

## Meeting House

The origin of the town meeting form of government can be traced to meetinghouses of the colonies. Early English settlers came to America for religious freedom from the Church of England. They set up a society that was free of the ornate, rigid traditions of the Anglo-Catholic church.

The central focus of every New England town was the meetinghouse. These structures were usually the largest building in the town. They were used both for religious worship, and for conducting town business. Taxes supported these structures.

They were always very simple buildings, with no statues, decorations, or stained glass. Not even a cross hung on the wall.

The practice of supporting the church with tax money continued until about 1820, when individual states passed laws separating church and state. Until that time, it was common (except in Rhode Island) to support the dominant church - referred to as the "standing order" - by taxing the citizens.

In fact, in the early years a town was not granted a charter until it had built a meetinghouse and hired a minister. Rhode Island did not support the church with taxes because it was founded by the Baptists who were expelled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for refusing to pay the church tax.

Most were almost square, with a rather steep pitched roof running east to west. This placed the long wall toward the south for better light, and warmth in the winter. These buildings were never heated for fear of fire.

There were typically 3 doors: The one in the center of the long south wall was called the "Door of Honor," and was used by the minister and his family, and any honored out-of-town guests. The other doors were located in the middle of the east and west walls, and were used by women and men, respectively.

A balcony (called a "gallery") would usually be built on the east, south, and west walls, and a high pulpit would be located on the north wall. Box pews were provided for families, and single men and women (and slaves) would typically sit in the balconies.

Large multi-paned windows would be located at both the ground floor and gallery levels. It was a status symbol to have lots of glass in the windows - glass was expensive and had to be imported from England.

A pulpit window, between the levels of the ground floor and gallery windows, would typically be in the center of the north wall. This window is one of the hallmarks of a colonial meetinghouse, and its former location can often be seen in the clapboards of structures that have been modified.

These structures have evolved over the centuries. Most that are still standing have been renovated several times to meet the needs of their owners and the styles of the times.

In the early 1800s, people wanted 'modern' churches that had one entrance on a short end of the building, a long aisle to a pulpit on the other short end, and slip pews instead of box pews. At this time it was also common to build steeples over the entrances, either incorporated into the building, or as part of an entrance porch that was added to the building's end.

Many a typical white New England church started out as a colonial meetinghouse. An interesting variation to the "make a church" type of renovation took place in several towns when the separation of church and state took place.

In these cases, the thrifty New Englanders complied with the law by building a floor at the balcony level, and using the first floor for town business, and the second floor for church. Many meetinghouses thus have a floor at what used to be the balcony level. (ColonialMeetingHouses-com)

### **Plymouth Meeting House**

The first structure the Pilgrims built at Plymouth was a fort (it also served as the Pilgrims' meeting house). As noted by Bradford,

"On ye 15. of Desemr [1620]: they wayed anchor to goe to ye place they had discovered, & came within 2. Leagues of it, but were faine to bear up againe; but ye 16. day ye winde came faire, and they arrived safe in this harbor."

"And after wards tooke better view of ye place, and resolved wher to pitch their dwelling; and ye 25. day began to erecte ye first house for comone use to receive them and their goods."

According to John Cuckson's A Brief History of the First Church in Plymouth, the first meetings of the congregation in Plymouth were held in a common house built ca. 1621 and located on the south side of Leyden Street, the first street laid out in Plymouth, which runs between the harbor and what is now known as Town Square. This building consisted of a twenty-foot-square form. (NPS)

Unfortunately, that initial structure was lost to fire,

"... ye 14th of January [1621] the house which they had made for a general randevoze [rendezvous/meeting house] by casualty fell afire, and some were fain to retire aboard for shelter." (Bradford)

