

Reverend Laban Ainsworth

Jaffrey's First Minister - Served 1782-1858



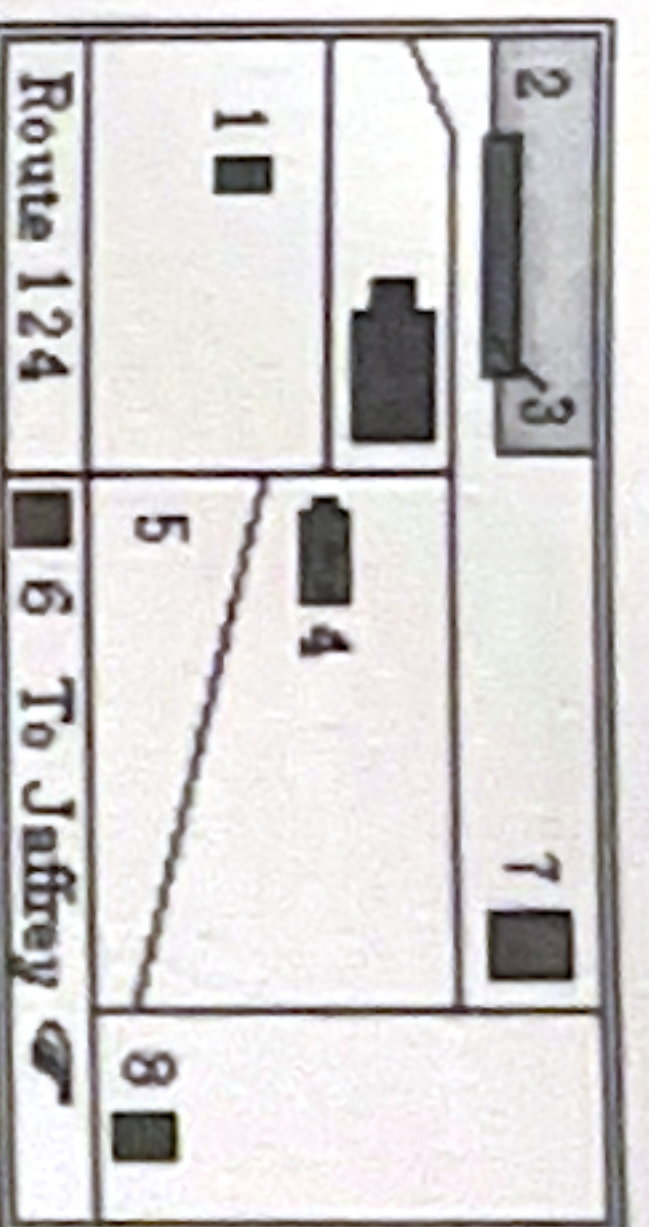
Laban Ainsworth was born on July 19, 1757, in Woodstock, Connecticut. He attended Dartmouth College (Class of 1778) and served briefly as a chaplain in the Revolutionary Army. After hearing him at the Dartmouth commencement, a committee of Jaffrey residents asked him to come to Jaffrey. He was ordained minister on December 10, 1782.

Parson Ainsworth was very popular in Jaffrey. In 1787 he was married and brought his wife Mary to town, and event marked by feasts and celebrations. Tragedy struck in February of 1788, however, when Ainsworth's house (at the corner of Main Street and Gilmore Pond Road) burned to the ground, injuring Mrs. Ainsworth and killing Isaac Spofford, son of the church deacon. The people of Jaffrey took it upon themselves to provide the minister with a new home, which has remained in the family ever since.

Parson Ainsworth was a member of the Masons, the Jaffrey Library Society, the Washington Benevolent Society, and was superintendent of schools. He was one of Jaffrey's most prominent citizens, and advised in matters both secular and spiritual. He served the Town faithfully until his death in 1858, and his service of 76 years as minister in the same town is said to be unmatched by any Congregational minister in America.



Other Points of Interest



The Little Red Schoolhouse (1) was originally located on Dublin Road. It was Schoolhouse #11, used from 1822 to 1886. In 1960 it was moved to its present location and refurbished. It is open to the public on weekend afternoons in the summer.

The Old Burying Ground (2) is the oldest cemetery in Jaffrey. Inside its walls lie many of the town's prominent citizens, including Amos Fortune, Hannah Davis, Laban Ainsworth, and Willa Cather. More information can be found on the plaque hanging on the horseheds near the entrance to the Burying Ground. The horseheds (3) were built in 1808 and were designed to keep parashioners' carriages dry during inclement weather.

The First Church of Jaffrey (4) was built in 1831 to house Jaffrey's Congregational Church when it moved out of the Meetinghouse. It's huge doorstone, weighing 8 tons, was brought by seven yoke of oxen 12 miles from Marlborough in January 1831. The common, owned by the Village Improvement Society, was the site of Cutter's Hotel (5), a popular destination that burned in 1901. The fine home on the corner is the Ainsworth Manse (6), built for Laban Ainsworth by the people of Jaffrey in 1789, to replace an earlier home that had burned.

