REPORT ON THE GROTON TOWN HOUSE GROTON, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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Abstract

The present-day Groton Town House is a portion of a two-story meeting house that was built on the same site between 1794 and 1797. The original building was heavily framed, and the present town house retains the staunch construction of the larger structure. The meeting house was reduced to a one-story town house sometime in the mid-1800s, at a period when similar remodelings were being carried out to older meeting houses throughout New Hampshire. This remodeling was accomplished by removing the bottom of the meeting house frame and lowering the upper half of the structure to rest on the foundation. The building was further reduced in size in 1906-7 when one end was removed, shortening the building by about twenty-one feet. The building has remained in use until recent times in essentially the condition in which it was left in 1906-7, although privies were added in 1921 and electricity in 1940. The building remains in good structural condition (with likely deterioration of some areas of its sills), but exhibits some shortcomings in compliance with present-day fire and life safety codes. The town house has served the town of Groton for over two centuries. It has the potential of continuing its role as a useful building and as a historical landmark.

REPORT ON THE GROTON TOWN HOUSE
GROTON, NEW HAMPSHIRE

JAMES L. GARVIN
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This report is based on a visit to the Groton Town House on July 15, 1998. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the overall structural condition and historical significance of the building. Also present at the meeting were local community representatives Tony LaPanne, Mike Lemieux, Aletha Lewis, Margaret and Dow Smith, and David Demers, as well as Groton Historical Society president Ellen Anderson.

Summary: The Groton Town House has served the town of Groton as a location for town meetings and other gatherings since the building was completed as a meeting house between 1794 and 1797. Although the structure has been one story in height since the mid-1800s, it was originally a two-story meeting house, with galleries or balconies, measuring forty-two by fifty-three feet. The building was cut down to one story in height at some time in the mid-1800s, and was reduced to its present length in 1906-7, reportedly because of fire damage but perhaps merely because diminished population in the town and a reduced attendance at town meetings required a smaller building.

The town house is built with a massive hewn frame that reflects the structure's origin as a two-story meeting house. Except for some deterioration of sills, the building remains in very sound structural condition. The building ceased to be used for town meetings in 1997 because of noncompliance with certain code provisions, but these deficiencies can easily be remedied and the structure returned to its historical use as a town meeting place. Because of its rarity as a building type and its symbolic association with over two hundred years of community life and government, the Groton Town House is worthy of preservation, rehabilitation and a return to public service.

Note on compass orientations: The ridge line of the Groton Town House is oriented approximately N41°W; North Groton Road, on which the building stands, runs approximately N39°W at the point near the town house. The axis of the ridge of the town house thus actually runs nearly northwest to southeast, making references to compass directions confusing. To simplify references to compass directions in this report, the following convention is adopted: the wall of the building with the porch and door will be called *east*; the wall facing the road will be called *south*; the wall facing the cemetery will be called *north*, etc.

History and description of the building: The Town of Groton does not have a published history, but an outline of the building of the meeting house can be gleaned from the Groton town records from 1774 to 1833, which are available on microfilm at the New Hampshire State Library. The originals of these records were placed in the custody of the New Hampshire Historical Society in 1929 and were relinquished by the Society to

the New Hampshire Division of Records Management and Archives (the State Archives) in 1987 in response to legislation passed that year.

Twentieth-century changes to the building are indicated in a rudimentary way in the published annual reports of the Town of Groton, available both at the State Library and the New Hampshire Historical Society.

When Groton was first granted as Cockermouth in 1761, the charter specified that "before any Division of the Land be made to and among the Grantees, a tract of Land as near the Centre of the said Township as the Land will admit of, shall be reserved and marked out for Town Lots, one of which shall be alloted to each Grantee, of the Contents of one Acre." The requirement that a village site of one-acre lots should be planned at the center of each new township was a standard provision of all charters made by the government of New Hampshire under royal authority. Cockermouth was not settled in 1761, and its charter was forfeited, but a subsequent charter of 1766, renewed in 1772, contained the same provision.