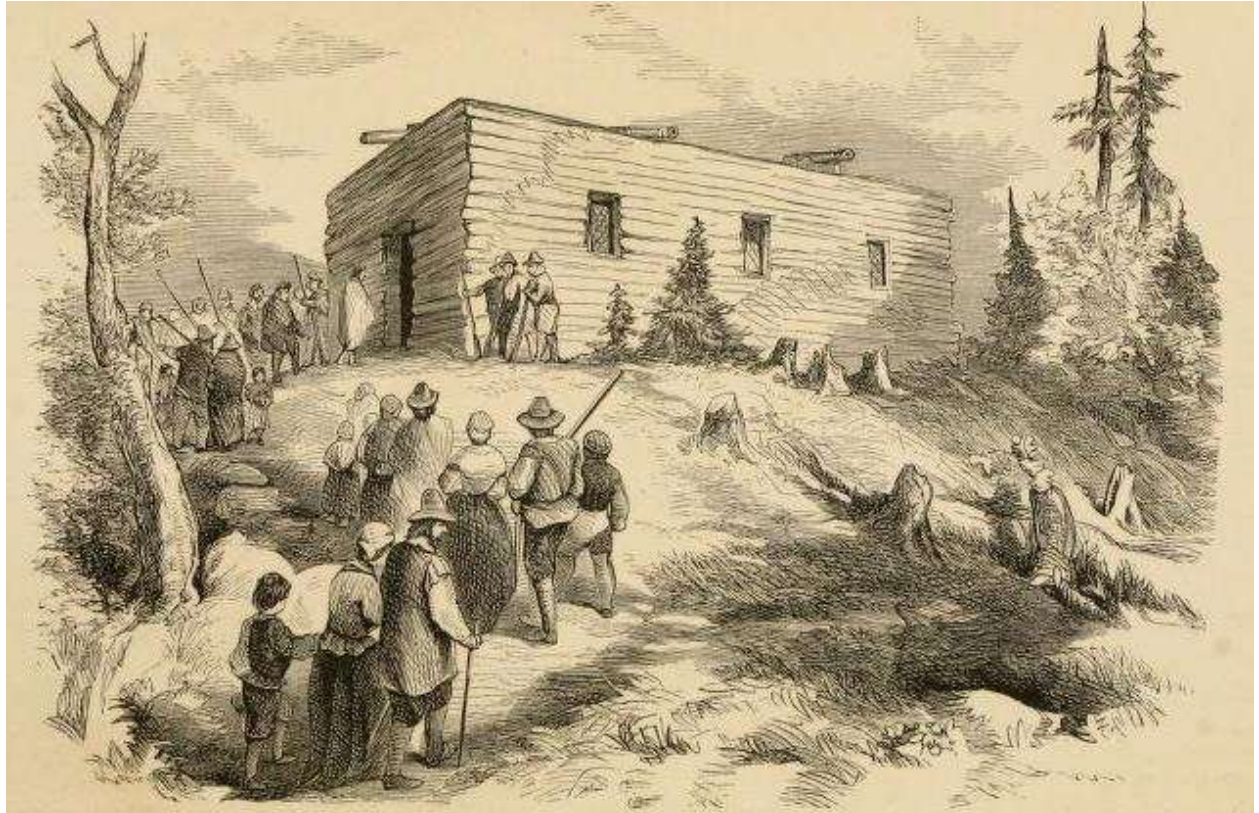
Winslow noted,

"14th of January, in the morning about six of the clock the wind being very great, they on shipboard spied their great new rendezvous on fire ..."

"... which was to them a new discomfort, fearing because of the supposed loss of men, that the savages had fired them. Neither could they presently go to them, for want of water, but after three quarters of an hour they went, as they had purposed the day before to keep the Sabbath on shore, because now there was the greatest number of people."

"At their landing they heard good tidings of the return of the two men, and that the house was fired occasionally by a spark that flew into the thatch, which instantly burnt it all up but the roof stood and little hurt."

"The most loss was Master Carver's and William Bradford's, who then lay sick in bed, and if they had not risen with good speed, had been blown up with powder, but, though God's mercy, they had no harm. The house was as full of beds as they could lie one by another, and their muskets charged, but, blessed be God, there was no harm done." (Mourt's Relation)



Pilgrim Meeting House.



“It served them allso for a meeting house, and was fitted accordingly for that use.”

“It was a great worke for them in this weaknes and time of wants; but ye deanger of ye time required it, and both ye continuall rumors of ye fears from ye Indeans hear, esppecially ye Narigansets, and also ye hearing of that great massacre in Virginia, made all hands willing to despatch ye same.” (Bradford)

Later, they constructed a new meeting house/fort:

“This somer [1622] they builte a fort with good timber, both strong & comly, which was of good defence, made with a flate rofe & batllments, on which their ordnance were mounted, and wher they kepte constante watch, esppecially in time of danger.” (Bradford)

Worship services were then held in a fort, built ca. 1621, on what is now known as Old Burial Hill. The fort was located directly behind the current First Parish Church.

According to Isaak de Rasiers, who visited Plymouth in 1627, the building consisted of “a large square house with a flat roof made of sawn planks set on oak beams, upon the top of which they have six cannon.... . The lower part they use for their church, where they preach on Sundays and the usual holidays.” (NPS)