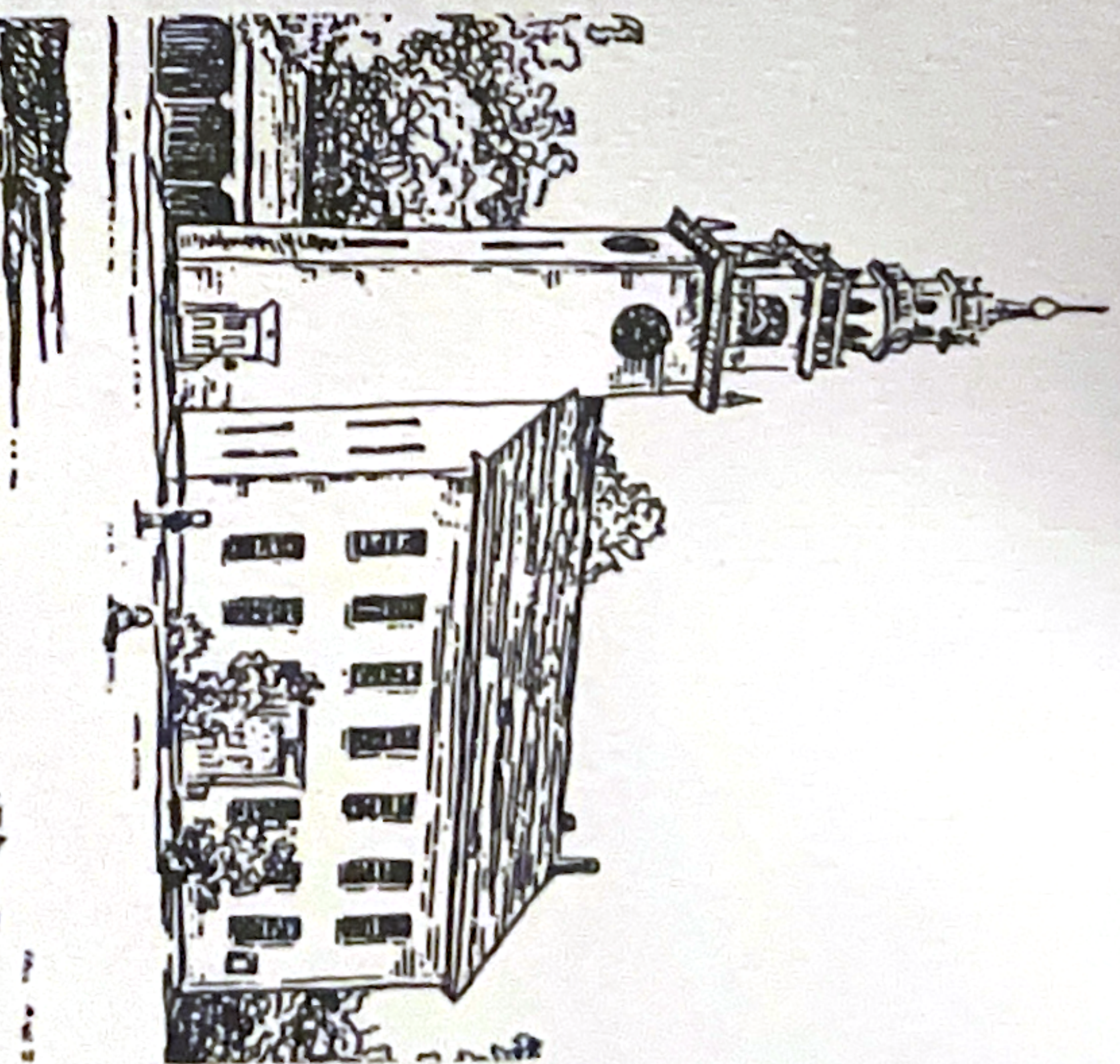
The Melville Academy (7) was constructed in 1833 and housed a private academy until 1857. It was used as the Jaffrey District #7 School from 1863 until World War I. In 1920 it was renovated by the V.I.S. and has been used as a local history museum ever since. It is open on a periodic basis.

The Monadnock #4 Firehouse (8) used to house the Jaffrey Fire Engine Company, which was founded in 1829. The building is now owned by the Jaffrey Historical Society, and houses several historical artifacts. It is open on a periodic basis.



Cover illustration courtesy of the Jaffrey Chamber of Commerce.
Brochure written by Peter Lambert.
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Welcome to the
Jaffrey
Meetinghouse



Raised on June 17, 1775,
the day of the battle of
Bunker Hill.

