The Colonial New England Meetinghouse
“Old Ship” Meetinghouse, Hingham, Mass., 1681
Springfield, Mass., Meetinghouse, late 17th century
Second Meetinghouse,
Northampton,
late 17th century
March 13, 1737. Lords Day. There happened a very strange & remarkable accident amongst us, while we were at the public worship of God in his house. It was in the forenoon exercise, and Mr Edwards was preaching upon these words--Behold, ye despisers, & wonder & perish. Soon after he had laid down his doctrine, our front gallery fell with all the people that were on it; there were about seventy persons that fell with the gallery, and there were nearly as many who were under it, whose lives were imminently exposed. But God of his goodness so overruled & ordered the matter that there was no life taken away, & not above ten persons so wounded as to make any great matter of it. It was the most awful sight that my eyes ever beheld to see that gallery fall, I apprehending so many persons destroyed without remedy. But God who is wonderful in goodness spared when he had lifted up his hand as if he would have destroyed in a moment. O that men would praise the Lord for his goodness this wonderful works to the children of men.”

-Ebenezer Hunt Diary Extract (Judd MSS, Forbes Library)
A New Meetinghouse

In November 1735 we passed a vote to build a new meeting house 70 feet in length & 46 in breadth. In the summer of 1736 we framed it, Mr Joseph Wright, master. On the 16th of September we laid the sills it being on Thursday, & appointed to begin to raise on Monday following, but that proved a wet day. So the town met together and agreed to hire 60 men to raise the house & to give them 7 per day, they keeping themselves excepting drink. On Tuesday morning they began to raise, it being the 21st of September; they raised all the posts in the length of the house excepting two of a side, & on Wednesday they finished the body of the house & put up two beams. On Thursday we put up all the beams & made some preparation for raising the upper part of the belfry. On Friday we finished the scaffolding & raised one half of the belfry; on Saturday it rained until noon, & in the afternoon they finished the body of the belfry. On Monday the 27th we finished the raising of said house, & we have abundant cause to notice with thankfulness the goodness of God in protecting & preserving the lives & limbs of all those that were active in the building of the house, for "except the Lord build the house," &c.

1737 July 21. The spire was raised with good success.

-Ebenezer Hunt Diary Extract
Northampton’s Third Meetinghouse, 1737

The official seating occurred Dec. 25, 1737 (determined by “The Standing Committee on Seating”)
But Edwards was wary . . .

“Don’t let us rest in that, that we have a convenient and comely house, and that the house is so and so adorned, as if we had therein attained our end. Don’t let us content ourselves in having it to say, that that [is] the best meetinghouse in the county, or that there is none to be compared to it anywhere in this part of the country. What will all this avail us, without the presence of Christ in the house that we have built? If we aim at nothing else but this, those things will do us more hurt than good, and will serve only to nourish our pride, instead of making of us better and happier.”

-Sermon on Hag. 2:7-9, Dec. 25, 1737
Edwards disagreed with the new criteria for seating (wealth over age and “usefulness”)

“It is not becoming persons to be overanxious about an high seat in God’s house in this world; for that is the honor that is of men. . . . Some have more stately houses than others; some are in higher offices than others; and some are richer than others, and have higher seats in the meetinghouse than others. But all graves are upon a level. . . . You that are pleased with your seats in this house, because you are seated high; or in a place that is looked upon honorable by those that sit round about, and because many sit behind you; consider how short a time you will enjoy this pleasure.”

-Sermon on John 14:2, Jan. 1738
Some parts of the old meetinghouse were used to construct a “town house” beside the new meetinghouse—a tangible change to the physical & cultural landscape.