It appears that the town house lot is a relic of the original charter requirement of the 1760s, and of the village center that never came to be. When the town first voted to build a meeting house at the town meeting of December 8, 1794, the vote was "to build a meeting house on the Cohoss Road as near the center of town as the land will admit of." [*Spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are modernized in this and the following citations from town records*.] The same meeting appointed a committee of five men "to be a committee to pitch the spot and report to the town" and another committee, consisting of Mr. Cheney, Mr. Caldwall, and Captain Breck "to draw a plan for [the] meeting house and report to the town." The meeting was adjourned to December 22, 1794, at which time the town voted "to accept of the report of the committee which is to set the meeting house . . ."

The town house and adjacent cemetery still stand close to the geographical center of the township. The town records appear to show that this cemetery had begun to be used for burials before 1779 and that the town eventually voted to buy it and fence it with a stone wall and wooden gate in 1791.

Although it has often been said that the Cockermouth meeting house was built in 1793, the town records show that the structure was constructed between 1794 and 1797, and that it was first used regularly for town meetings in 1797. Prior to construction of the meeting house, both town meetings and public worship were held at private houses or barns, and the locations for these gatherings were voted upon at town meetings. Just before the meeting house was constructed, most town meeting were being held at the tavern of Abraham Buell. When bids were requested for construction of the meeting house, tavernkeeper Buell was the low bidder. Buell probably acted as the contractor for work performed by others, not as the principal carpenter and joiner.

Discussion of building a meeting house for town affairs and public worship can be traced in the surviving town records back to 1774. The warrant for a town meeting that year

included an article "to see if the town will build a meeting house and choose a place to set the same, and choose a committee to lay out said place and clear [it] up, and give them any further instructions as shall be thought proper."

It appears that nothing was done about this article. In 1779, the town voted "not to appoint a place for a meeting house."

During the early 1780s, the town voted occasionally to hold religious services at various houses. In 1782, voters agreed " to meet at Mr. Sallmon Blood [for public worship] at present," but to "meet at Mr. Peter Gilman's barn as soon as the season will permit." Peter Gilman was an innholder.

Either the town or private parties began to take steps to build a meeting house in the 1780s. In 1784, the town voted "to dispose of the frame that was built for a meeting house. Whereas Mr. Buck and others appear [willing] to take the frame that was built for a meeting house and clear the town from any charge therefor, the town vote[s] that they take it upon the above conditions." From this it is clear that parties in town had proceeded to obtain a frame for a public building, but that the town did not wish to obligate itself to pay for finishing the proposed structure.

Several puzzling references to a "meeting house" appear in the Cockermouth town records during the early 1790s. In 1790, the voters were summoned to "assemble and meet at the meeting house in said Cockermouth on Monday the 30th day of August instant." In 1793, the town clerk noted that " . . . I have notified the inhabitants of said town to meet at the time and place within expressed by posting up a copy of the substance of the within [notice] at the meeting house door according to law." Perhaps these references to a "meeting house" actually referred to a public house or even a barn where town meetings were to be held. In 1791, voters were notified "to assemble and meet at the Society Chamber at said Cockermouth, viz., at William Comings' . . . to act on the following articles." The "Society Chamber" was probably not a separate building, but rather a place at William Comings' house where religious meetings were held. The reference to the "Society" is clarified in a warrant for a town meeting in 1803, which asked whether "this town has any objection against the Ecclesiastical Society in said [town] being incorporated agreeable to the vote of said Society."

Thus, these references in the early 1790s to meeting places for both town and church apparently referred to the accustomed meeting places of these groups, but not to an actual meeting house owned by the town.

Perhaps the reference to "the meeting house door" in 1793 gave rise to the later understanding (expressed, for example, in George J. Cummings' reminiscences about Groton in *Old-Time New England* in 1928) that the meeting house was built in 1793.

When the town finally voted to build the meeting house, the vote was clear and specific. On December 22, 1794, "being assembled in town meeting according to adjournment [the town] voted to accept of the report of the committee which is to set the meeting house on

Left[enant] Richards' land east of his house as it is staked out and that it [the meeting house] be built fifty-three feet in length and forty-two in width."

The meeting further voted "to cut up the body of the house up into pews except in two seats each side of the alley according to the plan exhibited by the committee." The "alley" would have been the broad aisle that extended from the front door of an eighteenth-century meeting house to the pulpit.

