

How Colonial is Colonial Religious Architecture?

Seth Hinshaw

Architectural historian Seth Hinshaw presented this program at the Society's February 15, 2009 meeting, held at the Baptist Church in the Great Valley.

In the late 20th century, several scholarly treatises examined the connection between the religious architecture of England and that of its New World colonies. Some scholars believe a strong tie connects the two, while others argue that American colonial religious architecture is indigenous to the New World. Using new information in England and in the USA, the existence and strength of a connection may be assessed.



Meeting House in Wilmington, Delaware: a Colonial Style building. *Unless otherwise noted, all images are by the author.*

I. What does it mean to be “colonial”?

An important starting point is a definition of “colonial.” In terms of American architecture, the word “colonial” is used in two different ways, though we don’t usually distinguish which of the two definitions we intend. The more general use of the term describes any building constructed before the American Revolution, including late medieval and Georgian architecture. Some historians extend “colonial architecture” to 1789 in order to close the gap with

Federal architecture. The alternate definition is influenced by sociology: “colonial” means the transplanting of one culture into another geographic area. Thus we read of the Dutch colonies, the Swedish colonies, the Spanish colonies, etc. This second definition assumes that the colonists bring their own ideas about folkways, architecture, spirituality, etc., while the former carries no such implicit assumptions.

Architectural historians today fall into two general camps in discussions of European antecedents for American religious architecture. Marian C. Donnelly, who wrote a book on early New England religious architecture, set forth the negative view as follows: “Among the views held as to the origins of the New England meeting houses, one of the most popular has been that this type of building was introduced ... by the colonists immediately upon their arrival in America and that this was done in deliberate, conscious rejection of the parish churches of England.”¹

This view (which Donnelly herself did not accept) has many other advocates. Among them was a committee from the Historic American Buildings Survey, which documented a group of Quaker meeting houses in the Delaware Valley. In a publication printed at the end of the project, Catherine Lavoie stated “Friends arriving in Pennsylvania in the 1680s brought with them no specific models of meeting house design.”²

A subset of the negative view includes religious architectural historians who did not try to establish an Old World connection. Among these was Edmund W. Sinnott, who wrote of the common type of Congregational meeting houses in New England, “Who first designed a meetinghouse of this sort we do not know...”³ Peter Mallary follows a similar course as Sinnott; his discussion of New England religious architecture was silent on whether an association existed.⁴

In contrast, the second group of historians argued that American colonial religious architecture was based almost entirely upon European precedents. The case is stated best by David H. Fischer, who wrote that colonists “carried across the Atlantic ... British folkways which became the basis of regional cultures in the New World.”⁵ Ironically, after making this broad statement, Fischer did not establish a specific connection between religious architecture on the two sides of the ocean. Other historians were less concise in stating the case but were emphatic about Old World connections. Marian Donnelly believed that colonial religious architecture was associated with the design of English market halls.⁶

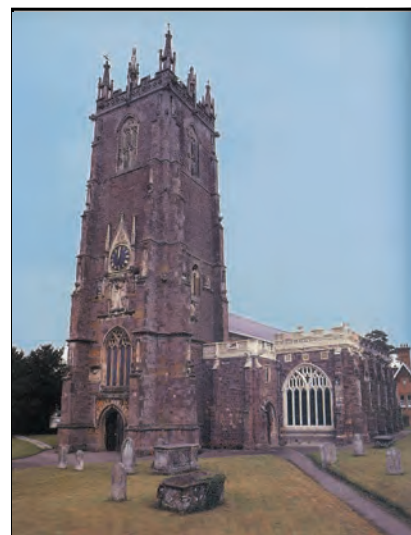
Jeffery Howe wrote “Newly arrived Europeans in America had no thought of creating a new architectural style; they were driven to re-create the church forms they had left behind in the Old World to create a sense of continuity and security.”⁷ In his later discussion of colonial religious architecture, however, Howe stated “these simple, barnlike structures were a new building type,”⁸ a reversal of his earlier conclusion. Of all books on the topic, the only one that attempts to establish a clear connection with English precedents is Dell Upton’s *Holy Things and Profane*, which reviews English religious architecture in the 17th century and established that nearly identical plans dominated early religious architecture in Virginia.⁹

In the late 20th century, a body of work became available providing a wealth of information to test whether English precedents for American religious architecture existed. Christopher Stell wrote four books¹⁰ documenting the nonconformist chapels and meeting houses in England and including relevant Puritan houses of worship before the Restoration. During Stell’s 16-year project, David Butler embarked upon a similar project resulting in a two-volume book focusing on Quaker meeting houses.¹¹ For the first time, a scholarly body of work came into being with information on the houses of worship being constructed while English emigrants were setting off for the New World. By 1990, England’s religious architecture of the 17th century was being categorized into two types, called the Chapel Plan and the Cottage Plan.¹²

II. English Religious Architecture before the Restoration

During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church arrived at a building type for their houses of worship. Cathedrals were constructed in the Gothic Style, which meant they had a common orientation and layout and were richly decorated. The buildings were constructed with a Latin cross shape, reminiscent of the cross of Jesus, and the building was oriented so that the congregation would move from the least holy part of the building (the narthex) into the nave, where they would face east to the most holy place, the altar in the chancel, which was lit by windows in the line of sight towards Jerusalem. Until the late Medieval times, congregants stood for mass. A rood screen ran laterally through the building to separate the nave from the chancel, where the priest would perform his duties. At the time, the homily was not given the importance it later assumed, so pulpit areas were generally minimal. Smaller chapels were often located on the transept arms for a more personal time of worship with the priest. Decorative elements (statues, carvings, stained glass windows, paintings, etc.) helped to tell stories from the Bible and other stories of earlier Christianity.

