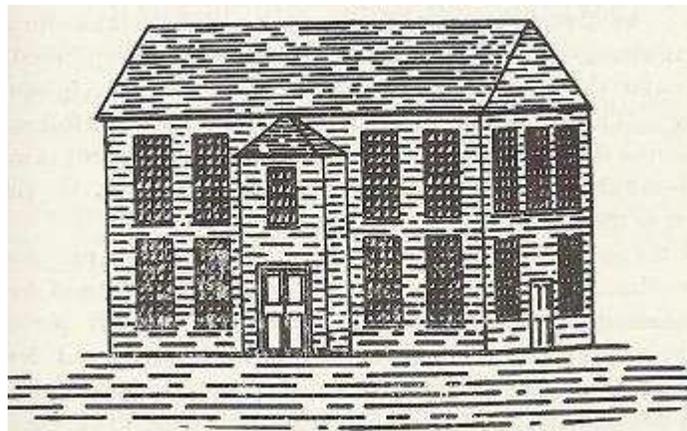


The Second Meeting House
of the
Upper Parish of Kittery
and
Eliot, Maine
1715 – 1835



By

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Eliot, Maine
2007

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Preface

It should be noted that the information contained herein was compiled, not by a professional historian or writer, but by an amateur whose only qualification for the endeavor was a keen interest in history and a passion for discovering more about the lives of the people who once trod upon the same ground which we now find ourselves walking. I wrote this paper partly to gather all the various information that I have read on the subject into one work. It contains nothing new to those who are familiar with the history of Eliot. There is a chance that it contains errors and omissions, and if it does, I can assure you, they were committed without intent. My hope is that this work may refresh an interest in the people, places, and events of our past and create a new desire to properly mark and remember those sites which played such an important role in our development as a modern town. The Second Meeting House once stood a stone's throw from my current home at the entrance to River Road, but, as no marker existed, it was a number of years before I became aware of its history. While researching the history of the Second Meeting House, I was struck by a quote from the Reverend Augustine Caldwell in a 1906 commemoration of the current First Congregational Church. Referring to the Second Meeting House, Reverend Caldwell states, "Without doubt a tablet will one day mark the site." Unfortunately, one hundred and one years later, the site remains unmarked.

Eliot has done a wonderful job keeping its history alive. The various plaques, books, and pamphlets allow the curious to learn a lot about the history of this great town. As we approach the 200th anniversary of the incorporation of our town, we should renew our commitment to preserving the stories of the sundry people, places, and events which, together, form our local heritage. In pursuit of that goal, it is my sincere hope that the prediction made by Reverend Caldwell over one hundred years ago, will finally come to pass. Thus, current and future residents of our community can always be reminded of the site of the Second Meeting House, from whence occurred the important events which brought forth our beloved town; Eliot, Maine.

Eric R. Christian
Eliot, Maine
April, 2007

I. Background

This is a brief paper about a simple and plain building which stood quietly, and sometimes not so quietly, in the town of Eliot, Maine for one hundred and twenty years. This building has been missing from our landscape for longer than it stood, but its importance to the early inhabitants of the Upper Parish of Kittery, in what was to become Eliot, Maine, should not be absent from the landscape of our memories. There was a time in the early history of New England when the concept of a separation between Church and State was mostly non-existent. The inhabitants of our New England parishes all attended the same church, which was the Puritan church, the Calvinist progenitor of the Congregational Church of modern times. The buildings, which these early settlers constructed to serve as houses of worship, were the same buildings in which the freeholders of the parish gathered to hold meetings to pay for highways, the minister's salary, and to decide various other secular and religious matters related to the operation of the parish. These buildings were also the gathering places in Colonial times in which to hear the latest news of the colonies, including the successes and failures of the French and Indian War. It was within their walls that most colonists first heard the sacred text of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. For nearly two centuries, these meeting houses, as they were called, served the dual role of church and town hall in our early New England towns. It was the inevitable conflicts which arose from the growth of other Protestant denominations which eventually necessitated a non-religious "town meeting house" for the purpose of conducting town business without parish membership being a prerequisite, and without a preference towards a particular religious denomination.

