Congregational Meetinghouse, Harpswell, Cumberland County, Maine; 1757-59; mid-1770s; partially restored 1958, 2005

Members of the second parish of North Yarmouth undertook the construction of a two-story framed meetinghouse around 1757 under the supervision of carpenter Elisha Eaton of Boston, the son of the local minister. The following year, the town of Harpswell was established. In the summer of 1759 Eaton purchased sash windows for the meetinghouse in Boston and shipped them in late May to the site. He spent the months of October and November finishing the 40 ½- by 35 ½-foot building for the use of the congregation and town. However, it was not until the 1770s before the three-sided gallery with its raised paneled breastwork, pews, and staircase and doorways in the 16- by 10-foot entrance porch on the long southeast wall were completed. The building served the parish and town until 1843 when a new parish church was built nearby for its new minister, Elijah Kellogg. Kellogg insisted that the old meetinghouse be preserved and it continued for some time, bereft of its pews in the center of the ground floor, as the meeting place for town business.

The meetinghouse that Eaton constructed is framed with a series of irregularly spaced bays. There are five on the two longer walls and three on the shorter gable end walls. The posts are unsheathed and flare slightly at the wall plate with curved braces on the long walls projecting into the room at the ceiling, which join the tie beams to the inner posts. The walls were enclosed with vertical sawn boards, which were originally covered on the exterior with shingles and since replaced with clapboards. The interior walls above the pew-height sheathing are plastered as the flat ceiling. Eaton fabricated a principal purlin roof with three purlins on each slope mortised into the sides of the principal rafters with a ridge beam at the apex. Shingles were nailed over the sawn vertical boards like the original wall finish. A double tier of windows piece each of the four walls with a larger window in the center of the rear northwest elevation, which lights the pulpit. All the sash were renewed in modern restorations.

Originally, the only entrance into the meetinghouse was through a doorway on the side of the stair porch with a low hipped roof on the long southeast wall. A second door was inserted in the north wall of the porch in 1958 during the restoration of the building. The unplastered stairwell is lit by a single window at the landing level on the front wall. In plan, the meetinghouse was ringed a series of boxed pews with raised paneling around the perimeter wall, some of which survive. The main floor once had a series of pews and benches, all of which were removed in the nineteenth century. Opposite the entrance, the raised pulpit survives. In form it follows many others of the period in the region with a deacon’s or elder’s pew in front of a rectangular first stage. Seven steps on the southwest or left-hand side rise to the preaching box, which consists of a paneled fields with an angled central projection covered with a wide sloping shelf. A compass-headed sash window lights the back of the pulpit, which is flanked by thin vertical panels and cornice above which projects a five-sided, flat-capped sounding board with molding cornice.

Sources:
Wheeler and Wheeler, History of Brunswick . . . and Harpswell, 1878

Images:
HABS, drawings, photos, 1937