

Seventeenth-Century Meeting House Turrets

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A few more pieces of information have been discovered which provide additional enlightenment about the turrets on meeting houses in seventeenth-century New England.

Of considerable importance is the document entitled "Articles of Agreement for Building a Meetinghouse in New London."¹ Dated 22 December, 1652, the agreement provides for the building of a meeting house at Pequot, now New London, Conn., by the carpenters John Elderkin, Samuel Lothrop and Samuel Smith. The meeting house was to be 30 feet square and 12 feet high, with six windows and two doors. The windows were to be glazed, the walls planked, and the roof shingled. Four gables were to be made in the roof, and the building was to be crowned "with a turret in the roofe floored in the bottome."

This document is of interest in that it is one of the earliest full building agreements known which specifies a turret for a meeting house from the beginning. In fact, of the sixty meeting houses that had been built by 1652, only two clearly had turrets as part of the original structure, those at New Haven, Conn., in 1640, and Springfield, Mass., in 1644. A bell was hung at Salisbury, Mass., in 1644, but this could have been in a separate bell frame. Work ordered on the turret at Ipswich, Mass., in 1653 suggests that it was part of the original building of 1646. The only other turret presently known before 1652 was the one added to the Watertown, Mass., meeting house (c. 1635) in 1651.

In the next twenty years eight turrets were built as part of the original plan and two were added to meeting houses of the 1650s. During this time sixty-one meeting houses were built. Then from 1677 to 1699, when eighty-six meeting houses were built, six turrets were included originally and one was added some time later. The fragmentary nature of records from the seventeenth century rules out secure generalizations about the use of turrets. The pattern suggested by the data included here is of the greatest popularity of turrets in the third quarter of the century, with that of New London one of the earliest in the series. If there was indeed such a concentration, a reason beyond fashion seems difficult to identify. No geographical pattern may be observed at present.

In connection with the use of turrets on meeting houses, another English building has come to attention which is of interest as a parallel to some of the New England buildings. The old Cross in the High Street of Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, was replaced in the sixteenth century by a two-story square building, raised on posts and finished with a cupola for a clock (Figure 1).² It was demolished in 1821. The resemblance to the New England square meeting houses with turrets is clear. Only one meeting house, at Norwalk, Conn., 1657, is documented in such a way as to raise the possibility of its having been built on posts: "...to be set upon posts in the ground 12 foot in height."³

If turrets such as the one at New London were inherited from an English market hall tradition, this would add another meaning to their functions in New England of housing the bells and serving as watch towers.

NOTES

1. This is found in the Robert C. Winthrop Collection of Connecticut's Manuscripts, 1631-1794, Document 258, in the Connecticut

State Library. It is quoted here with the permission of the Connecticut State Library and the cooperation of the Massachusetts Historical Society which will publish the full text of the "Articles" in their *Winthrop Papers*. Mr. Malcolm Freiberg of the Massachusetts Historical Society very kindly drew my attention to this document.

2. *Victoria History of the Country of Warwick*, III (London, 1965), p. 222.

3. *Town Records*, p. 29, January 3, 1656/7. (Connecticut State Library.)



FIG. 1. SCENE AT THE MARKET CROSS, STRATFORD-UPON-AVON, DURING THE GARRICK JUBILEE OF 1769. (Courtesy of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon.)