In England, the Gothic Style has been divided into four chronological movements. The last of these was the movement called the Perpendicular Style, which was dominant from 1350-1550. Cathedrals constructed during this period have a vertical emphasis, incorporate fan vaulting, and feature what Americans would call Tudor elements such as large pointed arch panel windows and doors. A particular intact Perpendicular cathedral was constructed in Cullompton, Devon 1545-1549. Its interior retains the standard Catholic organization of worship space, with an axis leading from the entrance tower (least holy) through the nave



Cullompton Cathedral

to a rood screen and the altar (most holy) at the east end. Two arcaded walls extend through the building to support the roof system. The rood screen separating the chancel from the nave is richly decorated with fan vaulting and hand-crafted elements.

In France, the Huguenots set the stage for several later English Protestant folkways. An image (not shown) of a worship service in the Lyons Temple (1564) is one of a handful of visual sources of Huguenot worship. The Huguenots rejected the use of the word *eglise* to describe a building, instead reserving that word as an equivalent of the Greek *ekklesia*, so the Huguenots used the word *temple* to describe their houses of worship. The Lyons image shows a large open room with simple benches. It appears to be a winter scene, since those gathered wear heavy clothes. The men are wearing their hats, including the minister, who speaks from a high round pulpit. The women sit on the benches facing the pulpit. Some men sit in benches flanking the women, with others standing on the round loft surrounding the room. The illustration documents that the later English separation of sexes during worship and dominance of the pulpit had already been established as normative in Europe.

The first generation of Protestants moved immediately to establish a new architectural type that was clearly different from the Gothic Style. In Scotland, Stirling Chapel was constructed for King James VI in 1594 as part of his capitol complex. The building's main entrance was on the south elevation, where a wide double door was located in the center of a seven-bay elevation. The building was oriented WNW/ESE, preserving the tradition of placing the altar under a window so that the congregants would face east towards Jerusalem. Swedish Lutherans constructed a similar cathedral in Stockholm in 1691.

In most locations, Protestants assumed control of pre-existing houses of worship constructed by Catholics. Protestants would often remove religious imagery and other

items as a part of the “purification” of the worship space to suit their minimalist taste. Protestants objected to most Catholic terminology and identified substitutes that survived until the mid-19th century when the Gothic Revival movement began. They objected to using the word *church* to describe a building, since in the Bible, the Greek word *ekklesia* was used to describe a group of people and not a building. Protestants built *meeting houses*, though on occasion they called the buildings *chapels*. Protestants also had ministers (not priests), had a communion table (not an altar), and had sermons (not homilies). The space where congregants worshipped was no longer called the nave; in this case, no new name was chosen. A major change in the use of religious space took place at the east end of houses of worship. This area, formerly called the *chancel*, was separated from the body of worshippers by a rood screen. Only consecrated people could enter into the chancel, where the altar was located. Puritans entirely shifted the purpose of the chancel. They installed seats there and removed the rood screens. Instead of keeping the congregants out of the chancel, Puritans had them relocate to the seats there to take communion. A building that captures these major changes in worship is Langley Chapel in Shropshire (see back cover).

Major changes in organization of religious space took place during the Interregnum. The Puritans controlled Parliament during these years, which gave them the power to regulate the appearance of the former Anglican houses of worship. They continued their earlier practice of removing religious images, removed many remaining rood screens, and continued to shift the focus of worship to the ministry. Their religious ideals of minimizing interior distractions from the sermon and making the chancel available for seating during the communion service resulted in a series of experimentations of how to arrange non-Catholic worship space. Of the various Puritan experiments, three survive to illustrate their attempts to re-think the configuration of worship space.

The first of three mid-18th century Puritan houses of worship in England is the Great Houghton Chapel. This long stone building (which is visibly scarred by industrial pollution) is an example of a “reduced” Catholic approach to worship space. On the exterior, the building has a front-end gabled orientation, with a bell cote over a stone entryway that is called a “porch” in England. A series of rounded merlons run along the parapet walls. The windows are large, multi



Mariestad Cathedral (Lutheran), Stockholm, Sweden; historic sketch printed in P.G. Hamburg, *Temples for Protestants* (Stockholm: Gothenburg, 2002), p. 189.



Great Houghton Chapel

-light units as commonly found in 17th century England. A sealed door on the south elevation formerly served as a private door for the mayor.

The interior features a strong axis leading from the entrance to the chancel area. The boxed pews on either side of the aisle are richly decorated with carvings. On the east end, the chancel is raised one step and outlined by a railing. The communion table is located under a large multi-light window, with the pulpit to the south and a reading desk to the north.



Bramhope Chapel

The second of the three Puritan houses of worship is Bramhope Chapel in Otley. This 1-story, 6-bay building of coursed ashlar has the general massing of Great Houghton but without the decorative exterior. It retains the bell cote on the west end. The interior shows evidence of the plan having been altered during construction. It appears that the interior was origi-

nally intended to replicate that at Langley, with a door for the congregants and a door for the priest. However, during construction, the pulpit was shifted from the east end to a point near the center of the north wall; a window was inserted to help light the pulpit. The chancel has seats running around three sides for the congregants to take communion, though its original appearance was later altered.

The third of the three Puritan houses of worship is Guyhirn Chapel (1660), located near Cambridge. This unusual building has two stone walls and two

brick walls, with double buttresses at the corners. A small belfry is located on the west end. The only door is located on the south elevation near the southwest corner.

