



CURRENT ISSUE PREVIOUS ISSUES SUBSCRIBE ABOUT

Paul Wainwright is a fine-art photographer who works with a large-format camera, sheet film, and a traditional darkroom. His prints are in numerous public and private collections, including the Boston Public Library. His meetinghouse work has recently been published in his first book, *A Space for Faith: The Colonial Meetinghouses of New England* (Jetty House, 2009), www.aspaceforfaith.com.



Old South Meeting House

by Paul Wainwright / May 4, 2011



Early on a Saturday morning in January 2008, I drove my car up and up and up to the top level of a mostly empty 10-story parking garage on Washington Street in Boston, where I proceeded to unload bags of equipment. In retrospect, I'm surprised someone did not send a security officer out to see what I was doing.

What I was doing was positioning myself to make a photograph of the steeple of the Old South Meeting House, which was built in 1729. Old South was one of the final structures I needed for my photographic study of Colonial meetinghouses. Unlike most of my previous meetinghouse images, I made no attempt to eliminate elements from the 19th, 20th, or 21st centuries. I wanted an image in which the stately steeple stood as a sentinel against the passage of time. I was not disappointed.

New England's (mostly Puritan) meetinghouses were once the backbone of every colonial New England community. Built with tax money before the separation of church and state, they were municipal structures that were used both for town business and for religious worship. The government of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was a theocracy — a system of government that was one and the same with the established church — so it was only natural to construct such buildings at taxpayer expense.

I first became interested in Colonial meetinghouses when I photographed the one in Fremont, New Hampshire, in 2004. I was intrigued by the qualities of the light that filtered through centuries-old glass, the textures of the unpainted wood, and the stark simplicity of the design. I wanted to find more.

My quest meant I needed to do some reading, and as I did so, I was impressed with the historical significance of these places. For example, the American principle of participatory government — commonly referred to as the town meeting — was formed and refined within these buildings. The separation of church and state, which was included in the First Amendment to the Constitution, specifically addressed the long-standing debate over the funding of these buildings with tax money. And the original Tea Party was organized in a meetinghouse — Old South — which still stands on Washington Street in Boston. The popularity of meetinghouses rapidly declined in the first decades of the 19th century. The religious beliefs and culture that led to the separation of church and state in the First Amendment also led to a desire to worship in a building that was not just a plain municipal structure. The early Puritan settlers had abandoned the rich architecture of England's cathedrals for the simple, stark meetinghouse, and after more than two centuries of change and refinement, popular tastes had swung back to a desire for a church-like structure in which to worship. Asher Benjamin, in his 1797 book, *The Country Builder's Assistant*, included a plan for a church building (Plate 27) that was based on a Christopher Wren church in London, and which closely resembles the nowubiquitous white (usually Congregational) church on many a New England town green.

Many meetinghouses were torn down or were remodeled into buildings similar to Benjamin's design, often requiring them to be rotated 90 degrees so the gable end faced the street. With true New England frugality, when faced with the necessity to separate church and state, many towns built a second floor at the balcony level of the meetinghouse and held church services upstairs and town meetings downstairs. Until the 1990s, the town of Ringe, New Hampshire, still had this arrangement.

New England's meetinghouses embody a fascinating chapter of American history, and the surviving ones represent a unique architectural form that is distinctly New England. But most of all, they serve as reminders of a very different time, when the boundaries among government, religion, and community were nearly invisible.

A PUBLICATION OF
BSA

- FROM THE EDITOR
- LETTERS
- OTHER VOICES
- UPFRONT
- END NOTES

- Previous Issues
- Subscribe
- About
- Submissions

Boston Society of Architects/AIA
52 Broad Street / Boston, MA 02109-4301
617-951-1433 / [directions](#)