

OUR HISTORY

Photographer Details ‘A Space for Faith’

Several Upper Valley Meetinghouses Are Featured in New Book

By AIMEE CARUSO
Valley News Staff Writer

BELLOWS FALLS, VT. — A new book by New Hampshire photographer Paul Wainwright details an iconic architectural survivor: the 18th century meetinghouse. *A Space for Faith: The Colonial Meetinghouses of New England*, which includes images of several Upper Valley structures, was a finalist in this year’s New England Book Awards.

Wainwright, of Atkinson, N.H., will hold a book signing on Nov. 27, from 1 to 3 p.m., at Village Square Booksellers in Bellows Falls, Vt.

The hardcover book features black-and-white photographs Wainwright made using a wooden large-format camera and an essay by historian Peter Benes. It grew out of Wainwright’s love for photographing old buildings.

In 2004, recently retired from his job as a physicist, an article about a meetinghouse in Freemont, N.H., caught his eye. “I need to make some photos of this,” he said to himself.

He shot the building and began seeking out similar structures. Drawn to their simple elegance, old clapboards and textured, weathered paint, he spent the next several years researching and photographing Colonial-era meetinghouses across New England.

Wainwright “really started to fall in love with the history of these buildings” and the stories he heard along the way. A common theme involved protracted squabbles over where to build the meetinghouse.

“Everybody had to come to church on Sunday, so if it was the middle of winter and the meetinghouse was four miles from your farm, ...” Wainwright said. “The townspeople would come together and the poor Select-board would have to listen to all of the arguments. It would be tabled until the next meeting. It could go on for years.”

Rather than “an encyclopedia of meetinghouses,” Wainwright said, he tried to create “a composite portrait” of the New England meetinghouse, as it would have appeared in the 1700s, eliminating from the photos “any semblance from the 19th or 20th centuries.”

New Hampshire architectural historian Jim Garvin, who helps groups throughout the state focus their restoration efforts, said meetinghouses were originally used both for church services and town meetings and had to accommodate “just about

everyone in the community on a Sunday.”

However, the Toleration Act of 1819, which effected the separation of church and state in New Hampshire, transformed the need for space.

“You no longer were paying taxes to support the minister and (could) decide to hire a minister of another faith,” Garvin said. “The congregation often shrank.”

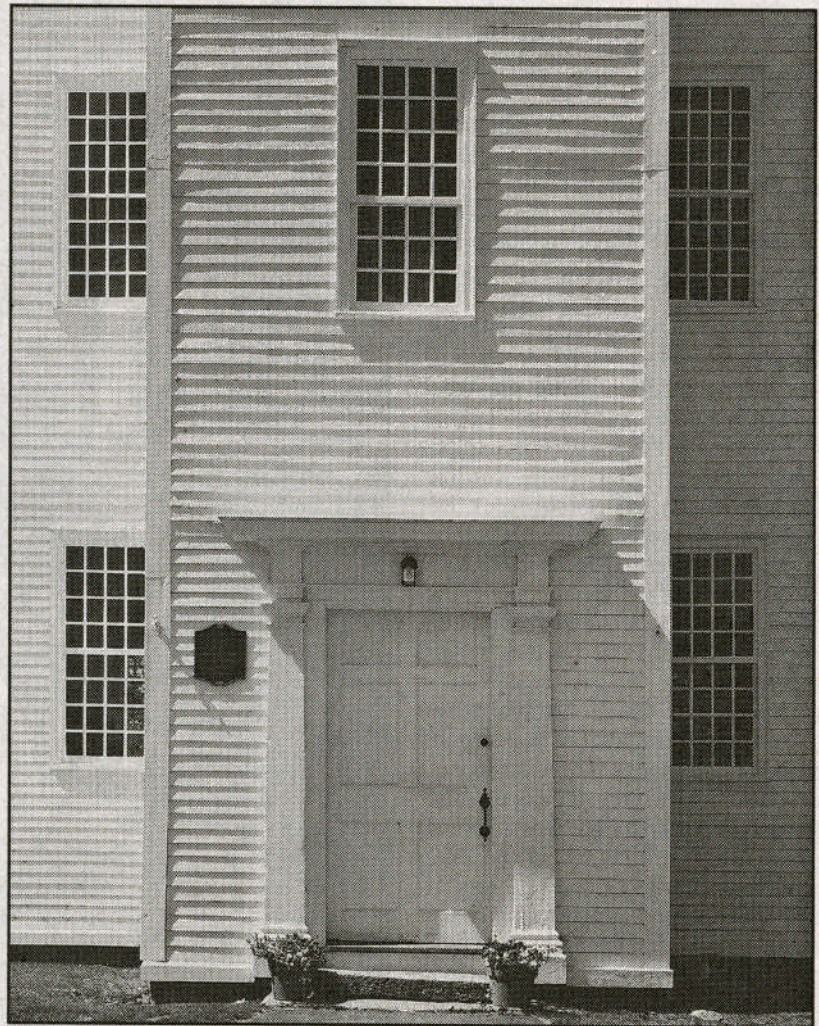
Sometimes the church and the town would divide the building and occupy different floors, an arrangement that met the letter of the law and accommodated the space needs of both.

After 1819, when a town hall needed only accommodate voters — men — a lot of the old meetinghouses were looked upon as inconveniently large, Garvin said. Some were relinquished to a local church, usually Congregational, but sometimes towns “turned

See MEETINGHOUSES — B8

The Canaan meetinghouse, as pictured in Paul Wainwright’s new book, *A Space for Faith: The Colonial Meetinghouses of New England*.

COURTESY OF PAUL WAINWRIGHT



Scroll down for more

Meetinghouses

CONTINUED FROM PAGE B3

their backs on them,” opting to build a new, small town hall, and the meetinghouses were abandoned.

Many fell down, or were burned down, in the mid- to late 1800s, Garvin said, and only about 38 of New Hampshire’s original dual-purpose buildings are still intact. Some are used as community buildings, churches or museums, while others are “in a state of flux.”

Wherever they do survive, towns are attempting at least to stabilize them, Garvin said. In rare cases, they will be restored to their original appearance. In Canaan, for instance,

work on the 1793 meetinghouse has included the removal of a second floor to re-create the “original geometry” — a first floor with church pews and a second-floor balcony on three sides, Garvin said.

Nancy Boone, of the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation, is the state architectural historian. She says that, as in New Hampshire, “you see the full range” of conditions in

In Canaan, work on the 1793 meetinghouse has included the removal of a second floor to re-create the “original geometry.”

Vermont meetinghouses.

“Where you see a meetinghouse that is actively used, it’s in good repair,” Boone said. But at “the other end of the spectrum” upkeep can be a challenge.

She could think of several cases of “committed, local, small congregations trying to hang on to their building and keep it in good repair for the future.”

Boone says it’s important for towns

to find a new use for meetinghouses that now stand empty.

“So many of these buildings are real community landmarks,” she said.

A Space for Faith: The Colonial Meetinghouses of New England, is available at the Norwich Bookstore, Village Square Booksellers, and the Dartmouth Bookstore in Hanover. The New Hampshire Preservation Alliance is offering the book as part of a membership package.

Aimee Caruso can be reached at 603-727-3220 or acaruso@vnews.com.