The interior of Guyhirn Chapel features several unusual features. The door opens into an L-shaped alley system. The frame benches are arranged in two ranks and are attached to the flooring; they are arranged in a way to prevent kneeling for prayer. The chancel on the east end is raised one step, but the raised area extends westward under all benches – suggesting that those gathered sit in the chancel for worship and communion. In the east end, the pulpit is located in the northeast corner, the communion table under the window, and a reading desk in the southeast corner.



Guyhirn Chapel, facing northeast

III. English Religious Architecture 1660-1700

English religious history went through several twists and turns during its version of the Reformation. The last great twist took place in 1660, when King Charles II returned to the throne. After this time, Parliament approved a series of laws to outlaw all forms of worship except Anglicanism and would often send local sheriffs to tear down the houses of worship of the nonconformists. During the last 40 years of the century, the largest nonconformist groups in England were the Presbyterians, the Congregationalists, the Quakers, the Independents, and the Baptists. All five groups have a minority of their houses of worship from this time still standing, and it is evident that their design was based on the experimentation of the Puritans during the Interregnum. Nonconformist architecture has been classified by British architectural historians into two general categories describing the orientation and configuration: the Chapel Plan and the Cottage Plan.

IIIa. The Chapel Plan in England

The Chapel Plan represents those houses of worship constructed with a strong axis leading from the entrance between two ranks of seating for the congregants to the site of the pulpit/altar, usually on the east end. The type was the more hierarchical of the two general types and allowed greater freedom to assign seats nearest the pulpit to those of higher social class. In general, the type was a distinct minority among the Congregationalists, the Presbyterians, the Independents, and the Baptists, representing 31% of the known houses of worship built by these groups during the years 1660-1700. There were three general subtypes of the Chapel Plan, based mainly on where the main entrance was located. In the three types, the interior configuration is similar.

Gable entry types were quite rare among the nonconformists. Example include the Stourbridge Friends Meeting House and the Grittleton Baptist Meeting

House. This type was considered too reminiscent of the former Catholic plan, with too much emphasis placed on the east end of the building. All five nonconformist groups constructed at least one example of this type during the period in question.

The Guyhirn Type had the general floorplan of Guyhirn Chapel. The entrance was located near the southwest corner, leading into an L-shaped aisle. While it appears this subset was as common as the gable entry type, they were constructed by the Presbyterian and Quakers with the exception of one Baptist meeting house. Examples include the Ettington Friends Meeting House and Stainton Chapel.

The Mixed Plan was the least common of all Chapel Plan houses of worship in England (though it became quite popular in the English colonies). These buildings combined elements from the Chapel Plan and the Cottage Plan in their design. Usually, they featured the main entrance centered on the south elevation, giving the exterior appearance of a Cottage Plan building. On the inside, however, the buildings featured an axial emphasis on the pulpit and altar derived from the Chapel Plan. Though the Mixed Plan was not very popular in England, each of the five main nonconformist groups have at least one example.

The most intact example is Bullhouse Chapel. This impressive stone building, originally Presbyterian but now Independent, is accessed by a gabled porch centered on the main (southeast) elevation. The double doors open between the chancel and the seating; congregants turn left to their seats while the minister turns right to the pulpit, which is centered on the northeast end wall. An area in the east corner was originally fitted for the congregants to take communion, but in the 19th century the members adopted a Quaker interpretation of communion and no longer use the space for that purpose.



Gable Entry



Guyhirn Type



Mixed Type



Bullhouse Chapel

IIIb. The Cottage Plan in England

The Cottage Plan was the preferred nonconformist building type between the Restoration and 1700. There are three general subsets: small square meeting houses with a centered door on the main (usually south) elevation; the larger, “square plan” meeting houses; and rectangular meeting houses with separate doors for men and women.

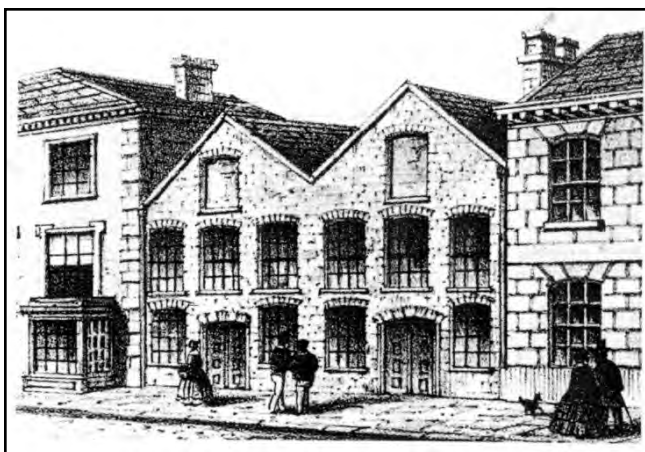


Adderbury Friends Meeting House, facing northeast

The “small square” subset is represented by the Adderbury Friends Meeting House in western England. This 1.5-story, 3-bay stone building (1675), has a remarkably

similar interior to the Kennett Friends Meeting House in Chester County, Pennsylvania. The main door opens into a room with two ranks of benches facing north. The gallery is centered on the opposite wall; it consists of two banked benches facing the remainder of the benches. The lower bench incorporates four large panels that would be considered Federal in the USA. Stairs in the southwest corner lead upstairs, where the women held their business meetings (they worshipped downstairs with the men). The only fireplace in the building is located in the women’s room upstairs. A railing outlines the second floor void, which looks down onto the gallery.

Another key example of the type in England (now highly altered) is Keach’s Baptist Meeting House. When built, it had a nearly identical floorplan. Among English Baptists, a long bench faced the remainder of those gathered. Their leaders would sit on this “messenger’s bench” and wait for inspiration to speak to those gathered, in a manner similar to that of the Quakers.