Jaffrey Center,
New Hampshire

The Jaffrey Meetinghouse

Pre-Construction

In 1773 the 351 people who lived in the area known as Middle Monadnock petitioned Governor John Wentworth to officially charter their settlement as a town. On August 17, 1773, this charter was granted, and the township was incorporated as Jaffrey. As they now constituted a township, the people of Jaffrey needed a place to hold town meetings and church services. Both provincial laws and good Yankee common sense required that the Meetinghouse be built at the center of the Township, and a suitable location was found on the top of a hill.

At town meeting on April 26, 1774 the people voted "to Build a Meetinghouse on the Common Near the Senter this and the insuing year." To Captain Samuel Adams of Rindge, who was the lowest bidder, was awarded the framing and covering of the Meetinghouse. It was a tremendous undertaking for the town, financially as well as physically, for the Revolutionary War was beginning and hard currency was difficult to come by in a small frontier town.

The great oak beams that support the Meetinghouse (and continue to be perfectly sound to this day) were cut on the eastern shore of Thorndike Pond and dragged to the construction site during the winter of 1774-1775.

Construction

The actual framing of the Meetinghouse took place between the first week of May and the middle of June, 1775, by Captain Adams, his brother-in-law Jeremiah Spofford, and their crew of workmen. However, the raising of the building - setting the huge timbers in place - was done on June 17, 1775, the same day as the battle of Bunker Hill.

It is perhaps Jaffrey's greatest tradition that the workmen and townspeople could hear the cannon from Boston that day. It seems hard to believe, but accounts from Francestown and

Hanover, New Hampshire also indicate that people in those locales heard the guns as well.

One way or another, after the raising little was done to the Meetinghouse. It was not until 1778 that a floor and pews were built, and a pulpit constructed under the large arched window on the north wall.

By 1792 the Meetinghouse was in such a complete state of disrepair that only emergency action by the Town saved it from collapse. The roof leaked and the building was still sitting on temporary underpinnings. The Town even granted Joseph Cutter permission to move the building because it restricted access to his tavern (he never moved it).

The Meetinghouse was finally given a stone foundation in 1797, and the windows and clapboards were repaired. The Meetinghouse was painted between 1798 and 1801, a project directed by Dr. Adonijah Howe, Jaffrey's physician. A woodstove was not installed until a private citizen placed one in 1822, although the Town did not vote to furnish wood until 1825. The steeple was not added until 1822, designed and built by Joel Patrick, a master carpenter in town. The clock, surprisingly enough, was not added to the meetinghouse until 1906

Usage

The Meetinghouse was used for town meetings and Congregational church services until the early 19th century. Following the New Hampshire Toleration Act of 1819, other denominations in Jaffrey were entitled to the same Meetinghouse privileges as the Congregationalists. For several years each denomination was given a certain number of Sabbaths to spend at the Meetinghouse.

Unhappy with this situation, in 1829 the Baptists moved to a new building in East Jaffrey. The Congregationalists moved to their new brick building across the square two years later, and the last denomination, the Universalists, moved to the present Cutler Memorial building in 1844.

The Meetinghouse was left unused except for town meetings and elections, a situation that did not change until 1870. That year, the pulpit and pews were removed and a second floor was

added. The first floor was used as a high school, while the second floor used as a town hall. This arrangement was abandoned a few years later, and in 1914 the place for voting was moved to East Jaffrey.

Neglected, the Meetinghouse was again saved by swift action by a few industrious townspeople. In 1922 the Jaffrey Center Village Improvement Society volunteered to cooperate with the Town to restore and renovate the building. The Town agreed, and, with the removal of the second story, addition of a stage and a new gallery, the building was brought to its present condition.

In the 1990s the Meetinghouse again underwent a series of renovations and repairs, from the renovation of the upper steeple (which was removed and sat on the Meetinghouse grounds for a time), to a complete re-painting in 1997-8.

The Meetinghouse Today

Today the Meetinghouse is used for a number of functions, mostly during the summer months (for there is, as in the olden days, no heating system in the building). Every Friday nights during July and August it hosts the Amos Fortune Forum, a series of talks and lectures named for a freed slave and prominent citizen who lived in Jaffrey in the late 1700s. The Meetinghouse is used for Monadnock Music classical concerts in the summer months, and has hosted a number of plays, including the Jaffrey-Rindge School District's annual Shakespeare Festival. It is used for meetings and several times each year couples are married within its ancient walls. Situated as it is in Jaffrey Center's Historic District, among many other historic structures, it provides a setting that is the epitome of old New England. The Meetinghouse is truly an asset to the Town, and one of Jaffrey's treasures.

For more information regarding the meetinghouse, please contact the Jaffrey Town Offices, 10 Goodnow Street, Jaffrey, NH 03452
(603) 532-7445.