

History of the Lenox Meeting House

In Early Massachusetts, There Was Little Separation Between Church and State

The Puritans who came to New England (mostly Massachusetts) 1620-1640), saw church membership as part of citizenship.

At the time Richmond and Lenox were being formed, church and state were still closely aligned. Citizens were taxed for support of the church and men had to be members of the church to vote. A meeting house that was to function as both church and town meeting hall was a requirement for government approval of a town. Because of the mountain range running down the middle of Lot#8, two locations were needed for meeting houses and by 1767 the lot was split into the two towns we know today.

Land for the meeting house and nearby burying ground was donated by the heirs of Rev. Reynolds - one of the holders of the Ministers Grant that included much of current Lenox.

There are indications that Lenox's original meeting house (thought to have been built around 1770) was situated in front of the current Church on the Hill. We don't know what it would have looked like, but it probably would have been a simple box shape with bench seats. Here's a drawing of the 1780 meeting house in Lee.



Between the religious tolerance acts of 1824 and the new state constitution of 1832, the remnants of theocracy disappeared and Massachusetts churches, including Church on the Hill ceased to double as town offices and had to support themselves based on contributions from parishioners. In addition, the burying ground became a town property.

1806 - the New Meeting House (the current Church on the Hill)

At a special town meeting in 1803, it was determined the original meeting house needed to be replaced and funds were set aside to build a new meeting house. By this time the original meeting house would have become dilapidated, and Lenox had become a successful little 19th century town. It was the county seat and a central location for education, trials, and commerce. The

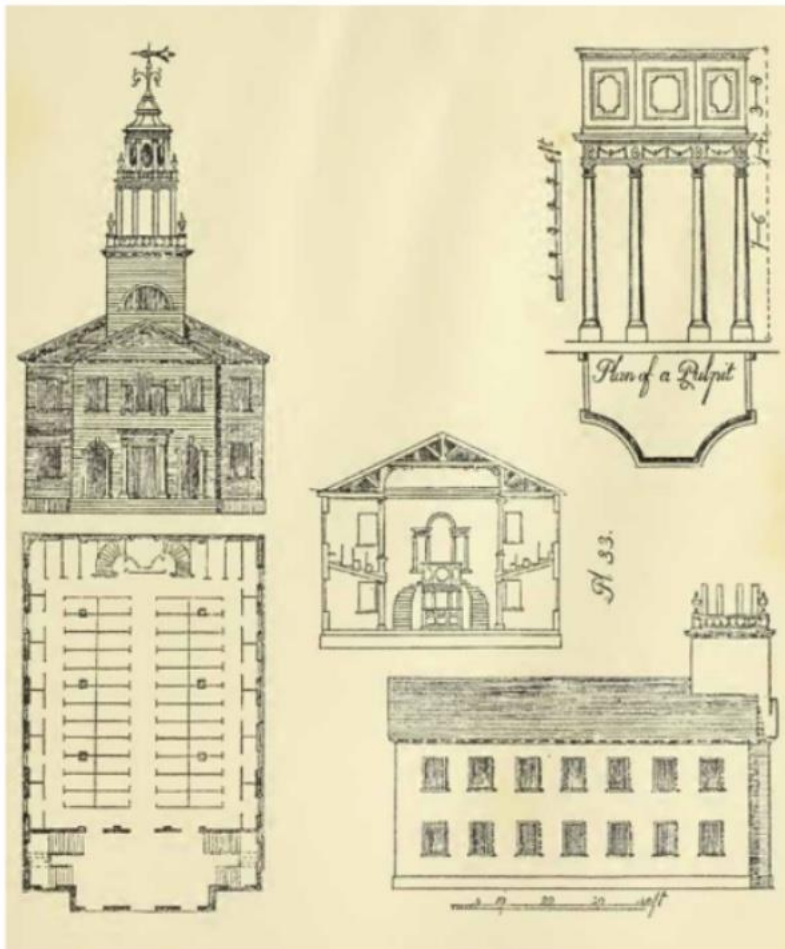
still standing second county courthouse (now the Lenox Library) and the Lenox Academy are other examples of Lenox's Federalist building spree.

