

North Vestry of First Congregational Church
Beacon Hill, Centre Street
Nantucket
Nantucket County
Massachusetts

HABS No. MASS-903

HABS
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10-NANT
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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

NORTH VESTRY OF FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

HABS
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Location: On Beacon Hill, Centre Street, Nantucket,
Massachusetts

Present Owner: First Congregational Church

Present Occupant: First Congregational Church

Present Use: Religious services

Brief Statement
of Significance: The North Vestry is one of the oldest church
buildings in America still in use.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: The North Vestry was first owned by the Presbyterian Meeting House Society; later the Vestry and the Church became the property of the First Congregational Society (Presbyterian), with the exception of a few months in 1834, when the Vestry was sold but almost immediately repurchased.
2. Date of erection: North Vestry variously dated from 1711 to 1732. It is known that the Vestry was in existence in 1732. (Abstract, Chief Justice Benjamin Lynde's Diary, in Mass. Historical Collections Series IV, Vol. 1, p. 255). According to tradition, it was built in 1711 (Abstract, Old bill of sale date 1711 for lumber. See Quarterly Register of American Education Society, May, 1843, and Nantucket Lands and Land Owners -- Worth).

Historians for years have differed on the date; the scarcity of ancient records makes a definite date difficult to determine. Some believe there may have been another meeting house built in 1711, but what happened to it is not known. (Abstract; Nantucket; a History by Douglas-Lithgow)

Much has been written on the subject, particularly in items listed in bibliography.

The North Vestry, originally called the Presbyterian Meeting House, was built on the "rising ground" north of its present location. In 1765 it was moved to Beacon Hill, on the site of the present Congregational

Church, where it remained until 1834. In that year it was moved back to its present location now behind the Church to make room for construction of a new church. (Abstract, Church Records)

3. Architect: None.
4. Original plans, construction, etc.: The North Vestry was a plain building when it stood on high ground in what was called "Holmes Country." Originally it had no tower, but in 1795 a tower was raised on what is now the south end of the building. This was bolted to the structure by iron rods, and timbers on the beams in the roof were used to give additional stability. In this tower the first bell ever used on the Island for the call to worship was placed in 1800. It weighed 1000 pounds. In the course of time, the people living near the Church were fearful the tower might be blown over. Consequently, the cap or dome, with the vane and two upper sections, were taken down. Around 1830 the two upper sections, were restored, the topmost of the two being octagonal, topped by a convex mosque-like dome. Again it was feared the tower would overturn and in 1834, when the building was moved back, the tower was entirely removed and the timbers used in a cottage opposite the Sea Cliff Inn.

The North Vestry was 40' by 60' -- the lean-tos were added later, and it originally had two rows of windows like the one showing in upper left-hand corner of 1897 illustration. There was a high pulpit on the west side of the church room and a huge sounding board suspended above the pulpit held by a cord attached to a hook in the ceiling. A gallery extended to the north, east, and south sides. The singers occupied the eastern gallery, directly above the main entrance. The pews were square pens with the seats hung on hinges to be raised and lowered as required. There was an open stairway in the northeast corner.

5. Alterations and additions: A clipping from the local paper in 1868 reported that there was a dedication or reconsecration service held at the North Vestry. The raised floor, ungainly pulpit and awkward, uncomfortable seats had been removed, and in their stead was a level floor, convenient seats and a desk for the pastor's use more in keeping with modern requirements and good taste.

Another clipping in 1886 reported that new chairs for the North Vestry had arrived by the Boston packet. They had maple backs with strong and handsomely-woven rattan seats and were very comfortable. Six armchairs with veneer tops were added for the pulpit and settees

to match were order, as well as an adjustable reading desk of black walnut. In 1890 water was brought into the Vestry and a passageway opened between the Church and the Vestry with the water in a closet on one side of the passageway. The small lean-to on the west side of the Vestry used as a wood room was enlarged to furnish a place for a water closet. A check for \$100.00, a sum nearly or quite sufficient for these improvements, was received from Hon. Elijah A. Morse, member of Congress for the Canton District, whose father had been pastor here years before.

In 1948 the interior of the Vestry was renovated at considerable expense. The hand-hewn oak framework with its wooden pins provided an appropriate background for the panelling and the wide boards used in the permanent pews, choir stalls, and pulpit. The Vestry is connected to the main Church building by a door at right of the pulpit in the large auditorium. Recently four new, up-to-date Church School rooms have been built on the ground floor at the rear of the Vestry. (Abstract, Church leaflet)

- B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure: At the time of the death of George Washington, the Islanders gathered at this meeting-house to offer tribute of respect to the great departed.

