MEETING HOUSE TO CHURCH: THE EFFECT OF
PURITANISM ON 19TH CENTURY NEW
ENGLAND CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

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I. INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has ever seen a green-shuttered, white, clapboard church with its delicate spire reaching through crimson and gold autumn leaves, has a preconceived notion of what a New England church must be. It is, in some ways, a kind of universal knowledge by which one recognizes such a pastoral scene as typically New England. This assumed commonality gives cause to reflect: what are the essentials which make up this universally recognizable structure? What are the architectural elements contained in these three to four thousand structures built before 1850 that make them distinctively New England? Is this universality the result of an accidental evolution or does its etiology follow the blooming of Puritanism in the New World? Thus, the central question of this research: what effect did Puritanism have on our shared architectural understanding of nineteenth century New England churches?

The effect Puritanism has played on New England church architecture has been widely examined. Marian Card Donnelly's study of New England meeting houses states:

For more than eighty years historians of American religious, social, and architecture traditions have described and analyzed the
Puritan meeting houses of early New England. Whether intrigued by a possible correlation between Puritan doctrines and modes of construction, by patterns of early New England life as reflected in Puritan worship, or by the ways in which English medieval building techniques were adapted for religious architecture in the New World, these historians have usually shared one especial enthusiasm: they have been investigating a Puritan phenomenon. (1)

The effort of this research will be to investigate that Puritan phenomenon and to examine how the tenets of seventeenth century Puritanism were expressed in New England church architecture. Further, this research will reveal to what extent these principles were visible in nineteenth century churches.
II. THE MEETING HOUSE BECOMES A CHURCH

Before the Puritans left England, it had become clear that if they were to be dissenters and leave the established church, they must also go without "churches". Consistent with their view of the Word of God as immutable, as later stated in the "Cambridge Platform", scripture mandated that the word "meeting house" replace "church". William Bradford's writings indicate that the term "meeting house" was in use before the Puritans emigration from England.(2) The Old World Puritans were using private homes for meetings during the middle of the sixteenth century. Therefore, at least in this context, the term "meeting house" was likened to the scriptural house churches.(3)

The earliest surviving usage of "meeting house" in the New World is found in John Winthrop's writings.(4) The term "meeting house" was deeply significant to Winthrop in that it was not synonymous with a physical church structure. To Winthrop, a church was a covenanted body of people. On the other hand, a meeting house was the multi-use structure in which that body met to worship or seek protection as well as serving a multitude of civic functions. It would seem the enormity of obstacles early Puritans encountered in their endeavor to carve out an existence in the New World's wilderness would place architectural considerations secondary...
to other concerns. Questions of decor and style had to be considered alongside concerns for safety and a myriad of civil and practical decisions.

Architectural historians and social historians differ on the definition of the term "meeting house". The former distinguishes a meeting house from a church by the so-called short-side alignment of the pulpit and the main entry. In a meeting house, the pulpit and main entry are situated on the opposing, long sides of a rectangular structure. A church differs in that the main entry and pulpit are rotated ninety degrees from that of the short-side alignment to face each other from the short sides of the rectangle. Social historians define a meeting house as a combined municipal and religious structure which was erected and maintained by public taxation. To a social historian, architectural details are of no consideration in differentiating the two. (5) Thus, an exact definition of the term "meeting house" seems elusive in that it may contain theological understanding, architectural design, endowment, or usage. However, the union of secular hall and worship center combined in one structure survived until the separation of church and state in the early nineteenth century.

Early charters from the Virginia Company, the Eastland Company, and the Dorchester Company, which date before 1612, include provisions for a place of worship. However, these charters only encouraged the building of a place of worship by
providing land for that purpose. In 1627, the *Orders and Conditions* of the Ulster plantation specifically called for "a convenient number of Parishes and Parish Churches in every county."(6) One year later, the Massachusetts Bay Company followed Ulster's example by including in its charter provisions for the building of a place of worship. Thus, it is worth noting that these buildings were not built merely out of a compulsion for a place to worship or a place to discern public affairs, but rather a matter of contract. By the mid-eighteenth century the principal requirements colonial authorities specified before land could be titled was a minimum number of settlers, and provisions for hiring a minister, and plans for the erection of a suitable meeting house within a specified number of years.