The town further voted "to be two years in building said house." On January 4, 1795, the town voted "to lengthen the time for building said house one year and that the [*illegible*] be lengthened likewise."

The town further voted "to set off the pews" and "to sell the pews at vendue [auction] to the highest bidder" and that "Capt[ain] Hardey, Capt[ain] Buell and Left[enant] Richards be a committee to take security for the pews."

In eighteenth-century meeting houses, pews were box-like enclosures that were privately owned. It was common practice for the building committee of a meeting house to raise the funds necessary to erect and complete the building by auctioning off spaces for pews to the highest bidders. Pew locations nearest the pulpit were usually the most desirable and commanded the highest prices at auction.

The town records list the names of the successful bidders for the pews on the main floor of the meeting house. Forty-six pew spaces were auctioned off at prices ranging from a high of $77 to a low of $36.

The records make it clear that the meeting house had a gallery or balcony, which would have extended around three sides of the building to provide good views of the pulpit on the north side. The committee auctioned off space for twenty-one gallery pews at prices ranging from a high of $39 to a low of $7.50.

At a meeting of January 4, 1795, the town voted to "let out the building of the meeting house to the lowest bidder." The lowest bidder was tavernkeeper Abraham Buell, at whose house the town had been holding its meetings. The town "Struck off said house to Mr. Abraham Buell at 2100 dollars, [the building] to be finished inside and out and handsomely painted to the acceptance of the town."

Town meetings continued at Abraham Buell's tavern until the spring of 1797. Thereafter, town meetings were held at the meeting house.

Although the building was used for town meetings beginning in 1797, it was two or three years before the interior was fully finished and all accounts settled. The town meeting of November 18, 1799, voted to "accept of the pews built in the gallery by the [building] committee" and that "Mr. Buell finish said pews at the town's cost, said cost to be established by the workman that finishes them." The same meeting voted "to appropriate

the four front [gallery] for the use of the singers." Most eighteenth-century meeting houses had "singers' seats" at the front of the gallery, opposite the pulpit.

At the town meeting of March, 1800, the town voted to sell off all remaining unsold pews, including a few on the main floor, one at the front of the west gallery, one at the front of the east gallery, and one at the east of the front gallery.

It is abundantly clear from the roof framing of the building is that Abraham Buell spared no expense in constructing a structure with a staunch frame that corresponded to its large dimensions. Before being reduced in size, the meeting house had a floor plan measuring forty-two by fifty-three feet, as stipulated in the town records.

These dimensions placed the structure within the mid-range of meeting houses in New Hampshire. The meeting house in Amherst, built in 1771, measured forty by seventy feet. The meeting house of 1773 in Wilton Center measured forty-five by sixty feet. Both were considered unusually large for rural meeting houses of their period.

Among the New Hampshire meeting houses with frames still in relatively unaltered condition, many have dimensions that are comparable to the original size of the Groton building. The meeting house in Hampstead (1749) measures forty by fifty feet, that in Danville (1755) measures thirty-seven by forty-nine feet, that in Sandown (1770) measures forty-four by fifty feet, that in Jaffrey Center (1775) measures sixty by sixty-five feet, that in Washington (1789) measures forty-five by sixty feet, that in Lempster (1794) measures forty by fifty feet, and that in Fremont (1799) measures thirty-seven by forty-seven feet.

The roof frame of the surviving portion of the Groton meeting house is composed of a series of queen post trusses. Such trusses have two vertical posts (queen posts) at each set of rafters. Older or smaller meeting houses usually had king post trusses, with a single post in the center of each truss, extending to the apex of the rafters. Queen post trusses were relatively rare. Among the few surviving New Hampshire meeting houses with queen post truss roof systems are those at Amherst (1771, remodeled); Rindge (1796, remodeled); and Fremont (1799, in original condition).

The heavy roof trusses of the Groton town house prove that the original meeting house was built very strongly. Eighteenth-century meeting houses were unusual in their own time because their interior was not subdivided by partitions. The entire expanse of their plastered ceilings was supported from above, by the trusses, without assistance from columns or walls below. In the case of the Groton meeting house, the uninterrupted ceiling would have measured more than forty by fifty feet. Such an expanse, made heavy by the wooden lath and lime plaster that would originally have been applied to the joists at the bottoms of the trusses, required staunch and well-designed framing.