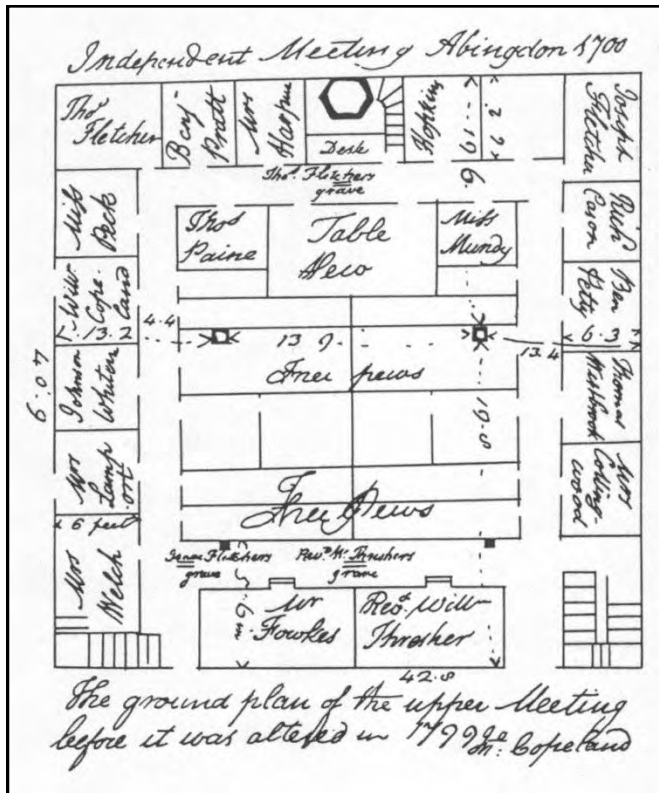


The Great Meeting House in Bideford, Devonshire; historic sketch published in Stell, *Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting Houses in Southwest England*, p. 61.



Interior of Adderbury Friends Meeting House, facing onto the gallery from the loft

The second subset of the Cottage Plan is the “square” plan. These buildings, usually nearly square in shape, usually featured two doors on the main elevation, many windows to allow natural light, and ignored the earlier emphasis on orientation. An important historic example was the Great Meeting House in Bideford, Devonshire. At the time, wood was expensive in England, so the “square” meeting houses resorted to various means to minimize the roof system. One technique was to install parallel gables, such as the paired gables at Bideford; some nonconformist houses of



Interior plan of The Square or Upper Meeting House, a Congregational house of worship in Abingdon, England; historic sketch printed in Stell, Southwest England, p. 3.

worship had three, four, or up to seven of these paired gables. In order to clearly defy the earlier Catholic orientation, the pulpit was centered on the west wall, facing those gathered, who sat in boxed pews. The Great Meeting House was remarkably similar in exterior appearance to the Hertford Friends Meeting House and the Old Meeting House (Presbyterian) in Bolsover.

The interior plan of The Square Meeting House in Abingdon was typical of the “square” type. The two doors opened into alleys connecting the boxed pews. A large bank of boxed pews was located in the center of the room, with additional pews along the outer walls. A hexagonal pulpit was centered on the north wall, facing an area where the communion table was placed on the days when the congregants took communion. It is remarkable that the pews between the door and the pulpit are indicated as the “free pews,” rather than reserving the pews along the south wall (nearest the doors) for the free pews.

Although the nonconformists emphasized simplicity of architecture, they were not always strict. The Ips-



Pulpit at Ipswich (Presbyterian) Meeting House

wich Meeting House, built in 1700 and substantially intact, has several areas of rich decoration, including carvings of fruit in the woodwork on the pulpit and elsewhere. Most second floor windows are large rosette-like windows. The building features a U-shaped loft system (balcony), which was called a “horseshoe” loft at the time.

The third subset of the Cottage Plan in England is the rectangular type with doors in the end bays. These buildings were primarily constructed by the English Presbyterians. A typical example is the Brook Street Chapel (Presbyterian) in Knutsford. The rectangular building's entrances are located in the outer bays of the north wall, with exterior stairs leading up to the entrances to the loft. On the inside, an aisle runs the length of the building, with the pulpit centered be-



Brook Street Chapel

tween the doors. Across the aisle from the pulpit is the area for communicants to sit to receive communion. Two similar Presbyterian chapels in the same county are King Edward's Street Chapel in Macclesfield and Chinley Chapel.