The style and design of early meeting houses reveal two somewhat related views on their origin. They were either the deliberate and conscious rejection of the parish churches in England or, those English dissenters, having spent some time in Holland prior to their journey to the New World, were influenced by Dutch Protestant architecture.(7) However, the wide variety of both interior and exterior designs seems to indicate that the Puritans had no standard preconceived notion regarding church architecture. It would seem that had there been a Dutch or English model there would have been a far greater universality in the early meeting houses.(8)
Further, it appears that the Puritans were not so blatantly hostile toward the Anglican church that they expressed their deliberate defiance in a wholesale departure from Anglican architecture. (9) As will be developed later, the quarrel between the Anglican church and the Puritans had more visible effect upon the communion table than either the external structure or the interior pulpit placement. (10) Further, one can develop a rather convincing case that the later nineteenth century New England meeting houses adopted a strong Anglican influence as they evolved from their pre-church existence into church.

Donnelly suggests that early Puritan meeting houses were not wholly the result of religious or doctrinal traditions, but rather contain some degree of other sociological influences. Bradford expands this point as a matter of practicality by saying:

*builte a fort with good timber, both strong and comely, which was of good defence, made with a flate rofe & batillments, on which their ordinance were mounted, and wher they kepte constante watch, espetially in time of danger. It served them also as a meeting-house and was fitted accordingly for that use.* (11)

This same sense of urgency or practicality was witnessed as the populating of New England proceeded. Often the most visible idea which ruled in the site selection and the materials chosen had more to do with safety than sacrosanctity. In addition to
safety, the erection of most early meeting houses was mandated by cost, convenience, and shelter while engaged in the worship of God. One early meeting house (Meriden, N.H.) was described as "a rude enclosure resembling a pen." Thus, the primary function of early meeting houses in New England was that of a safe place to hear the Word of God with little regard for elegance or beauty. (12) These early Puritan builders placed the utilitarian aspect of the meeting house as of far more importance than its comeliness.

The ensuing years saw an increase in population. The resulting strain on these small (usually 25 feet by 40 feet) structures made them inadequate as places of worship and assembly for the expanding community. (13) Additionally, the increased population afforded more persons to share the expense of building and maintaining a communal meeting place. This expanding population was coupled with an increasing opulence of the community and the disappearance of the threat of attack. (14) It seems it was this change in the social fabric of the early eighteenth century rather than any shift in theological understanding which led to the demise of the tiny, crude, log structures of the first epoch meeting houses.

Although it appears that hostility against the English Church is not to be totally overlooked, neither is it to be seen as the predominate influence in the evolution of New England church architecture. However, there remained enough
resistance to replicating Anglican architecture that one early eighteenth century church patriarch tersely wrote:

... to seek merely to secure a building spacious enough to contain the people who desire to worship together; one that is plain enough within and without to guard against ecclesiastical pride; and externally suggests at no point, the shrines of that Church which drove our fathers into this wilderness.(15)

It was out of this mild resistance against Anglicanism, a need for more space with less regard toward defense, and a desire for simplicity that a new type of meeting house structure became common in New England. It was a plain, semi-cubical structure, without porch, tower, chimney, or steeple. Aside from the fact that these structures often had from 40 to 60 windows, they carried a close resemblance to a barn. Hence, the inevitable, but not necessarily irreverent name--"barn meeting houses."(16) (The importance of the inordinate number of windows will be discussed later).

One feature which was common to all these "barn meeting houses" was the long side location of the pulpit and main entrance as described earlier. Two other doors were usually located at the center of the ends of the building. Galleries were built on three sides--across the front entrance which was opposite the pulpit and across the two ends over the side doors. The pulpit was elevated to approximately the level of the gallery's lower row and it was reached by a flight of
stairs. The pulpit usually had a canopy-like "sounding board" located above it. It would seem a consciousness of both the efficient usage of space and acoustics were at the heart of this design.