The tie beams of the Groton trusses (the horizontal members that span the width of the building) measure a full thirteen inches high by fourteen inches wide. The queen posts themselves measure nine inches square. The horizontal ties that connect one truss to the

next through the length of the building measure six by nine inches. All these members are hewn (one of the queen posts near the present front wall of the building being hewn from bird's-eye maple), while all the diagonal braces, wall studs, and ceiling joists were sawn in a water-powered mill.

To further resist the wind and snow loads to which the roof of the building was subjected, the trusses were braced in several directions. As was typical of all meeting houses, the separate trusses are connected to one another by longitudinal ties that run down the length of the building, connecting the queen posts at their mid-height. The bottom chords of the trusses, just above the ceiling, are also connected to one another by diagonal braces. These stiffen the ceiling membrane and prevent the building from racking or twisting from horizontal wind forces.

In all eighteenth-century meeting houses, the main door of the building was in the middle of one of the longer sides, and this was almost invariably the south-facing elevation of the building. A pulpit stood opposite the main door, almost always on the north side of the building. It was common for the pulpit to be lighted by a single window, which was higher than the windows of the main floor of the building, but lower than the windows lighting the gallery.

The Groton Town House as it exists today is a portion of the upper or gallery level of the old meeting house. Evidence of a lowered pulpit window appears to survive at the northeast corner of the building. When the building was shortened in the early 1900s, the portion that became the east end, adjacent to the present front door, had been the center bay of the original meeting house. The original pulpit would therefore have stood against the north wall at what is now the northeast corner of the shortened building.

Whereas the tops of all the windows on the north and south sides of the town house are now placed just below the heavy exterior cornice of the building, examination of clapboards below the window at the northeast corner, facing the cemetery, reveals that this window was once lower. Vertical joints in the clapboards show that the window once extended down to a point about thirty-three inches above the foundation. The window may once have extended still lower; replaced clapboards may now hide evidence of vertical joints at the bottom of the wall. It is almost certain that this was the location of the pulpit window of the old meeting house.

All obvious evidence of the original two-story design of the building has long been lost. While Groton historians have always known that the town house began as a meeting house, there is little memory in town of the appearance of the original building. This is almost certainly because the building was cut down to its present one-story height somewhere around a century and a half ago. No illustration of the meeting house is known to survive; the Groton town map of 1805, now at the State Archives, illustrates the meeting house merely as a small square symbol, and does not depict the actual appearance of the building.

The configuration seen in old photographs of the Groton Town House, with a single door in the eastern gable end of the building, is typical of the design of town houses that were built new in the mid-1800s, and also of a group of meeting houses that were reduced in size from two stories to one story at the same general period. All of these town houses, either newly-built or remodeled, were intended to be in harmony with the Greek Revival style, which flourished from about 1830 until about 1850. Town houses in the Greek Revival period, like other buildings of that era, usually had their principal entrances in the center of one of the gable ends.

A number of other early New Hampshire meeting houses were converted to town houses in the mid-1800s. All of these buildings began their existence as two-story meeting houses, but were reduced in size to one-story buildings, quite comparable to the Groton Town House as it appeared before it was shortened in the early 1900s. These buildings include the town houses at Milton, New Durham Corner, and Plainfield.

When the religious societies that had shared these buildings moved to newer buildings, these structures were converted for use by town governments alone. At that time, the two-story buildings were cut down to one story. A town house in the mid-nineteenth century was usually a smaller building than a meeting house, since meeting houses or churches needed to accommodate both the men and the women of a community, whereas a town house needed to accommodate only the voters, who then were men only.

In New Durham Corner, the two-story meeting house of 1770 was reduced to one story in 1838; in Milton, the meeting house of 1803 was cut down to one story in 1855; and in Plainfield, the upper portion of a meeting house of 1798 was moved some distance and remodeled into the present town house in 1846.