IV. Religious Architecture in the English Colonies

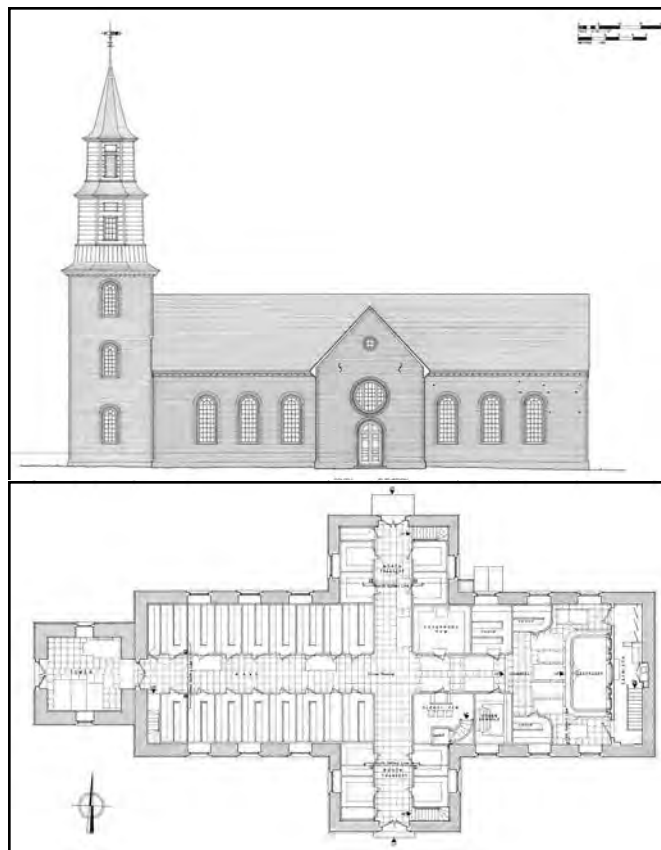
Religious architecture in colonial North America falls into three general types based on European precedents and a new building type introduced by the Quakers. The medieval Gothic architecture of European cathedrals was repeated in a few small buildings in the colonies and was the least common religious building type. The two Puritan building types used in England – the Chapel Plan and the Cottage Plan – dominated religious architecture in colonial North America until the mid-nineteenth century. The new Quaker building type was a modification of the Cottage Plan.

IV a. The Gothic Style in colonial North America

Of the three building types imported from Europe, the Gothic Style was by far the least common in the English colonies. Only a handful of examples are known to have been constructed. The earliest of these was built by Jesuits in St. Mary's, Maryland, the capital of the Maryland colony under the Calverts. The church, now an archaeological site, has a clear cruciform shape. The type was used in the construction of several Anglican houses of worship, including Elizabeth City Parish, Elizabeth River Parish, and Mattaponi Church in Virginia. Dell Upton documented 17 Anglican houses of worship with this interior plan in colonial Virginia.¹³

Today, the best-known Gothic Style house of worship in the colonies is the Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg, Virginia. Although Dell Upton downplayed the Gothic characteristics of the building, it clearly falls into this category. It has the Latin cross shape and orientation expected in Gothic architecture, and the west entrance is dominated by a 5-story entry tower. A feature not common in Europe but found in many other examples in Anglican Virginia was the set of entrances on the ends of the transepts.

The floorplan of the Bruton Parish Church hearkens back to its European antecedents. The interior is divided by two aisles: the main aisle and the transept



Bruton Parish Church, Williamsburg, Virginia. South elevation (above) and floor plan. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, HABS VA-191.

aisle. The pulpit is located on the south side of the intersection of the aisles, across from the Governor's pew. Further east is the chancel, where the communion table sits on a platform outlined by a railing.

IV b. Chapel Plan in the English Colonies

As in England, the Chapel Plan served as the more hierarchical of the two Puritan building types. The interior axis emphasized the social order, with boxed pews arranged in two rows oriented east toward the pulpit and altar.

The building thought to be the oldest house of worship in the English colonies is the Newport Parish Church in Smithfield, Virginia (today called St. Luke's Church). It was constructed in the 17th century, though estimates of its date of construction vary from 1632 to as late as 1685. Important features of the building include its heavy tower (which appears to have been part of the original construction), stepped Flemish gables, three buttresses on the side walls, and decorative lancet windows.



Historic photograph of Newport Parish Church, printed in *American Architect and Building News*, April 19, 1884.

The interior has a standard Chapel Plan configuration. A center aisle leads between two ranks of pews and passes north of the pulpit to a passageway through the rood screen. The passage allowed congregants to enter the chancel to take communion. A feature found in the Newport Parish Church and later Virginia Anglican religious architecture is the priest's door (also called the chancel door), usually opening on the south elevation near the rood screen.



Merchant's Hope Church (Anglican), Prince George County, Virginia. Source: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, HABS, Reproduction number HABS ILL, 16-CHIG, 33-2.

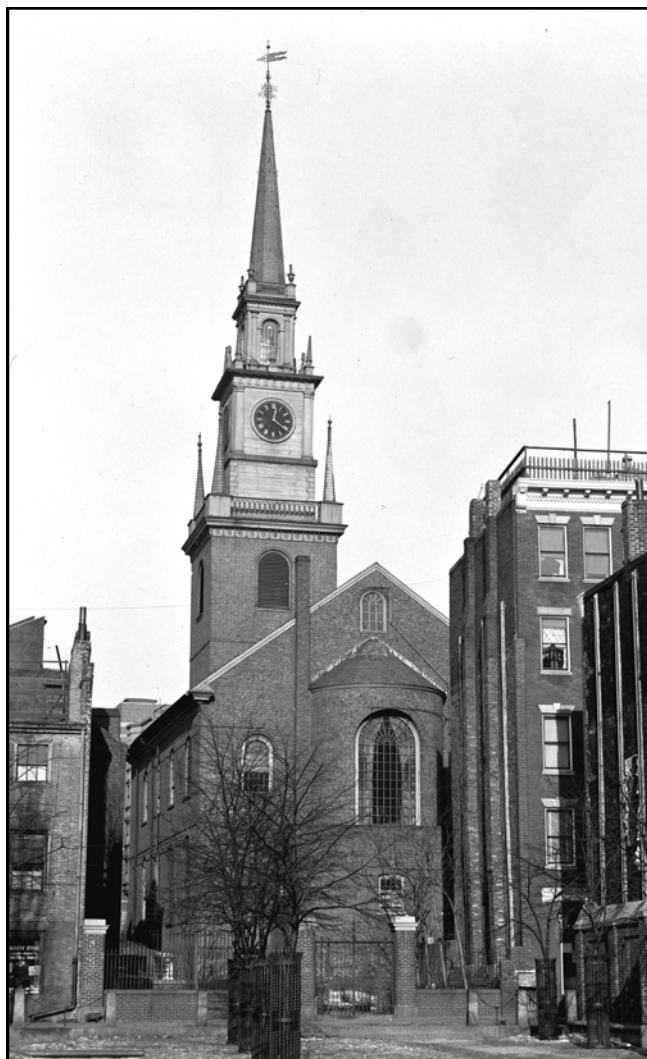
As the 18th century progressed, Virginia's Anglicans took a more puritanical approach to their houses of worship. The Flemish gables found on earlier churches such as Newport Parish and St. Peter's Parish Church (Virginia) were no longer used, and they also chose to stop constructing the towers that the Puritans so hated. The result was a minimized house of worship, such as Merchant's Hope, constructed in Prince George's County. Originally called Martin's Brandon Parish Church, the building retained the standard chapel plan interior with the priest's door opening into the chancel.

