

# BENNINGTON'S OLD FIRST CHURCH AND WHAT IT SYMBOLIZES

By Joseph Parks and Tyler Resch

## I. The New England Context

The Old First Church of Old Bennington, now marking its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary, symbolizes the fact that those who lived in the late 1700s began to believe that the beautiful lines of a church praised God. Yet their pioneering ancestors, who came to settle here in the wilderness some forty years earlier, were “plain people” who believed that a beautiful church building distracted from worship and was therefore wrong.

When the first settlers came here in 1761, they found nothing but wilderness, practically unexplored, and it would take time to build cabins, remove trees to let the sunshine in, pull out stumps and rocks from the fields, and plant crops to feed people and domestic animals. They would do without such conveniences of life not produced here except for what they brought with them. Later, when they developed “money crops” such as maple sugar, they would travel to a large city (probably Albany), to purchase what small conveniences of life they did not produce.

They would do without a church for a few years. First they needed a minister among them. Rather than make a church of logs, they would wait until a sawmill was operating, to construct a plain-looking building of boards that would serve as church and meetinghouse until a proper church could be built, when they would also have a separate building for public meetings. As events unfolded, it took about three years to recruit an acceptable minister, and another year to build a combination church and meetinghouse.

What the first meetinghouse looked like is not clear, but it was almost certainly built in the somber style of Puritanism, influenced by the writings of John Calvin. The settlers' clothing, homes and manners also reflected Calvin's thought.

Bennington was first settled in 1761, just after the capture of Quebec by the British ended the French and Indian wars. Before that time, French Canada repeatedly sent raiding parties of their Indian allies led by French officers through what is now Vermont to terrorize New England settlements in western Massachusetts such as Deerfield. The French, mostly Roman Catholic, especially hated Massachusetts (“les Bastonnais”) as the symbol of Puritanism. It was not safe for English people to live in Vermont. But after France was defeated, the Indians stopped raiding from Canada while New England settlers from Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island moved into the territory now known as Vermont with as much possessions as they could haul or carry, to build cabins, clear fields, and raise crops. These people were overwhelmingly tillers of the soil, and devoted to their religion.

Those who came from old England to Massachusetts starting in 1620, settling first at Plymouth, later Boston, as well as their descendants who spread out to other colonies -- some of whom came to Bennington in 1761 and later -- were not from the privileged classes of old England. Few wealthy aristocrats and titled nobles who owned large tracts of land as feudal domains in England were attracted to migrate across the Atlantic.

Most migrants to the American colonies had formerly been the tenants of the aristocrats and noblemen. They wanted to own land and escape the domination of the higher classes. Why

didn't the monarchy take action to make them serfs here, too, as in England? Many of the aristocratic owners of manors in England wanted the kings to forbid them to leave, but it wasn't attempted. Why? For one thing, Englishmen or Britons (England had combined with Scotland to make Great Britain in the early 1700s) had developed ideas of personal freedom. For another reason, the religion of the monarchy (although occasionally the English kings were Roman Catholic) was Protestant, called Anglican in the old country, but Episcopalian here. Those who had been laborers on the aristocratic estates tended to become Puritans. The monarchy wasn't comfortable with Puritans, and may have let them go settle the colonies to be rid of them.

The best way for the Puritans to own land in America was to buy a plot or obtain a grant on the frontier where an entire family would labor together to carve a farm out of the wilderness. After obtaining land, building shelter and clearing fields for crops, a priority of the settlers was to practice their chosen religion of Puritanism, escaping domination of the Church of England headed by the king and favored by the nobility.

They tended to join one of the denominations that England nervously tolerated. Such denominations might be Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, or Quaker, but settlers often chose to be Congregationalists because that denomination gave its members more freedom.

The settlers who settled in Bennington came here after breaking relations with four different Congregational churches in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Each of the four dissident groups had the same dispute with the congregations they left - - the issue of being "born-again," which they claimed should be a pre-requisite to church membership and salvation. Most Congregational churches left that issue to the individual, but it often happened in the era known as "the Great Awakening," under the influence of the Rev. George Whitefield of London, that some "born-again" adherents insisted that the congregation be limited only to those who shared the born-again beliefs. Those who rejected the liberality of Congregationalism might find a like-minded minister and "separate" from the old congregation to found a new community and church elsewhere. They were known as "evangelists," "dissenters," "separates," or "New Lights," while the congregations they left were known as "Old Lights." Another divisive issue among the two types was whether a tax should be imposed to support the church and the minister.

