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A CASE-STUDY IN RESTORATION

THE LEBANON MEETINGHOUSE, LEBANON, CONNECTICUT

By Theodore Sizer

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THEODORE SIZER

I. Background

In June 1804 the versatile Col. John Trumbull,¹ the "Patriot-Artist," former aide-de-camp of Gen. Washington, returned from London to this country after serving it well for a decade as a diplomat.

After a stormy passage of a month's duration he finally arrived at New York accompanied by his strikingly beautiful English wife. There he set up, with much difficulty, as a portrait painter. Possibly it was because he was not pressed for time that the forty-eight-year-old historical painter, the chief visual recorder of the Revolutionary War, accepted the invitation to prepare designs for a new Congregational meetinghouse in his home town.

He had always been interested in architecture. During his senior year at Harvard he had been set on fire when he first beheld the set of nine great volumes of prints of the monuments of ancient Rome by the Italian, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, which had arrived at the College Library a few years after their publication.² He never got over the impact which these Piranesis made. His concern with the problems of architectural form, proportion, and perspective continued before and after his military service. In London, while studying under the kindly Philadelphian painter Benjamin West, it was temporarily abandoned, only to be promptly revived during his eight months' imprisonment in reprisal, he so believed, for the hanging of the popular British officer, Major André.³ Books were supplied to the incarcerated colonel by that great friend of the wayward Colonies, Edmund Burke,⁴ who admonished the artist to give up painting in favor of architecture.⁵ The latent seeds of this early interest, pertinent advice, and undistracted study in prison ultimately blossomed forth. In 1791 the colonel designed (so I believe) the First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia,⁶ then the capital of the new Republic. A year later he produced comprehensive plans for Yale College at the request of James Hillhouse, Treasurer of the College and a delegate to the Continental Congress.⁷ He was not unprepared for his task at Lebanon.

II. The Building

The day after the colonel and his bride arrived at New York in 1804 the congregation at Lebanon voted to build a new meetinghouse. Two months later it was again voted that it be "agreeable to the Plan which has been made by Col. John Trumbull."⁸ A year later, on 30 June 1805, the latter wrote to his brother, Jonathan: "Our Meetinghouse goes on very well and is in a fairway to be neatly and handsomely finished. Our workmen appear to know their business and the people are well disposed to have the work well executed."⁹ The church dominates and lends its grace to the town in good New England fashion and is still its most cherished landmark. It was constructed of red brick with a vaulted entrance flanked by four engaged, Roman Doric brick columns, and surmounted by a white wooden steeple of graceful proportion. It differs in some ways from other contemporary churches in Connecticut, its designer having arrived freshly from England and having the classic examples of Wren, Gibbs and other London ecclesiastical architects well in mind. It is chaste, restrained and elegant in a homey way. The mouldings are rich, delicate and sparingly employed—in the manner of the brothers Adam of London¹⁰ or, more closely, in that of the Connecticut architect, David Hoadley. The church was in use early in 1807, though it was not finished in all detail until 1809.

III. Mutilation

Only a year prior to the Centennial Exhibition at Philadelphia of 1876, that great turning point in the awakening of interest in America's past and in the full appreciation of the beauties of Colonial and Federal architecture, was the interior of the meetinghouse made over in the Victorian manner. The balconies were joined in order to make a second floor and the fine Palladian pulpit-window removed (but fortunately preserved) to create two floors, in order to give extra space for the missionary society and other church activities. Only the handsome exterior, except for the bricked up pulpit-window on the rear wall, remained intact in its former quiet beauty after these unfortunate changes had taken place. And so it remained until the great hurricane of 21 September 1938.

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FIG. 1. Lebanon Meetinghouse, c. 1938.



FIG. 2. Lebanon Meetinghouse after the hurricane of September 1938.



FIG. 3. Lebanon Meetinghouse after the hurricane of September 1938.



FIG. 4. Lebanon Meetinghouse. Rebuilding the spire.

IV. Restoration

In that catastrophe the steeple was blown across the ridge, smashing the shingled roof and demolishing the floor at the former gallery level. The four brick walls, the fine arched doorway, and the square brick tower above it alone remained. The rest lay in ruins.

Immediate action was taken by the pastor, Rev. Howard C. Champe, the congregation and citizens of Lebanon, as well as by interested groups throughout the state. Fortunately, Wilbur L. Cross was governor. Recognizing the importance of preserving the historic church he headed a state-wide body, which became known as The Committee

on the Restoration of the Lebanon Meeting House,¹¹ to undertake the difficult task. J. Frederick Kelly,¹² New Haven architect, antiquarian, and architectural historian, was propitiously commissioned in 1940 to carry out the program of restoration. No more admirable choice could have been made. Mr. Kelly was superbly equipped by temperament, scholarship, and foresight for the mission. Some years before the destruction of the stately old meetinghouse he had made accurate measured drawings of the whole structure and could, therefore, proceed on a solid basis without guesswork. Several pieces of the original trim and mouldings had been acquired by the writer in 1928



FIG. 5. Lebanon Meetinghouse. Rebuilding the spire.

