



# FAITH & FORM

THE INTERFAITH JOURNAL ON  
RELIGION, ART AND ARCHITECTURE  
VOL. XLIV • NO. 2, 2011 • ISSN 00147001



Gravestones and window, Pelham Town Hall (1743),  
Pelham, Massachusetts, 2006.





# A Space for Faith

Text and Photographs by Paul Wainwright

Editor's Note: **A Space for Faith**, by photographer Paul Wainwright, comprises 77 duotone images of New England meetinghouses. The book recently won the 2011 Gold Medal Award from the Independent Publishers' Association as the best northeast regional non-fiction book of the year. In this excerpt from the book, Wainwright explains his working methods, his choice of meetinghouses as subject matter, and his hope for their future preservation.

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 shown here 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 19th, 20th, or 21st 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 these meetinghouses to this day do not have electricity.

Steeple, Old South Meetinghouse (1729),  
Boston, Massachusetts, 2008.







Sun on windowsill, Old Walpole Meetinhouse (1772),  
South Bristol, Maine, 2007.





Interior, Old Meetinghouse (1773), Sandown, New Hampshire, 2005.

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 are sequenced for artistic purposes, and not by where they were made.


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.





Doors, Friends Meetinghouse (1706), Pembroke, Massachusetts, 2006.

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.

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. 

PHOTOGRAPHER PAUL WAINWRIGHT IS BASED IN ATKINSON, NEW HAMPSHIRE. MORE INFORMATION ABOUT HIS BOOK, *A SPACE FOR FAITH*, PUBLISHED BY PETER E. RANDALL PUBLISHER, IS AVAILABLE THROUGH THIS WEB SITE: [ASPACEFOR-FAITH.COM](http://ASPACEFOR-FAITH.COM)