Within about three to four years of arriving here, the Bennington settlers built their meetinghouse to serve both religious and secular needs. (The doctrine of "separation of church and state" was far in the future). They had successfully recruited a minister of the New Light persuasion, the Rev. Jedediah Dewey, to live and preach here.

A question within the church soon became a problem. Settlers were arriving in Bennington, some to stay, others passing through toward lands farther north. The question was, since not all the settlers hoping to settle here insisted on thinking of themselves as born-again, how long could Bennington and its church remain closed to settlers who thought otherwise?

When the French in 1760 were surrendering to the British army in Canada, and the Indian raids suddenly stopped, one of the New Light partisans from Hardwick, Massachusetts, Captain Samuel Robinson, learned that the colonial governor of New Hampshire, Benning Wentworth, had made a grant of a thirty-six-square mile township known as Bennington (named for himself) to a group of political supporters. Robinson heard that the holders might sell their land grants at attractive prices. Almost certainly Robinson went to see the governor at Portsmouth, and was encouraged by him to buy as much of that land as possible and settle Bennington. It's

possible that Robinson borrowed money from “New Lights” of the four churches who wanted to settle here among those of similar persuasion. While in Portsmouth, Robinson saw an opportunity and bought lands in other townships nearby granted by Wentworth.

By this turn of events Captain Robinson, whose previous motives had been purely religious, without perhaps wishing it, became a real estate broker with lands to resell for profit. His role as a broker enabled him to keep people of other faiths out of Bennington, because he could offer land in Bennington only to those in accord with his religious ideals. Those of Anglican persuasion he encouraged to settle in Arlington, a few miles north, and to Baptists he would sell land nearby in Shaftsbury.

It seems this story is not entirely legend, although it is not recorded fact. Whether this scheme actually motivated Captain Robinson or not, it seemed to work for many years after his death in 1767. Not until the late 1820s and early 1830s, did Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians start up churches in Bennington, and Catholics not until the 1850s.

Robinson was a “plain person,” and becoming a broker might make him wealthy, but the fact was that plain people did not so much frown on gaining wealth as on showing wealth. After all, human thought does not remain long without change, and the next change would become the “Protestant ethic,” that God rewards with riches those who work hard, live modestly, and save as much as possible of what they make.

## II. The First Meetinghouse: Church and Government Using the Same Building

It was already a custom in Puritan New England during the early settlements that until the wilderness was conquered, the desire for a proper church edifice should be postponed by compromising on a plain building used both for church meetings and local government. That was in keeping with the desire of plain people not to be distracted from worship by ostentation, and also practical in view of subsistence farming incomes and dislike of taxes.

In the early 1600s the combination buildings, found mostly in eastern Massachusetts, tended to be square, pyramidal-roofed and crowned with a belfry, but later they became more standardized and even less artistic, looking like barns from which they probably were derived, for practical reasons of low cost and ease of construction. Some historians in fact call them “barns.” A few still exist, but during the early 1800s most communities outgrew the small space inside, and churches replaced the old combination meetinghouses. After that, separate courthouses for town purposes, and churches for worship became the norm.

Five or so years after the first settlers arrived, the Bennington community was ready to build a building with sufficient room for religious services coupled with meetings of the proprietors (land owners) who were superseded gradually by selectmen. This first meetinghouse was also used for town meetings, later for state legislative sessions, court trials, and such unforeseen events as housing the wounded “Hessian” prisoners after the battle of Bennington on August 16, 1777.

The old meetinghouse was paid for by a tax on plots of land. After ten years and more it was still not finished inside and a subscription was taken to complete it. Thereafter that first building served its dual purposes through forty years during the terms of the first three ministers, the Revolutionary War, and the fourteen years (1777-1791) of the independent

Vermont republic. In 1781 the first courthouse was built on the upper hill, and governmental functions were held there.

By that time, public opinion was changing slowly toward appreciation of beauty in churches, and leadership was moving toward the elitist faction led by Governor Isaac Tichenor. Almost all the elitists chanced to live around the lower hill on today's Monument Avenue near the old meetinghouse, and they favored a new and beautiful church building to bolster Bennington's prestige.

The center of power in Vermont, by 1791 the fourteenth state of the American Union, was moving northward, and in Bennington commerce was beginning to move downhill from the "centre" (or center) village toward the water-powered industrial sites along the Walloomsac River in the industrial revolution that was only starting to blossom in North America.

