

A Space for Faith:

The Photographs of Paul Wainwright



Curved Beam, Olde Meeting House (1755), Danville, New Hampshire 2004

By Eric Biggerstaff

Colonial American meetinghouses were more than simple places for Puritan worship; they were the heart of most early American communities. It was within these meeting places that the members of the community would gather to learn of local news, celebrate community events, set town laws and conduct the business of the community. In these meetinghouses, early America and its traditions were formed and in many ways the ideas that developed within these structures set the foundation of what America would become as a nation. It is these places that have occupied the elegant eye of New Hampshire based photographer Paul Wainwright for the past six years, recently culminating in his first book “A Space for Faith: The Colonial Meeting Houses of New England”.



Door and Windows, Canaan Meeting House (1793), Canaan, New Hampshire 2006

Of the more than 500 meetinghouses still standing in New England, only about 30 remain largely unaltered since the day they were built. It is these unaltered 30 that Wainwright has focused his lens upon. Paul's work is not about creating an architectural catalog of these buildings, it is about artistically capturing the feel of these places and what it might have been like in the days when they were used. As he states "I feel a presence whenever I am in one of these places – not 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 nations' ancestors, whose lives – the day to day joys and cares – are not much different from mine today."



Pulpit and Sounding Board, , Olde Meeting House (1755), Danville New Hampshire 2007

Paul's photography spans both the literal record of the building and the abstract translation of the place. In many of the images, the viewer immediately understands what is being shown, a simple exterior of the meetinghouse for example. However, once the viewer has this visual record, Paul invites them inside to take a more abstract view of the soul of the structure. Similar in many ways to people (and we can imagine like the Puritans who built them) the buildings' exterior stands in stark cold contrast to the warmth of the interior. It is the interior soul of these structures that comes through in Paul's best images such as "Box Pews, Looking Down, Rocky Hill Meeting House (1785), Amesbury, Massachusetts, 2004" or "Attic, Freemont Meeting House (1800), Fremont, New Hampshire, 2007". As he notes "In general I resonate to the interior, more intimate



Interior, Old Meeting House (1773), Sandown, New Hampshire 2005

images. The exterior photographs give context for the interior work. One of my favorite images is the box pews looking down, not only does it reveal an important element of my life but it is also a good example of pre-visualization, five months had elapsed between when I first “saw” the image and when I exposed the film” (see side note on the making of this image). The more abstract images will take the viewer some time and effort to decide just what it is they are looking at, but it is these images that help express the “sense of mystery” that the buildings evoke and that Paul is trying to convey to the viewer. In addition, Wainwright goes to great lengths to remove as many traces of the modern world from the image as he can, his goal is to help transport the viewer back in time and he accomplishes this by removing these distractions. This often means framing the image to exclude electrical services, nearby roads, modern buildings and signs.



Pulpit Detail, Chestnut Hill Meeting House (1769), Millville, Massachusetts 2006

Wainwright continues to employ, and continues to enjoy, a large format camera; “Working with a view camera, placing myself under the dark cloth helps isolate me from everything but the image I am working on. The fact that the image is upside down on the ground glass helps me to separate myself from the object – it is the first step in abstracting the image. It enables me to look very carefully at the various elements I am working with so that I can see them as borders, lines, shapes, forms and textures and not simply as a building, a door, a pew or a pulpit.” In addition, Paul prefers to work in black and white as opposed to color as it again helps to further separate the image from reality. All photographs are interpretations of reality, none are truly real. Color photographs can hinder this interpretation as it allows the viewer to bring a pre-conceived idea of what is or isn’t real into the image, black and white helps remove the viewer’s understanding of what is “real” and emphasizes the abstract thereby creating a more artistic interpretation of the scene.

Paul Wainwright’s photographic journey through time

has helped create a lasting and important body of work. The colonial meetinghouses will surely continue to stand for hundreds of years more and Paul’s elegant images will help convey the importance they have had in American history and will help tell their story for generations that follow. To see more of the images, learn about the project or to purchase the book please visit www.aspaceforfaith.com

Technical Notes

Paul works with a Zone VI 4X5 camera and his preferred film is Kodak T-Max 400 which is developed in a Jobo using T-Max RS developer diluted 1+9 from concentrate. For development, Paul uses 7 minutes as his “normal” time, 9 minutes for “normal +1” and 6 minutes for “normal-1”. Lenses range from 58mm to 400mm and he utilizes the Zone System of exposure and development. His prints are made in a traditional darkroom using a Zone VI 5X7 enlarger and Ilford Multigrade IV paper that is developed in Kodak Dektol 1+2 for 3 minutes and then Selenium toned at 1+12 for 6 minutes.



Steeple, Old South Meeting House (1729), Boston, Massachusetts 2008



The Making of “Box Pews Looking Down, Rocky Hill Meeting House (1785)”

As noted in the article, this image took 5 months from the time I saw the image until the time I actually exposed the film. I had been photographing the Rocky Hill meetinghouse and had just made an image of Puritan graffiti in the form of a wooden mast sailing ship scratched into a pew by what must have been a young boy bored by the sermon taking place at the time (see page 34 of book). I leaned over the balcony rail to ask a question of the person who had let me in and there it was; I saw the box pew image immediately. Puritan meetinghouses are exceptionally plain and stark, and there are no religious artifacts anywhere in the structure, but there in the box

pews I saw a cross! The difficulty was getting the view camera about 2 feet away from the balcony, aimed straight down and leveled, with the back shifted the appropriate amount and the lens exactly over the intersection of the pew walls. And, I needed to see the ground glass to focus! The solution consisted of a tripod head mounted to a plywood support that could be clamped to the balcony rail without damaging it. A plumb bob was used to position the lens exactly over the intersection and a 45 degree mirror was used to see the ground glass. With some practice, and several sheets of film, I was able to successfully capture the image I had visualized many months before and it remains one of my favorite images of the series (see image of camera support and set up).



Roof Beams, Old Ship Meetinghouse (1681), Hingham Massachusetts 2008

The setup necessary to make the photograph on the preceding page.