The elevated, central location of the pulpit's position was also indicative of the vital importance these Puritans assigned to preaching. For them, the pulpit was not a mere stand or a convenient rest for the pastor's notes. The pulpit was seen as "the throne of the Word of God." Windows were often placed near the pulpit not only for the obvious advantage of natural light, but aid the congregation's focus on the Word of God. These windows were clear glass to allow natural light rather than colored which might induce an emotive state and focus other than that wrought by the Word.

Interestingly, the two level floor plan lent itself to a visible and rigid seating hierarchy. All the citizenry was admitted, and indeed were even compelled to attend the meeting house; but once inside, a definite class distinction emerged. Slaves and persons with black or red skin were relegated to those seats in the oppressive heat under the eaves and in the stuffy closeness of the back rows in the upper decks. Admittedly, there were seldom many Indians or Negroes in attendance in eighteenth century New England, but neither did the hierarchy of seating end with the consideration of skin color. Boys and young men between the ages of ten and
twenty-one, along with the town's poor were obliged to find their seats in the upper gallery. (17) The "best men" were given "foreseats", and individuals of lessor worth were obliged to take their place farther back from the pulpit or in seats offering only an obstructed view. To determine who were the "best men", such criteria as age, wealth, birth, learning, and public service were considered when handing out seating assignments. (18) Recorded examples of "the best seat to the man who paid the greatest tax" can be noted in Hampton, New Hampshire, and Dedham, Massachusetts. (19) Notably missing in the seating selection process was any mention of one's church membership status. Apparently it was either a given assumption not worthy of mention or one's ecclesiastical standing was a matter of little importance when compared to the fore mentioned list of criteria. It would seem the former is more in keeping with our understanding of the theocratic structure of the Puritan society. It is not clear if the intent of the two level floor plan was to support this graded social distinction or, given the utilitarian consideration for the efficient usage of space, it simply fit the prevailing norm of racial inequality and a curious twinge of aristocracy.

Gender was one other social separation which also existed in at least some early eighteenth century meeting houses. In 1762 Ezra Stiles penned the floor plan of an extensive addition to the New Haven meeting house. He describes it as:
... a body of seats divided down the center, with women on the east and men on the west, long and short seats arranged around the walls, and then the addition back of the pulpit, again with seats and stairs to the gallery on the north wall. (20)  [See Figure 1]

FIGURE 1

Evidence of this separation by gender is still quite apparent in many New England churches built before 1800. The fact that many of those churches still have a center division of the main body of pews and two entries remains as a relic of that separation.

The move from seats and benches to pews had an integrating effect on meeting house seating. Families wealthy enough to afford pews were allowed, after some early resistance to maintain gender segregation, to be seated together. The adaptation of "pitts" or individual cubicles however proved to be another method of separation prevalent in early eighteenth century meeting houses. Squares on the church floor were sold
as real property to individuals within the community. These usually were approximately six feet by six feet. Each "pitt" owner was required to "build, keep in repair, and maintain all the glass against it." (21) [See Figure 2]

There is no mention of a stove or furnace in any New England meeting house until First Church in Boston installed one in 1773. (22) Families usually brought along foot stoves which enclosed a warm brick or a pan of hot coals. Thus, the "pitt" system served a three-fold purpose. First, it was a matter of practicality and comfort in that it helped stave off drafts in an otherwise unheated building. Second, the "pitts" were a source of revenue. And third, they served as a symbolic barrier to the world. When one entered and closed the door on the cubical, it shut out the distractions of the outer
The matter of privacy afforded by these individual "pitts" and the high sided pew is said to have been a product of the Reformation. One early historian insists they served to "conceal the worshippers within, that external eyes could not detect, on their part, a want of compliance with the order to bow at the name of Jesus, in the service." (24)

These individual enclosures did lead to a more integrated seating arrangements, but they were not without their critics. As one pastor put it:

Pew doors are a useless, wasteful and slamming abomination, that ought not to be tolerated in the House of the Lord.(25)

The "House of the Lord" terminology causes one to note the later shift from meeting house to sacred space in this critique of "slamming abominations."

