

*Restoration
of the*
**HARRINGTON
MEETING
HOUSE**

By Timothy John

*Above — The Meeting House before restoration began.
Below — The historic building as it looks today.*



THE Harrington Meeting House at Pemaquid, a section of the town of Bristol, is one of Maine's oldest churches, dating from 1772. Services were held there until 1915. Then for nearly a half-century, the building, which is situated on a crossroad between Routes 129 and 130, remained abandoned until restoration was instigated by Mrs. Edward J. Fertig of Pemaquid in 1960. Today, the two-story white structure, fully restored to its 18th-century lines, is a National Historic Site, exemplifying local Maine church architecture of the pre-Revolutionary War period.

When a town was established in Colonial days, one of the first matters of public business was deciding where to build the meeting house. In Bristol, founded in 1765, it was impossible to find one site easily accessible to all residents of the widely scattered community, then encompassing what are now Bremen, South Bristol and part of Damariscotta. As a result, it was decided to build three meeting houses: at Walpole, to serve the upper western section of the town; at Broad Cove, for the upper eastern section; and at Harrington in Pemaquid, for the peninsulas of Christmas Cove and Pemaquid.

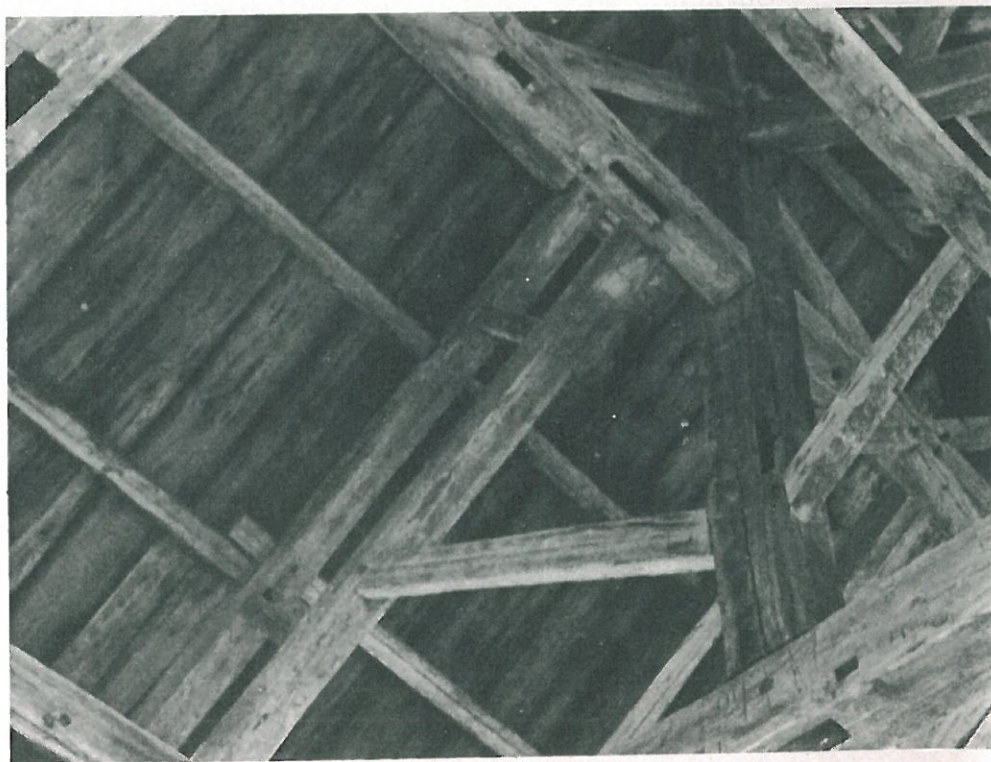
The Harrington Meeting House got off to a controversial beginning. Although land for the building had been given to the town by William Sproul in 1768, a faction living in what is now Bristol Mills wanted the structure built there. Residents even erected a framework, which was greeted with a mixture of approval and dismay. A town meeting finally authorized a committee to dismantle the framework and remove it to the Sproul land. The meeting house was officially accepted by the town in 1775, and erected at the rear of the cemetery it now faces. In the late 1840s, it was moved a few hundred yards to its present location on the Old Harrington Road, and considerably changed inside.

