

Do you know how the Fifth (i.e. the present) Meeting House came into being?

The fifth and present meeting house of the North Parish was built in 1836. The early 1800's were a dynamic time for the Unitarian theological movement. William Ellery Channing preached his famous sermon on "Unitarian Christianity" in 1819. This sermon, which upheld the unity of God, the humanity of Jesus, and the ability of man to overcome error by reason and moral sense, is one of the most definitive statements of Unitarian principles made and it marked the real break between Unitarians and Trinitarians in America. The American Unitarian Society was founded in May of 1825 "to promote the union of all Unitarian Christians in the country." They had no wish to cut themselves off from historic Christianity, but rather to restore it to its primitive purity. But the break with traditional Christianity was not to be ignored. Bailey Loring, the minister of the North Parish at the time, subscribed to these views and supported these liberal developments.

Unfortunately, some members of the Church felt that Mr. Loring and the North Parish were "not satisfying their soul yearnings for a personal Saviour." This theological friction came to a head in 1834, when some members of the congregation withdrew to organize the Evangelical Church in North Andover, whose name was subsequently changed to the Trinitarian Congregational Church.

After this 1834 secession, as if to express their determination not only to survive as a congregation, but indeed, to thrive, the North Parish decided to build its fifth meeting house. And they were conscious of building for the future. The new emphasis in religion on religious education centers with "Sunday School", and on the Church as a social center with suppers and "sociables" made the old meeting house outdated. Thus one of the original motivations for a new meeting house was creation of a Parish Hall for both RE and social use.

The present building is the result of a meeting held on March 5, 1835. Thirty-four members voted in favor of a new church building, while twenty-two felt it would be wiser to repair and renovate the old Fourth Meeting House – hardly a unanimous vote! A committee was immediately appointed to procure plans. The committee soon reported that the new church could be built for \$6000, with an additional \$1000 for the "basement". As it turned out, they sorely underestimated the required amount, for in the end the cost came to \$11,400. Creative financing to close the gap was required in the form of auctioning of the old pews (though some were unhappy about this). In the end, the Parish raised the required amount, though it took a number of years.

Richard Bond of Boston, architect of Harvard's Gore Hall, was selected to design the Fifth Meeting House. A simplified Gothic plan based on the First Parish Church of Cambridge was decided on. By July, 1835, work was well underway, providing only 6 months from the initial decision to construction. The 1807 Paul Revere Bell was moved from the old meeting house to the new tower, where it remains today. The new meeting house was dedicated June 1, 1836, almost exactly 170 years ago. It was immediately decided that the basement would henceforth "go by the name of the Parish Hall."

Thus, the original construction of the Fifth Meeting House in many ways parallels our current building project. Committing on faith to a project validating our will to thrive as a congregation and to provide the environment necessary to allow us to fulfill the vision of our ancestors.