It is also interesting to note that the process of building was gradual. It was not unheard of for thirty years to pass between the initial framing and completion of such structures. The usual process was to frame in and roof the structure to make it an enclosure secure from the elements. The interior work was to be completed later as funds were made available. The records indicate that the frame of one such structure, located in Bedford, New Hampshire, was raised in 1755, but was not completed until 1785.(26) Therefore, it is not unlikely
that numerous architectural changes were made and an evolution of sorts may well have occurred during the thirty years of delayed construction.

Our twentieth century stereotype of a New England meeting houses usually includes color. Diaries, maps, needlework, and the analysis of some surviving fragments indicate that no less than 101 different colors are known to have been used or considered for New England meeting houses. The most commonly used were: yellow or light yellow, with whites, grays, blues, reds, oranges and greens in descending favor. (27) Contrary to our present-day belief, colors were by far more common than white or natural weathering.

Regionalism played a significant role in color selection. Yellows, light yellows, and ochres were predominate in Massachusetts. Oranges and blues were confined to Connecticut and Rhode Island. Apparently neither a theological concept nor the availability of tint material was at the heart of most of these regional preference, but rather it is attributed to a tendency to imitate or "keep up" with a town's nearest neighbors. (28)

However, the use of blue for the exterior of meeting houses, particularly in Connecticut, did have a theological underpinning. The "Blue Meeting House" of New Haven, Connecticut, identified it as part of the New Light separatist group which broke away from the Reverend Noyes' church during
the Great Awakening. Thus, the color blue, at least in the New Haven area, was synonymous with religious revival. During this early eighteenth-century New Light enthusiasm, the color blue, which is symbolic of the blue sky, took on an iconographic understanding. It symbolized their being "on the right path". However, as with many icons, the intended symbolism of sky blue color was soon diluted by widespread adaptation and lost its initial symbolic meaning to regionalism.(29)

The predominate color choice outside Connecticut for New England meeting houses of this period was yellow. The choice of yellow seems to be a deliberate attempt to copy or simulate the building materials of classical architecture. The availability of timber and scarcity of quarries made wood structures the most common. Several surviving plans call for "light stone color," "dark stone color," or "yellow stone color" as an apparent effort to make these wooden structures look like masonry.(30)

As mentioned earlier, no single architectural element influenced New England meeting houses more than the altar/communion table controversy. Building material, structural size and configuration, pew alignment, pulpit placement, and even color varied widely, but the one common denominator found in all Puritan meeting houses was the stark absences of an altar. It has already been noted that pure animosity toward Anglicanism was not the single most
determining factor in meeting house design. However, the matter of the communion table was the single most visible symbol of New England reform. Abolishing the altar as the worship focal was the foremost issue the Puritans sought to reform without compromise.

The Puritan tradition regarding the matter of communion table and altar goes back to the beginning of the reformation. Although Luther did not seem to have any particular agenda regarding church planning, but rather saw the matter of altar placement as secondary and quite without urgency when compared to other reforms. He causally stated:

The Mass vestments, altars, and lights may be retained till such time as they shall all change of themselves, or as it shall please us to change them: though, if any will take a different course in this matter, we shall not interfere. But in the true Mass, among sincere Christians, the altar should not be retained, and the priest should always turn himself towards the people as, without doubt, Christ did at the Last Supper. That, however, must bide its time.(31)

Both Zwingli and Calvin introduced new liturgical emphasis for Communion and, at the same time, entirely did away with altars. Zwingli's rite called for communicants to be seated in the choir and to be served bread and wine by the deacons. In Calvin's rite, the communicants left their seats and went forward to receive communion at the Holy Table which had been placed in front of the pulpit at floor level.(32)
No single architectural solution was derived from this diversity among early European Protestants. Thus, with no long-standing tradition or Continental pattern for New England meeting houses to follow, the matter of communion table placement was usually solved on an individual basis which best fit the space restrictions. Although the earliest New World meeting houses lacked a common location for the communion table, they sought to demystify the religious experience and, in so doing, often placed the communion table in the midst of the congregation or, depending on the floor plan, in front of the pulpit or slightly into the center aisle between the front benches or pews.\(^{(33)}\) The theological interpretation of placement of the Holy table, the distribution of the bread and wine to the seated congregation, and the absence of an altar was to emphasize the communal rather than the sacrificial aspect of the rite.

