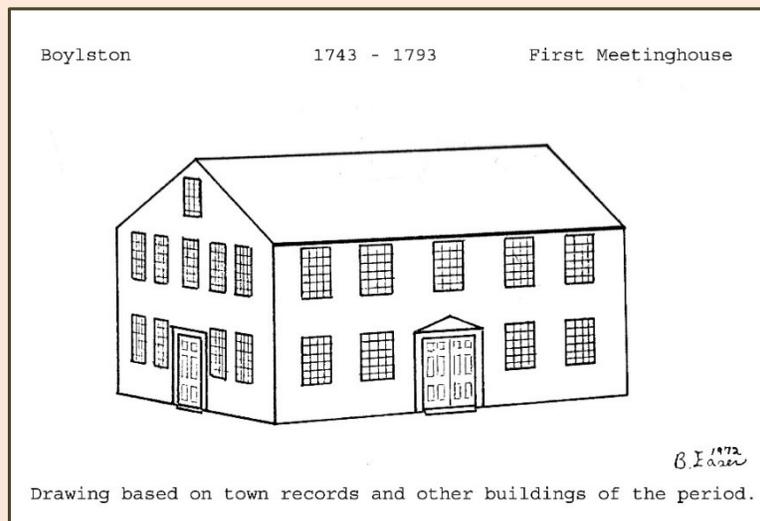


# Boylston's First and Second Meeting Houses

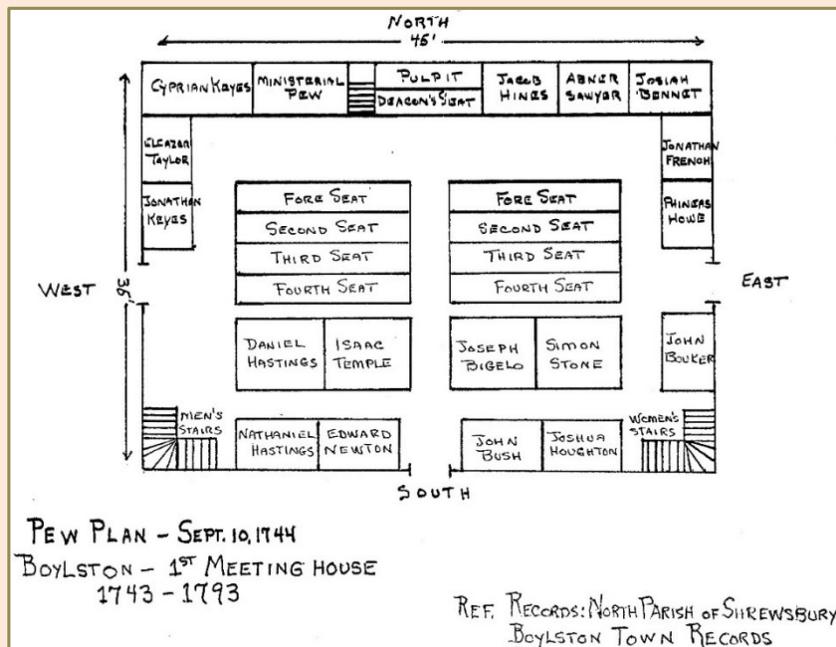
By Inga Milbauer

The first settlers in the territory that became the town of Boylston, Massachusetts had to travel to Lancaster or Shrewsbury to attend church services and town meetings. At the time, the journey was done by horseback or by foot which made it quite burdensome, especially during the winter months. The distance to the meeting house in Shrewsbury was the reason for the settlers to request a formal separation from the town of Shrewsbury. This resulted in the establishment of the North Parish of Shrewsbury, or Second Precinct of Shrewsbury, on December 17, 1742. The land for the First Meeting House and the burial ground was donated in 1742 by Lieutenant Eleazar Taylor, one of Boylston's earliest settlers. The first meeting of the new parish was held on January 19, 1743; at a meeting on February 18, 1743, it was voted to build a meeting house without delay. The dimensions of the meeting house were to be "forty-five foot long, thirty-five wide and twenty feet between the joints." A committee was formed to build the meeting house, and the committee "shall have the frame of said house up and covered by boards and shingles agreeable for said house, and rough boarded around the sides, by the first of June next." [1]

## First Meeting House



A typical meeting house built during that time would have a steep pitched roof running from east to west. "This placed the long wall toward the south for better light, and warmth in the winter." [2] Usually, there were three doors: the "Door of Honor" located in the center of the long south wall, one in the middle of the east wall, and one in the west wall. The "Door of Honor" was used by the minister and his family, and any honored guests from out-of-town. The east and west doors were used by women and men, respectively. The pulpit would be on the north wall, and a balcony,



called a "gallery", would usually be built on the east, south and west walls. Single men and women, and slaves would sit in the gallery. The men and women would sit on one side and the women on the other side of the building. Families were seated together, if they could afford it in their own box pews.