### III. The Original Settlers

Two developments occurred simultaneously. One was that the attempt to allow no one but "New Lights" to live in Bennington gradually failed. Captain Robinson didn't live long, and his sons and heirs were willing to sell land to others regardless of their religious orientation. The younger Robinsons were, over the years, also willing to sell small lots in the center village to non-farmers, being artisans who would work from their homes, such as blacksmiths, cordwainers (shoemakers), weavers, tailors, millers, and so forth. These people were wanted in the early days to make a self-sustaining community. Doctors and lawyers were little wanted. The Robinsons might as well be liberal, for they no longer had a complete monopoly on all the land for sale in the center village. As it was, the Robinsons' willingness to sell small plots to artisans caused the first community in the town to be located in the center of the town around the public buildings, but that took years to accomplish.

The true origin of the center village was soon forgotten, as various oral versions of history supplanted the truths that had never been recorded. It came to be believed locally that the first parties of settlers to reach Bennington in the summer of 1761 liked the looks of the area between where the battle monument and old first church are today, so everyone unloaded the wagons and began building shelters there. The truth is that each family had a deed to a parcel of 320 acres or fraction thereof (160 or 80 acres), bought from leader/broker Robinson, and since Indian raiders were no longer a problem after the fall of Quebec, the families set out to find as best they could the plots they owned, and build their cabins there.

To find one's plot was not easy because Bennington was 36 square miles in size, 6 miles on each side, marked only at the corners by blazes on trees. It helped that the 320-acre parcels were numbered on a little map that probably had been circulated by the founder/broker, showing lot number one in the south-west corner, counting east along the south border to eight, then up a rank and east again to 16, and so on by ranks to lot 64 in the north-east corner.

The misinformation that the settlers had squatted together in a community at the center, was picked up and believed by local historians a century and more later. Three of them gave different reasons why the center (Old Bennington) was chosen in 1761 for the settlement. One claimed it was high ground chosen for military defense. Another claimed that it was high ground chosen for reasons of health over the damp areas along the river. A third claimed there

was a natural clearing there so that no trees need to be cleared for planting. All were wrong. It was the Robinson heirs' willingness over the early years to sell small plots to artisans that made the central area the first village.

Until the death of Captain Robinson in 1767 he could exclude the non-believers by not offering them land in Bennington, but that was a difficult policy to maintain as more settlers arrived who were willing to say they were believers. Who knew? A change was made in the early church whereby applicants for church membership were required to describe their conversion experience to a church committee for a judgment on its sincerity. That solution didn't work out either, and over the years after the captain's death, applicants were allowed to choose to be members (believers in evangelism) or associate members (non-believers) with no questions asked. This latest change ended the attempt at exclusion from Bennington of those who were not born-again and put the local church back into the mainstream of Congregational liberalism, i.e., leaving the born-again issue for each individual to decide according to his or her own conscience.

Another change taking place was the breakdown of the "plain people" distinction. That concept had not taken deep root anywhere except for a time in the New England interior. It was never popular in the east coast shipping centers where men were getting rich with no desire to hide the fact. In the Southern seacoast cities such as Charleston, the same attitudes of elitism prevailed as in Boston and New York City. In the interior South, where planters inherited agricultural lands worked by slaves, there was no prejudice against wealth, social position, and education for rich children only. Those who had advantages were proud to show it.

For some decades in Bennington the perceived differences between the elitists and the plain people prevailed, but as time went by the distinction weakened. The men of the principal founding family, the Robinsons, in early years wore long trousers called pantaloons, ending in short boots preferred by farmers (although the Robinsons were not all farmers anymore) and vests, with their hair pulled back and tied at the back of the neck with a string. That costume contrasted with the elitists who wore knee britches over white stockings ending in black shoes with metal buckles, preferably of silver. They preferred cut-away waistcoats and shirts with ruffles at the neck and on very special occasions, wore white powdered wigs.

The first of the elitists to come here was Isaac Tichenor from New Jersey, who arrived just before the Battle of Bennington. He was a young man of courtly manners and deferential talk (behind his back he was called "the Jersey Slick") who intended to be a politician. Tichenor was paid by the Continental Congress in Philadelphia to stockpile military supplies in Bennington for soldiers assembling to stop the advance of General Burgoyne's half-British, half-"Hessian" army toward Albany.

When a prominent New York Tory advised Burgoyne that there was a well-supplied storehouse in Bennington, Burgoyne saw it as a solution to his pressing supply problems, and sent German Brunswickers to raid and seize those supplies and deliver them to his hungry camp north of Albany. Foiling that raid and capturing the raiders is what the Battle of Bennington was all about, although this brief explanation simplifies a great event.