The Rev. Timothy White, who left his valuable "Papers" to posterity, was the first established preacher of this Church. The Rev. Myron S. Dudley who later compiled these "Papers," was pastor from 1889 to 1897, and was a diligent investigator of local history and the author of several historical publications.

An old homemade book of Church records was found in 1909 giving receipts for the year 1784, showing collections of 550 pounds and expenditures of something over 350 pounds. This book is now in the custody of the Nantucket Historical Association.

In 1769 the last person on the Island to suffer capital punishment was an Indian named Nathan Quibby. According to tradition his trial was held in the meeting-house.

"Notes on Nantucket" written by the Rev. James Freeman in 1807, as published in the Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, reads, "The Congregational meeting-house has a tower 80 feet in height which commands a fine prospect of the town, the island and the surrounding sea. Strangers fail not to visit this tower....The Congregation-
alists are more than 200 families."

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: Two excellent views of North Vestry, one of interior and one of exterior from court in rear, taken by Platt, photographer, just prior to 1890; several sketches, and a pencil drawing by William Henry Coffin, showing tower on the North Vestry erected by 1795, property of Church.
2. Bibliography:
Douglas-Lithgow, Robert Alexander. Nantucket: a History. New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1914.
Dudley, Myron Samuel. Timothy White Papers, 1725-1755. Nantucket: Nantucket Historical Association, Vol. 1-bull. 2, 1898. (includes 1897 photograph of North Vestry by Wyer and "Floor Plan of First Congregational Meeting-House" as about 1820, by William F. Codd - see copy)
Starbuck, Alexander. The History of Nantucket. Boston: C. E. Goodspeed and Co., 1924
Worth, Henry Barnard. Nantucket Land and Land Owners. Nantucket: Nantucket Historical Association Bulletin, 1901-1910, Vol. 2, no. 1-7.

Prepared by Mrs. Marie M. Coffin
Nantucket, Massachusetts
August 1966

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Often rebuilt early eighteenth meeting house with some original structural and finish material remaining.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent, extensive modification of interior space and finish but structural system still exposed.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: 40'-5" by 60'-7" not including additions and appendages.
2. Foundations: Originally stone dry walls, now reinforced concrete as part of basement construction.
3. Wall construction: Wood frame, weathered wood shingles nailed on horizontal sheathing; corner boards.
4. Structural system: Post and lintel platform system, braced frame, girts and plates exposed to the interior;

mortise and tenon joinery, treenail fasteners; modern timber and lally columns supplement earlier wood beams.

5. Chimney: Brick chimney at north wall.
6. Stoops, bulkheads, etc.: Concrete slab at south entry, area way access below west appendage to basement.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Modern paneled and glazed doors.
 - b. Windows: Single hung fifteen-over-fifteen and six-over-six in older structure; twelve-over-twelve in appendages; head of six-over-six window penetrates fascia of cornice; two two-panel opening wood shutters at second floor windows, louvered.
8. Roof:
 - a. Shape and covering: Gable roof, shed on appendages at west and south, ridgeboards, asbestos shingles, roof sheathing parallel to slope of roof.
 - b. Framing: King post roof truss, rafters and purlins; mortise and tenon joinery, treenail fasteners; old rafters used as stiffeners between king posts and rafters.
 - c. Cornice, eaves: Boxed eaves, large boards and fascia at gables, no gutters.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans:
 - a. First floor plan upper level: Organ loft at northwest corner; stairways to attic and down to first floor and basement at northeast corner.
 - b. First floor plan lower level: Entry from enclosed porch at south into vestibule and auditorium, two room appendages to the west, one room to north, access to the auditorium of the Congregational Church; chancel at north end of auditorium.
 - c. Modern basement: Storage and meeting rooms.
2. Stairways:
 - a. Modern stairs at northeast corner of auditorium to first floor lower level, L-shaped with landing; U-shaped stairway with winders to attic.
 - b. Ladder to organ loft.

- c. Stair from exterior to basement below vestibule.
3. Flooring: Wood strips 4" ± wide, concrete at lower level.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Paneled wainscot at south wall and in first south bay, possibly salvaged doors and/or pew ends; horizontal board wainscot elsewhere, plaster walls and ceiling.
5. Doorways and doors: Six-panel doors, simple trim.
6. Decorative features and trim: Simple carpenter classic decoration at north wall of chancel.
7. Notable hardware: Typical Nantucket wood latches, guards, keepers; lightning rods at gable of roof.
8. Lighting: Modern electric.
9. Heating system: Modern hotwater.
- D. Site and Surroundings: The Old North Vestry is located immediately west of the Congregational Church (MASS-902) and attached to it by an enclosed covered way. Modern appendages to south, west and north; macadam paving at south and north.

Prepared by F. Blair Reeves, A.I.A.
Nantucket, Massachusetts
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