Although the Harrington, Walpole and Broad Cove parishes were widely separated geographically, all were originally of the same Presbyterian denomination. The Reverend Alexander McLain, who came to this country from Scotland in 1770, served the three parishes from 1772 until 1798. Living in Round Pond, he made a circuit of the churches on



Above — The classic simplicity of the exterior of the building, dating from 1772.

Below — Mortised roof trusses, left exposed, add to the charm of the interior.



horseback, preaching in at least two of them each Sunday. In 1851, the Harrington parish became a Universalist church.

The last known service to be held in the church prior to its present-day restoration was a funeral in 1915. Thereafter, the roof was allowed to deteriorate, permitting rain and moisture to crumble the interior plaster and warp the walls and floorboards. Bees took up residence in the roof, hiving in such proliferation that a local beekeeper was able to draw barrels of honey from the combs.

In 1960, when Lincoln County, of which Bristol is a part, celebrated its

200th anniversary, Mrs. Fertig, then a trustee of the Lincoln County Cultural and Historical Association, decided to mark the event by saving an historic building in the town of Bristol. She chose the Harrington Meeting House near her home at Gentle Cove.

Because John Johnston in his *A History of Bristol and Bremen*, published in 1873, had intimated that the original meeting house had been destroyed when it was moved in the 1840s, Mrs. Fertig at first saw no reason to undertake a full restoration. Her aim was simply to preserve the building by putting on a new roof and removing what remained of the crumbling

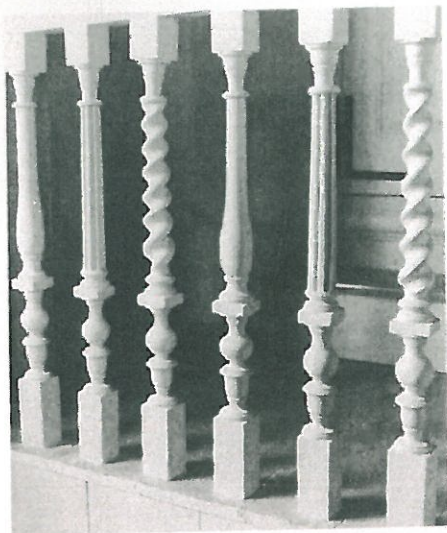
plaster. With the assistance of J. Carroll Benner, a New Harbor builder, work began. The bees were smoked out, the roof was resingled, and the plaster was removed.

When the outer layer of plaster was stripped off, Benner and Mrs. Fertig found beneath it an earlier plaster wall on which people had written their names and various messages. One Willy Boyd wrote his name many times, and someone asserted that "McLain is a lying fool."

More important than these writings, however, were the cracks uncovered in the undercoating of plaster. They indicated where twenty-



The raised pulpit with its graceful wood carvings and finely turned balusters, and the box pews, all meticulously restored.



eight original windows had been, and also led to the location of boarded-up doorways on three sides of the building.

From these clues, Mrs. Fertig was convinced that the original meeting house, and not a second building as suggested by historian Johnston, did indeed exist. Repair then turned into a full-scale restoration of the 1775 structure as faithfully as could be determined.

Work proceeded without a cent of state or federal assistance, Mrs. Fertig contending that government grants would only entail red tape and interference. To raise funds she set up the Pemaquid Historical Association as a non-profit educational organization and went about gathering tax-deductible contributions.

Fund raising and restoration continued for ten years. Work halted when money ceased coming in, then started up again when additional contributions were received. It was a pay-as-you-go endeavor, with a final price tag of \$50,000.

Today the restoration of the Harrington Meeting House is complete in almost every detail, except for the lack of pews in the balcony. Instead, that area has been converted into a small museum which exhibits artifacts, tools, photos, clothing, instruments and maps having to do with the town of Bristol's early days.

The church itself is again being used. Each spring a concert is held there, featuring organist Doris Havens Marble of Bremen and the chorus of St. Andrews Church, Newcastle. In August, an annual, non-denominational church service is conducted by a distinguished member of the clergy, and from time to time a wedding ceremony is performed in front of the restored pulpit.

For those who wish to see an outstanding example of the kind of building in which Maine people worshipped 200 years ago, the Harrington Meeting House is open during the months of July and August on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays from 2 until 5 p.m., and by appointment during September and October. There is a small admission charge of 50 cents for the museum.

This year the spring concert has been scheduled for Sunday, June 20, at 3 p.m. ■



*Above — View of the cove where early parishioners came to church by boat.
Below — The old graveyard which the Harrington Meeting House now faces.*



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The Magazine of Maine



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