Chapel Plan houses of worship were found throughout the colonies. The only surviving Catholic house of worship from the time is a chapel attached to Doughoregan Manor in Maryland, where Charles Carroll of Carrollton lived. It is a 1-story, 3-bay section constructed during a time when the Anglican colonial assembly had outlawed Catholic mass. A similar house of worship was constructed in Philadelphia by the supporters of George Keith, a Scottish schoolteacher who came to oppose the Quaker colonial government. His house of worship was sketched just prior to demolition.



Keithian Meeting House in Philadelphia. Old sketch printed in Julius F. Sachse, *The German Sectarians of Pennsylvania 1708-1742* (Philadelphia: 1899), p. 84.

While Virginia Anglicans avoided high style architecture and resorted to Puritan-like houses of worship, Anglicans embarked upon a different course in the northern colonies. The first step was taken in Boston, where they constructed a house of worship named Christ Church (but usually called the "Old North Church") in 1723. In Massachusetts, the Anglicans were considered nonconformists and were taxed to support local Congregational churches, so the con-



Old North Church (Anglican), Boston, Massachusetts. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, HABS, Reproduction number HABS MASS, 13-BOST,5-4.

struction of a high-style Chapel Plan building helped them make a major religious statement. Old North departed entirely from the Cottage Plan houses of worship that dominated New England. The building was constructed with a strong front end gabled orientation. It was accessed through a six-story entry tower, which the Congregationalists considered to be the dreaded “steeple.” The side walls had two rows of arched-headed windows, and the east end featured a two-story apse with a large multi-light window lighting the chancel and altar.

On the interior, Old North used a strong axis to re-establish the connection between social status and the organization of religious space. The seating area (not

called the nave although other Gothic terminology was being resumed) is thought to have introduced boxed pews to North America. The boxed pews were arranged along a strong axis leading from the tower to the chancel. As in Europe, the pews nearest the altar were reserved for the social elite. The pulpit was located just north of the chancel, mostly located inside the apse and separated from the sea of boxed pews by a low railing. Other key features of the interior included a barrel vaulted ceiling and a “horseshoe” loft system running along the long sides and over the west end.

Old North was one of the most important houses of worship constructed in the colonies. Within a decade, Boston Congregationalists constructed the Old South Meeting House – a house of worship with a similar 2-story exterior appearance, though it was a Cottage Plan building with a stair tower on its west end. Old South was accessed by doors centered on the south, west, and east walls and is thought to have introduced boxed pews to American Congregationalists. The boxed pew shifted the way people worshipped. The earlier pattern of the men and women sitting on separate sides of the center aisle disappeared, as family units sat together in their own boxed pew. Anglican houses of worship in the northern colonies constructed after this time (such as Christ Church, Philadelphia) continued the Anglican movement toward a more stylish architecture even while Virginia Anglicans maintained their puritanical architecture until the Revolution.

IV c. The Mixed Plan in the English Colonies

As in Europe, the Mixed Plan borrowed from the two larger categories. They were usually constructed in a way to appear to be Cottage Plan buildings but had a Chapel Plan interior. A major difference between England and its colonies was that in the New World, Mixed Plan (and Cottage Plan) meeting houses usually featured a balanced or symmetrical main elevation (a concern not emphasized in England). Another difference in the colonies was the distribution of the plan among the various faiths. In England, half of known examples were built by the Quakers, with scattered examples among most other major faiths. In the New World, no Quaker meeting houses with the Mixed Plan are known to have existed. Instead, it was the favorite of the Anglicans and Lutherans almost exclusively.



Augustus Lutheran Church in Trappe, Pennsylvania, facing north-east.

Multiple examples of the Mixed Plan are found throughout the English colonies. One of the more important examples is Augustus Lutheran Church in Trappe, Pennsylvania. The church building, constructed in 1743, is the oldest Lutheran house of worship still in use by Lutherans. The oldest extant Lutheran house of worship is Old Swedes in Wilmington, Delaware, which later became an Episcopal church. Augustus Church is a Mixed Plan building. Its main entrance on the south elevation opens into a T-shaped alley system. The boxed pews face east, with the pulpit along the north wall and the altar centered on the east wall in the apse.



St. David's Anglican Church, Newtown Township, Pennsylvania

Two Anglican houses of worship in southeastern Pennsylvania were constructed in the early 18th century and were originally nearly identical: St. David's and St. Peter's. When built, the two stone buildings

featured a symmetrical south elevation with double doors flanked by arched-headed windows. The interior featured four banks of boxed pews separated by a cross-shaped alley system. The altar was centered on the east end and lit by a large arched-headed window; it was surrounded by a railing around which the congregants would kneel to receive communion.

