

Richmond, Vermont's Round Church

A community gathering place since 1813 – National Historic Landmark since 1996.

The story begins in 1796, when a committee of five townsmen was elected at a special Town Meeting “to look in the different places in the Town and report to the town the most conven[i]ent place to set a meetinghouse.” This meetinghouse was to serve as a town hall for public meetings and elections as well as a place of worship. The committee, however, was unable to reach a unanimous decision and voters rejected the choice of the majority. Over the next several years, a series of committees was similarly unsuccessful: either committee members could not agree with each other or the voters found their recommendations unacceptable. At the 12 March 1811, Town Meeting, the Town voted not to raise money for a meetinghouse at all. Finally in 1812, two adjoining landowners—Isaac Gleason and Thomas Whitcomb—agreed, according to the minutes of the 7 February 1812, Town Meeting, “to furnish 60 rods each, clear of expense” on which to locate the meetinghouse. A committee was formed to draw up a plan for the building and to begin raising money by selling pews.

A 40-year-old Richmond resident named William Rhodes was chosen to oversee construction of the building. Rhodes, a member of the development committee, was an experienced carpenter and blacksmith who had built several homes and covered bridges by this time; he was also an active participant in town affairs. Perhaps most important for present-day Richmond, Rhodes is credited with creating and implementing the church's unique design.

The church that Rhodes built is a 16-sided polygon, topped by an eight-sided bell tower and cupola. Constructed of wood and held together mostly with machine-cut nails of a type made common after 1797, it measures about 50 feet in diameter. It is built in the simple Federal style popular in the U.S. during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. The Federal style featured light, delicate buildings with little ornamentation. In the Round Church, the window sashes placed close to the plane of the building and the minimal roof overhang contribute to this impression of lightness. The interior of the church has twice as many wall panels as the exterior, which hide the 16 large corner posts and make the inside look much more delicate and circular than the outside.

Sixty-eight townsmen representing Richmond's five Protestant congregations contributed a total of about \$3,080 (about \$70,800 in 2023 dollars) for the construction of the church. In exchange, these congregations—Baptist, Christian, Congregationalist, Methodist and Universalist—were granted the right to “peaceably enjoy ... their equal share” of the

building. Construction began in 1812 and was completed the following year. A dedication worship service was held in the church on February 9, 1814; the first Town Meeting convened there on March 1 of the same year.

Exactly why Rhodes chose his unique 16-sided design is not known. Legends abound, of course, such as the one claiming that the shape prevents the devil from hiding in the corner. Another legend holds that Rhodes had 17 men working for him, so he assigned 16 of them to build one side apiece and the 17th the belfry. A less fanciful possibility is that Rhodes was inspired by a structure he had seen in Claremont, New Hampshire, where his parents were living at the time. The Claremont Meetinghouse was originally a typical rectangular church building; in 1807, however, town voters approved the construction of a seven-bay, semicircular extension to be added to one side of the building, providing increased seating and a new entryway. A similar structure had been appended to the Rumford (now Concord), New Hampshire Meetinghouse a few years earlier. Perhaps Rhodes had seen and admired one or both of these additions and decided to have Richmond's meetinghouse complete the circle implied by their shape.

Whatever the reason for its unique design, the Round Church has been a landmark, gathering place and source of community pride for more than 200 years. Now managed by the Richmond Historical Society, the church hosts a Round Church Concert Series as well as weddings and other private events during the summer and fall. (It is closed in the winter since it has no heat.) An annual Pilgrimage worship service takes place in September, hosted by the only still-active founding congregation, the Richmond Congregational Church (which moved into its own building in 1850). A holiday carol sing is another popular community event. Each year thousands of people come from all over the United States and around the world to view the church. Although regular worship services ceased in the 1880's and its last Town Meeting took place in 1972, the Round Church continues to bring people together, as it has since 1813.

- Adapted from *The Richmond Round Church 1813-2013* (Richmond [VT] Historical Society, 2013)

The Round Church is open to visitors from 10 am to 4 pm from Memorial Day weekend through October, or by appointment. It is also available for weddings, recitals and other private events. Please go to www.richmondvthistory.org for more information.

The Richmond Historical Society is an all-volunteer 501(c)3 non-profit organization. Donations to support Round Church upkeep are always welcome!