II. Origins and History

The story of the Second Meeting House begins around the time of the search for a full-time minister to be settled in the parish to serve the religious needs of the parish inhabitants. In those early days it was a crime for a parish to be without the services of a minister who could preach to the inhabitants. To satisfy their religious needs, some, in what is now the northern part of Eliot, found that it was more convenient to travel to nearby parishes on the Sabbath. The Upper Parish also found itself sharing a pastor with another parish in Kittery. The inhabitants decided that this arrangement would not suffice. In 1714, their search for a pastor ended in the person of the Harvard-educated, Reverend John Rogers of Ipswich, Massachusetts. Reverend Rogers was a pious man and gifted orator. He came from a long line of respected ministers which stretched back to England. The sermons of John Rogers were in such demand that the existing meeting house at Long Reach, near the present-day corner of Greenwood and Main Street, was deemed insufficient in size to hold the swelling congregation that came to listen to him. A decision was made to build a new meeting house. Captain John Leighton, son of William Leighton, gave a portion of his lands for the construction of the new meeting house and in 1715 the meeting house was completed. Four years later, more land was deeded directly across the road from the meeting house to construct a parish house for the comfort of Reverend Rogers and his growing family. The trustees in charge of constructing the parsonage were James Chadbourn, Joseph Hammond, John Leighton, Nicholas Shapleigh, and Stephen Tobey. In 1721 the First Upper Parish Church was

officially settled with the Second Meeting House serving as the home to its congregation. The Reverend John Rogers was officially ordained as its first pastor.

For the next forty seven years the Second Meeting House welcomed Reverend Rogers through its doors to preach to the members of the parish. In 1768, Reverend Rogers was near the end of his ministry, and the end of his life. The Reverend Alpheus Spring succeeded him in 1768, and served until his own death in 1791. The Reverend Samuel Chandler was ordained in 1792 and served as pastor until his death in 1829. It was during this time (1809) that the Second Meeting House served as the location for discussions, arguments, petitions, and polling related to the separation of the Upper Parish from Kittery. This eventually led to the incorporation, in 1810, of a new town which they named Eliot. About twenty years later, the use of the Second Meeting House was approaching its end. Its successor, the Third Meeting House, was constructed in 1833 across from the current Congregational Church. The story of the Second Meeting House finally came to its conclusion in 1835 as it was torn down and the remnants were auctioned off piece by piece. The land, upon which it had rested, was returned to the Leighton homestead.

III. Exterior Characteristics

The descriptions we have of the Second Meeting House come mostly from conversations that Dr. John L. M. Willis conducted with older citizens of Eliot at the time he published his newsletter of the Eliot Historical Society, Old Eliot. Dr. Willis published his newsletter from 1897 until 1909 around the time of the Eliot Centennial.

Anyone who is interested in the history of Eliot and the Upper Parish owes Dr. Willis an immeasurable debt of gratitude, for he has preserved a great deal of Eliot's early history for the benefit of posterity.

The Second Meeting House was a two story structure, built in the tradition of the plain New England meeting house. There were no steeples on these early church buildings. The exterior resembled that of a large colonial-style home. The sketch on the title page of this paper was provided by Dr. Willis in Old Eliot Vol. VIII No. I, 1906. A similar sketch was drawn by William Fogg on a map of Eliot which he created in 1850. The building was 50 feet by 40 feet and 25 feet high. In the front there were two sets of windows, two above two. A vestibule was added late in the history of the meeting house, and the stairs leading to the gallery were moved into this vestibule. The meeting house was sided with wood clapboard.