Based on this statewide pattern of conversion of older meeting houses to town houses, it may be theorized that the Groton building was reduced to one story in the mid-1800s. The Groton town records that are available on microfilm or in manuscript form at the State Archives end at 1833. At that time, it appears that the building still retained its original form of a two-story meeting house. The town meeting of March 12, 1833, voted "to clean and repair the meeting house."

It is possible that the remodeling occurred after the Union Meeting House was constructed in North Groton in 1840. At this time, presumably, the Congregational, Baptist, Free-Will Baptist and Methodist religious societies, which eventually had come to share the use of the 1797 building, would have relinquished their interests in the structure to the town. Regrettably, the microfilmed town records for Cockermouth and Groton extend only up to 1833, and so offer no evidence of the date of the remodeling.

After its reduction to a one-story building, the structure continued to serve as a place for town meetings until after 1900 without further change. At least two photographs of the town house survive from the turn of the twentieth century. One was evidently published as a post card, and the other is used as an illustration in George J. Cummings' article, "A

Leaf from the Life of a Farmer's Boy Ninety Years Ago," published in *Old-Time New England* in 1928.

Both photographs show that the building was essentially the upper half of the old meeting house. The building had five windows across its south side, which would have been the original front of the meeting house. Two windows, plus an attic window, existed on the east gable end. The west gable end still retains the same arrangement, as well. A new doorway had been cut into the center of the eastern end of the structure, providing access to the town hall.

The building retained its original heavily-moulded cornice (which remains along the eaves of the building today), as well as its original twenty-over-fifteen-light gallery window sashes. Although both photographs show the structure in a weathered condition, traces of white paint can be seen in each picture beneath the cornice, showing that the building had once been painted with white lead. Today, the structure also shows traces of red paint under the current white, recalling the original requirement of 1797 that the building be "handsomely painted."

The building remained in this condition until the early 1900s. Evidence of its reduction in size to the current dimensions is scanty in the published town reports of the early twentieth century, which include no warrant articles on the subject. The town treasurer's reports provide enough evidence, however, to suggest a theory as to when the building was shortened to its present length.

Although it has long been understood that the town house was shortened because of damage by a fire, there is no evidence of a fire in the attic of the present structure. Because heat and smoke rise into the attic of a building, fires typically leave traces that remain as indelible evidence in a structure. At the very least, a fire darkens the wood that is exposed to smoke and heat; usually, there is also evidence of charring of some timbers at a point closest to the origin of the fire.

There is no evidence of this kind in the attic of the town house. Even the queen posts adjacent to the present front of the structure, where a portion of the building was removed, are in original condition except for the normal darkening of age. In fact, the present front (east) wall of the town house is the original eastern wall of the meeting house, which was moved up to seal the open end of the building after two of its structural bays were removed to reduce the size of the building.

In the absence of any sign of fire damage, it may be theorized that the town house was shortened simply because the town no longer needed a forty-two by fifty-three foot building. Possibly there was a fire that damaged the hall below the ceiling but, if so, the heat and flames fortunately never penetrated into the attic of the town house.

In any case, published town reports provide some record of changes to the town house both before and after its reduction in size.

The 1891 report shows that some shingling had been done on the building in 1890. The 1893 report shows that J. E. Muzzey, who had shingled the building two years earlier, was paid $9.30 for unspecified work on the building. The 1897 report shows that Oliver F. Kidder did more shingling on the building at a cost of $11.00 for labor and $27.25 for shingles and nails.

In 1902, the town began to pay yearly rent of $5 or $6 to the Independent Hall Association for rental of that group's hall for the use of the selectmen.

The 1907 report, however, reveals that the town appropriated $300 for Town House repairs in 1906. This expenditure suggests that 1906 was the time when the building was reduced to its present size. C. D. Jewell was paid $207.41 for his labor on the building. P. H. Crawford was paid $77.44 for lumber and nails, while J. S. Kelly was paid $7.50 for drawing (transporting) the lumber and nails.

The 1908 report likewise includes a separate account for "Town House Repairs." This account notes that in 1907 the town had voted $100, apparently in addition to the $300 appropriated in 1906, for repairs to the building, and lists a credit of $5.00 for "old windows, shingles and doors sold." Among the fifteen charges against the Town House account for 1907, published in the 1908 report, were eight charges for labor, totaling $75.80; a charge of $28.50 for new windows and $3.55 for freight and cartage of the windows; and small charges for bricks, lime, paint, and zinc.

