



Rocky Hill Meeting House in Amesbury, photo by Paul Wainwright from his book *A Space for Faith*. Visit [aspacefor-faith.com](http://aspacefor-faith.com) for more meetinghouse inspiration.

# Keeping THE Faith

BY BONNIE HURD SMITH

Places where North Shore residents have worshiped for four centuries are treasured spaces, and many of them survive. The earliest meetinghouses are gone, but their architectural descendants remain.

**I**n their design, we see influences from Europe, from immigrants' countries of origin and the ancient past. We see evolving American taste and the desire to create "heavenly," worthy tributes to Deity.

Each one was, and still is, lovingly cared for and funded by a dedicated congregation. It is

no small feat to maintain a historic building, and religious organizations of all kinds, in particular, face funding challenges.

But the work is rewarding, and whatever your religious bent, the places of worship in our midst are part of our architectural landscape. What would a New England town be without a rising spire or two?

## ROCKY HILL MEETING HOUSE

4 Old Portsmouth Road, Amesbury (pictured at left)

**H**istoric New England considers the Rocky Hill Meeting House in Amesbury (a property it acquired in 1942) "one of the best-preserved examples of an original eighteenth-century meetinghouse interior in New England." Built in 1785 in what was then the West Parish of Salisbury and along the road to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the meetinghouse's architectural details have remained largely untouched due to a combination of local economic and political factors, population shifts and generations of church "squabbling."

Like many New England meetinghouses of this era, Rocky Hill features a high pulpit and pentagonal sounding board just above to project the minister's sermon; carved wooden box pews (where you can still see graffiti); marbled columns; and a second-story viewing gallery.

What's unusual is the double-rafter "truss system" supporting a free-standing ceiling - the kind of

mechanism used to build bridges, leading some historians to credit two bridge builders from Newburyport, Ambrose Spoffard and Timothy Palmer, with the meetinghouse's construction.

Not only are the acoustics for music and public speaking exceptional, the pews in the meetinghouse have never been painted. The paint on the columns and pulpit dates to 1785, and all of the hardware is original. The charm of Rocky Hill Meeting House is untouched since the fall day in 1789, when George Washington stopped by during his tour of the New England states.

The building was originally built as a municipal structure, and was used both for worship and town meetings, thus making it somewhat unique among the old churches in the area. The separation of church and state occurred in Massachusetts in 1832.

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