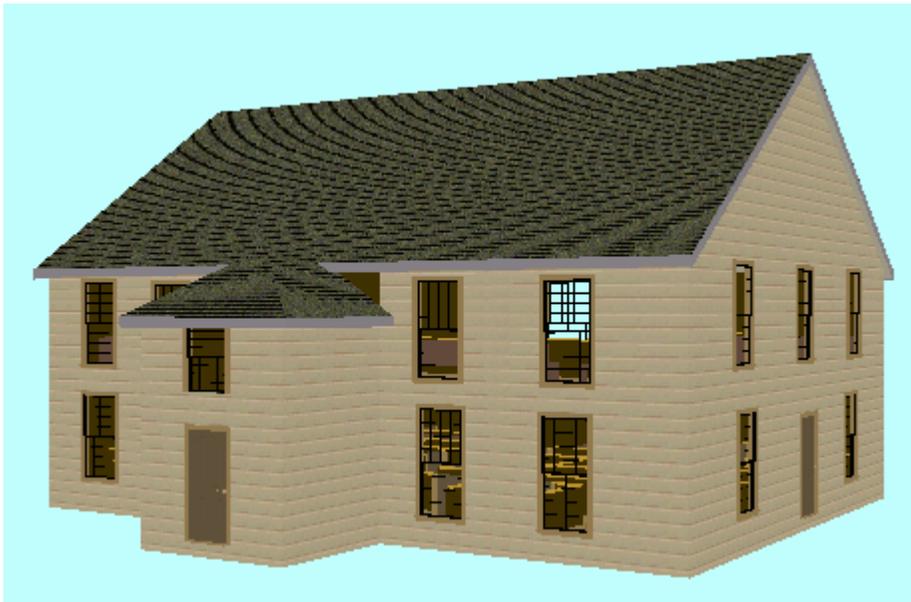


Figure 1a. Rendered view of front-right exterior of the Second Meeting House



Figure 1b. Rendered view of the front-left exterior of the Second Meeting House

IV. Interior Characteristics (Ground Floor)

The interior of the meeting house contained the typical layout of New England meeting houses of that era. When entering the vestibule, a set of stairs to the left led up to the gallery above the main floor. In this gallery were the singer's seats which were situated opposite the pulpit. Entering the main part of the meeting house, one could walk down a broad aisle that led directly to the pulpit. The pew area was mostly filled with square and rectangular "box pews". These were family pews that could fit an entire family together in one box. These pews were entered by a door on the side, which opened into an aisle. Box pews lined the entire exterior wall of the meeting house. These pews were elevated above the main floor such that the occupants could easily see above the pews which occupied the center of the meeting house. An aisle separated these

elevated pews from the pews in the center. Near the front of the meeting house, directly in front of the pulpit were 6 rows of bench pews, sometimes referred to as “free pews”. These were mostly used during communion ceremonies or, at times, for those in the parish who were hard of hearing. Figure 2 shows a rendition of how the bottom floor of the meeting house could have looked.