The First Meeting House of the Second Parish of Shrewsbury which would become the First Parish of Boylston in 1786, was located on the north-eastern side of the Old Burial Ground with its main door facing the Old Burial Ground. In 1772, the First Noon House, or Sabbath House, was built behind the Meeting House. As meeting houses were unheated, worshippers would go to the Sabbath house to warm themselves between services and share the noontime meal. Reverend Ebenezer Morse was ordained for the North Precinct Church on October 26<sup>th</sup>, 1743. For more information about the members of the First Meeting House and its ministers please see *Boylston's Church History* on the website of the Boylston Historical Society and Museum: [https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/Boylston\\_Church\\_Formation/c145](https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/Boylston_Church_Formation/c145)

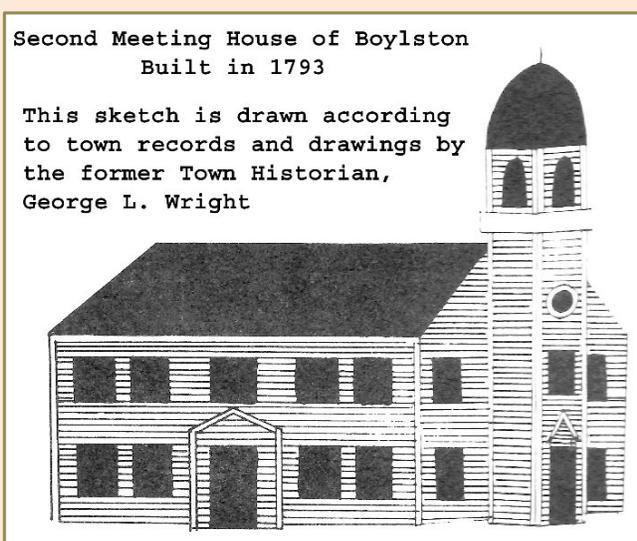
The meeting house in the American colonies originally served dual purposes, as a house of worship and a place for public affairs until the separation of church and state. As Paul Wainwright describes in *Colonial Meetinghouses of New England* "it was common to support the dominant church - referred to as the "standing order" - by taxing the citizens. In fact, in the early years a town was not granted a charter until it had built a meetinghouse and hired a minister." [3] The Second Precinct of Shrewsbury was incorporated as the Town of Boylston, Massachusetts in 1786. It was not until 1833, that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts would pass an amendment to Massachusetts State Constitution to separate the church and state.

### *Second Meeting House*

By 1791, the First Meeting House in Boylston had begun to deteriorate and the building was becoming too small for the growing congregation, so a new meeting house was necessary. The Second Meeting House was built in 1793 on the site of the present Sawyer Memorial Library.

The building had a bell tower and a clock, around 1796 a bell was installed. The bell was purchased from a London firm, was made of steel and weighed 993 pounds. William O. Dupuis mentions in *History of Boylston 1786-1886* that a bell was ordered from Paul Revere & Sons at Canton, for the church in Boylston in October 1809. The records of the Paul Revere Bell Company mention "the purchase of a bell for \$471.66 @ 42 cents a pound for a bell weighing 1123 pounds, with credit given for an old bell, weighing 993 pounds @ 25 cents a pound, for a total of \$248.25, leaving a balance of \$223.41." The balance was paid on October 19, 1809. [4] A new Noon House was built in 1796 near the spot where the current War Memorial stands.

One of the windows from the Second Meeting House was kept and is on display in the Boylston Historical Society and Museum. It was, most likely, situated in the center of the wall above the pulpit. This early nineteenth century wheel window is made of wood divided by simple spokes radiating from a central boss. It has clear single-glass panes in each opening. The window was donated in 1973 by Henry J. Harlow. The portraits in the window, as seen in the photographs below, show some of the ministers who served in what would become the First Congregational Church of Boylston.



**Second Meeting House Window**  
(front and back views)  
BHSM Object Collection



**Pew Doors from Second Meeting House**

*Left side door with #18; Right-side door was taller  
BHSM Object Collection*

These pew doors from the Second Meeting House in the photographs were donated to the Boylston Historical Society and Museum by Mr. and Mrs. Joshua Bradford, whose Boylston forebearers were the Hastings and Reed families.

