



Address: 35 South Main Street

Contemporary Building Name: First Church in Marlborough (Congregational)

Historic Building Name: Marlborough Congregational Church

Present Use: Church

Historic Use: Church

Architectural style: Greek Revival

Date constructed: 1842

Description: The Marlborough Congregational Church is a frame Greek Revival-style meetinghouse situated on a hill overlooking South Main Street. The setting is a rural, wooded area with a scattering of both historic and modern buildings nearby. Completed in 1842, the church is a single tall story high and measures 44 by 55 feet in plan, with its narrower end facing the road. The front gable is treated as a pediment, and the main entrance is recessed, centered behind two freestanding fluted Doric columns. The corners of the building are finished with wide, plain pilasters, and a simple entablature runs below the eaves and across the front gable. The entrance has double doors of recessed panels, above which is a row of dentils and a pair of panels where a transom might be; a fluted-board frame with acanthus-leaf carving in the corner blocks surrounds the entrance. Clapboards cover the side and rear elevations of the church, while the facade is finished with matched boards. Side elevations have a single tier of tall triple-hung windows fitted with fifteen-pane sash; the windows have shutters in two parts, with the top parts closed so as to block off the upper third of the windows. A small, square-plan tower located on the front end of the gable roof is made up of four parts: a base with a molded cornice; a belfry stage in which a plain paired pilasters flank a large rectangular louvered opening, about which is a reduced-scale version of the building's main cornice; another stage identical to the belfry but smaller in size; and a shallow dome surmounted by a wrought-iron weather vane in the form of a large arrow. The original bell dating from 1841 became cracked and was replaced by the present bell in 1889. The steeple was toppled during the Hurricane of 1938, which also caused minor damage to the church itself; both were repaired and returned to the original appearance. The church's granite basement story is partly exposed on the side elevations; it was built from stone quarried from the northern part of Marlborough, as were the entry steps that extend across the front of the church. The interior of the building, which is still used for religious services, is simple, unadorned, and almost entirely original. A small vestibule runs across the rear of the church, where two doors give access to the auditorium; there are two stairways, one leading to the basement and the other to a balcony, which was closed off in 1888.

The large open auditorium has plaster walls, a simple wainscot of vertical boards, and a coved ceiling. The pulpit, which is said to incorporate elements from an earlier church's pulpit commissioned in 1754, consists of a slanted desk atop a large base; its front has four fluted engaged columns that carry an entablature decorated with a Greek fret or meander design. The church's painted pews have paneled sides, a dark-stained wooden top rail, and stained curved arm rests terminating in a circular turning. Other original interior woodwork includes paneled doors and simple molded window frames. The seating is arranged as seven rows, with a large center section, two aisles, and smaller side sections. Wainscot railings define two spaces at the front corners of the church for a modern organ (a replacement for an 1860 organ that was originally located in the balcony) and, opposite the organ, seating for the choir. The mid-19th century circular was clock on the rear wall of the auditorium was a gift of Elias Ingraham, a former Marlborough resident and founder of E. Ingraham & Company of Bristol, Connecticut, one of the country's largest clock and watch manufacturers. Two large wings have been added at the rear of the church. The Crawford Wing, a 2 1/2 story addition dedicated in 1955, extends from the northeast corner; it contains the Christian Education office, a kindergarten, and several other rooms. Extending from the southeast rear corner is a 1-story brick wing housing the Community Fellowship hall; it was built in 1974. Though they are sizable additions, the visual impact of the wings is reduced because they are relatively low in height, with their entrances at the same level as the church's basement.

Significance: The Marlborough Congregational Church is significant primarily as a well-preserved example of early 19th century New England church architecture, epitomizing the Greek Revival style with its fluted columns, pedimented gable, and other elements derived from Classical precedents. In addition, the property is significant for its role in the historical development of Marlborough. The church was the place of religious worship for the town's Congregationalist majority, as well as accommodating town meetings and other community gatherings. The Greek Revival style was a popular choice for New England meetinghouses built in the 1830s and 1840s. Features such as Classical columns, pilasters, cornices, dentils, and acanthus-leaf ornament--all present in the Marlborough Congregational Church--reflected an interest in the architecture and institutions of ancient Greece, which had important democratic connotations for Americans of the early National period. The ideal form for Greek Revival builders was that of the Classical temple. The temple form is closely approximated in the Marlborough Congregational Church through its orientation, with the gable end facing the road; the treatment of the front gable as a pediment; the creation of a recessed entry or "anta" with plainly finished side walls, a common arrangement in Greek temples; and the use of flush boarding on the facade to imitate masonry. The use of Greek Revival elements in this building also indicated that, like contemporary courthouses and academies, the meetinghouse was an important community building deserving of extra stylistic attention. Through its plain rectilinear form, numerous typical Greek Revival details, and simply finished interior, the Marlborough Congregation Church represents a pristine example of the antebellum New England meetinghouse. The pulpit is an especially notable component. Such Greek Revival-style pulpits appear in photographs from the mid-19th century, and the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives presided from a similar desk in the State House at Hartford, which was remodeled in 1837. Because of Victorian-period refurbishings, relatively few of these Greek Revival pulpits and lecterns

have survived. The builder of the Marlborough Congregational Church, who along with the congregation's building committee presumably came up with the design, was Augustus Truesdale (c.1807-1870). Truesdale, born in Thompson, Connecticut, was himself the son of a carpenter. He lived for a while in Coventry and Somers before settling in the Rockville section of Vernon, where he is known to have built the first St. Bernard's Church (no longer extant), as well as several large houses for Rockville's millowner families. He passed on the country-builder tradition to his nephew Albert Truesdale, who worked with him for several years in Rockville and became a prominent builder in Killingly, Connecticut, in the late 19th century. Truesdale received \$2600 for building the church, with another \$600 paid to A. and S. Brainard for laying the stone for the basement. The present church in Marlborough is the congregation's second meetinghouse. In 1736 fourteen people from the area, then part of the towns of Colchester, Glastonbury, and Hebron, requested permission from the Connecticut General Assembly to establish their own separate place of worship, claiming that travelling a distance of seven or eight miles to attend Sabbath services put a strain on their "weakly wives" and small children. In 1747 the Assembly finally granted the residents permission to form the Ecclesiastical Society of Marlborough, and work began to construct a suitable meetinghouse. In 1803 Marlborough was incorporated as a separate town. As the population increased, Marlborough's first meetinghouse became cramped; it also was thought to be cold and uncomfortable. In January 1841 a subscription was drawn up to raise funds for a new church, and at a March 1841 meeting the congregation voted to establish a building committee. The first services in the new structure were held in August 1841 upon completion of the basement. After several more months of construction, the church was finished and was dedicated on March 16, 1842, with a large number of people participating in the celebration. Although Congregationalism ceased to be Connecticut's state-supported religion after the ratification of the state constitution in 1818, it remained the faith of a large majority of people in most rural Connecticut towns throughout the 19th century. Consequently, Congregational meetinghouses served as symbols of community identity beyond their specifically religious meaning. With Sunday Schools, missionary societies, women's organizations, and other church-related groups, the meetinghouses functioned as social centers for their towns. Moreover, most small rural towns (including Marlborough) held their town meetings and elections in the Congregational meetinghouse well into the 20th century. Not only was this a tradition inherited from colonial times; but also in most towns the Congregational meetinghouse, because of its size and central location, was the only structure that could reasonably accommodate large public meetings.

Sources: National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form. May 1993.

Ransom, David. Historical and Architectural Resources Survey, Town of Marlborough, Connecticut. April 1998.

Notes: This historic image was taken in 1907.