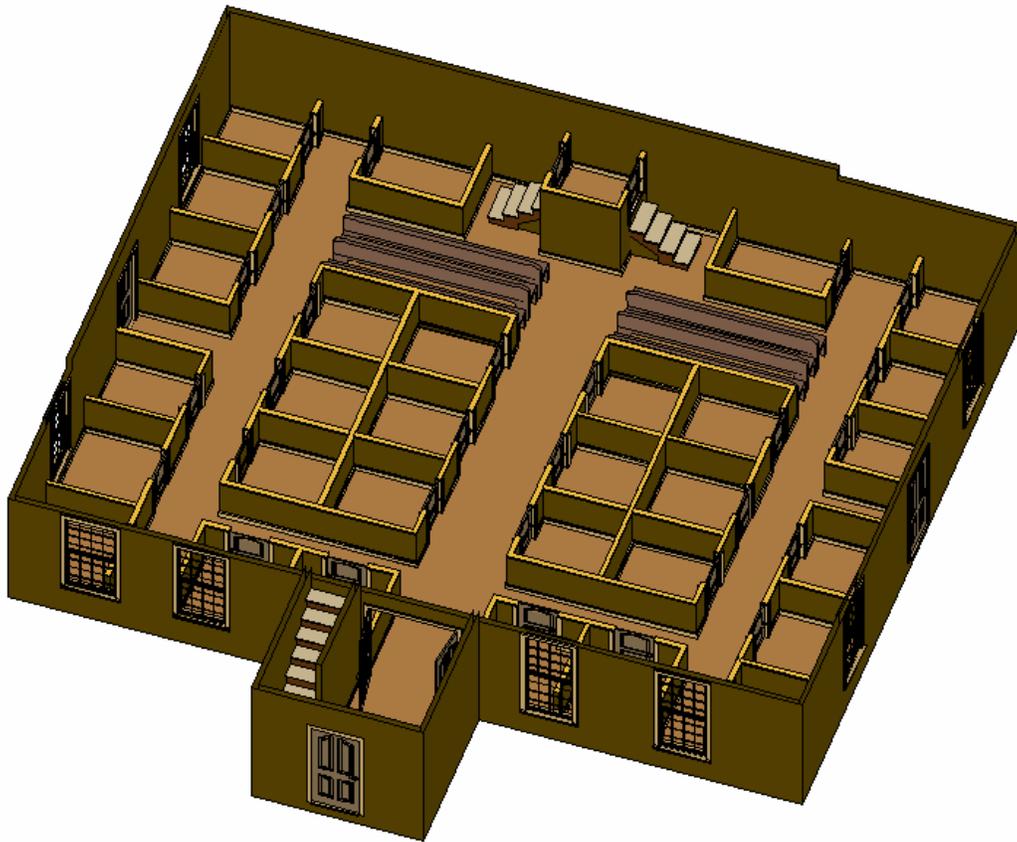


Figure 2. Rendition of bottom floor pew layout

V. Interior Characteristics (Gallery)

There are conflicting descriptions of the gallery in the upper floor provided in Old Eliot. Mr. James Shapleigh recalls the gallery “had seats on three sides, and the choir occupied the side facing the pulpit.” Everett Stackpole also describes a gallery on three

sides. The Reverend A.L. Chase recounted that the gallery occupied only the long side facing the pulpit and the short side along the road. In any event it appears that the choir occupied one side and children would sometimes sit together in the side gallery, along with the tithing man who, with the help of his tithing rod, would surely keep an eye on things. Figure 3 presents a possible look into our meeting house without its roof.

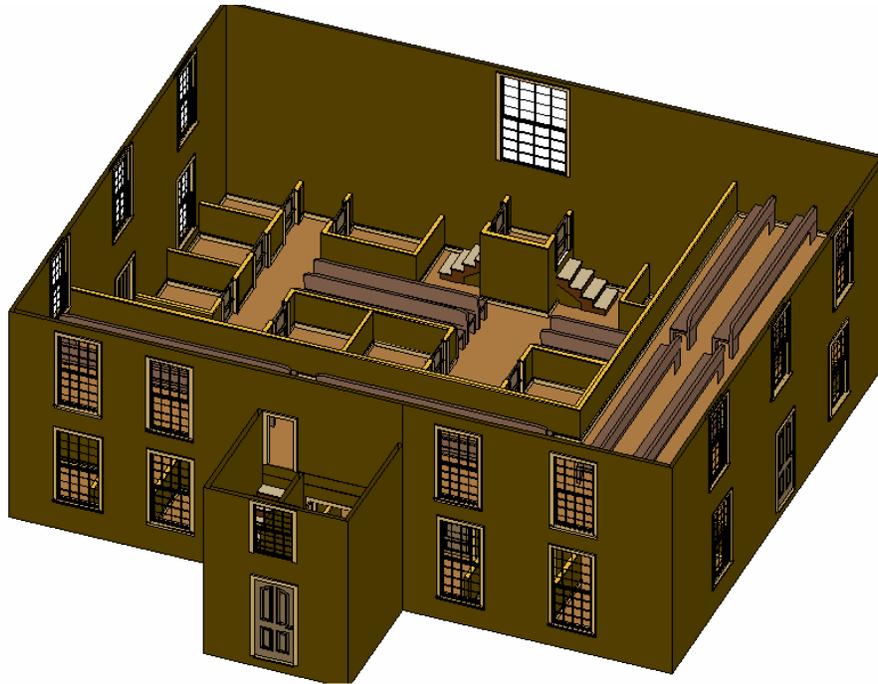


Figure 3. Rendered view of meeting house showing gallery

Figure 4 shows a possible view of the interior of the meeting house from a vantage point within a box pew near the front left of the building.



