

A Space for Faith: The Colonial Meetinghouses of New England

Photographs by Paul Wainwright with essay by Peter Benes
Jetty House, 2010.

\$35. 128 pages.

Reviewed by Niki Barrie

Let's start with the essay, the last chapter in this book, a beautiful book that is well-written and well-researched and meticulously designed and illustrated.

In the first subchapter of the last chapter, the author, Peter Benes, who is the cofounder and director of the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, writes about how one meetinghouse in Pelham, Massachusetts came to be. This includes a discussion of the painstaking and exacting work from 1739, when the land was surveyed to 1744, when Reverend Robert

Abercrombie was ordained to lead the Pelham congregation. Benes' additional subchapters are just as rich in the history of meetinghouses and include the role of the early American meetinghouse, architectural origins, meetinghouses of the second period, denominational differences, meetinghouse as the center of secular and religious life, strains on the parish system, demise of the second period meetinghouse and a conclusion on the photography of Paul Wainwright, which illustrates this book.

In the front of the book is a Foreword by Brent D. Glass, Elizabeth MacMillan director of the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution; Commentary by William Earle Williams, Audrey A. and John L. Dusseau professor in the humanities and curator of photography at Haverford College in Haverford, Pennsylvania; and Preface by photographer Paul Wainwright, who tells us he sees beauty and mystery in these meetinghouses, "I love the textures of the wood," he says. "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."

The 77 duotone images were taken with a wooden 4x5-inch view camera and sheet film using available light, and each one is captioned with the name and date the meetinghouse was established and its location. Wainwright has chosen to show meetinghouses of the second period—a time when, according to Peter Benes, "many of the earlier 'Puritan' liturgical practices in the region were being replaced by quieter, more inclusive, more formal 'Congregationalist' ones, and town houses and large public halls were gradually replacing meetinghouses as the sites of town meetings that handled municipal business."

Most of Wainwright's exterior views are "straight on and square." His interior images explore the presence he feels when he visits these meetinghouses, and he has captured this sense of wonder for us to see. His interior images, using natural light "filtered through ancient handmade glass windows, spotlights and highlights these spaces. The light is so precisely evoked that it is difficult to believe

its only source is the sun," said William Earle Williams.

I was impressed with Wainwright's variety of creative views. For instance, he photographs an aerial view of a cross formed at the junction of box pews; the sounding board and hanging lamp taken straight up from below; an isolated window with an obscured view of trees and perhaps a burial ground seen through all the bubbles and scratches of the original old glass

Wainwright says his hope is that this book and companion exhibition of his silver gelatin prints, "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."