

For the 250th Anniversary *of* the Raising *of* the Jaffrey Meeting-House

I WAS NEVER a church, though I have sheltered several.
First the Congregational church alone, starting
When I was fit to house other than barn swallows
And field mice (there were fewer complaints then
About my accommodation than in many years subsequent).
Like Rome I was not built in a day, though that's the memory.
I began as a legal obligation from the Proprietors:
"You want to be a proper town, with boards and meetings
And taxes and standing among your neighbors? Then
Show us you can support a schoolmaster and minister
And build a meeting-house!" The hardy folk under the mountain
Glumly agreed, though what they craved was roads. It took
A while (the first of many whiles), but finally
They found the funds, the builder, and the time,
And on one good June day they raised my frame,
the skeleton of what you see here now.
Though a clear day, by all accounts,
They seemed to hear distant thunder—at any rate,
A multitude of fits and new starts was burgeoning
All round them in this corner of the world.

So here I stood, the bones of me, till this new town
Could make good its investment with roof, walls,
Doors, windows, even paint. Eventually
Came pews in sections, paid for in advance,
Under a great pulpit's firm authority
Below the rounded window in the north wall.
And in due course they managed to convince
A serious young Dartmouth man
To live among them, preach a sturdy Gospel,
baptize, marry, bury, and in between
To be in their lives a solid constant presence,
Knowing that he could be in turn a farmer
Among farmers, trader among traders, husband and father too,
Endure with them the outrage and the blessing
Yet still have in reserve the other blessing of his cloth.
Sabbath by Sabbath he at some length proclaimed
Danger and redemption for all who cared to hear.
At length I acquired my elegant companion
Soaring above my southern wall,
Complete with weathervane and bell, reminding all
How fleeting are your chances to make good and fast.

Yet other Godward voices soon arose
And I, as Meeting-house, must invite new churches in
To sound new praises intermittently,
Proportionate to their numbers in the town.
As no one found this tolerable in use,
New dedicated places hastily were built,
One for each certainty, leaving me bereft
Of worshippers, empty all the year.
I was reshaped within for other gatherings,
Meetings of children in classrooms down below
Meetings of other sorts on a second floor above.
The town's attention shifted towards the river.
I was again abandoned—still beloved, but quaint.

It seemed I might, with all the Green around,
Sink into decay, into the earth itself,
When suddenly arose new marshals to force the willing
To turn the clock, if not quite in reverse,
At least toward a new direction: the Center as reminder,
Inspirer of new energies and thoughts.
And so inwardly east-facing I was turned,
Complete with stage, backstage, galleries and benches,
A place to demonstrate the high, the broad,
The new and unaccustomed face of things.
Now I resound, with old words in young throats,
Forum and concert, dance and declaration,
Shoring up and checking any who draw near.

Yet I am mortal, of perishable fabric still
In need of constant care, replacement, twists and turns.
I am, in fine, an edifice, not a church.
Yet I detect in those whose touch I know
Deep joy of the protector, helper, friend.
And so, dear Jaffrey, while you keep me true,
I'll stærive, as Meeting-house, to do the same for you.

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