Figure 4. Rendered view from front of meeting house

VI. Interior Characteristics (Pulpit)

The pulpit sat at the front center of the meeting house opposite the entrance through the vestibule. It is described as having two sets of stairs leading to the top which was a platform surrounded by 3 sides of a square. This elevated platform would raise the speaker to the level of the floor of the gallery above. Directly behind the pulpit was a large window with an arched top. Above the pulpit was a sounding board made of a dark wood which would help to amplify the speaker's voice in the age before microphones. Figure 5 shows an ornate example of this type of pulpit.

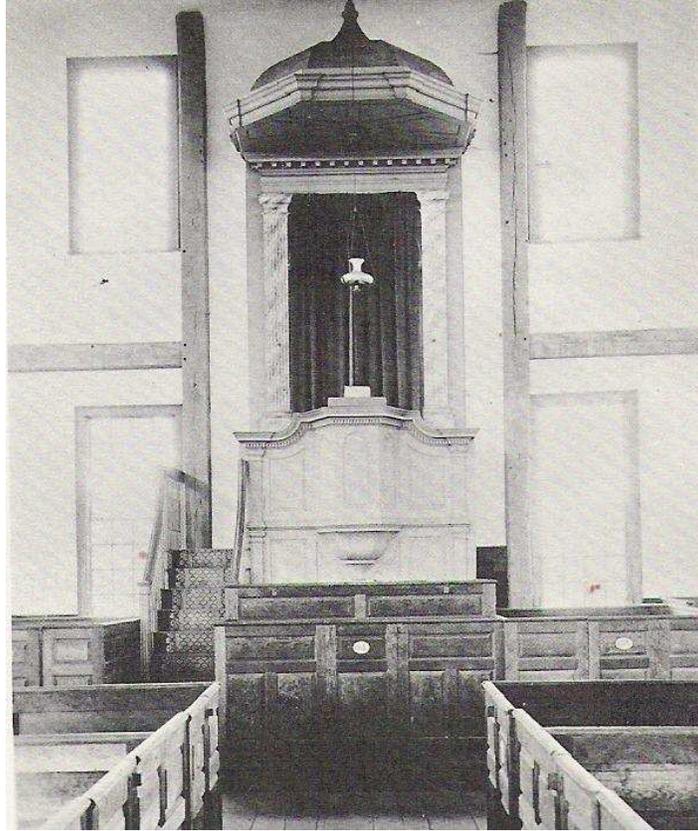


Figure 5. Pulpit from Rocky Hill Meeting House, Amesbury, MA

VII. Location

As stated in part II, the Second Meeting House was built upon lands given by Captain John Leighton. John Leighton was living on the estate that he inherited from his father William. This entire area was known as the Watts Fort area which encompasses all the land near the intersection of Old, Fore, and River Road, including Leighton Lane and part of the Riverview Development extending to the banks of the Piscataqua. Stackpole calls this area “Leighton’s Point”.

