

Form and Function in Colonial America

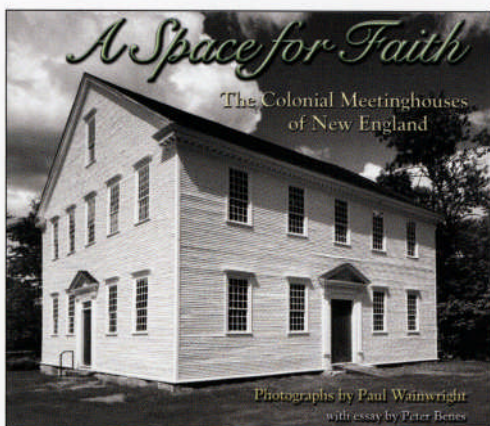
Of enduring value: A new collection of fine photographs, with an illuminating essay

by Larry Sommers

Review of *A Space for Faith*:

The Colonial Meetinghouses of New England

Photographs by Paul Wainright, with essay by Peter Benes
Jetty House, 128 pp., 9 x 10.5 in., \$35.00 hardcover with dust jacket



We have been blessed this year by the appearance of two major photographic studies of the traditional New England meetinghouse. Steve Rosenthal's masterful collection, *White on White: Rural Churches of New England*, was reviewed in our June 2010 issue; our hope was to review the present volume in the same issue, but its publication was delayed by the artist's wise insistence on the highest possible print quality.

It has been worth the wait.

Paul Wainright, a new Hampshire photographer with a doctorate in physics from Yale University, takes us on a tour of 30 meetinghouses built between 1681 and 1801, presenting them in 77 striking black-and-white images.

If Wainright's concern with form and structure stands out plainly in the photographs, it is not to obscure, but rather to bring out, the emotional resonance of his subject matter.

"I see beauty and mystery in these meetinghouses," he tells us in his preface. "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."

Photographers will love these images for the formality of their perspective; meetinghouse aficionados will appreciate what they reveal about the spatial elaboration of the colonial Puritan tradition.

Wainright pays as much attention to the interior and exterior details of these buildings as to their overall structure and form. We are treated to a collection of doors, windows, pew boxes, cupolas, latches, and keys that provide a sense not only of the people who used them through long ages of worship and civic life, but also of the variety of ornaments and styles available within a common pattern of construction.

Of equal value is the accompanying 20-page essay by Peter Benes, co-founder and director of the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, which relates with concrete detail and luminous clarity the birth, development, and purpose of the New England meetinghouse.

These buildings were meant from the beginning as practical venues for worship in the Reformed manner, and for town meetings and other important civic gatherings. They were designed and built in wood by local artisans, with budgets and timelines set by town authorities. Often the project specifications called for the conscious imitation of other meetinghouses in the vicinity—which encouraged the development of a coherent regional style. Most of all, these rather plain, box-shaped structures were meant to be the locus of the preaching of God's word, and the interior spatial arrangement favored a common focus on pulpit and preacher above all else.



Interior, Old Meeting House (1773), Sandown, New Hampshire, 2005.

Paul Wainright

Besides Wainright's compelling photographs and Benes's welcome essay, *A Space for Faith* includes a foreword by Brent Glass of the Smithsonian Institution, a commentary by William Earle Williams of Haverford College, and the author's own preface. The book is sturdily bound, with a handsome dust jacket, and would make the perfect gift for anyone with an interest in fine photography and the roots of our Congregational tradition.

LARRY SOMMERS, also a photographer, is the editor of *THE CONGREGATIONALIST*.