

Nine men formed the original membership of the First Congregational Church of Lebanon in 1700. The first Meeting House was in a small barn, which served the congregation for six years.

The town grew and so did the church and a larger building was needed. In 1722, steps were taken to build a larger Meeting House. “Thus began the Meeting House War.” The North Society wanted the building to be erected closer to them and the South Society wanted it to stay at its present location. Finally, the matter was referred to the General Assembly and in 1731, it decided that the new Meeting House should stand on the same site and that site should forever be the location of the Meeting House.

The new Meeting House was sixty feet by forty feet with a height of twenty-six feet. Changes were made over the years, but this building served the people for over seventy-five years. Stirring events took place within its doors. For fifty-four years, Solomon Williams preached with religious fervor and patriotic zeal. Here the Trumbull family held its honored pews. Here meetings were held to protest the Boston Massacre. Here Faith Trumbull added her beautiful red cloak, gift of the French Officers, to the piles of clothing and supplies in front of the high pulpit.

In 1802, the Meeting House needed repairs, and again the North Society wanted the building in a more central location. The “Meeting House War” broke out again. This time it ended in 1804 when the North Society formed their own parish and erected their own building at the far end of the Common. The South Society decided to build a brick Meeting House according to the design made by John Trumbull. The timbers were made from native lumber and the clay for the brick was dug from the Common. The red brick Meeting House with its vaulted entrance flanked by four built-in brick columns surmounted by a white wooden steeple dominated the town until the mid-Victorian era when architectural standards were at their lowest.

In 1875 a modernization project was undertaken to provide for a vestry (often referred to as church parlors) in addition to a sanctuary. In the process, the entire interior was removed, the ground floor lowered several feet and a floor installed to separate the upstairs sanctuary from the downstairs parlors. Externally, the windows on the north side (including the palladian window) were bricked up and the other windows were adjusted as to size and level. The new brick work must have been unsightly; all brickwork, except the four white columns in front, was then painted a dark battle-ship grey.

September 1938 – the steeple had just been freshly painted and the numerals of the clock regilded when the hurricane hit Lebanon full force. The steeple crashed down to the floor destroying the walls, and leaving only the front facade intact. Rev.

Howard Champe was pastor of the Meeting House at that time and in his words “People had taken the church for granted, but its destruction brought home to them a realization that it stood for something they cannot afford to miss, and it took a larger place in their lives than they realized... though the bell no longer sounds forth its sonorous appeal calling people to worship, people are coming in larger numbers to the High School Auditorium for church services and are giving more liberally from their limited resources. Eighteen new members were received into the church at Easter time (1939) eight of whom were baptized.” Wilbur Cross, Governor of Connecticut at that time, sent out a state-wide plea for monies to help rebuild the Meeting House, and that plea was answered. Work was started to restore the old Meeting House as John Trumbull designed it. Construction progressed as money came in. Work was interrupted by World War II, but resumed as materials became available. Gottlieb Laibrandt from Village Hill and his fellow craftsmen duplicated the original carving around the balconies. Mr. Laibrandt himself did all of the carving around the palladian window and the pulpit. work progressed slowly, but the 250th Anniversary Service was held in August 1950 with the building complete except for the spire. The final stage in the restoration of the Meeting House was the completion of the steeple in 1954. The restoration was due to the ability of a few and the courage, generosity, unflagging devotion and abiding faith of the many. The total cost of the restoration was \$107,451.85.

In 1958, the Fellowship House was added. This building adjoins the sanctuary and contains larger meeting rooms, Sunday School rooms, offices and a beautiful Memorial Room.

Today we worship in a Meeting House that would be most familiar to the members of the South Society of the early nineteenth century.

### Lebanon Meeting House Restoration Study

The above information was taken in part from *Historic Lebanon* by Dr. Robert Armstrong, *Three Centuries In A Hilltop Town* by Rev. George Milne, and was compiled and submitted by: Mrs. Arlene McCaw.