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## Importance of colonial meetinghouses discussed in Belmont

By TIM CAMERATO | Sep 24, 2014

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**BELMONT** — Colonial meetinghouses weren't just a place of worship, according to Paul Wainwright they helped build core principals of American democracy and left behind stunning architecture.

Wainwright is a photographer and author of "A Space for Faith: The Colonial Meetinghouses of New England." He presented his photos and some of what he's learned at a recent presentation before the Belmont Historical Society.

Wainwright began photographing colonial meetinghouses in 2004. The project began when he attended an open house at the Freemont Meeting House, on the way home he passed the Old Meeting House in Danville. He said he choose to photograph the meetinghouses to bring their story to a wider audience.

Wainwright said the buildings were a product of the Puritans, who settled New England.

"Puritans were a byproduct of the Protestant reformation," Wainwright said.

He said the religious group tried to purify the Church of England for about 100 years following its split with the Catholic Church.

Wainwright said the early meetinghouses helped develop the building blocks of what we know as American democracy, including participatory governance.

"That whole form of governance was brand new," Wainwright said.

Wainwright said his working definition of a "colonial meetinghouse" included those built for both town business and worship. He said those two weren't separate things for colonizing Puritans.

"The government was basically a theocracy," Wainwright said.

He said meetinghouses were usually built with tax money.

"They built buildings that were very different from cathedrals," Wainwright said.

He said the meetinghouses look very similar to each other though. They normally had three doors. One on the south wall was often called the "Door of Honor" and was used by the minister and guests. The other two were placed on the east and west walls. At one point, women and men would enter at different sides, but that tradition was later abandoned.

None of the meeting houses were white, as they're now presented today. Wainwright said original colors include mustard brown, yellow, and even shades of blue. He said color seems to have been regional, with certain sections of New England adopting similar hues.

Wainwright said the meetinghouses also had a box-like structure with very steep roofs. He said the insides usually included raised pulpits and box pews, which helped to cut down on the draft during the winter months. Early New Englanders were known to bring small charcoal stoves to keep their feet warm, along with other heating methods.

"You could bring a dog," Wainwright said. He said the animals would lie at parishioners' feet in the winter.

Wainwright said the meetinghouses often began with the questions of where to build. He said debates over placement of a meetinghouse could go on for years, and sometimes have to be mediated by neighboring towns' Board of Selectmen.

"They were always the center of the community," Wainwright said.

He said the buildings were also prone to moves, either when the residents of a community moved away or for expansion. Many colonial meeting houses were split in two and added onto for make space.

After taking audience members through some of the meeting houses he's photographed. Wainwright discussed the downfall of the meeting house.

He said the separation of church and state meant it was harder to use meeting houses for both purposes, although some towns built a second floor and literally separated the two activities.

Wainwright said a book named "The Country Builder's Assistant" by Benjamin Asher in 1797 also changed the architecture of America. In Asher's plans for buildings, he included a church that would become a model for many throughout the Northeast, leaving the colonial meetinghouse a thing of the past.

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