Tichenor had an early admirer here, Captain Elijah Dewey, son of the first minister. Dewey wasn't noticeably religious, joining the church near the end of his life more out of insurance than conviction. But he got along with his religious father, Jedediah Dewey. Being an enterprising man, in 1771 Elijah Dewey built Dewey's Tavern (now the Walloomsac Inn)

across the road from the meetinghouse. "Dewey's" offered not only lodging but also was a "tavern stand" for stage coaches and handled the rudimentary mail services of that early date. The inn of 1771 still stands directly across the highway from the church - - in deteriorating condition.

Elijah Dewey was a man proud of his accomplishments and wealth. After he lost his first wife, he married a New Jersey widow of wealth. He commissioned the itinerant artist Ralph Earl to paint portraits of him and wife in fine clothing, and you can see his inn both in the portrait of himself and the landscape of the centre village. Anyone interested in New England culture should see those paintings at the Bennington Museum, and compare the elitist clothing of the Deweys with that of the plain General David Robinson, who still pulls his hair back and ties it with a string about thirty years after plainness started going out of style.

In the 1780s, a courthouse was built where the Bennington Battle Monument now stands. It can be seen in the landscape painting by Earl, crowning the hilltop where the Robinsons and other plain people tended to live, whereas Tichenor, Dewey, and other elitists tended to live around the old meeting house. Tichenor's white Georgian mansion, located near the inn, has a prominent place in the Earl landscape.

The places where these factions lived were called "uphill" and "downhill" until the industrial village of downtown Bennington developed in the 1800s around water-powered mill sites on the river. That gave an entirely new meaning to the two terms. Until about 1850, however, the new industrial village down-the-hill was an object of scorn from the hill-dwellers, especially their sons, who traded insults with the sons of the downhill-dwellers. Their fathers may have been more mannerly, but they were partisans, too.

Not only were the plain people and elitists separated geographically, but also politically, because the plain ones were followers of Thomas Jefferson (called Republicans back then, later Democrats). The elitists were devoted to the politics of Alexander Hamilton, whose party later were called Federalists. As long as George Washington lived, the idea of political parties was unwelcome to him.

#### IV. When the Old First Church was New

The old meetinghouse by the 1800s was seen by many as small and demeaning to a town that had developed pride in its growth and appearance. The movement to build a new church for religious purposes began about 1790 in the ministry of Rev. Job Swift, the second minister, who said the question "vexed" his ministry. Each time the elitists passed a motion raising the "new church" issue, the plain people moved to countermand it, declaring a new church "not wanted." This struggle continued for years, but each year the number of the aging plain faction was reduced, while the elitists were growing in numbers and determination.

Another matter vexing Rev. Swift's ministry was the continuing demand for revival meetings, which the minister did not welcome because he did not approve the born-again belief, thinking that revivals made susceptible persons think they had experienced something connected to God that God didn't do. Rev. Swift resigned, and it is remarkable that during the first years of the 1800s while the question of the new church was being decided, there was no minister at all.

In his absence, however, there were revival meetings, which helped to convert a few of the plain people to favor the new church proposal, even if it would be a “fancy” church. Without a minister in those important years, few records were kept, making it difficult to know what happened. A book, “The Old Meetinghouse” (really about the Old First Church) by the younger Rev. Jennings (1907), attempts to reconstruct the missing information.

To build a beautiful new church here of the type which became common to southern New England, involved solving several problems. How was it to be paid for? Where on the public land at the center would it be located? Would the old meetinghouse be taken down? Who would design the new church and what would it look like?

The plain people, dwindling in numbers and power, recognized the inevitable and concentrated their opposition on a proposal to raise the necessary money by selling the box pews to the highest bidder, the choicest box pews bringing the highest prices. To have the town’s richest man and his family occupying the box in the center front of the church because he could pay for it, was an affront to plain peoples’ ideals.

The traditional way to raise money to build a church had been a tax on real property. Old Lights had believed in it, but the plain people were usually New Lights who traditionally disliked taxes. If people were taxed on real estate, nobody who owned land could escape it, and plain people predictably hoped to escape taxation. To object to the minister and escape paying for his support to them seemed their right. There had been protests to the legislature and it tried an experiment in letting them support a second or third minister in town so long as they supported some minister. That caused some of them to pay a minister on Mount Anthony whose church was his house, but that didn’t suit all of the objectors either.