The warrant for the town meeting of 1908 contains two articles relating to the town house. One article asked "if the town will vote to raise and appropriate money to arrange a room at the town hall for its officers to use in doing town business," while the other asked "if the town will vote to raise and appropriate money to paint the inside of the town hall."

It is not clear whether these articles were approved, but the town paid $29.90 for paint, oil, and brushes for the town house in 1914, and $20.65 for labor in painting the town house in 1915.

The privies were added to the town house in 1921 under an appropriation of $50. A number of payments were made for repairs to the town house in 1932, and the warrant for 1933 had an article asking "if the town will vote to raise and appropriate a sum of money to make a suitable entrance to the toilet, from inside of [the] town house." Payments of $69.95 for labor and materials in 1933 suggest that this work was done.

The warrant for 1940 asked if the town would approve of buying shutters for the town house and "wiring public buildings for electricity." This probably indicates the date of the installation of the current lighting fixtures in the building.

Structural Condition: Our brief inspection on July 15th did not permit a full assessment of the structural condition of the building. It is clear, however, that apart from the normal

deterioration of a wooden structure that has not had large sums invested in its upkeep, the building is in good structural condition.

Because the town house began its existence as the top portion of a large, two-story structure that had a self-supporting roof and ceiling, the upper frame of the structure is far larger and stronger than would be expected in a hall of the present size. As noted above, the roof trusses of the building were designed for an unsupported ceiling of over forty by fifty feet, and the timbers of the roof and ceiling frame are of great size. There is no sign of chronic roof leaks that might have weakened the roof frame of the building, and the framing seen in the attic is essentially as strong as it was in 1797.

The walls of the town house are the upper walls of the old meeting house, and the connections between the wall posts and the wall plates have never been disturbed. The joints between the posts and wall plates are complex, and are intended to lock the posts, plates, and tie beams together in a rigid connection. The flared tops of the posts , visible from within the hall, were given extra cross-section to accommodate two tenons, at right angles to one another, that were necessary to connect the upper parts of the frame. The undisturbed carpentry of the upper wall frame gives an assurance that the upper walls of the town house are sturdy and strong.

The condition of the lower walls of the building is less certain. The lower ends of the shortened posts would have been about halfway up the walls of the original meeting house. The posts would have been connected at this level by horizontal girts that would have tied the building together at the gallery level. We presently do not know whether these girts are still in place, with new sills added below them, or whether the girts were removed when the building was cut down to its one-story height. If the girts remain, they would provide an extra connection around the bottom of the building in addition to the sills upon which the posts now rest.

The building's sills reportedly appear to be in good condition. One vantage point at the southwest corner of the building, where an underpinning stone is loose, allowed us to see that the girders (which run across the building from north to south) and the sleepers or joists (which run east-and-west between the girders) are in very good condition despite the lack of ventilation under the building. As seen in this location, the sills appear sound, but sills typically deteriorate from the outside due to the splashing of water from the eaves. We noted one area of deteriorated sill on the northern side of the building.

It is probably safe to assume that certain portions of the building's sills have deteriorated, but this is typical of any wooden building with low foundation walls.

As noted above, the framing of the floor membrane appears to be in sound condition. The soil under the building is mounded up and extends virtually to the underside of the girders that run north and south across the structure, so it is presently impossible to carry out a thorough inspection of the entire floor frame. It is safe to say, however, that the floor frame has not suffered major deterioration.

Structurally, then, the Groton Town House is in good condition. Routine repairs should keep its two-hundred-year-old frame in service for an indefinite period.

As the study committee knows, the Groton Town House does have certain shortcomings from the standpoint of fire and life safety. These shortcomings have been documented in a letter of July 10, 1996, from investigator Charles G. Chamberlain of the Office of the State Fire Marshal to Groton fire chief Tony Albert. Investigator Chamberlain's report made the following recommendations:

1. Create two means of egress from the hall in accordance with presently-adopted fire codes.

2. Install emergency lighting in the building.

3. Place proper exit signs over exit doors. These signs do not have to be internally lighted.

4. Hang all exit doors to swing outward.

5. Install panic hardware on exit doors.

6. Place at least one six-pound ABC-type fire extinguisher by exit door[s].

7. Check all clearances for the wood stove and stove pipe, reinstalling the stove and pipe if necessary to achieve proper clearances.

