

# Guilford Center Meeting House

Guilford Vermont 1837



The meetinghouse in Guilford center is listed in the Guilford Town history as having been constructed in 1837 with some timbers salvaged from the old “White Meeting House” on the hill. Its bronze bell is cast with that date as well. The town history also suggests that the White Meeting House was constructed prior to 1773, the first record of a town function held in “the meeting house” being on that date.

Wood samples from the structure give cutting dates of 1834, for up-and-down sawn hemlock boards, planks, and beams that appear associated with the current configuration of the structure, while pine, oak, (beech and maple) planks, boards, and timbers with evidence of re-use have cutting dates of 1787. These cutting dates suggest construction in 1835 and 1788 respectively.

Currently, no structure of similar size and proper age is known as a candidate for the source of the re-used timbers.

The oak planks with rafter mortises appear to be re-sawn beams and the white pine timbers currently supporting the belfry may be parts of a truss chord. If so, this would suggest that the source building was at least one truss longer than the current meeting house. The unused mortises in the truss chords and rafter sculpting may also suggest that the original structure was somewhat greater in width as well. All the re-used timbers examined exhibited a patina attributed to weathering in the open - perhaps lying in wait for the construction to begin on the new structure. This patina was chopped through where hemlock braces were mortised into the oak truss timbers.

It is possible that the 1834 cutting dates and weathering imply a two year wait between the preparation of the timber and the allocation of funds and final construction of the Meeting House.

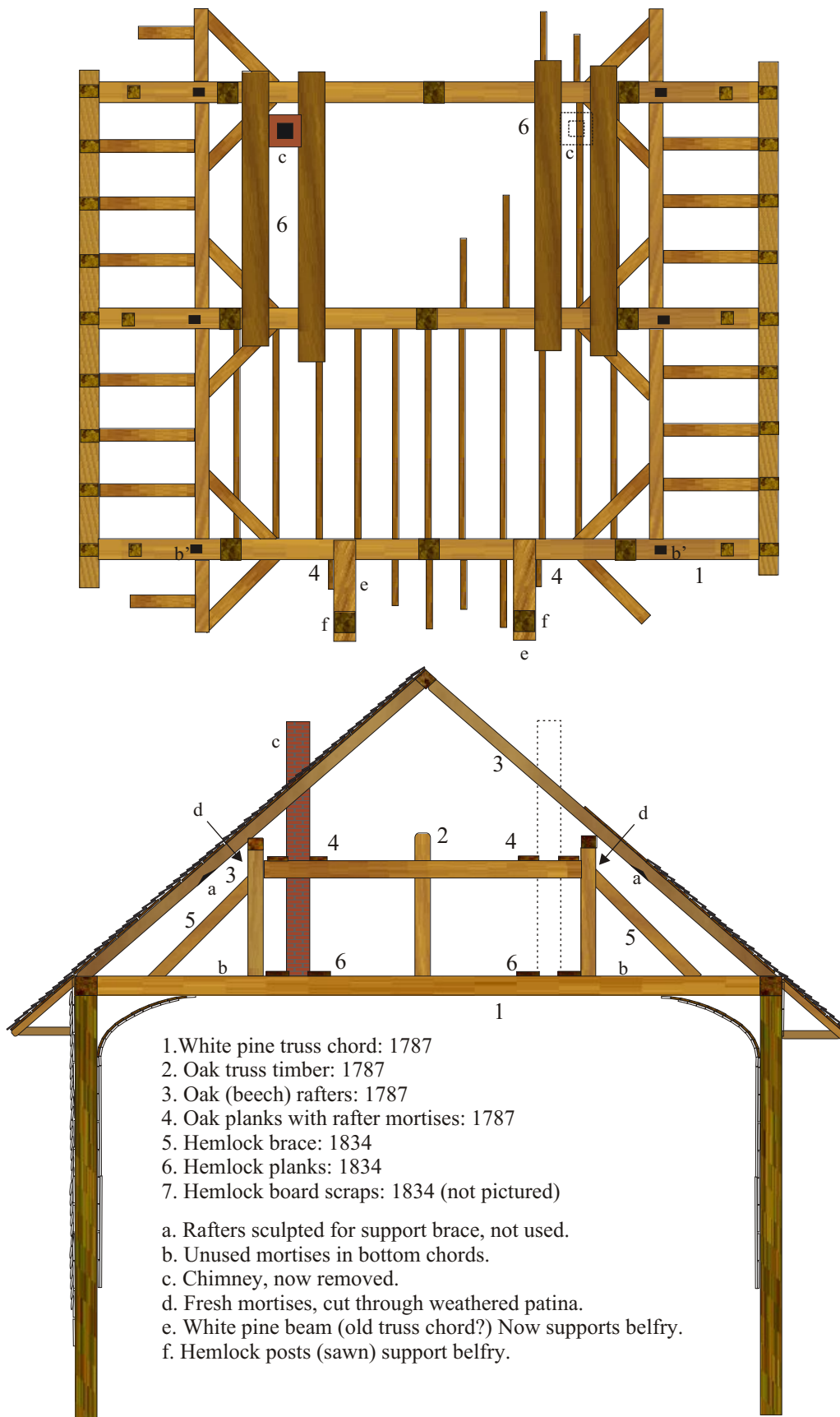
Some uncertainty remains regarding the 1787 date, as I lack a local oak tree-ring chronology to confirm it. However, oak chronologies from Massachusetts suggest that the date is correct.



