

History of the North Wilmot Church

The early years

In the early decades of the 19th century in New England, several congregations often would collaborate to raise money to build a shared house of worship, or “union meeting house.”

When the North Wilmot Church was built in 1829, it was known as the North Union Meeting House. People from five denominations - Congregational, Christian Baptist, Freewill Baptist, Methodist, and Universalist - united to contribute toward the cost of building a worship space. Members of the various congregations purchased pews and used the proceeds to build the structure on Tewksbury Hill.

Members could not agree on a site for the new structure, so they voted to determine where it should be. According to Florence Langley in *With Prayer and Psalm*, “As the north had the greatest population and the most votes, it was placed on the hill.” Josiah Stearns, a master carpenter, built the meeting house. It is 40 feet by 40 feet square with an entry pavilion. Its exterior, which has details from the late Federalist and early Greek Revival architectural styles, remains virtually unchanged from 1829.

At its peak in the 1850s, at least 50 families for a population of at least 200 people (based on the number of cellar holes in the area) lived in the hill farm community of Greater Fowler Town, which included parts of North Wilmot and East Springfield. At times, as many as 60 students attended Sunday school at the meeting house.

Moving the meeting house

According to Langley, the proprietors - members of the North Union Meeting House who owned pews - met on November 24, 1849. At that meeting they organized the North Wilmot Union Meeting House Society. The proprietors appointed a committee to write a constitution and bylaws. Pew ownership was the criterion for membership. In December of that year members voted to have the pews appraised. In September 1850 the 38 pews were valued at \$214.

At that meeting, they also discussed whether they should move the church, which was difficult to reach in winter. In January 1850 members appointed a committee to "...move and fitup this house on the located ground." They decided to move the building downhill about one-half mile north to its current location at the intersection of Tewksbury, Piper Pond, Breezy Hill, and North Wilmot roads. The address of the "new" location is 3 Breezy Hill Road, Wilmot.

The building was moved on rollers with 30 to 35 yoke of oxen across Henry Tewksbury's field - because it wasn't as steep as the road. "Sledges filled with rocks had to be fastened on behind to act as a brake so the building would not go down the hill too fast," Langley notes. They built a temporary bridge across the brook where the banks were low.

Accounts of how the building was moved vary. One says that Josiah Stearns rode in the steeple as the structure moved down the hill. A second story suggests that a quantity of rum was involved. A third tale blamed a resident porcupine for delaying the work. In *The Early History of Wilmot*, Casper L. LeVarn states: "Many oxen were used to start the church from its old foundation but at first it refused to budge. One of the workmen crawled underneath and found a porcupine, which he killed. At the next pull by the oxen, the church moved. ..."

Members of the North Wilmot Union Meeting House Society paid \$400 to

move the building. In the fall of 1850, members voted to pay \$70 to plaster the interior; the work was to be completed by November 15, 1850.

After the Civil War

By 1867 the church was effectively controlled by members of the Freewill Baptist and the Methodist Episcopal denominations, which held services on alternate Sundays. In that year, members voted to pay \$200 to roof the meeting house, Langley notes. They voted to add \$100 to the budget to also repair the interior. Changes to the interior included laying a floor “in the middle of the house and raise it to the level of the wall pews.” Other alterations included wallpaper, red plush carpet, and damask curtains for the windows. Members paid Seth Goodhue, cabinet maker and entrepreneur, \$25 to craft a pulpit, which he made in his workshop in Wilmot Center. Members also purchased a settee, two chairs, a black walnut table, and eight oil lamps. Two box stoves at the rear of the building provided heat. Reportedly these improvements cost more than \$800. The pulpit and settee are still used today.

The Early 20th Century

In 1915 Mrs. Edward Kimball, who owned a home nearby, took an interest in the structure and proposed changes that would allow the church to double as a civic or community center. The fixed pews and choir loft were removed. Folding oak chairs, still in use today, were purchased. A kitchen and furnace were installed on the lower level. Plays and church suppers, organized by the Nimble Thimble Club, were scheduled - “but no dances.”

