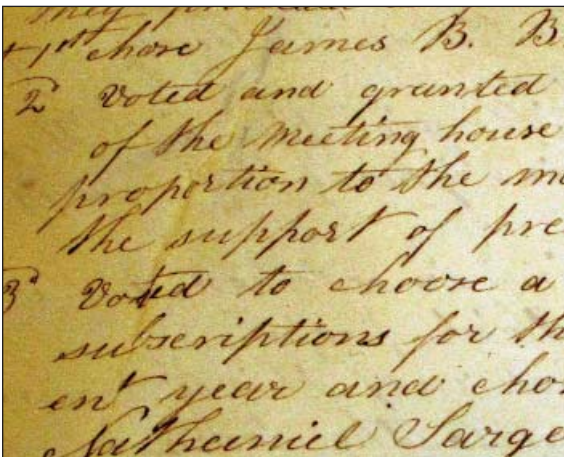


News from the Stow Historical Society

*A newsletter for all friends of Stow history.
Please feel free to pass it along to others who might be interested!*

November 2012

Meetinghouses – One More (Stow) Thing:



From the archives: The handwritten record of the April 13, 1833 town meeting.

The evolution of New England meetinghouses into traditional churches was the subject of the Stow Historical Society's dinner meeting earlier this month. Historian Peter Benes talked about both architectural forms and the social norms that characterized religious congregations.

By the 1830s, Benes noted, worshipers were moving away from the idea of meetinghouses jointly serving as both the home of religious services and the seat of government. Some towns decreed that governmental activities (including trials and nearby executions) had no place in their houses of worship, which were increasingly taking on the aspect and titles of "churches."

Indeed, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts made it official in 1834, approving the separation of church and state by law.

On the surface, Stow appears to have run behind the trend in some respects: It wasn't until the town's Fourth Meetinghouse was destroyed by fire in 1847 that the decision was made to build a separate town hall.

On the other hand, a review of handwritten town records from the 1830s reveals two things:

1) Folks in the 1800s (and the late 1700s, in fact) had uniformly fine handwriting. Or perhaps it was a condition for being elected to town offices.



2) They were clearly aware of the growing church/state distinction and making moves in that direction.

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No images remain of Stow's first four meetinghouses but the final result is familiar – separate First Parish Church and town hall buildings with similar Greek revival facades, the town hall lacking only the church's steeple and double doors.

For one thing, in 1833, townspeople chose to become a Unitarian congregation – and the First Parish Church. With that, worshipers assumed financial responsibilities of a private body of worshipers. The town continued to own and use the building but charged the church congregation for their use of it as well.

Specifically, at a town meeting on April 13th, 1833, the town “Voted and granted the Universal society the use of the meeting house a certain part of the time in proportion to the money they shall pay for the support of preaching.” They also voted to appoint “A committee of five to procure subscriptions for the support of the present year and chose...*(it names the five)*...for said committee.”

Interestingly, the warrant summoning people to attend the town meeting called them to gather at the “town hall.” In other references building was “the meeting house.”

Still, another town meeting in the early 1840s considered a proposal to build a separate town hall – and rejected it. Of course, after the Fourth Meetinghouse burned down in 1847, they had to build something and they did approve construction of a separate town hall.

Even after the new town hall was in use, the town continued to own the land on which First Parish Church stood. The property was finally sold to the congregation for \$1 in 1906.



Historian Peter Benes, author of the book Meetinghouses of Early New England.



Before the dinner, Bob McDonald and his wife his wife Gay had a lively discussion with John Makey.



Past and present; State Rep. Kate Hogan talks with her predecessor, Pat Walrath, and Pat's husband, Bob.

The SHS session on November 3 started with a terrific potluck spread and ended with the discussion of meetinghouses.

Many thanks to everyone who attended and contributed, and especially to Linda Stokes, Karen Gray, Dorothy Sonnichsen and Barbara Sipler for all their work organizing the dinner. And, for that matter, to David Gray, Bob Stokes and Dwight Sipler, who are always around helping out and never get enough recognition for it.

Meeting Photos by Dwight Sipler.