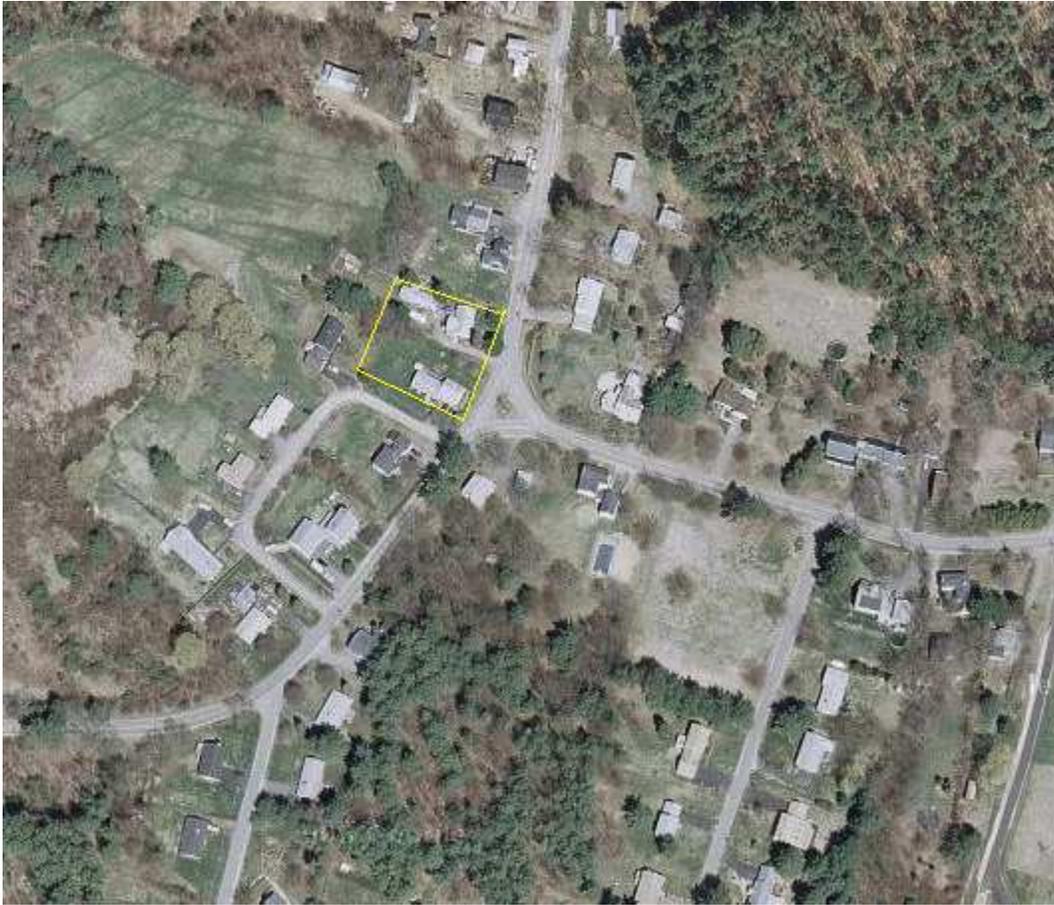


Figure 7. Modern aerial view with location in yellow

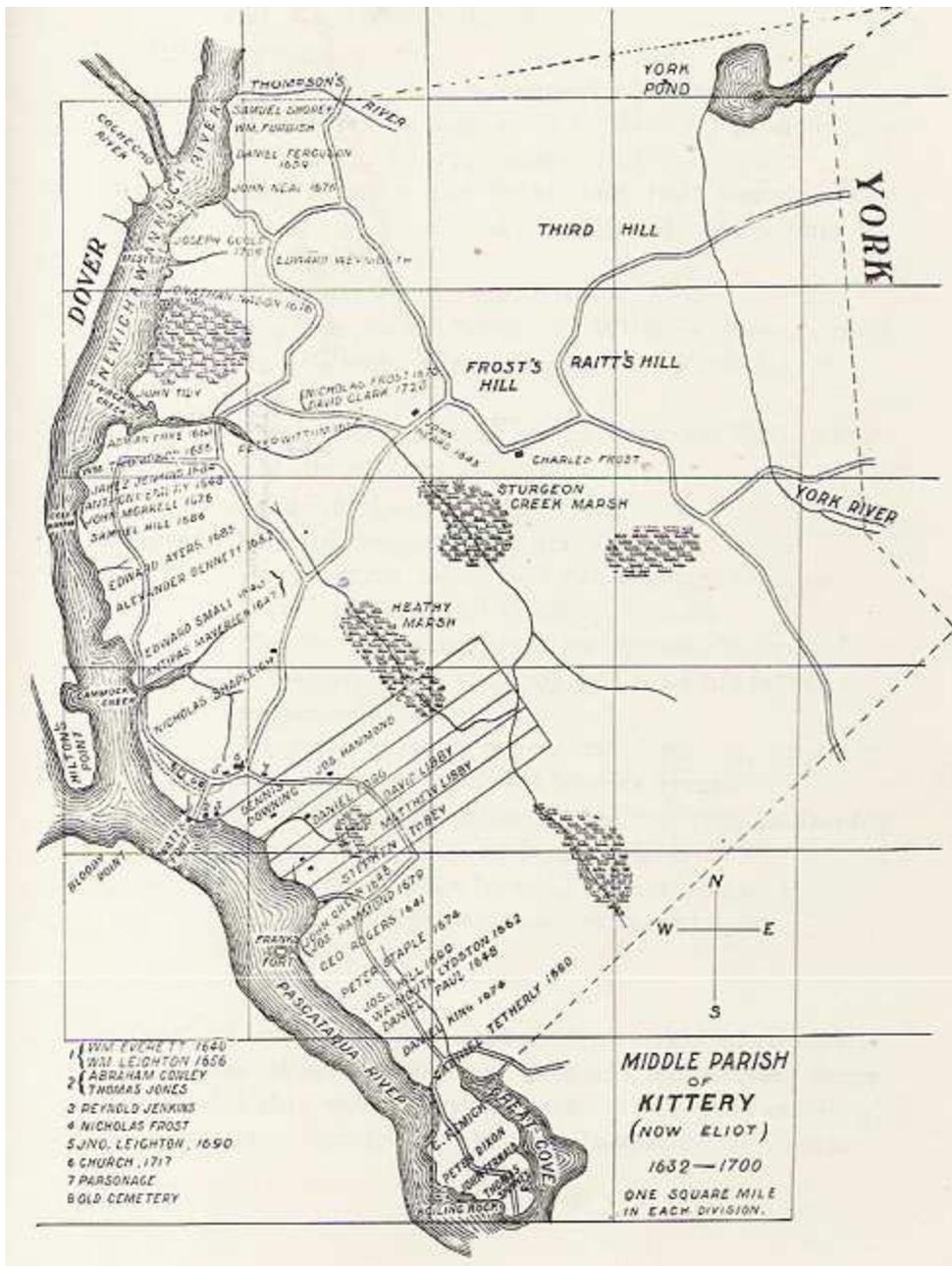


Figure 8. Map showing location of meeting house (6) & parsonage (7)

VIII. Conclusion

The Second Meeting House served as the center of parish life for the inhabitants of the Upper Parish of Kittery and Eliot for one hundred and twenty years. It may be that the old house required too much maintenance to continue its use. Eliot, and other New England towns, would soon discontinue the mix of religious and municipal business within the same building. The memory of the Second Meeting House fell to the older generations of the 19th century, and by the turn of the century, there were not many around who could still remember the old meeting house. Again, we are fortunate for the work of Dr. Willis, William Fogg, and the others who left descriptions and stories about the old meeting house for posterity.

The Second Meeting House is the link to our New England Puritan and Colonial past. Many of the traditions that we continue to this day, including the annual Town Meeting, had their beginnings under the roofs of the many rural meeting houses that dotted the New England landscape. The historic site of the Second Meeting House is an important part of our heritage. It is the location of the somewhat contentious genesis of our town's incorporation. The echoes of the sermons, debates, orations, and protests which occurred within its walls continue to reverberate for those who study its history. The religious legacy of the old meeting house continues today with the First Congregational Church of Eliot. The cultural legacy continues with the many descendants of those early families of Eliot who still inhabit our town, as well as in our present form of town government. For these reasons, the Second Meeting House is worthy of remembrance.

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