IV d. The Cottage Plan in the English Colonies

As in England, the Cottage Plan represented the less hierarchical design of religious space. Unlike England, the American examples tended to emphasize symmetry of the main elevation. In America, examples of the Cottage Plan fall into three general subtypes that are roughly chronological. The three American subtypes are the small Cottage Plan, the Square, and the "meeting house plan." The three subtypes are based on the massing of the buildings; they have similar interior plans.

Small Cottage Plan meeting houses are found throughout the English colonies. This was a particular favorite of Presbyterians, Quakers, Congregationalists, and Baptists. These 1-story, 3-bay buildings usually featured a symmetrical main (south) elevation with a centered door flanked by windows. Like their English contemporaries, the buildings were constructed without decoration or grandeur. The small Cottage Plan was the standard Congregational building type of the 17th century, with the earliest identified example built at Dedham (Massachusetts) in 1638. The oldest extant example of the type is the Norriton Presbyterian Meeting House near Norristown, Pennsylvania (1698).



Norriton Presbyterian Meeting House



Radnor Friends Meeting House, Delaware Co., Pa. (1718)

Later examples were constructed well into the 18th century by many faiths and by the Quakers into the early 19th century. The earliest identified Quaker example in the New World was constructed at Chester, Pennsylvania in the 1690s. The Radnor Meeting House, built in 1718, is one of the most intact of the early Quaker examples, though a room was constructed off the east end for the women's business meetings later in the 18th century. Another important Friends meeting house of this variety is the Kennett Meeting House in Chester County, Pa. The main elevation has a 1-story, 3-bay appearance, though the interior has a "horseshoe" loft as well as a finished attic/third floor area.



Kennett Friends Meeting House, Chester Co., Pa.

An interesting subset of the small Cottage Plan in the New World is the group of polygonal houses of worship constructed by the Dutch Reformed. Also constructed with European antecedents, these 6- or 8-



Dutch Reformed Meeting House in Bergen, New Jersey. Old sketch reproduced in Harold Kalman, *Pioneer Churches* (New York : Norton, 1976), p. 97.

sided buildings have disappeared. Illustrations of two exist (one shown here). A similar Quaker meeting house was built in Burlington, New Jersey.

The "square plan" was the second wave of the Cottage Plan in North America. These houses of worship were usually 2-story buildings featuring expressive roof systems, often with a belfry or lantern and a hipped/pyramidal roof. The type emerged in New England in the late 17th century and was commonly built by Congregationalists and Quakers.

One of the oldest examples, and the oldest house of worship in New England, is the Hingham Meeting House, called "Old Ship" today. The building was constructed in 1681 and later enlarged, though the



First Parish in Hingham, Old Ship Church. Originally Congregational, now Unitarian Universalist.

general shape was retained. Old Ship is the only example of the “square type” that retains its belfry. It was built with its corners pointing in the compass directions. On the interior, the pulpit is centered on the northeast wall, in front of the area for receiving communion. The first floor is mainly occupied by boxed pews that were installed in the early 18th century.

Other Congregational examples of the Square type were found throughout New England. Examples in-



The Newbury Congregational Meeting House, Newbury, Massachusetts, built in 1700. Historic sketch published in Ola E. Winslow, *Meetinghouse Hill 1630 – 1783* (New York City: Macmillan Company, 1952) on an unnumbered page facing p. 84.

clude Newbury, Boston, and Lynn in Massachusetts. The wide availability of lumber in the colonies made it possible for these buildings to have expressive roof systems that would have been cost-prohibitive in England.

The “square plan” was also a common Quaker building type. Many examples were constructed, often in urban environments. The Friends Meeting House in Wilmington, Delaware is a typical example. Like the Congregational examples, the buildings were 2-story buildings with a hipped/pyramidal roof. Most were built with the corners pointing in the compass directions. Several examples were constructed for annual business sessions, including those at Newport, Rhode Island (extant) and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (demolished 1755). Several of these meeting houses were later extended to reflect the Quaker Plan, losing their original “square” appearance.



Wilmington (Delaware) Friends Meeting House (1738). Historic 1817 sketch printed in Edward P. Bartlett et al., *Friends in Wilmington 1738-1938* (Wilmington DE: Charles L. Story Co., 1938).

The third phase of the Cottage Plan in colonial North America is what is called the “meeting house plan” in New England. These 2-story, 5-bay buildings were built throughout the colonies by Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Quakers, with scattered examples from other faiths. The type was common among the Congregationalists during the years 1720-1790 and among the Quakers from 1730-1780. The Harrington Meeting House in Maine is almost identical on the exterior to the Oblong Friends Meeting House in New York, the Wickford Huguenot/Anglican Church in Rhode Island, and the “Old Drawyers” Presbyterian Meeting House in Delaware (see back cover). It is remarkable that such diverse religious groups could build houses of worship so nearly identical in appearance.

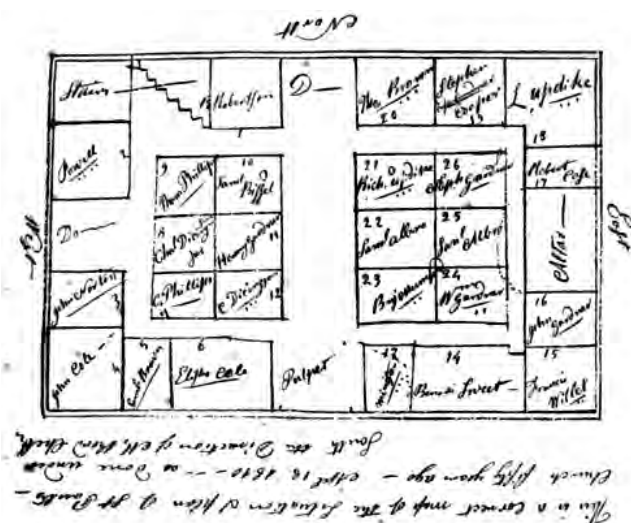


Harrington Congregational Meeting House in Bristol, Maine (south elevation).