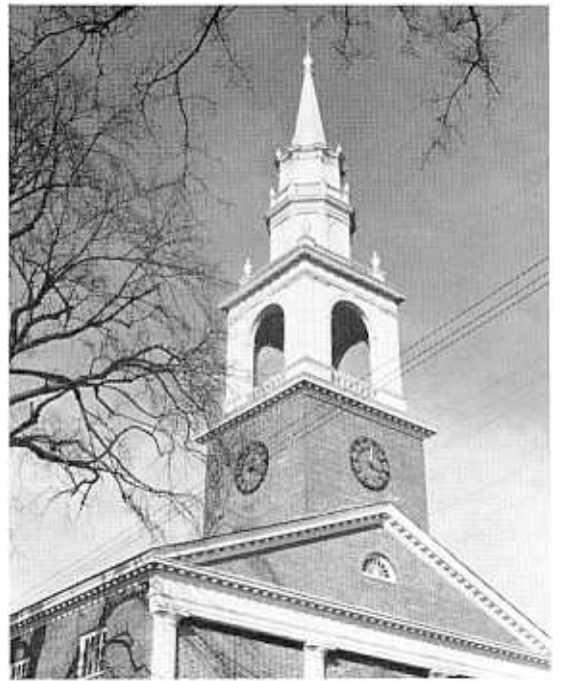


FIG. 6. Lebanon Meetinghouse. The completed spire, winter 1954.



FIG. 7. Lebanon Meetinghouse. Interior view before 1875.



FIG. 8. Lebanon Meetinghouse. Audience Room made by connecting the balconies, 1875-1938.



FIG. 9. Lebanon Meetinghouse. The restored interior.

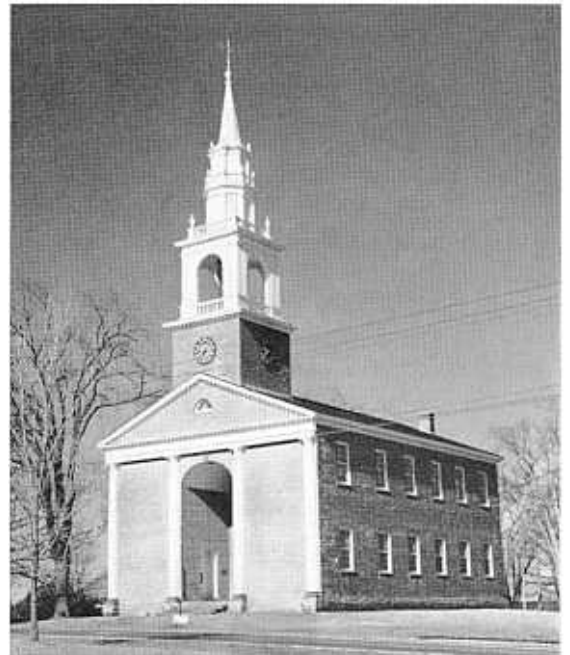


FIG. 10. Lebanon Meetinghouse as restored.

from an elderly colored woman in Lebanon whose brother had been a carpenter during the remodelling of the interior in 1875; these proved to be of some minor use. Fortunately, a master woodcarver, Gottlieb Laibrandt of Village Hill, was found. He and his fellow craftsmen "neatly and handsomely" executed the original Connecticut architect's designs as rescued, over a century later, by the farsightedness of another Connecticut architect. The laying of the cornerstone took place on 29 June 1941 with Governor Cross the principal speaker. The rebuilding proceeded as funds permitted with a loving care and pride in craftsmanship more characteristic of pre-Industrial Revolution days than of the present. Progress was slow but continuous. A serious blow was struck by the long illness and subsequent death in 1948 of the architect-in-charge. He was succeeded by his

brother, Henry Schraub Kelly, his former partner, who, with great fidelity, aided by the enthusiastic and learned support of the pastor, Rev. Robert G. Armstrong, D.D., carried the whole to successful conclusion.¹³ The dedication, on 28 November 1954, of the William Williams¹⁴ Memorial Steeple marked the completion of the restoration of the meetinghouse at Lebanon, the sole surviving example of the architectural work of her illustrious son, Col. Trumbull.¹⁵

Sixteen years have elapsed since its destruction by the hurricane. The meetinghouse now stands forth in all its pristine beauty, due to the ability of the few and to the courage, generosity,¹⁶ unflagging devotion, and abiding faith of the many.¹⁷

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1. See *The Autobiography of Colonel John Trumbull*, edited by Theodore Sizer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), for biographical details, and Sizer, *The Works of Colonel John Trumbull*, New Haven, 1950, pp. 93-94 and Plates 42-46 for architecture.

2. The identical volumes are still in the Harvard College Library.

3. Trumbull regarded André as his "perfect pendant." It is interesting to note that years later, in 1821, he designed the casket in which the bones of the hanged André were placed, returned to England, and buried in Westminster Abbey. See Sizer, "The Perfect Pendant," *The New-York Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. XXV, No. 3 (Oct. 1951), pp. 400-404, and *Autobiography*, Appendix, pp. 365-368.