The simplicity of the table, which was void of religious ornamentation or symbolism, was of theological importance. The pre-Reformation altar was usually carved from stone and boasted religious adornments, whereas the communion table was a simple, long rectangular table with only modest turnings and the commonest of decorative moldings. Two types are known to have been in use. The first was a simple, rectangular table, which was quite exemplary of most seventeenth century household furniture. The second was a hinged hanging table which attached
to the deacon's pew. It swung up to serve as a table, and, when 
not in use, dropped down to a hanging position. These hanging 
tables may have been necessary to conserve space. However, by 
virtue of their inconspicuousness, these hanging tables could 
be understood as a further removal from an altar as having 
sacred and mysterious qualities. Hanging tables purposely 
avoided visual and symbolic focus for the Puritans. Instead, 
they hung unobtrusively out of sight and out of mind until such 
time as needed. (34)

There was little change in the exterior of New England 
meeting houses until the late eighteenth century. The interior 
design did however undergo several modest changes. Many of the 
"pitts" and old square pews were torn out. The pulpit, which as 
previously noted had been located on the long side of the 
building, was moved to the end of the structure. The pulpit was 
also lowered, as were the galleries. Frequently the galleries 
were torn out and wholly dispensed with, except in those cases 
where it was preserved over the entrance for the choir. A 
rethinking of pew arrangement took place which resulted in more 
efficient usage of the available floor space and more 
convenient aisles. It was not until mid-nineteenth century that 
pews were arranged in a semi-circular sweeping fashion which 
accommodated every parishioner an improved advantage for 
hearing the message and seeing the pulpit from which it was 
being delivered. (35) Examples of these semi-circular
arrangements are: the First Congregational Church of Bingham, Maine, and the North Deering Congregational Church.

A discussion of New England church architecture must include steeples and cupolas. Since bells were the common means of summoning the area's people, the obvious function of such an appendage was to house the bell. Cupolas were widely used before steeples because they provided a functional place to suspend a bell and were far less expensive than steeples. There is no mention of any early church having avoided a steeple for reasons of their being too ornamental. A steeple, cupola, or bell tower became an accepted addition to the early meeting house by 1650. Records show that by mid-seventeenth century Springfield, Cambridge, and Dedham, Massachusetts, as well as Wethersfield and Hartford, Connecticut, had cupolas which suspended bells.(36)

The placement of the bell in the delicate spires, often seen in New England churches, was a matter which presented some unique structural problems. Cast bells were extremely heavy—often weighing half a ton or more. If not done with great care and strict attention being paid to the direction in which the bell swung, mounting such weight in a high steeple could prove disastrous to the building. The bell's swinging motion could rock the entire meeting house. For this reason, many eighteenth century churches placed their bell in a low tower which was attached to the side of the church proper or
stood a short distance away. (37)

The final evolution of New England meeting house into church took place in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is not to say that the dual ecclesiastical and civic roles of these structures were abandoned because they did indeed continue to serve both purposes until the early nineteenth century. However, these structures had every architectural appearance of a "church", but were legally municipal meeting houses (38).

Most architectural historians agree that although the move from Congregational meeting house to Congregational church was not a sudden event, its shift began with the second Brattle Square Church in Boston in 1772. In some ways, the long-standing schism between Anglicanism and Puritanism was architecturally resolved in this particular structure. Earlier in the century English architect, Wren, brought the English Renaissance to its full bloom. It was from this Renaissance architecture that Brattle Square Church member and architect, Thomas Dawes, incorporated three Anglican "codes" in one structure: the church plan, compass windows, and the use of the bell tower door as the main entry. Churches in Salem and Providence also adapted these elements at about the same time. (39) Interestingly, it was at this time of radical exterior change that the time-honored hanging communion table saw its demise. The acceptance of the church plan and the
influence of Anglican architectural features provided the climate for this debate to melt into the Congregational mode. (40) 