As nothing pleased everyone and the church was not being built, the congregation decided to try a call for donations. The amount donated was about half the \$5000 estimated to build the church. The donations were returned. The only remaining option was to “sell” the box pews. It was proposed to do so at auction, with a minimum price specified, ranging from \$40 to \$500. This was considered a true “sale” because the box pews could be re-sold or inherited. At that point, Moses Robinson, the town’s richest man, the leader of the plain people, and a deacon of the church, let it be known that he would pay \$500 for the choicest box pew. That may have struck the plain people like lightning, but they must have seen it as the inevitable and unavoidable end of the argument.

The minimum prices were met or exceeded, producing proceeds of almost \$8000, said to be ample to build the proposed church of 52 feet by 60. At that point, it appeared certain that the new church would be built, but where on the public lands at the center of town remained undecided. The proponents of beauty wanted the church placed where it would be seen and admired from the roads approaching it from the north, south and west. That called for a precise location for optimum viewing, in an area partly covered by gravestones, and partly by a peculiar little building that was a private upper school, Clio Hall (named for a school in England that was named for the Greek muse of history). Clio Hall burned in 1803, giving the proponents of beauty their desired location for the new church.

The remaining issue was the graves that would be covered if the new church were placed where the proponents wished. In fact, they wanted the new church pushed further back from the intersection of the roads, in order to provide a proper space in front of the church to create a visually pleasing setting. They prevailed. That space allows the lane in front of the church that

is used to create an island where the old meetinghouse once stood, and the lane with its walk provides the space for the ornamental memorial fence that unites the church visually with the cemetery.

It was argued that in the mother country it was customary to have graves under the church. Now the elitists were in control, and they left it to those families who wished to remove the remains of their relatives to new graves to do so, otherwise construction would proceed over the graves. So far as we know, no families removed remains. The gravestones, if they existed (the original markers were made of wood and were sometimes replaced later by stone) were pulled up and stacked against the northeast foundation of the new church and remained there for decades.

Whether to leave the old meetinghouse standing for town purposes was an easy decision. The old meetinghouse would have interfered with the visual setting the proponents of beauty desired. Furthermore, the new courthouse on the hill had a courtroom large enough for most public occasions, so the old meetinghouse, or at least part of it, was sold to the pioneer printer Anthony Haswell and added to his home on the upper hill.

At last, construction of the new church began in 1804 with framing and boards coming from trees logged in the area. Lavius Fillmore, called "the joiner," meaning contractor, moved to Bennington and supervised the construction. The six principal columns were made of single tree trunks of the type previously reserved by British law for masts needed by the Royal Navy. They run upwards from brick foundations in the cellar to the roof. The shipyards of New England did not have lathes large enough to turn the tree trunks so the work was done with axes, chisels and planes.

Who was the architect of the new church? That has been a disputed matter pursued through research and finally settled. Some writers thought that the plans were taken by the contractor Lavius Fillmore from a book of plans called "The Country Builders Assistant" by Asher Benjamin, who must therefore be the architect. But Glenn Andres, Professor of Architecture at Middlebury College, found in recent years that before Benjamin's book was published, Lavius Fillmore (the contractor) about 1794 had already designed and built the church at East Haddam, Connecticut, with all the new design features that Benjamin has been given credit for. Therefore we must pardon the good Rev. Vincent Ravi-Booth, minister of the Old First Church in the 1930s, for his mistake in calling Benjamin the architect, since Professor Andres had not yet uncovered the truth.

After the Asher Benjamin book was published, Fillmore designed and built similar churches at Bennington and Middlebury, but both their designs included new refinements that make them superior to the design of the East Haddam church. The church at Bennington is thought by some experts to be the finest of the three, but that opinion gives demerits to Middlebury for existing modifications made subsequent to its construction, whereas the subsequent modifications at Bennington have all been removed and the edifice restored as it was when Lavius Fillmore finished it.

Fillmore the architect moved to Bennington from Connecticut to supervise the construction, and later moved to Middlebury while the church there was under construction. He had relatives in Bennington, and was a distant cousin of U.S. President Millard Fillmore of Buffalo, N.Y., whose grandfather lived in Bennington.



