

## Description of the Meetinghouse

The old meeting-house in Jaffrey was of the common form of its period, of which an almost perfect specimen remains in the original town meeting-house of Sandown, New Hampshire. In appearance it was like a large two-story house with its front door on the south side. It had one-story porches at each end, resembling diminutive ells, dwarfed by the towering sides of the main structure. In its severity of lines and absence of ornament, it was of the type called the barn meeting-house. Its front door opened directly to the broad aisle leading to the high pulpit on the opposite side of the house. The pulpit standing eight or ten feet above the lower floor was entered by a flight of stairs at the left which by a turn near the top led to the enclosed pulpit. The pulpit, high and dignified in appearance, displayed in its frame and paneling the finest craftsmanship of the period. An arched window at the rear admitted light upon the desk and upon the form of the preacher as he expounded his chosen text, and over the pulpit hung a curious device suspended from the ceiling by an iron rod, which has been described as resembling a truncated turnip. It was called a sounding board and was deemed indispensable as a means of diffusing the speaker's voice to all parts of the edifice. On the floor in front of the pulpit was a pew for the deacons, to which was attached a hinged table used for christenings and ceremonial occasions. Facing the pulpit on three sides of the house was the gallery supported by fluted columns from the floor beneath. The breastwork of the gallery was in paneling of old pine lumber without knot or blemish. The walls from the floor to the lower windows were wainscoted in pine in common with the finish of..... the pews, and the walls between and over the windows and the ceiling were finished with plaster. Above the wainscoting the posts of the house projected from the walls at intervals in the form of pilasters enlarged at the upper ends to support the plates and cross-beams, which in turn supported the ceiling and roof. The posts were left unfinished and today still show the untouched ax marks of the workmen of a hundred and sixty years ago. The pews on the lower floor were of two classes, called the body and wall pews. The body pews were first built and were considered the most desirable in the house. They were oblong in form with dimensions of about five by six feet, while the surrounding wall pews, of similar pattern, were raised one step above the floor level and were five feet square. Between the body pews and the pulpit were the free seats, mere plank benches, at first occupied by the congregation but later assigned to the boys and young people from the overflowing pews, where they were kept under the parental eye or the watchful care of the deacons or tythingmen. The pews were enclosed by divisional walls of panel work three feet in height, surmounted by a balustrade, called a banister, fifteen inches in height, made with spindles or balusters seven inches in the clear between cap and base rails each four inches in depth, as shown by a section of one of the original pews in the historical collections of the Village Improvement Society at Jaffrey Center. The doors of the pews were about twenty inches in width, and the seats consisted of boards hinged to the front and rear walls so that they could be raised during prayer and in other parts of the service, allowing a standing position for the participants. This arrangement had its objections in the discordant clatter and clang, likened to a volley of musketry or pandemonium let loose upon the solemnity of the occasion, when the seats fell to their former positions.

Reliable tradition tells us that John Eaton, who was one of the first members of the church, turned those thousands of balusters in his mill in the present Squantum Village. He was a maker of flax wheels, among the many products of his hand, and these balusters were only a slight variation from the common pattern of spokes used in the drive wheel in the familiar pattern of flax wheels then used. A like tradition ascribes a share at least in the fine paneling in pulpit and pews and gallery to John Buckley, the Hessian cabinetmaker (see Genealogical Volume), who learned his trade in the Old Country and found his services in demand not only in the finishing of the Jaffrey Meeting-house but also in those of surrounding towns.

With the increased demand for pews the space occupied by the free seats on the lower floor was eventually used for six additional pews, one of which was reserved for elderly people and the rest sold for \$274, which in 1823 provided in part the funds for the purchase of a bell. In the gallery there were twenty-five similar pews lining the outer wall, in front of which on a lower platform were free seats occupied by the younger portion of the congregation. In 1787 it was "Voted to Grant the two middle Seats below men and womans Side for the Singers," and four years later, with an enlarged choir and the modern fashion of singing in view, it was "voted to grant half of the Front Galery for the Singers and take it out of the Senter." To provide further funds toward the cost of the bell, pew ground in the gallery occupied by free seats was sold at vendue, bringing \$59.95, making the total amount \$333.95, the successful bidders to build their own pews uniform in design and finish with the pews already installed.

No photograph of the interior of the Jaffrey meeting-house as originally laid out is in existence. However, the meeting-house at Rockingham, Vermont, was nearly an exact replica of the Jaffrey structure, and the accompanying view of that interior is presented here, through the courtesy of the town clerk of that place, to illustrate the gallery and pew arrangement of the Jaffrey meeting-house prior to 1870.

(*Source: P 187-89 Town History v I*)



The Meetinghouse at Sandown, NH, as referenced above.



The Rockingham Meetinghouse in Rockingham, VT, as referenced above.



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