

Restoration of the Allenstown Meetinghouse

The Town of Allenstown has undertaken a thoughtful and important restoration of their important community landmark. The building is New Hampshire's only known surviving, one-story meetinghouse serving both religious and civic functions from its inception. It is unique in incorporating slanted floors, typical of schoolhouses of its time, to provide visibility of the pulpit. It is a product of the early preservation movement, having been restored by the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1909. It has survived a hurricane in 1815 (its first year), a forest fire in 1914, and damage from arson in 1985.

History and significance:

Built by the Christian Church and the Town of Allenstown between 1815 and 1821, the Meetinghouse served as the town's religious and government center. It continued to serve this traditional dual function until 1860, when the church dissolved but used the building as a location for religious revivals until the 1880s. Allenstown held town meetings here until 1876. In 1908, the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) gained title to the building, restoring it in 1909 in one of New Hampshire's earliest efforts at historic preservation. After the 1985 fire, the DAR conveyed the property to the Department of Resources and Economic Development (DRED) in 1991, which carried out structural repairs. DRED returned the building to Allenstown in 2004 after the town adopted a master plan that renewed the community's commitment to its cultural resources. Listed in the State and National Registers of Historic Places in 2004, the Meetinghouse is significant for its role as a town center utilized for religious, government, and social meetings, for its architecture, and for its distinction as an early example of historic preservation. As a community-defining structure, it represents and symbolizes the nucleus of the original dispersed rural town of Allenstown. It retains this strong community identity and today is surrounded by Bear Brook State Park, created in 1943.

The decade-long restoration of the Allenstown Meetinghouse included three phases. The town first addressed stabilization and the need to protect the building from the elements. Phase I, completed in 2006, repaired sills and provided a well-designed roof to replace an interim roof built after the fire of 1985. Phase II created a watertight building with in-kind replacement of deteriorated, eroded clapboards and installation of 15 windows of period design. Phase II also repaired the door's sill and adjacent floor, eradicated powder post beetles, and installed electricity. All excavations were preceded by archaeological testing.

Phase III addressed interior work. Box pews in the northwest corner of the building, destroyed by arson in 1985, were carefully replicated. A new ceiling of hand-troweled plaster replaced the original ceiling, which was lost in the fire but protected the features of the room below. Original wall plaster was repaired and electric fixtures were installed to permit nighttime use of the building. Phase III concluded

in 2013 with the reproduction of a split rail fence, duplicating a fence contributed by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1936. The Allenstown Historical Society is now raising funds for the ongoing stewardship of the building.

The project has benefited from many partners. Following the fire of 1985, Buntin-Rumford-Webster Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution protected the building as they had for much of the twentieth century, passing it to the Department of Resources and Economic Development for initial stabilization. After resuming ownership of the property in 2004, the Town of Allenstown collaborated closely with the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources, which placed the building on the State and National Registers of Historic Places, compiled a historic structure report to guide the rehabilitation, and monitored preservation easements on the property. The building received three Conservation License Plate (“Mooseplate”) grants from the Division of Historical Resources and a grant from the New Hampshire Land and Community Heritage Investment Program (“LCHIP”), making possible the major components of the project, including the new roof, clapboards, window sashes, restored pews, and new ceiling. The project is an exemplary partnership among the town, the Daughters of the American Revolution, two state agencies, two preservation grant programs, the Timber Framers Guild, the Allenstown Historical Society, innumerable private donors, and many volunteers who have contributed thousands of hours over a ten-year period.