stained glass, statuary, decorative paint and plaster—even simple crosses—were absent from meetinghouse décor.

As time passed into the second period, religious sects softened many of their early rules for worship and the designers and builders of meetinghouses began to apply popular design elements, particularly Georgian touches such as fluted pillars, dentil moldings, triangular door pediments, and similar classical elements, inside and out.

Step into a meetinghouse today, and you'll be struck by the quiet majesty of sweeping open space. Tranquility seems to radiate from plain painted woodwork, the high ceiling and gallery, and the sunshine beaming through plain glass windows.

But in their day meetinghouses were far from quiet within. Citizens debated in town meetings, issued policy, and levied justice. Trials were conducted and discipline delivered, often publicly. On the grounds of the meetinghouse, early colonists saw wrongdoers confined in stocks or cages—and witnessed executions.

Finding a seat for a worship service in the meetinghouse was not a matter of personal choice. In first-period meetinghouses, men and women typically sat separately, men on the left facing the puplit, women on the right.

Most meetinghouses had upper galleries, one on each side wall and one across the back wall. Gallery seating was assigned to lower-ranked citizens—unpropertied men, apprentices, servants, and slaves. In some meetinghouses, unmarried men and unmarried women sat in opposite galleries.

Preferred seating was nearest the pulpit and was assigned according to age and community rank. In the second period, people of wealth or prominence built pews for themselves and their families.

Comfort was neither an issue nor an option. Most meetinghouses were unheated, and light came only from natural sources. Numerous evenly spaced windows along first-storey walls and the clerestory above maximized sunlight. In some meetinghouses, a large window behind

Rockingham Meeting House is the oldest public building in Vermont, built between 1787 and 1801 to accommodate the town's religious services and civic events. With seating for nearly 1,000 people, it is one of the larger rural meetinghouses in New England. Restored in 1907, it retains much of its original fabric—king post timber framing, exterior woodwork, many of the glass panes in the 48 20-over-20 windows, interior plaster work, sounding board, and most of the material in the "pig pen" box pews. The surrounding burial ground contains more than 1,000 graves, the oldest from about 1776, with some of the finest gravestone art found in New England.

The First Parish Meeting House, 1747, stands on the green in Cohasset, Massachusetts. It retains its outward appearance as well as any other example of a meetinghouse still in current use in Massachusetts. Over the main door on the long southwest side rises a simple two-storied porch, built in 1768. The upper part served as the minister's chamber.

Built in 1681, the Old Ship in Hingham, Massachusetts, is the sole surviving first-period meetinghouse. Architecturally it differs from later examples—its layout is essentially square, with a hip roof and curved beams resembling the inside of a ship. Inside, the high pulpit backs the north wall with its Gothic windows; galleries occupy the other three walls. Box pews fill both the ground floor and the galleries.

the pulpit shed light on the pastor's written sermon.

As America became more diverse, public funding of a church building for a preferred religion became less tenable and, with the Constitutional separation of church and state, illegal. Congregations were forced to either abandon the meetinghouse or, as happened more frequently, take possession of the building.

Some meetinghouses became town halls. More often, they were sold outright and became everything from apartments to dance halls. Eventually most were demolished. But the few that remain still hold within their walls the practical, hard-working spirit that built America. ★

Victoria Welling is an Ohio writer with a passion for art, antiques, architecture, and interior design.

Information and images for this article are based on *A Space for Faith*, by Paul Wainwright, (Jetty House, 2009), which combines Wainwright's large-format black-and-white photographs with an essay by noted historian Peter Benes to illustrate the beauty and history of New England's remaining colonial meetinghouses. The book won the Independent Publishers Gold Medal as the best northeast regional nonfiction book of 2011.

Jaffrey, New Hampshire, boasts one of the most picturesque meetinghouses, its frame raised on June 17, 1775, the same day as the battle of Bunker Hill. Workers reportedly could hear the sound of cannon fire in far-off Charlestown. The tower and bell were added in 1822, the clock in the early 1900s. The adjacent horse sheds date to 1808; behind them is the Old Burying Ground.

OPPOSITE Lynnfield Meetinghouse, 1714, in Lynnfield, Massachusetts, is believed to be the third oldest Puritan meetinghouse in New England still standing on its original green. It reflects the simple and strictly functional design typical of New England buildings of the period. The entire frame is of oak, the roof trusses braced by a process called crowning used in ship building and old barns of Europe. Pine pews, from the early 19th Century, cost from $8 to $4.50 annually until 1908, according to prices written on the underside of some pews and original pew deeds.

Built in 1707 in Wickford, Rhode Island, the Old Narragansett Church was described as (and still is) a "plain oblong structure with curved ceiling, many windows, some of them arched, and all with innumerable small panes of glass..." The oldest Episcopal church building north of the Potomac River, it houses a wooden pipe organ built by Bernard Smith in England c. 1660, believed to be the oldest church organ in use for church services in the United States.