8. Label electrical panels to identify the circuits.

Except for the creation of a second exit door, all these recommendations can be achieved easily. Creation of a second means of egress can also be accomplished easily, but should be approached with full consideration of fire and life safety code requirements, of the requirements of the Americans With Disabilities Act, and of the fabric of the building. If the study committee should recommend substantial changes to the building, including its enlargement, then placement of a second means of egress should be made part of the plans for redesign of the structure. It would be a mistake simply to cut a second door through a wall of the building without careful thought.

Our brief inspection of July 15th, coupled with later documentary research, has clarified many aspects of the history and evolution of the town house. It would nevertheless be helpful to carry out a fuller inspection of the condition of the sills, the structure of the lower walls, and the floor membrane. Apart from the issue of the structural soundness of the floor, it would be wise to obtain an engineer's opinion as to whether the floor's design, with its girders and sleepers of certain dimensions and spacing, is technically capable of supporting the floor loads specified by code for a place of assembly. It should be possible to determine the framing design of the floor largely from above, by plotting

the lines of nails in the flooring. Dimensions of girders and sleepers can be approximated by measurements made through the access point at the southwest corner of the building.

Feasibility of Restoring the Building: If the study committee and the town decide that it would be desirable to enlarge the structure to its original forty-two by fifty-three-foot dimensions, it would be feasible to reproduce the missing portions of the frame using the skills of modern timber framers. While it would not be likely that modern framers would use hewn timber, they could obtain sawn members of the same sizes as the original framing members. Because of the mortise-end-tenon connections between the roof truss ties in the attic, there are open mortises in the original queen posts that would permit connections with new, adjacent queen posts.

The two areas were damage was done to the original frame in shortening the building would have been in the wall plates and the sills. Here, the original members would have extended the full fifty-three-foot length of the meeting house, and these members would simply have been sawn off when the structure was shortened to its current thirty-two-foot length. New sills and wall plates would have to be spliced to the original members.

Because the eastern wall of the town house was moved up and attached to the open end of the shortened building in 1906, this end of the building could be detached and re-used in its original position if the building were extended to its original length.

Lengthening of the building could gain needed floor space for expanded meetings and voting, for indoor toilets, for a small kitchen, and for central heating, if desired. It might also be feasible and desirable to excavate a full or partial basement under the building, permitting the first floor framing to be strengthened if necessary. If the committee would like to consult with an architect to discuss conceptual plans for enlarging the building and adapting its floor plan for needs identified by townspeople, the following nearby architects are sympathetic to historic structures. A more comprehensive list is attached to this report.

David B. Blake
Architects' Workshop, Inc.
Depot Road—P.O. Box 71
Campton, NH 03223
726-3900

Thomas Samyn
Samyn D'Elia Architects
P. O. Drawer 1259
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968-7133

Paul Mirski, Architect
RFD #1—Algonquin Road
Enfield, NH 03748
632-5555

Christopher Williams, Architect
P.O. Box 703
Meredith, NH 03253-0703
279-6513

For information on New Hampshire timber framers who might be available to provide an estimate for lengthening the building, the committee might want to contact

Mr. Joel McCarty
Timber Framers' Guild of North America
Pratt Road
Alstead, New Hampshire, 03602
835-2077.

Significance of the Town House to Groton: It would be presumptuous for someone from out of town to attempt to define the significance of the town house to the people of Groton. The New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources is, however, in contact with groups throughout New Hampshire who are working to rehabilitate comparable meeting houses and town houses for continued community use. Many of these towns have small populations and budgets. Yet residents of these communities believe strongly that their ancient public buildings embody the history, identity, and memory of their towns. These people believe that the preservation and rehabilitation of these structures is a civic duty and a means of recognizing the sacrifice and privation through which earlier generations created and bequeathed a valuable legacy to the present generation.

