

# Introduction

My passion for photographing old buildings reflects my curiosity about exploring the experience of living by examining the structures we build, which, without our realizing it, become monuments to our way of life.

New England's colonial meetinghouses were built to serve the needs of a community to gather both for town business and religious worship – concepts that were not at all distinct in colonial New England before the separation of 'church' and 'state.' While many of these meetinghouses have been torn down or renovated well beyond their original appearance, the structures included in this book and accompanying exhibition look much as they did when they were first built. I feel a "presence" whenever I am in one of these places – not in a haunting way, but with a sense of wonderment about the people who built and used them. My photographs of these structures are devoid of people, yet to me they are all about our nation's ancestors, whose lives – the day-to-day joys and cares – are not much different from mine today. Sometimes when I am in one of these meetinghouses I love to sit and contemplate those who came before me. I wonder how many others have had the same experience.

In photographing these buildings, I have made every effort to omit any reference to the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, or 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. For example, my preferred interpretation of exterior views is straight on and square. Telephone wires frequently require that I relax this approach. Also, when photographing the interior spaces, I always use natural light. I feel that artificial illumination would detract from the sense of space and light that I experience in these places. Furthermore, most of them to this day do not have electricity.

While architectural photographs are usually seen as illustrations of what a structure looks like, this is not my primary intent. Rather, I see beauty and mystery in these meetinghouses. I love the textures of the wood. I am impressed with their regularity and symmetry – they are beautiful in their austerity and simplicity. Perhaps romantically, I suspect these qualities reflect the lives of those who built them. Their religious beliefs were unambiguous and the simple lines of their meetinghouses reflect this.

In many ways, the location where each photograph was made is unimportant. I approach meetinghouses in much the same way that an artist who works with the human form approaches a model. It is not important what the person's name is. Rather, the artist sees in the model a quality that can, when properly posed and lit, yield a piece of art. These meetinghouses are my "models" for making art, and my photographs reflect my emotional response to them – my physical location when I made each photograph is not of primary importance. Therefore, the images in this book are sequenced for artistic purposes, and not by location.

I made my first photograph of a meetinghouse in Fremont, New Hampshire, a town not far from where I live. That led to several nearby meetinghouses in Sandown and

Danville, New Hampshire. Following my curiosity, I started to do some reading to find additional structures that would pose for me as models. I began to understand the importance of the history embodied in these places, and the project began to take shape.

My photographs are first seen in my mind before they are made. My craft with working the camera, developing the negative, and making the print is then harnessed to produce the desired image. The slow pace of working with a traditional wooden field camera, sheet film, chemicals, and photographic paper causes me – *forces* me – to slow down and think. I enjoy the tactile quality of working with traditional photographic media. There is an intimacy in going under the dark cloth and looking at an upside-down image on the ground glass or in working in the darkroom on a snowy winter day. I hope that this feeling is reflected in my photographs. There is certainly a Zen-like quality to my pace of working, and I think my photographs are better for it. I know I am.

Music has also been important in my life. Through my research on the colonial period in America, I have come to love the music of William Billings (1746 – 1800). Billings was the first American-born composer and is primarily known for his church hymns. I have chosen selections of his hymn texts to accompany my photographs.

This book, and the companion exhibition *A Space for Faith*, are my tribute to New England's colonial meetinghouses and the people who built and used them. It is my hope that my photographs will illuminate both the graceful beauty and rich history embodied in these structures, and thereby awaken an interest in the importance of preserving this vital part of our national heritage.

Paul Wainwright, Photographer

Atkinson, New Hampshire  
January 2009