In 1917 the church joined the Congregational denomination. In that year, a bell was installed in the belfry and men from the neighborhood constructed the horse sheds behind the church.

Camp Wilmot and North Wilmot Church

Camp Wilmot, affiliated with the Presbyterian Church USA, has conducted services for campers and counselors at the North Wilmot Church since the 1960s. The camp is one mile south of the church at 5 Whites Pond Road. In its heyday, Camp Wilmot provided preachers/worship leaders for the Sunday worship services during the summer. In the 1970s volunteers from Camp Wilmot painted the interior of the church. In 1979 representatives from the camp were instrumental in organizing and conducting the 150th anniversary celebration of the church. Camp Wilmot summer campers continue to use the church for occasional evening services.

North Wilmot Union Meeting House Society, again

By 1984, the North Wilmot Congregational Church had few members. In that year, a group of local residents established the North Wilmot Union Meeting House Society (the second organization with that name affiliated with the building) to ensure the preservation, maintenance, and upkeep of the historic church and grounds.

In recent years, the North Wilmot Union Meeting House Society, a 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization, installed a standing seam metal roof, painted the building three times, and repaired the steeple. It also schedules summer worship services, concerts, programs, and other events.

The building, the oldest church structure in Wilmot, is available for weddings, anniversary celebrations, memorial services, and other gatherings. The North Wilmot Union Meeting House Society was successful in getting the building placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1989.

The North Wilmot Church is on the seal of the Town of Wilmot. In 1991, a photograph of the church graced the cover of the town's annual report; in 2016 the town chose a watercolor of the structure for the cover of its annual

publication.

For several decades in the late 1900s, the building was known as the North Wilmot Church. However, it was not until 2001 that the North Wilmot Union Meeting House Society board of directors adopted North Wilmot Church as the name for the structure they own and maintain.

Names of the structure:

North Union Meeting House, 1829

North Wilmot Union Meeting House, 1849

North Wilmot Congregational Church, 1917

North Wilmot Church, 2001

The North Wilmot Church also has been referred to as the Old North Church, the Church in the Wilderness, and the Chapel in the Woods.

In 2020, board members of the North Wilmot Union Meeting House Society embarked on a fundraising campaign for Phase One to restore the building. The organization garnered grants from several sources including Land and Community Heritage Investment Program (LCHIP), The 1772 Foundation (administered by the NH Preservation Alliance), the Daughters of the American Revolution, Mary Butler Chapter; the Wilmot Historical Society, Mascoma Bank, and Bar Harbor Bank and Trust. More than 175 people also supported the fundraising effort, which raised more than \$125,000.

Work started in 2021 and included removing a rotted beam at the front of the church and installing a poured concrete foundation under the pavilion and bell tower. All the windows in the structure were removed, repaired,

reglazed and painted, and replaced. In 2023, painting the exterior of the church completed the project.

For Phase Two, the board will focus on the interior of the church including restoring the historic tin ceiling and painting the interior in time for the North Wilmot Church's bicentennial in 2029.

More information about the 1829 historic church is available from *Wilmot History*, 1957, by Caspar L. LeVarn; *With Prayer and Psalm*, 1981, by Florence Langley; and *Home to the Mountain: A Bicentennial History of Wilmot, NH*, 2007, by Thomas Curren and Kathy Neustadt. These books can be borrowed from the Wilmot Public Library or obtained from the Wilmot Historical Society.

Other sources consulted in preparation for this short history:

Bylaws, North Wilmot Union Meeting House Society, 1984, updated, 2019

National Register of Historic Places application, 1989

New Hampshire Architecture: An Illustrated Guide, 2004, Bryant F. Tolles, Jr. and Carolyn K. Tolles

History of Wilmot, N.H.: via Black and White Photos with Brief Descriptions, 2015 and 2017, Walter Walker