4. *Autobiography*, p. 375.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 84 and 175.

6. Sizer, "Philadelphia's First Presbyterian Church," *JSAH*, Vol. IX, No. 3 (Oct. 1950), pp. 20-22, and Vol. X, No. 2 (May 1951), pp. 27-28. The church, known only through the engraving by William Birch, was begun in 1793, in use by 1796, and razed in 1821.

7. *Autobiography*, pp. 169-170 n. and Sizer, "John Trumbull, Amateur Architect," *JSAH*, Vol. VIII, Nos. 3-4 (July-Dec. 1949), pp. 1-6.

8. See J. Frederick Kelly, *Early Connecticut Meetinghouses* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), I (2 vols.), "Lebanon Congregational Church," pp. 260-274, for the most authoritative account of the construction and history of the church.

9. Trumbull Papers, Connecticut State Library, Hartford.

10. For Trumbull's architectural drawings in the Adam manner see those at the New-York Historical Society.

11. The account of the fund raising efforts of the State Committee headed by Gov. Cross, Honorary Chairman, Rev. Rockwell Potter and later, Rev. C. C. Hemenway, Chairmen, and Rev. James F. English, Secretary, has no place in this article. Several well-illustrated publications should, however, be noted: "The Old Meeting House at Lebanon," *Congregational Connecticut*, Vol. III, No. 11 (Nov. 1938), pp. 8-9; Howard C. Champe, "Three Monuments," *Congregational Connecticut*, Vol. IV, No. 2 (Feb. 1939), pp. 5-7; *High Winds & High Hopes, a patriotic effort to restore the hurricane-stricken Meeting House at historic Lebanon, Connecticut*, 1939; *Campaign for Funds to restore the Lebanon Meeting House*, 1941; *First Unit of Historic Meeting House*, 1941; *Lebanon Meeting House, Four Years after the Hurricane*, 1942; *A Story of Progress of the Restoration of the Lebanon Meeting House*, 1947; Robert G. Armstrong, *John Trumbull Returns, an address . . . given on the occasion of a pilgrimage by the members of the Connecticut Society of the Colonial Dames of America . . .* 1948; and the more recent, *Our Story in 10 Sentences; The Fulfillment of High Hopes; and The William Williams Memorial Steeple*, by Rev. Robert G. Armstrong.

12. See Sizer, "J. Frederick Kelly, A.I.A., 1888-1947," *Walpole Society Note Book*, 1947, pp. 31-34 (bibliography included). The most important of his many publications were *The Early Domestic Architecture of Connecticut* (New Haven: Yale University Press,

1924), the standard work on the subject, now in its fourth printing, and *Early Connecticut Meeting-Houses*, referred to in note 8, published a year after his death, a review of which, with references to the Lebanon church, by Sizer, will be found in *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. XXII, No. 4 (Dec. 1949), pp. 534-540.

13. The 250th Anniversary Service of the First Congregational Church of Lebanon, Connecticut, took place in the restored (but for the spire) meetinghouse on 27 August 1950. A service of unveiling a memorial plaque to the memory of the architect, Col. Trumbull, was held on 15 June 1952, tributes being made by Henry Schraub Kelly and the writer.

14. Named in honor of William Williams, resident of Lebanon (his home, close to the Meetinghouse, still stands), a signer of the Declaration of Independence, for many years clerk and deacon of the church. A bronze, commemorative plaque to his memory was unveiled at this occasion. He was John Trumbull's brother-in-law.

15. Other examples of Trumbull's architectural work are the American Academy of Fine Arts, Barclay Street, New York City, built in 1830, abandoned in 1841, and the Trumbull Gallery (the earliest art museum connected with an institution of higher learning in America) at Yale, built in 1831 and demolished in 1901.

16. Actual figures are interesting. The final report on the project was made by Rev. C. C. Hemenway, Chairman, on 11 March 1955:

" . . . The total costs of restoration, from the beginning, were as follows:

Razing the ruins	\$ 998.36
Construction	89,716.52
Architect's fee	8,892.15
Campaign expenses	3,597.09
Plaques	564.10
Insurance	84.25
Ceremonies	230.69
Interest	209.33
Clock	1,651.26
Miscellaneous	1,508.10
Total Cost	\$107,451.85

"The total amount received in all campaigns was \$108,766.40. With all bills paid, we have a balance of \$1,314.55.

"This surplus over costs results from the over subscription of the steeple campaign, in which our goal was \$28,000. However, that sum did not include the cost of providing a striker for the clock and for flood lighting the steeple. I assume that the balance in hand will provide most, if not all, of the cost of these two items, which will complete the work.

"This report is based on figures obtained from Mr. Clarence G. Geer, who served so efficiently as our treasurer . . ."

17. It is interesting to note that two Revolutionary patriots were born on the same day, the 6th of June: Capt. Nathan Hale in 1755, who graduated from Yale in 1773 and Col. John Trumbull in 1756, whose Harvard class, 1773, was the same. The two hundredth anniversary of Trumbull's birth falls on 6 June 1956.