In the early New England meeting houses, the seats were “long, narrow, uncomfortable benches which were made of simple, rough hand-riven planks placed on legs like milking-stools.” [5] As the wealth in the colonies grew, spots for pews (sometimes called “pitts”) were sold to, initially, a few influential or rich men who wished to sit together, and eventually to any family of dignity or wealth. The pews built by individual members were individual, not communal properties. “Permission to build a pew was granted by the church and town, and built at one’s own expense.” [6] In the late 1700s this changed, and churches would build and offer pews for sale or rent.

In 1830, the construction of the granite Town Hall on the Boylston Town Common near the Noon House had begun. The building opened in the spring of 1831 and all public, town and social meetings were held in the Town Hall. The Second Meeting House was viewed as too large and plans were made to build a new church. On December 10, 1835 the Third Meeting House on the Boylston Town Common, where the First Congregational Church now stands, opened its doors. The above-mentioned bell from the Second Meeting House had been transferred to the new building. The Noon House was not needed any more; it was taken down and moved to 22 School Street to be used as a home.

Just as the First Meeting House led to the founding of Boylston, the construction of the Second Meeting House had serious implications for the Town of Boylston itself. The decision of the location of the Second Meeting House contributed to the division that led to the formation of the town of West Boylston. The parishioners living in the far western section of Boylston had complained that the distance they had to travel to attend services was excessive. Thus, the geographic center of the town had been proposed as a possible site for the new meeting house. At the town meeting of April 24, 1791, a committee was formed to find the actual center of the town. On November 21, 1791 the committee reported its findings to the full town meeting, and it was decided that the actual center of the town was the so-called Plain of Jotham Bush. This was located near the present Pine Grove Cemetery. Another committee was chosen to survey the site, and it reported on December 5, 1791 that it would cost 304 pounds just to lay out roads to this site. [7]

No action was taken until the meeting on January 30, 1792 when a motion to build the meeting house was passed, but to build on the Bush site was voted down. Instead, a motion to build on the land belonging to Eleazar Taylor was passed. This site, where currently the Sawyer Memorial Library is located, was approximately one mile east of the Bush site. Unable to come to a decision after several meetings, a committee of three citizens from the neighboring towns of Bolton, Lancaster and Northborough was appointed to mediate the issue on November 5, 1792. The report they submitted at the November 19, 1792 meeting concluded that the best site for the Second Meeting House was on the Taylor land and the Second Meeting House was built at the site of the current Sawyer Memorial Library. On the front lawn of the property, an historic marker placed by the Town of Boylston signifies its original location.

## *Second Parish of Boylston*

The majority of the townspeople voted to accept the report, but the story does not end here; the opponents to its location did not give up. This resulted in the families from the western section of town, led by Ezra Beaman, deciding to build their own meeting house three miles west. Beaman funded the entire project on the land that was donated by Abel and Joseph Bigelow, and John White. The new Meeting House, located on the site of the current Congregational Church, was dedicated on January 1, 1795. The members of the new congregation proceeded to petition the General Court to be incorporated as a precinct. Precinct status was granted in 1796. This newly formed Second Parish of Boylston would eventually become the town of West Boylston on January 30, 1808.

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### *Acknowledgements:*

- [1] A Brief History of the First Congregational Church of Boylston, Mass, being a sermon held by Rev. Israel Ainsworth on August 15, 1886, Press of Sanford & Davis, 1887, Worcester, Massachusetts
- [2] [https://www.colonialmeetinghouses.com/background\\_information.shtml](https://www.colonialmeetinghouses.com/background_information.shtml)
- [3] [https://www.colonialmeetinghouses.com/background\\_information.shtml](https://www.colonialmeetinghouses.com/background_information.shtml)
- [4] Boylston Historical Series by Bruce Filgate, 2012, p. 432-433
- [5] *Sabbath in Puritan New England* by Alice Morse Earle, p. 54
- [6] *Sabbath in Puritan New England* by Alice Morse Earle, p.73
- [7] Boylston Historical Series by Bruce Filgate, 2012, p. 412  
Boylston Historical Series by Bruce Filgate, 2012, Volume IV *The History of Boylston 1742-1786* & Volume XII *History of Boylston 1786-1886*  
Editor, Nancy A. Filgate, Director, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc., Boylston, Massachusetts  
[https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/Boylston\\_Church\\_Formation/c145](https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/Boylston_Church_Formation/c145)  
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<https://www.wbhistory.org/history.htm>  
Photography by Inga Milbauer  
*Sabbath in Puritan New England* by Alice Morse Earle, 1891, E-book by Duke Classics, 2015