The rest of New England either ignored this new fashion, were unaware of it, or thought it too outrageous to adopt. Rural communities continued to construct their places of worship on the familiar meeting house design. It was not until 1789 that the towns of Taunton and Pittsfield, Massachusetts, hired the Boston architect, Charles Bulfinch to design large, porticoed meeting houses on a church plan. (41) Bulfinch's design, which included shallow, projecting porches or porticoes, roof-supported storied steeples, Palladian windows, and low-pitched roofs rapidly became the dominate form for new church construction in New England. Several instances of adapting old meeting houses to this design by simply adding a new facade over the existing exterior are known. One such example is Hopkinton, New Hampshire, where an enormous porch and steeple were incorporated into its existing twin-porch design. (42) 

It seems that as soon as the Brattle Square Church broke away from the long-standing meeting house tradition, a plethora of architectural modes swept New England. The 1820' and 1830's saw Greek revival and Gothic revival motifs in wide acceptance. By 1830, Greek revival was clearly the dominate architectural fashion. As previously noted in the case of Hopkinton, many New
England communities were updating their meeting houses by applying these motifs over existing framework. It was at this time that the meeting houses which had been various shades of yellow, orange, and chocolate color now became universally white.
III. CONCLUSION

It appears New England church architecture went through a mild evolution between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Some of the basic tenets of Puritanism did remain intact while others all but vanished from sight. A gradual move toward resolving the long-standing architectural quarrel with Anglicanism, regarding the visible communion table rather than an altar, lost some of its importance. Puritanism's focus on the preached Word and the centrality of pulpit placement for that purpose were often preserved. The simplicity of overall design reminiscent of the Puritan dislike for ecclesiastical pride can also be noted. It is arguable though that this simplicity of design certainly was not universally maintained, as some churches became quite ornate both inside and out. The Puritans' revolt against iconoclasm, in which carved or painted "images" and other "popish" trappings were so violently opposed, began to ease as paintings, stained glass windows, and even an occasional crucifix began to be accepted in New England churches. It seems the tenets of Puritanism which were so visible in the early seventeenth century architecture were either absent or diluted by the mid-eighteenth century.

The architectural renaissance of sorts which swept New England apparently did not meet with unanimous approval nor
delight of all. In the early nineteenth century there seemed to be no clear and concise architectural norm, but rather a searching for a new identity. Dexter poignantly expresses his distaste for this architectural chaos by writing:

We had Grecian temples with no towers, and then the old tower was hoisted from the ground and set a-straddle upon the ridge pole of the temple; while all manner of urns and obelisks, and domes and spindles--each more hideous than another--topped the pile. This had its day, when a great Gothic invasion came over us, and for the last few years parishes have been hard at work building "Byzantine" and "Romanesque" and "Norman" and "Lancet" and "Perpendicular" and "Tudor" churches of brick and stucco, and clapboard and shingle and plaster--about as much like the cathedrals which they feebly misrepresent as a pyramid of lemon ice-cream is like Bunker Hill Monument.(43)

Perhaps the chaotic atmosphere which pervaded the land is lost in Dexter's scathing sarcasm. However, when his remarks are carefully examined, one can readily see the array of architectural motifs present in early nineteenth century New England churches. One can visualize through the radical changes in architectural expression the encroachment of values early Puritans would find either hard to understand or totally repugnant.

Thus, Dexter had every right to be so indignant--not because he was merely a credible critic with an eye for function and aesthetic beauty in the sacred space, but rather a traditionalist with an understanding of what had been lost.
NOTES


7. Ibid., p. 7.

8. Ibid., p. 91.

9. Ibid., p. 92.

10. Ibid.


- 25 -
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 189.
16. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., p. 209.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., p. 190.
27. Benes, pp. 57-59.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., pp. 61-62.
32. Ibid., p. 24.
33. Benes & Zimmerman, p. 73.
34. Ibid., p. 75.
37. Ibid., pp. 59-60.
38. Ibid., p. 28.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., p. 75.
41. Ibid., pp. 28-30.
42. Ibid., p. 31.
43. Dexter, p. 194.
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