

CONCORD MONITOR

Published on *Concord Monitor* (<http://www.concordmonitor.com>)

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Created 07/15/2010 - 00:00

Photographer memorializes New England's meetinghouse history in new collection

One afternoon in 2006, a cloud rolled in high above the old meetinghouse in Jaffrey. It was wispy and stood out against the otherwise absolutely clear sky, almost as if it was there to offer protection to the 235-year-old building. And Paul Wainwright was there.

He wasn't there by chance. Wainwright was in the middle of a years-long project to photograph many of the remaining meetinghouses throughout New England. He uses an old-fashioned, large-format film camera (the larger negatives allow for depth of detail that 35mm misses), the kind you might see in an old movie, where the photographer stands behind a camera on a tripod, his head under a cloth studying the image, which, by the way, is upside down.

His goal was not to create glossy, ready-for-postcard portraits of the proud old buildings where townspeople once gathered to both vote on community business and to share their faith. He set out to photograph the history, the souls of those buildings and the souls of those who gathered in them. He documented not just the outside of the buildings but the rugged roof beams, the pews, the knotted and century-old doors, and the graveyards, where those same townspeople set off for eternity. His portrait of the meetinghouse on Star Island captures not just the interior but a granite monument dedicated to the Rev. John Tucke, who served in the community in the 1700s.

The result is *A Space For Faith: The Colonial Meetinghouses of New England*, a collection of photos, taken with only natural light, soulful and sacred, artistic and historic. Wainwright will appear at Gibson's Bookstore in Concord on Saturday from 11 to 1 p.m., during Concord's Market Days.

He spoke to the Monitor recently about his work.

Your photo of that meetinghouse in Jaffrey with the cloud overhead was clearly not happenstance. How did you get to that perfect shot?

Oh, I knew that cloud was coming in over the building, but as it was moving, it would evaporate for a while. I knew what I wanted, so I waited. I was there waiting for an hour, hour and a half. I ate my lunch and hung out. Eventually, the cloud went where it was supposed to.

There are other examples of solid old structures in New England - schoolhouses, covered bridges - what was it specifically about meetinghouses that spoke to you?

In general, I'm drawn to old buildings.

The meetinghouses are beautiful and the textures - the lines, the old wood, are wonderful. It also spoke to me because of my own spirituality. I am a church member and have been my whole life, and so these buildings, that served as places for town business and also for worship, resonated with me.

You spent a lot of time inside and outside of these old buildings. Can a building have a soul?

I think they do. These are buildings built by those no longer here, but the buildings are here. Their spirits are embodied in the building. I think soul is an okay word to use. These photographs are not just about the buildings, but the lives of people no longer here.

In his foreword to your book, Brent Glass of the Smithsonian Institution likens Flight 93 - the Sept. 11 flight that crashed into the farmland in Pennsylvania after passengers voted to try to take back the plane - to a modern-day meetinghouse: "a form of town meeting took place on Flight 93, a brief but poignant tribute to traditions that are deeply embedded in Americans from a variety of backgrounds. The setting aboard that plane was vastly different from the meetinghouses pictured in this book. Nevertheless, . . . its story illustrates that the ideals that flourished in these simple buildings of faith and community have endured over the centuries and have shaped our national character." What was your reaction?

I was blown away when I read that. He found a way to make these meetinghouses relevant, to explain that they are essential. No matter what form they take, there will always be meetinghouses. We will always need meetinghouses.

In your bio you talked about being a very shy kid and how photography helped you to fit in a little bit better - but the thing is, if you look at the work of most photographers, they are almost never in their own pictures. Even though photography helped, did the shyness and the camera still keep you at a certain distance?

I think so. I wasn't on the sports teams, but I took the team photo. I wasn't in the drama club. I was looking in on life through a window. Which is what I continue to do. Look at some aspect of life through windows.

You have always been a photographer, but you have only devoted your passion and time to it after leaving a career in physics. Has that background been a help, or given you a particular viewpoint about the art and history you are creating now?

In a literal way, it's probably helped with the more science and technological aspects of photography, from understanding the chemistry of the darkroom to understanding the F-stops on the camera, which a lot of people have trouble with. In experimental physics, you are interested in the natural world and documenting it. That's a curiosity I have, and that curiosity extends to photography.

Do you have a favorite image in the book?

I do. I do. It's on page 65 and it speaks to my own spirituality - the view looking down on the box pews in the Rocky Hill Meetinghouse in Amesbury, Mass. I was working up in the balcony and I leaned over the railing to ask the person who'd let me in a question. I looked down and thought, "My goodness. There's a cross." The lines of the box formed a cross.

I had to engineer a rigging to support me enough to be able to lean out over the railing and get that. I went back five months later. But all the while, I saw it in my mind.

More of Wainwright's work can be found at paulwainwrightphotography.com.

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