Pittsfield is among the communities that have recently rehabilitated an early structure for continuing town uses. Pittsfield's old town hall began its existence in 1789 as the town meeting house. After the Congregational Society relinquished its interest in the building and built a new church in 1841, the town took charge of the building and remodeled it as a town hall and academy. The appearance of the building was radically altered in 1881 when the town permitted the Masonic Hall Association to replace the original gable roof with a tall Mansard roof. A fire damaged the building in 1984 and the structure sat empty, open to the weather, until 1989. Then, a non-profit group rehabilitated it as the Pittsfield Community Center, using a Community Development Block Grant provided through the Office of State Planning. Today the building serves many community groups.

The Town of Plainfield is unusual in having two town halls, one in the village of Plainfield and one in the village of Meriden. The Plainfield Town Hall is the top story of the town's old meeting house of 1798. In a series of changes that closely parallel the history of the Groton meeting house, this building was cut down to one story, moved some distance, and remodeled into a Greek Revival town hall in 1846. By 1993, the building had begun to deteriorate through lack of town investment in its maintenance. The local fire chief had severely limited occupancy of the building because its second means of egress was a door that was three steps above the main floor level. Through a series of local initiatives, the town appropriated funds to make improvements to the building, returning it to full use in 1995.

Other towns are currently studying possibilities for rehabilitating their meeting houses. In Lempster, the meeting house of 1794 was moved to a new location in 1822, and the two-story building stands on this second site today. After the Congregational Society relinquished its interest in the building in 1835 and built a new church elsewhere, the town divided the building into two stories, occupying the first floor for a town hall and allowing an academy to occupy the newly-created second floor, which took the place of

the former open galleries. The building has since housed the town library, a local chapter of the Grange, and other organizations. The town ceased to use the building for town meetings around 1990. By 1993, members of the Board of Selectmen were recommending that the building be demolished. Although this town of under 1,000 people has not yet found a way to rehabilitate the building fully, the town has voted to repair a leaking roof and take other needed steps to mothball the meeting house. The town has also secured the services of an architect to develop a comprehensive plan for rehabilitating the structure.

In Rindge, the town's large meeting house of 1796 is unusual in that it is still shared by the town and the Congregational Society. The building was divided into two stories by the building of a full floor at the gallery level in 1839. The Congregational Society, which paid for the new floor, was permitted to convert the new second story into a church room, while the town continued to use the first floor as a town hall. Despite conscientious upkeep of the building by both the town and the church, the structure revealed a number of structural and cosmetic problems by 1996. With support from the Rindge Historical Society, the town commissioned a report outlining improvements that might be made to the building. In the town meeting of 1996, the town voted $20,000, to be supplemented with monies from a local trust fund, to undertake repairs to the building.

There are many other instances of the rehabilitation of meeting houses and churches for continued service to their communities. Renovations are being carried out or studied on the Park Hill Meeting House in Westmoreland, on the Baptist Church at Cornish Flat (a town-owned building), on the Old Allenstown Meeting House, on the Early Settlers' Meeting House in Ossipee, and on the Smith Meeting House in Gilmanton.

In all of these cases, residents have seen the rehabilitation and continuing use of these local landmarks as essential to the identity of the community. These structures have suffered from lack of funding, threats of demolition, and citations of code deficiencies. Despite such obstacles, these buildings and others like them are being rescued from abandonment and neglect, often by a combination of town appropriations, private contributions, and grants from outside agencies. As New Hampshire continues to change, often at an accelerating pace, people in more and more communities are coming to look upon their old landmarks not as obsolete structures to be abandoned, but as monuments to town identity and memory.

The Groton Town House housed the town meetings of its community from the first such meeting in May, 1797, until 1997. During these two centuries, the building evolved from a two-story meeting house to a one story town house, and had its dimensions reduced from forty-two by fifty-three feet to the present forty-two by thirty-two feet. Despite all these changes, the building has continued to be the site of debate, decision-making, and community gatherings for the people of Groton. The building remains in sound structural condition. If the town wishes to rehabilitate the structure and can find the financial means to do it, there is no reason why the Groton Town House cannot serve the community for another two centuries. Preservation of the town house would be a fitting means by which the present generation could honor a legacy that spans two centuries.