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NOTES ON THE CORSER HILL MEETING HOUSE WEBSTER, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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These notes record a few observations made during a brief inspection of the meeting house on April 8, 1999. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the condition of the balustrade and other features on the bell deck of the tower. The Webster Congregational Church intends to repair these features, and has received estimates for rebuilding the balustrades, repairing the finials, doing some sheet metal work as required, and doing some frame repair in a few areas of minor deterioration.

The bell was re-cast in 1921 by the McShane Bell Foundry of Baltimore, Maryland, from an original bell of 1835 made by George Handel Holbrook of East Medway, Massachusetts. This suggests that the meeting house, which was built in 1823, had no bell for some years. The church records may document the first purchase of a bell.

Charles Carleton Coffin wrote in his *History of Boscawen and Webster from 1733 to 1878* (1878) that one of the builders of the meeting house, George T. Pillsbury (1792-1836) was the first builder in the area to adopt the square rule method of framing. The square rule method of joining framing members is visible throughout the tower of the building and is also seen alongside the staircase that ascends to the attic from the southeast corner of the gallery. All joints have recessed seats fashioned below the surfaces of the timbers, and the corner posts of the house, as seen from the stairway, are cut back at their tops in a manner similar to that shown on the attached drawing.

The roof frame of the house is composed of a series of kingpost trusses. One such truss is incorporated in the northern gable wall of the building, an unusual departure from the general custom of framing rear walls of meeting houses with plain studding and rafters.

The auditorium is spanned by three additional kingpost trusses, which are connected longitudinally by horizontal ties near the centers of the kingposts.

The slanted upper chords of the trusses are not connected to the rafters above them by struts. This suggests that the carpenter conceived of the function of the upper cords as independent from the roof structure.

The rafters above the upper chords carry a series of longitudinal purlins, which bear roof sheathing boards running from ridgepole to eaves.

The frame of the building is composed of unusually heavy timbers. Some of the posts and girts in the tower frame are sawn on a reciprocating saw; others (the longer ones) are hewn. The same appears to be true of the roof trusses, although time and circumstances did not permit entry into the main attic of the building to examine these.

One post at the northeastern corner of the tower frame at the level of the front gable of the building has been spliced with a new section. This new timber was skillfully hewn. Mr. Paul Whitcomb, a member of the church who was present at this meeting, did not know of any church records that would indicate when this repair was made.

The Corser Hill Meeting House was built at the time of the first general appearance of square rule framing, by a carpenter who was noted as one of the first in the region to adopt that method. It would therefore be valuable and instructive to take time to study the exposed sections of the frame in much greater detail.