

History of “THE MEETINGHOUSE”

By
Anita Creager

In 1657, the first survey was made of where we now live. It included 8000 acres granted to the town of Billerica, Massachusetts to encourage expansion. In 1734, a portion of the Old Town of Dunstable was set off by the Massachusetts Bay Colony known by the Native people as “Naticook” consisting of most of what is now Litchfield on the east side and a portion on the west side of what is now Merrimack along the Merrimack River from Pennichuck Brook to the Souhegan River. A grant was made to William Brenton, then known as Brenton’s Farm with lots divided and sold on both sides of the river. One of the requirements on that charter was “that the town must settle a minister and build a meetinghouse.” The original meetinghouse on the east side was completed in 1736 with a graveyard adjacent to it. It was built next to the Merrimack River at the site of the ferry crossing the river. This enabled those on the west side of the river to attend church services and participate in the town meetings. The new meetinghouse was rebuilt from portions of the original building across the road when the river changed its course before 1835. It then also served as the Town Hall until 1844 when the new Town Hall was

built. Recently a new municipal complex was built, and the old Town Hall is now the home of the Litchfield Historical Society adjacent to the early Presbyterian Church. The gravestones were also moved, with some graves going to the new Meetinghouse and some moved to two newer graveyards.

In 1746 the town of Merrimack was created with a charter on the western side of the Merrimack River, from the Pennichuck Brook to the Souhegan River including a portion of the Brenton Farm. In 1750 a second charter was granted with boundaries to the west in Amherst and to the north in Bedford. These boundaries have fluctuated, but now Merrimack has two anniversaries depending on where you live.

With the new charter in 1746, Merrimack needed to have its own Meetinghouse. A committee was chosen to locate it. A survey determined that the geographic center of our new town was located 40 rods south of the bridge at Turkey Hill and in 1751 a committee was chosen to design and build a new Meetinghouse. The site was to include a burying ground and training field. The builders were to be John Thomas, Samuel Caldwell and Samuel Spaulding. The design was to be 50 feet long and 34 feet wide. Galleries were to be built on the second floor. Taxes on non-residents would cover the construction costs.

A vote was taken to hire a preacher. In 1752, the town voted to build bridges at three locations, but there must have been other bridges already at those site. They were not covered until much later.

There were many delays in construction, but the “underpinnings” were approved in 1755 and the vote to install floors not accepted until 1762, when they began searching for a preacher. In 1771 they fenced in the graveyard, with the first gravestone for Thomas McInnes being the first recorded. It is possible that others were buried there without stones, but no records are found. There is a stone in Thornton’s Graveyard dated 1749, but no record that the graveyard was there yet. Perhaps it moved there from Litchfield.

A vote was taken to invite a minister to preach on a trial basis, while he preached in the unfinished meetinghouse. Eventually Dr. Jacob Burnap accepted the appointment, with his ordination being in 1772 with great celebration. The flooring and roofing were complete for the event, but windows not installed until 1774. The Congregation, at the time of Rev. Burnap’s arrival consisted of 13 people. Remember at this time that there was much going on with the political situation as the revolution began.

Repairs were made frequently to the new Meetinghouse and by 1803 pews were

installed in the galleries for the singers.

In 1829, a church was built in South Merrimack to serve the people in that area. In 1837 a new church was built on Baboosic Lake Road to serve the original congregation, but the old Meetinghouse remained in use as a Town Hall.

In 1869, considerable deterioration was taking place in the old Meetinghouse, but it wasn’t until 1872 that a new Town Hall was constructed on land donated by Benjamin Ela. The old Meetinghouse was abandoned until 1898 when it burned on July 4th.

The new Town Hall was dedicated on Christmas Day, 1872 with the ceremonial opening on New Year’s Day 1873. It was used for town business and many social events including dinners, plays and dances over the years. There was even a basketball court on the second floor in front of the stage. In the Matthew Thornton Room, you can see the flooring for that court. In the media room, you can see the tin ceiling exposed. In more recent times, a second office building was added, which included a Police Station at one time with a connection between the two buildings as we see it today.

Visit the Historical Society at 520 Boston Post Road (open Tuesdays noon- 8 PM) or contact Anita at 603-424-5084 or anitacreager58@comcast.net.



Coutesy photo

The original meetinghouse about 1774.



Coutesy photo

The meetinghouse about 1890 before it burned.