For more than a century changes had been made to the Bennington church to make it more comfortable and useful, and to keep up with changes in the public taste, but the changes diminished the purity of the design. A furnace with ugly hot air pipes was installed to replace the sooty little foot stoves used to warm toes in winter. Stained glass replaced clear glass in the Palladian windows, and the box pews were replaced with heavy benches in dark Victorian colors. The high pulpit with its double stairway had been removed and replaced with a choir loft and an organ with tall pipes that covered the largest Palladian window. Some windows that had been plastered over were uncovered. Parts of the walls had been painted green. The interior had been vastly changed, for better or worse.

## V. The Evolution of Old Bennington

To understand the church in recent times, one needs to understand the accomplishments of Reverend Vincent Ravi-Booth, Italian-born minister of the Old First Church in the early 1900s, mentioned earlier in connection with the widely accepted mistake that Asher Benjamin was the architect instead of Lavius Fillmore.

As said before, nothing about human affairs stands still for long. Over the decades, great changes occurred in the “centre” community that surrounds the church. (It was not incorporated as the “Village of Bennington Centre” until 1896, and the name was changed to Old Bennington in 1907). The first signs of change were noted about 1800 when the new industrial community down-the-hill began to grow along the river with its good sites for mills and factories powered by waterwheels. By 1820, the population there equaled the population of the center village on the hill, and there was another water-powered community downstream called the north village.

On the hill in 1820 were all the town’s trappings of political power and prestige: the church, the courthouse, the newspaper, the post office, the school, the cemetery, the hotels, the stagecoach “stands,” and so forth. When the circuit-riding legislature met here, it convened in the courthouse on the upper hill. The hill-dwellers thought all was as it should be, and must always be so. By the 1850s, however, the newspaper, the post office, and even the name “Bennington” were moved down to the industrial village.

Schools, hotels, churches, and cemeteries were now all over town. Both the downtown village and north village (North Bennington) had railroad stations and factories while the old center village had none. The only souvenir of better days left in the center was the courthouse, and by 1869 it would move downtown, too. Vacant houses were for sale or rent on the hill, and the old center village began to look like a slum.

In 1875 something unnoticed happened on the hill that had unforeseen consequences for good throughout the town and county. By the efforts of former governor Hiland Hall of North Bennington, the legislature chartered the Bennington Historical Society. The old gentleman, our best early historian, had negotiated from the legislature exactly what he wanted. The plan called for an impressive monument to the victory of the Bennington Battle, to be located on the upper hill at the site of the continental storehouse the British were sent to capture. Invited to participate in the festivities (and fund it) would be certain specified governments: the United States, Vermont, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Connecticut.

Quietly omitted from participation was New York, a state that Hiland Hall and most Vermonters had never forgiven for claiming that the lands granted by New Hampshire’s

nefarious governor Benning Wentworth, actually belonged to New York, which we know now was true all along. But in 1891, when the battle monument was dedicated with U.S. President Harrison present, a resident of nearby Hoosick claimed that there were New York military units that participated in the Battle of Bennington as denied by Benningtonians, and moreover, that a battle monument must be erected only at the battle site. This argument was to some extent answered by Benningtonians and to some extent ignored. New York state authorities were not interested in the protests from Hoosick because New York was involved in building a great memorial to the victory at Saratoga, of which the victory at Bennington was only a brief interlude in the greater drama at Saratoga. It is truly said that Saratoga was the “turning point of the American revolution” because it brought France to our aid. (One can claim that Bennington’s battle was the “turning point of the turning point.”)

The unforeseen consequence of Hall’s initiative was that some wealthy citizens of Troy, N.Y., noticed that it was a little cooler here in the summer than Troy, that much fine real estate was available in the old center village at bargain prices, and moreover, that an hour’s trip on the railroad was all the travel necessary to get here. They bought land, built, tore down, and moved houses, organized for themselves a country club and lending library, gave parties, and soon had a thriving, exclusive summer colony where the wife and children spent the summers and father came on the train to spend weekends.

The existence of the summer colony in the old center village presented both opportunity and problems for Rev. Ravi-Booth. His church was surrounded by the old town cemetery. The cemetery over the decades had been enlarged several times by local businessmen who sold lots for profit before perpetual care had been invented. Families were supposed in theory to take care of the lots, but in many cases the families had moved west during the 1800s and the cemetery looked bad indeed.

At the end of the Civil War, a concerned citizen named William S. Montague organized an effort to beautify the cemetery by regrading it, removing boulders and briar patches, and straightening stones. It is believed that he also retrieved the gravestones of those buried under the church and planted them side-by-side along the north side where there are no graves. In any case, after Montague had finished, the cemetery returned slowly from a wild state to a beautiful, well-kept appearance, an effort that Ravi-Booth continued and completed.