Interior of the New Castle Presbyterian Meeting House, facing down from the loft.

The interiors of the third phase of the Cottage Plan are also remarkably similar. The main door on the south wall opened into a sea of boxed pews except in Quaker meeting houses. As with the exterior, the interior plans were nearly identical. A raised pulpit (usually octagonal in shape) was centered on the north wall under a sounding board, located as much as possible in a place where the sermon could be best heard by those gathered. The following diagram of the Wickford (Huguenot/Anglican) Meeting House shows a typical floorplan used by Anglicans, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians throughout North America.



An 18th century sketch of the boxed pews in the Wickford (RI) Huguenot / Anglican Meeting House, as published in Mallary, p. 52.

A second typical Cottage Plan interior is found in the Presbyterian Meeting House in New Castle, Dela-

ware. The main entrance opens into the alley system, with a block of boxed pews between the door and pulpit and additional boxed pews along the end walls. The pulpit is raised to the height of the boxed pews. It has an octagonal sounding board attached by a decorative panel. The communion table would have been placed in the alley system between the pulpit and the block of boxed pews when needed and was not otherwise a dominant piece of furniture in the building. This alternate plan, by eliminating the central aisle, helped to undermine the former emphasis upon gradually more important religious space with the connotations of economic or social status that accompanied the axial organization.



Pulpit in the New Castle Presbyterian Meeting House

IV e. The Quaker Plan

While the various faiths appear to have subscribed to religious architectural precedents once they arrived in the New World, one new building type appeared in North America that was unknown in England. In the

early 18th century, American Quakers began to experiment with ways of accommodating two needs: space for the ministers and elders at the front of the room and space for separate women's business meetings. Attempts to handle these sometimes conflicting needs varied in their success.



Sketch of the Springfield (PA) Friends Meeting House by John Sartain, printed on an unnumbered page in Henry G. Ashmead, *History of Delaware County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: L.H. Everts & Co., 1884).

In 1738, Quakers in Springfield, Pennsylvania, constructed a new meeting house. Instead of following the standard pattern of installing a partition parallel to the facing benches, they constructed the partition wall through the facing benches, dividing the entire interior into two separate (but unequal) spaces. The partition had moveable panels that could be opened during the worship and closed when the women held their separate business meetings. The men and women had their own doors on the main elevation leading into the separate rooms. The only intact meeting house of



Maiden Creek Friends Meeting House, facing northeast

this type is the Maiden Creek Meeting House near Reading (built 1759).

In the 1740s, Chester County Quakers made a single change to the plan used in the Springfield Meeting House and produced a plan that swept through Quaker settlements in North America and became their dominant plan of religious architecture for a century. The Caln Meeting House, constructed c. 1745, was a 1-story, 6-bay building with equal interior spaces for the men and women. A person visiting the location when no one was there would have had difficulty discerning which side was used by the men and which by the women. On the interior, the gallery or facing bench area extended across the entire north wall, providing space for one-third of everyone to be seated there (in contrast to the English system, where at most one-fifteenth of those gathered would sit there). The meeting house was later lengthened for quarterly meetings. The Exeter Meeting House in Berks County (c. 1758) gives a sense of the original appearance of the Caln Meeting House. Caln is the earliest known example of what is called the Quaker Plan.



Caln Meeting House

In a time of extensive travels by Quaker ministers, innovations spread as rapidly as Quakers would allow. The Chestnut Street Meeting House in Philadelphia, built in 1763, appears to have been the first two-story example of the Quaker Plan. The oldest surviving two-story example is Makefield Meeting, Pennsylvania, a former Cottage Plan meeting house that was doubled in 1764 to its current appearance. One of the most famous of Quaker Plan meeting houses was constructed at Buckingham in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, in 1768. On the exterior, the building captures the symmetry and simplicity that Quakers sought. On the interior, the men and women had their separate rooms for worship and business. A “horseshoe” loft system ran around three walls, with



Buckingham Friends Meeting House, facing northeast

benches facing through the void onto the gallery. The interior organization ignored social status. Among Quakers, members were appointed to sit in the gallery based on their perceived spiritual maturity and not economic success; the body of “public Friends” was drawn from every social stratum. It appears that with this building, the mid 18th century Quaker ideals were finally captured in a building.

Conclusion

Our understanding of the use and organization of religious space in the 17th and 18th centuries has been

greatly deepened during the past 25 years because of the work done in England by two architectural historians, Christopher Stell and David Butler. These two men documented the houses of worship constructed by the Puritans and the nonconformists, two groups whose institutional descendants dominated the cultural life of the English colonies in North America. Using the two building types identified by Stell and Butler in England, it becomes readily apparent that the North American colonists brought their religious understandings with them. The continuity between English religious architecture of the 17th century and American colonial religious architecture of the 17th and early 18th century, previously disputed, establishes that American colonial religious architecture was imported from England and a vital part of the lives of the earliest settlers in the English colonies.

Mr. Hinshaw, an architectural historian and Senior Planner with Wise Preservation Planning of Chester Springs, is an expert on Colonial architecture. He has previously spoken to our Society on the evolution of residential architecture in Chester County from the 1600s to the present, and has presented programs on architectural history on local television.

NOTES

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13. Upton, p.81.