

German Lutheran Church, Waldoboro, Lincoln County, Maine, frame possibly 1772-73; moved and rebuilt and furnished c. 1794-1804

This well-preserved two-story meetinghouse was erected by members of a German Protestant community who had immigrated to the Broad Bay region in the mid eighteenth century. Local records suggest that a framed meetinghouse was built in 1772-73 to replace an earlier structure. The meetinghouse was not located at the present site but stood on the east side of the Medomak River. The building remained a framed shell where services and town meetings were held in a room with unplastered walls, rude benches, and no galleries. Though it remained unfinished for the next twenty years, the church was disassembled and moved to its current location on the other side of the river where it was re-erected in the early 1790s. The complete set of interior fittings including the tall pulpit with its sounding board, tall box pews with raised panels that line the ground floor and three-sided gallery all date from the late 1790s and early 1800s. By 1804 the building was substantially finished and painted for the first time.

The question is how much of the earlier building was reused? Elements of the old frame may have been salvaged for the reconstruction of the building on its present site in 1794. But even so, the plan of the earlier building probably looked nothing like the present configuration. The building now measures 45 ½ feet in length and is 36 ½ in width. The principal rafter roof is framed with common purlins. The single entrance into the building is through a two-story porch tower (13 by 16 feet) on the shorter southwest gable end. The pulpit stands opposite the entrance in the center of the shorter northeast gable wall. A three-sided gallery wraps around the two long walls and the shorter entrance wall with access to the upper level seating from a stair in the tower.

If this were the original configuration in 1773, then the building would have been perhaps the earliest in New England to have a short wall entrance and meeting space oriented longitudinally, predating by more than fifteen years the reconceptualization of the meetinghouse form in the axial plan designed by Charles Bulfinch at Pittsfield, Massachusetts in 1789 and subsequently popularized by Asher Benjamin in the 1790s. This seems unlikely, but the framing system is such that no central, long-wall entrances were possible. With four, equally spaced framing bays in the long walls, two-story posts stand in the center of the building, precluding the placement of doorways where they would have been expected in a meetinghouse built in New England in the early 1770s. It seems unlikely that they were slightly off-center, a solution rarely employed in this region. The fact that the builders were a congregation composed mainly of Reformed and Lutheran Germans had no bearing on the design since these denominations were building churches with central, long-wall entrances throughout colonial America. What is most likely is that this structure may have had some recycled materials when it was built in the early 1790s, but the framing and plan are entirely new as are the finishes and fittings.

The interior is dominated at the far gable end by polygonally shaped pulpit crowned by a flat-capped sounding board with wavy lines painted on its frieze and architrave that nearly reaches the flat ceiling. The flattened, hexagonally shaped pulpit projects out from a narrow goblet-shaped base and is trimmed with gouge work and dentillation. A 24-light flat headed sash window enframed in a compass-headed

architrave lights the back of the pulpit. Fluted Doric pilasters flank the window and connect the projecting sounding board.

Sources:

Stahl, History of Old Broad Bay and Waldoboro, 1956

Images:

HABS, 1930s drawings

CRL, plan, 1990