The solution for Ravi-Booth’s cemetery problem came from the legislature, which created a non-profit corporation called the Bennington Centre Cemetery Association, to solicit the public for funds via memberships, dues, and donations to be used to keep the cemetery in proper order. Ravi-Booth worked personally in the effort, and over years, its appearance has completely changed, so that it is now in harmony with the old church rather than subtracting from it. The imposing white wooden memorial fence across the front of the cemetery binds church and cemetery together visually into a pleasing sight.

Ravi-Booth’s second problem recurred each year in the fall, when the summer colonists returned to Troy leaving him without a congregation until they came back the following summer. The industrial village residents, perhaps offended by the Trojans’ exclusivity, did not come readily up the hill for services. How could he have a congregation for the cold months only? His answer was to found a college or finishing school for non-resident females who would arrive when the summer colony went home in the fall and remain until summer when the Trojans would return.

That idea had been proposed years before by the widow Ada Conkling, mother-in-law of a wealthy gentleman farmer and summer resident from New York City, James C. Colgate, whose Fillmore Farms estate covered over 3000 acres on and around Mount Anthony. Mr. Colgate's lands extended as far east as Monument Avenue at the westerly end of Elm Street, where Ravi-Booth hoped Colgate would give the church the acreage for the college.

To make the long story shorter, several factors came together to make the minister's college idea of 1923 fail. The Great Depression beginning in 1929 affected Colgate's inherited New York City brokerage business and shrank his wealth, making him cautious. Secondly, the idea of a college for females attracted the attention of prominent educators nation-wide who became enthusiastic over the suggestion that the new college would not be another "finishing school for females" turning out cultured wives and mothers, but a truly new type of school that would educate women, not necessarily for marriage but for careers as writers, actresses, teachers, dancers, musicians, etc.

While Colgate kept silent, he could not accept the new idea and withdrew his offer. The initiative passed to a family named Jennings who descended from the minister who published a history of the meeting house and church in 1869 called "Memorials of a Century." A gift of a Jennings mansion and farm near North Bennington resulted in Bennington College opening its doors there in 1932, and later the Hall Park McCullough family of North Bennington, related to the Jennings family, helped the college through to success. While this development proved a disappointment to Ravi-Booth's hopes, he unselfishly did all he could to make the new college succeed.

Rev. Ravi-Booth's third problem was that the Old First Church, after all the unhappy "improvements" during the 1800s, had come to look dark, dilapidated, and depressing. The cemetery was looking better and made the old church look worse. He saw tourists beginning to arrive in automobiles in summertime and fall foliage season despite the Great Depression. The Battle Monument was attracting visitors, and so did the new Bennington Museum. History was Bennington's theme. If the church could be made attractive inside and out, and its history received publicity, it too, might attract tourists. Would a fund drive help? It was depression time, but he would try.

That worked better than anyone could have expected. Of his three initiatives, this one had perhaps the least reason to expect success, but in the end, it succeeded and became Ravi-Booth's best work.

He had originally estimated \$30,000 for the restoration work. Henry W. Putnam, the Bennington industrialist whose fortune established the hospital, contributed one-third and Ravi-Booth traveled the state to raise the remainder from individuals. Apparently no federal or state moneys were contributed, but the donations came from individuals in small amounts. That seems surprising, especially when the total cost of restoration went to \$150,000, but it worked despite the depression.

## VI. The Restoration of a Shrine

In the late 1930s, the Old Bennington summer colony was still active, but time had shrunk the ranks of the original Trojans, and many of their houses were owned by newcomers. One of the newcomers was a well-to-do Congressman and financier from Chicago named

Morton Hull, who owned the oldest frame house in Bennington and perhaps in Vermont, the Dewey house two doors south of the church, first occupied in 1763-4 by the first minister Rev. Jedediah Dewey. Morton Hull spent all his entire summers here.

Inasmuch as Hull's son was working on the project, it might be thought that the father was a large contributor to Ravi-Booth's restoration project, but that isn't known. The son, Denison Bingham Hull, was an architect specializing in historic reconstruction projects. Another unanswered question is whether Denison Hull was paid for his efforts by the church, or his father, or anyone. It also isn't known whether the restoration project was suggested by Ravi-Booth to the father or son, or one of them suggested it to the minister. All we know is that Denison Hull knew Bennington well, as he spent summers here in the house owned by the late Tom and Kit Foster near the hospital, and he is buried here in the old cemetery.

