

New Hampton Town House

Also known as the Center Meeting House, Old Meeting House

New Hampton, NH was incorporated on November 27, 1777. By 1797-1798 the townspeople were already considering the construction of a meeting house. At the annual town meeting in March of 1798, the voters of New Hampton decided to erect a meeting house. Two more town meetings in April and September were required to settle all of the details of the building project. But, the building was ready for use by the next annual town meeting in March of 1799. It is believed that the architect/builder was Samuel Kelley, one of the town's first settlers. The New Hampton Town House began as the meeting house for the Town of New Hampton, serving both for religious services and town meetings. The Town House stands on the town common on a 5.5 acre town owned lot at the northeast corner of Town House Road and Dana Hill Road, considered to be the "Center". This location was referred to as the "Town Common", the "Center" and is now known as the "Old Institution".

The main entry was presumably in the center of the south façade. The interior of the main block was one large, two story high room. The main floor was filled with square pews, the "the pews next to the walls... raised about eight inches above the ground level. There were also additional pews in the galleries above. "The pulpit was so high that the preacher's head was 10 feet above the floor; a flight of stairs closed by a rude door led to it." Above the pulpit was an octagonal sounding board with a plastered underside

There are no views available of the building as it appeared before it was rebuilt in 1872. But descriptions of the building in its early days make it clear that it was a standard late 18th century meeting house, similar to many other New Hampshire town meetinghouses of the period. The style of architecture was simple with little exterior ornament and for many years, not even exterior paint. The two story gable roofed main block, had a "porch at each end", a stair tower serving the second story galleries.

The use of the meeting house for town supported religious services was relatively short lived. The New Hampton Congregational church members declined from 135 in 1801 to just 12 in 1820. It was briefly revived, but finally in 1842 the remaining members dissolved the New Hampton church and joined the Bristol church. Three town meetings in 1844 considered changes to the meeting house ranging from repairs and alterations to building a new one, to relocating the town house to a "suitable place". Also discussed in 1844 was the interest by the First Baptist Society to use the building. Funds were appropriated to make alterations, but there is no record of changes being made. In 1866 town meeting dismissed a warrant article to move the Town House to "Smith's Village", today know as the New Hampton village.

By the 1870's the old meeting house must have seemed quite out of style and obsolete for use as a town hall based on petition warrant articles in the years to follow: "to build a Town House or repair the present one" and another in March 1872 "to build a Town House." A special town meeting on April 13, 1872 was called to consider an article "to see if the Town will vote to locate and build a town house or repair the old one either in its present, or some other, location and what appropriation of money they

will make for the same ...". The meeting decided "to repair the Town House where it now stands" and appropriated \$700 for the project.

The main block of the wooden town house is now a mid 19th century vernacular structure, while the smaller additions on its rear are mid 20th century vernacular structures. The main block is post and beam construction and stands on a cut granite block foundation. The tall one and a half story, gable roofed main block is set with its main façade, the lateral south side, facing Town House Road across the wide common. In the center of the main block's south façade, a one story, gable roofed porch shelters the main entry. The main block's rear northern side is entirely covered by three, one story shed roof additions for the kitchen, the stage and the privies, and at the east end, a small one story shed roofed rear entry porch with a ramp. The main block has a post and beam frame, while the three additions have balloon frames. The building retains its basic integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and association. The main block's exterior has seen little change since the remodeling in 1872, save for the additions on the rear. The main block's interior, a single large room over sixteen feet high, also appears much the same it has since 1872, save the two doors and a stage opening placed in its north rear wall, when the additions were built. The one large meeting room that occupies the main level of the main block is lit by twelve large 20/15 sash windows on the east, west and south sides of the building. Four additional windows are now enclosed by the kitchen and privy additions. Each window has a simply molded frame, plain window sill, and is covered by a large plain single shutter, made of vertical boards, and hung on long metal hinges. The main meeting room has a hardwood floor and has plastered walls. Two L-shaped platforms, that once held pews, are found around the three sides of the room. They cover the entire east and west sides and are interrupted in front of the main entry on the south side. The main building is clapboarded and is framed by wide corner pilasters with simple molded capitals but no bases. A wide box cornice with moldings, deep frieze and returns trims the shingled gable roof. There is no plumbing or water to the building. The building is heated by two wood stoves on the east and west end of the building on the main floor. The older Waterbury stove, a large metal cylinder embellished with embossed Victorian floral and geometric designs is located on the west side of the building. A plainer and smaller modern stove is located on the east end. Built on the platform and against the wall beside each chimney (to the north of the west chimney and the south of the east chimney) is a large open wood box, made of horizontal boards.

The main building has changed relatively little and still conveys the character of a mid 19th century town hall. This is not to say that the building has not changed. In the 1930's and 1940's several changes were made to the Town House to increase its usefulness as a public meeting place, not only for town meetings, but for other community events, such as Old Home Day observations, suppers, as well as family reunions and weddings. The first important change was probably the addition of the privies, perhaps in 1934. Electric lights were installed in 1937. An addition with a kitchen and a stage in 1940 made it much easier to use the hall for suppers, plays and other public events. Hardwood floors were installed in 1942. The wooden floor of the front entry porch was replaced by a granite slab in 1963.

The three additions are almost unchanged since their construction, probably 1934 and in 1940. The kitchen addition contains a small one room kitchen. It has two windows, one 6/6 sash window on the west and a double casement window with six pane sash on the north. There is a wooden cabinet and a wood cook stove in the kitchen. The stage addition contains the stage area, which opens into the main meeting room and also has six voting booths on the northern side with a railing on the south side, leading to stairs on the east and west end of the stage to the main floor. There are no windows in the stage addition. The privy addition has three spaces, two restrooms on the north side, and the narrow corridor serving them on the south side and the rear entry out to the porch on the east side. Both privies are two-holers, with board front and top and hinged board covers for the holes. Both rooms have plain framed four pane hinged windows, a northern window in the Gents room an eastern window in the Ladies room. The additions have novelty siding and trimmed with corner boards. The large sign on south front does not appear in the late 19th century photograph, but it does appear in a 1904 photograph.

The attic of the main block is a large unfinished space. It has no floor, just the laths of the main room's plaster ceiling nailed to the ceiling joists. The ceiling is hung from four large queen post trusses, made of heavy timbers. Each truss has a tie beam, two queen posts, two common rafters, to principal rafters running from the tie beam to the queen posts and a collar beam connecting the two queenposts. The queenposts of the four trusses, which run north-south, are connected by horizontal beams running east-west, with large braces at each end to tie all four trusses together. Purlins support the slanting board ceilings. In each gable end is an untrimmed 15/15 sash window. In front of each window is a brick chimney rising to the roof. The three additions have shed roofs, no attic.

Notwithstanding its present use for various social events and its past use for religious services, the most significant use of the Town House throughout its long history has been for town meetings and elections. Every town meeting and every election in New Hampton since March of 1799 has been held in this building. Discussions of local politics and town affairs took place elsewhere in the community, in homes, stores, and other public buildings. But the actual decisions of local government have been made at the town meetings in the Town House for nearly two centuries. No other building in Belknap County has such a long history of use for town meetings and elections. The New Hampton Town House is a well preserved, excellent example of these important historical buildings and has been recognized by the National Register of Historic Places.

These excerpts are from the National Register of Historic Places nomination 11/21/1997report which is much more detailed.