The meeting house interior.



1893 Topographic map of the Guilford area and approximate locations of (1) the current meeting house, and (2) the old “White Meeting House”.



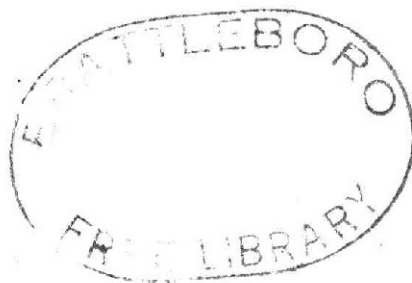
## Roof structure and basic framing of Guilford Center Meeting House.

Not to scale, drawing based on field notes.

Official History  
of  
GUILFORD, VERMONT  
1678-1961

*With Genealogies and  
Biographical Sketches*

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The White Meeting House: At a meeting of the proprietors of the town of Guilford held at Brattleboro on Sept. 14, 1763, it was voted to choose a committee to view house lot No. 40, for the purpose of finding a convenient place for a meeting house and burying place. This was a fifty acre lot in the geographical center of the town, which had not then been sold, but was owned in common by the several proprietors. The location was nearly one mile south of lot No. 100, where the meeting house and cemetery were afterward established on the hill east of Guilford Center village. We find no evidence that this committee ever filed a report, and are unable to fix the exact date of the erection of the meeting house, but it was apparently prior to 1773, as the town meeting held June 15 of that year was adjourned to meet the "third Tuesday in May, next, at the meeting house." At that time the land was owned by Hezekiah Stowell, who sold to Elihu Field, and it was twenty years before the land was deeded to the pro. proprietors of the meeting house. This was done by Mr. Field on July 1, '1793, for the consideration of eleven pounds.

The description of the land conveyed is as follows: "Beginning at a stake and stones for a corner, standing on a course from Lieut. James Houghton's dwelling, house East 40 degrees North, and from my dwelling house on a course West, 18 degrees South, and from Gov. Benj. Carpenter's dwelling house on a course East, 32 degrees South, and from the Southwest corner of the aforesaid meeting house on a course 38 degrees West, and from thence running North, 24 degrees East, 16 rods and 16 links to a stake and stones for a corner, and from thence running East, nine degrees South, 6 rods and 10 links to a stake and stones for a corner, standing three rods from the Northeast corner of the meeting house on a course North, 33 degrees East, and from thence South, 32 degrees East 11 rods to a stake and stones for a corner, from thence West 15 degrees South 19 rods and 14 links to the first mentioned corner, containing 154 square rods."

The cemetery was not established there until 1796, when Rev. Elijah Wollage conveyed one half acre and 28 rods for a cemetery. This adjoined the meeting house tract on the westerly side, and has since been enlarged and now includes the site of the meeting house.

The architect of the White Meeting House was William Shepardson, more familiarly known as "Uncle Bill." It is related that the frame being finished, ready for erection, a large concourse of the townspeople were called together for a "raising bee"-an institution very popular in the early days when timber was plentiful and buildings were made as they should be. After every mortise and tenon had been knocked together, the rafters securely placed and fastened by six inch pins of white oak, and the entire framework completed, staunch and square and plumb, Uncle Bill Shepardson, with the agility of a gray squirrel, climbed to the lofty ridge pole, stood erect, threw his left foot over his neck and hopped nimbly on the other foot the whole length of the ridge pole from end to end.

There is no record of the dimensions of the edifice, but it was a large two-story building, painted white. It had no steeple, there were circular windows in the gable ends. Its greatest dimension was from east to west, the front door being on the south side and a smaller door at the center of the east end. A broad aisle led from the front door to the pulpit, which was in the center of the north side and was reached by a narrow stairway. There were two rows of body pews, and wall pews on three sides. There was also a gallery on three sides, with pews. The seats were hung upon hinges, and were tipped up "while the congregation stood at prayers. At the conclusion of the prayers the seats were allowed to fall back with a tremendous clatter. There was no provision made for heating the house, and those who could do so brought foot stoves during the cold weather.

People came from all over town to attend the meetings, often filling the house to overflowing, and in warm weather would be grouped about the doors outside during services. Many came on foot, some on horseback, singly or on pillions, some with ox carts, as no light wagons were used in town until after 1800, and it was many years before they came into anything like common use. As good shoes were expensive, wholly made by hand, and all wished to be decently clad while attending religious services in their honored sanctuary, some of those who traveled on foot carried their "go to meeting shoes" with them, which they put on just before entering the place of worship. Boys and girls usually went barefooted in summer time, not only when about their homes, but while attending school as well. Their worthy parents saw to it that they did not enter the meeting house without shoes. Pity the poor young ones who had to stop at the "last brook", wash off the road dust and confine liberty loving toes in Sunday shoes. The girls had the added chore of buttoning on starched pantalettes.

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On Dec. 5, 1836 the proprietors of the Old Congregational Church on the hill were asked if they would agree to remove the House to some more convenient place. Jan. 21, 1837 they voted to sell "Old Congregational Church" on the hill, at auction Feb. 18, so as to move to a more central location. On Feb. 25th the Guilford Center Meetinghouse Society was organized. The land was given by Edward Houghton May 6, 1837, the present edifice, containing timbers of the original, was erected the same year. The completed cost was \$2409.21 including \$205 paid for the old church, and \$320 for the bell.

# Meeting house samples



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