Denison Hull and Ravi-Booth seem to have thought from the beginning that the church must be restored to its original condition, if that could be known. Fillmore's original plans were not found. Hull studied the building like a detective at a crime scene, taking up sections of floor to learn where the original box pews had been. Pieces of wood that had been stored away were found in the cellar and attic and studied for clues to the past. In time, it was clear that enough money would be found, so the church was closed and work began. The heavy bench pews were taken away, as well as the choir loft and the organ that obscured the largest Palladian window. The hot air furnace with its ugly pipes was replaced by a steam system located in a separate building outside with pipes running underground. All doors and windows that had been changed were replaced. Stained glass, which belonged to the Victorian era, was changed back to clear.

Finally Denison Hull had solved all the problems, his plans were made, and Ravi-Booth agreed. It took the two years 1935-6 to do the work, so while Hull supervised the work, the minister devoted his time to publicity and fund-raising. In early 1937 the restoration was complete, and the legislature was pleased to declare the cemetery and the church together to be "Vermont's Colonial Shrine." Tyler Resch has declared the result "an architectural confection" and stated that if a vote were taken among architectural experts they would conclude the Old First Church of Bennington is the finest example of church architecture in Vermont.

## VII. Architectural Fine Points

In conclusion, let us study some of the more notable points of the architectural details of the Old First Church as understood from Denison B. Hull and others who have offered informed opinions on such matters.

1. The style of the Church's architecture can be correctly called "Georgian" (after the succession of British kings whose first names were George) or it can be called "Federal," referring to the era following the U.S. Constitution, when it was built. The style shows the influence of Sir Christopher Wren's churches in London, and Thomas Bullfinch's in Boston.

2. Lavius Fillmore was chosen to be the architect of the Bennington church because of the success of his church at East Haddam, Connecticut. Archer Benjamin was not the architect. Fillmore offered to the church officials in Bennington his design for the ceiling that he called the "Cross of Christ Embracing the World." In architectural terms, it was a raised area in the

ceiling with a round, raised “dome,” leading the eye upwards towards heaven. Fillmore used the same design in the East Haddam church, except that the “dome” there was octagonal rather than round. The round Bennington design seems more pleasing.

3. Denison Hull produced magnificent drawings of the Old First Church showing in great detail such exterior features as the false windows high in the belfry, and the quoins, which are wooden imitations of tailored stones set in the corners of the building. Hull also discovered that Fillmore was so meticulously attentive to detail that he made each row of clapboards wider as they ascend from the foundation toward the roof, so that the perspective of the viewer at ground level is corrected to make each row look exactly the same width.

4. Palladian windows are named for the Italian architect Palladio whose work became popular in England during the 1700s. His windows are not always the same size, sometimes have arched tops, and the mullions, instead of being straight, curve gracefully. The largest one, in the east end of the church that was obscured by the old choir loft and organ, has smaller panels flanking the center panel. There are other Palladian windows with curved tops and curving mullions in the upper rows of side windows, while the lower rows are conventional.

5. Box pews were in style at the time the church was first built in 1805. They have the disadvantage that some of the occupants sit with their backs to the minister, but they look quaint and please visitors who enjoy things as they one were. Box pews are also designed to hold families, and the original money to build the church was raised by “selling” the box pews.

6. In the first years of the church there was no bell in the belfry. In 1820 the leader of the elitist faction and many times governor, Isaac Tichenor, donated a bell cast in Troy. It cracked, was sent back to the foundry for repairs, and has worked properly ever since.

7. After 1845, whatever weathervane originally decorated the highest point of the church was apparently removed and replaced with a new and elaborate design of painted iron, showing a double comet streaking across the sky. It must have been inspired by Biela’s comet of 1845 that broke in two parts that traveled along together, a great curiosity. When the belfry was taken down for repairs in 1984, a copy of the weathervane was made and installed. The original is now on loan from the Old First Church to the Bennington Museum, where it can be seen in the Church Gallery.

8. Due notice should be taken of the endless use of architectural decoration in the church, both inside and out. To speak of them requires architectural terms such as pediments, capitals, dentils, and pilasters. The front entrance is ornamented with three doors. The front side of the church is doubled, repeated with a smaller version, both with its own gable ends and ornamented with dentils. The belfry is made in three separate parts for ornamentation, with Palladian windows all around except in the highest part, which is decorated with false oval windows. It truly is, as said earlier, an “architectural confection,” and yet all the ornamentation fits together so artfully that one might think of it as simple when it isn’t.