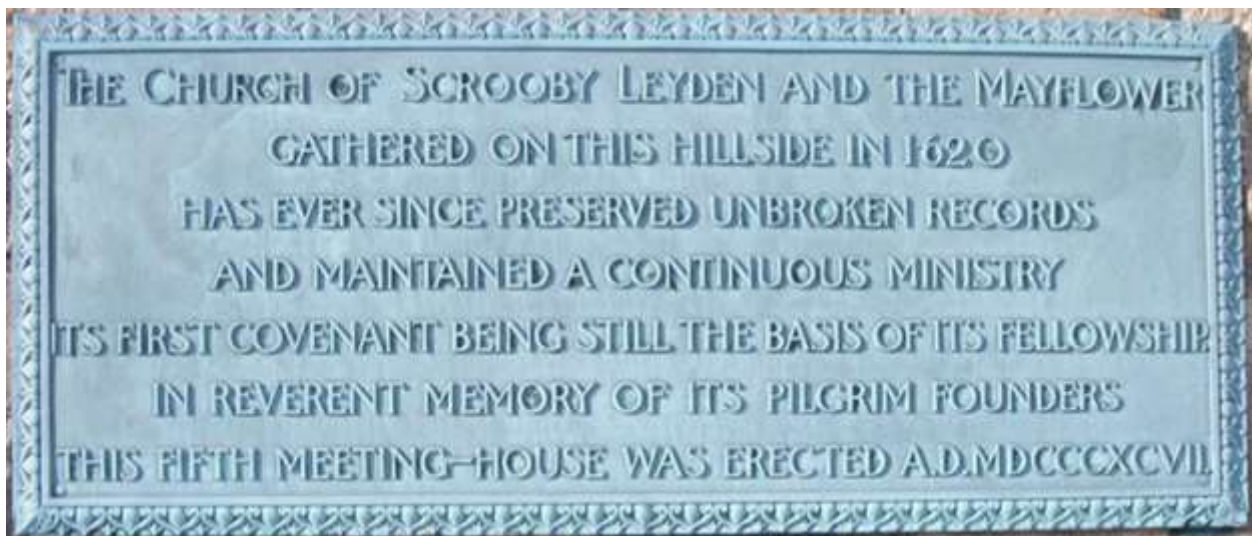
Later, a separate meetinghouse was built in either 1637 or 1648 - accounts differ.

According to Plymouth historian Fred A. Jenks, worship services were conducted in the fort “until 1637 when the first meetinghouse was built on common land on the north side of Town Square.”

However, according to John Cuckson, Minister of First Parish from 1901-1910, the first meetinghouse was not built until 1648 on the north side of Town Square.

All of the land between Burial Hill and Main Street, which included present-day Town Square, originally belonged to William Bradford and John Alden. The land on which the First Parish Church now stands was likely given up by John Alden when he left Plymouth in 1627, after which the land became known as the Town Commons.

A plaque notes the First Church of Plymouth (on what is the 5<sup>th</sup> Meeting House of the Plymouth Church),



## **Mayflower Society Given (and Restoring/Maintaining) First Parish Meeting House**

Since the Mayflower Pilgrims' first Meetinghouse was built at the top of Leyden Street in Plymouth, MA in 1621, a place of spiritual ministry has continued to this day. Presently, the First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church of Plymouth worships at this centerpiece of the Plymouth, MA cultural district.

The Mayflower Meetinghouse (formerly the National Pilgrim Memorial Meetinghouse) is the fifth spiritual structure built on this location. The first meetinghouse was built on common land on the north side of Town Square, at a different location from the subsequent four meetinghouses. (GSMD)

The first meetinghouse burned shortly after it was built. The second meetinghouse was built in 1683 at a new location, on the site of the present First Parish Church at the west end of Town Square. The second meetinghouse was the first of four meetinghouses built at this location.

The third meetinghouse was built in 1744 on the same site, replacing the second meetinghouse that had fallen into disrepair.

In 1831, an increase in the congregation and a desire for a larger and more contemporary church resulted in a vote to replace the third meetinghouse with a fourth structure.

The fourth meetinghouse burned in 1892. The First Parish Church, completed in 1899, is the fifth meetinghouse built for its congregation, and the fourth built at the current location. (NPS)

When the General Society of Mayflower Descendants (GSMD) became aware that the congregation was having trouble with the increasing maintenance and restoration of the building, it approached the congregation about donating the Meetinghouse to GSMD as a place to fulfill its educational mission.

Since the General Society of Mayflower Descendants was founded in 1897, the same year the present structure was built at the top of Leyden Street, families of descendants – our families – have made regular pilgrimages to this spot. In fact, our Member Societies have helped to furnish this structure with Tiffany stained-glass windows from the New York and New Jersey Societies, objects in the sanctuary from Rhode Island, as well as many other contributions through the years.

To save the building they love, the First Parish Church congregation has agreed to donate it to GSMD upon the condition that funds be put in place to permanently maintain it, and that they be allowed to continue scheduling their services there.

The General Society of Mayflower Descendants and First Parish Church signed a Joint Venture Agreement, which led to the Charitable Trust, during Congress 2017.

Along with the Meetinghouse, GSMD will be given all the church records from modern times back to 1620, written by William Bradford, William Brewster, Robert Cushman, and many others.

There are references and stories of our Mayflower ancestors going back to Leiden, information that simply must be curated and properly maintained permanently. There is no group better to do this than the actual descendants of the Mayflower Pilgrims. (GSMD)







*Recreated Fort/Meeting House at Plimoth Patuxet*

Information here is from General Society of Mayflower Descendants; National Park Service; Bradford; Winslow; ColonialMeetingHouses-com)

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young