

History of the Bell Hill Meeting House

Presented by Maureen Howard

In January 1793, David Ray donated one acre of land and contracted with the proprietors (the original owners of our town) to build a frame meeting house on the top of Otisfield Hill on lot 93. The work began in 1795 and was completed in 1797. It was originally known as the Otisfield Congregational Church.

At about the same time that David Ray donated one acre of land for the Meeting House, he donated a lot adjoining for a cemetery. The Bell Hill Cemetery, established in 1781, is the oldest cemetery in our town. The graves of numerous Revolutionary veterans and early settlers lie within its bounds. (you will meet some of them today).

The building that you see today was preceded by a simple, two and a half story, rectangular meeting house that from 1797 – 1845, stood just north of this site. It was built by David Ray and George Peirce. It had box pews and a high pulpit centered on the long wall and the sexes were divided by the center aisle. It was used first by the Congregationalists, but after 1812 it was used by all the religious sects in Otisfield.

In addition, it served as a town meeting place. Unfortunately, no photograph of the exterior is known to exist. However, it probably closely resembled the Porter, Maine meetinghouse which is the county's only surviving example of meetinghouses built at this time.

In November, 1797, the meetinghouse (not quite finished) was dedicated to the worship of God and the ceremony was attended by many. For it, the proprietors furnished ½ barrel each of New England and West India rum (which made, I suspect, the dedication ceremony a bit merrier) and ten pounds of loaf sugar. (Loaf sugar is liquid sugar poured in a form and comes in the form of a solid block, rather than as a granulated substance).

The church was now formally organized and had 8 members – 3 Spurrs, 2 Hancocks, 1 Thurston, 1 Peirce and 1 Turner. The church population soon increased to 14 members. Two Sunday services with two hour long sermons was the rule in those days.

In September, 1798, the townspeople selected the Rev. Thomas Roby (who you will meet today) as their first minister at a salary of 75 pounds per year: one third in silver or gold, the other two thirds in wheat or rye or Indian corn. Rev. Roby remained shepherd of the flock until he was dismissed in 1810.

A large proportion of our first settlers were soldiers of the Revolutionary War and military training was compulsory for all able bodied men between the ages of 16 and 60. Twice each year the Otisfield Militia met on this hilltop for drill and training. These occasions were called "Muster Days" and the whole population gathered to watch, listen to the music provided by a fife and a drum, visit with friends, exchange bits of gossip and enjoy refreshments while the children romped and played. "Muster Gingerbread" was

still remembered for years after the old "Muster Days" had passed out of existence after the Civil War.

In 1837, it was decided to build a more modern structure as the first church building had been allowed to get out of repair and work began on the present building that you are looking at today. It was designed by Nathan Nutting, Jr. (you will also hear about the Nutting family today). The top story of the old meetinghouse was moved down the hill in 1845 to be used for town business until replaced by the present Town House in 1905.

Soon after 1845, the population in and around Bell Hill began to decrease while that in the villages of Bolsters Mills and Spurrs Corner increased. In 1887, when the present structure was abandoned for the more conveniently located Union Chapel at Spurrs Corner, the Bell Hill Association was formed to preserve this remarkable landmark in this beautiful hilltop setting.