Dedicated in 1806, the current Church on the Hill would have started its life as a dual-purpose sanctuary and town hall. And even in its religious role, it would have been a center of town life with high levels of church attendance and all-day Sunday services and gatherings for weddings, funerals and oratory. We have diary entries about children playing in the burying ground during the midday break in the service.

Evolution of the Meeting House Building

The design was to follow Asher Benjamin's *A Country Builder's Handbook* (1797) and built by Benjamin Goddard, a joiner from Richmond.

Plate 33



A Design for a Meetinghouse

The Lenox meeting house showed customization from a Bullfinch design in Pittsfield including:

- An enhanced porch at the back
- Side doors to entry porch

- Tower integrated into the building
- Palladian windows in the tower (before installation of the clock in 1849)
- Open-air belfry (louvres added later)
- Bell-shaped cupola.

The original interior may have had a raised pulpit and certainly had box pews. As indicated by the diagram, sale of pews covered most of the cost of construction.



The original floorplan, as noted above, consisted of high sided box pews. The circular pulpit was high so the preacher could see the worshippers. No fires were allowed in the church so parishioners probably brought boxes of coals - foot warmers - into their pews. During the winter the minister preached in a large blue overcoat and wore with a red bandanna around his neck and woolen mittens on his hands. The long services broke at midday and parishioners went to nearby houses to warm themselves.

In 1840 the box pews were replaced with bench pews similar to those in use today. The center alley was eliminated and replaced by two large side aisles. The pulpit and the gallery front were lowered and stoves were installed in the back of the main room.

From "Buildings" by Rev. Harris B. Hinchcliffe in Church on the Hill History Gathered 1769-1970.

"In 1866, the floor plan of the meetinghouse as it presently exists was set up, and in 1880 a society of young women of the church financed a projection of the front wall of the building and installed the present platform and pulpit....."

".....In the late 1940's and throughout the 1950's the meetinghouse received rather continuous efforts of modernization. Electricity was finally brought in, oil heating was installed so that for

the first time in many years services might be conducted at main church building throughout the winter.”

In the early days, worshippers were called to services by the beating of a drum. A bell was installed at some point prior to 1838 when the Centennial History makes reference to a second bell being hung in the steeple (still in use as of 1906).

Fanny Kemble donated a clock in 1849 that was plagued with difficulty and was followed by the gift of a second clock by Morris K. Jesup in 1899.



With all due respect for stoves added to the back of the building, parishioners would have to have bundled well into the 20th century. Central heating and full electrification had to wait until 1955. And, as will be discussed under detailed plans, the work of winterization is certainly not done.

In the early days there were few hymn books and it sounds like music was – to say the least – not a center piece of worship. Use of the violin and flute was specifically criticized because they unpleasantly resembled the flute, harp, sackbut and dulcimer which accompanied the worship of Nebuchadnezza. By 1850, thinking on music had evolved and the rear gallery was resigned to house an instrument called a “Seraphim” to support the singers. In 1850 the seats in the gallery in the porch were appropriated “for the use of those who assisted in singing”. In 1868 the present organ was installed.



The first Bible gift recorded was from William Walker in 1818; another (still in use as of 1906) was donated by his son William P. Walker in 1852. The baptismal font and tablets at the rear of the pulpit were placed in 1882 in memory of Sarah and Thomas Egleston. The two pulpit lamps were given by Mrs. Robert E. Hill in the name of her husband Robert E. Hill, in memory of his grandfather Dr. Robert Worthington.

In 1896 Mrs. Mary Hill present a pulpit in memory of her mother Mrs. Jane Worthington Hill. In 1864 Ammi Robbins donated the iron fence with stone posts. His heirs gave the church society \$1,000 the income of which was to be used to maintain the fence and the church grounds. Needless to say that income didn't last to the present day! Fencing, church grounds and the cemetery owned by the Town of Lenox and maintained by the DPW.

The building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1987 and thanks to the hard work of the congregation, the Master Plan done in 2021 judged the overall structure to be sound but elements of the building need further restoration to maintain preservation goals.